

7. A defeat after the victory

1/12/2006

How many people who showed their best while on the way to success came to miserable ends because they didn't take extra caution after the victory and success? They work so hard to achieve their goals, yet they let their guards down afterward. That leads them to sad and terrible ending of their lives. In results, many of them turn to alcohol, drugs and gambling and ruin their once-a-great-life.

From the viewpoint of secular people, Gideon did well. He lived long, lived well with authority. But in the eyes of God, he finished miserably.

As I said it before, Gideon started as a coward in chapter 6. he stepped into the area of his life as a conqueror in chapter 7, but he is going to finish his life as a corrupter in chapter 8.

It is important how we live, but it is equally important how we finish our lives. Someone who is very wise said, "The height of a tree can be best measured when it is down on the ground." In other words, people can see our achievements best after our death. As Christians, we all want to hear that words from the lips of our Lord Jesus. "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord." Matthew 25:21

A. COMPLAINT, COMPLAINT

Judges 8:1-3 Now the men of Ephraim said to him, "Why have you done this to us by not calling us when you went to fight with the Midianites?" And they reprimanded him sharply. 2 So 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? 3 God has delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. And what was I able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that.

The men of Ephraim were a large and important tribe, second only to Judah, and they were a proud people. Gideon was from Manasseh, the "brother" tribe to Ephraim, and Ephraim took it as an insult because he didn't call them to the battle.

But the real reason is that Ephraim missed out on acquiring some valuable spoils of war from over 120,000 Midianite soldiers. Usually when people criticize something you've done, there's a personal reason behind their criticism.

As a victorious general, a national hero, Gideon might have used his authority and popularity to put the tribe of Ephraim in its place, but he chose to use a better approach.

Proverbs 15:1 A soft answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.

Proverbs 16:32 He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, And he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

Gideon's immediate feelings weren't that cordial, but he controlled himself and treated his brothers with kindness. Gideon proved that he could control not only an army, but also control his temper and tongue.

It's sad when brothers declare war on each other after they've stood together to defeat the enemy. It didn't cost Gideon much to swallow his pride and compliment the men of Ephraim.

B. DEALING WITH THE SKEPTICS

Judges 8:4-9 When Gideon came to the Jordan, he and the three hundred men who were with him crossed over, exhausted but still in pursuit. 5 Then 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 Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian." 6 And the leaders of Succoth said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?" 7 So Gideon said, "For this cause, when the Lord has delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers!" 8 Then he went up from there to Penuel and spoke to them in the same way. And the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered. 9 So he also spoke to the men of Penuel, saying, "When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!"

The men of Succoth wouldn't help their own brothers. The tribes of Gad had sent no soldiers to help either Deborah and Barak or Gideon. While others were risking their lives, the people of Gad were doing nothing.

When we set out to do the Lord's work, often the resistance we face is from our friends. We can't let this hinder or discourage our work.

Judges 8:10-13 Now Zebah and Zalmunna were at Karkor, and their armies with them, about fifteen thousand, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East; for one hundred and twenty thousand men who drew the sword had fallen. 11 Then Gideon went up by the road of those who dwell in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah; and he attacked the army while the camp felt secure. 12 When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them; and he took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army. 13 Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from battle, from the Ascent of Heres.

Gideon, continuing in the boldness of the Lord, led a courageous surprise attack. This wasn't 300 attacking the vast army of 135,000 described in Judges 7:12, but it was still a small army against a much larger army of 15,000.

We can suppose that Gideon was bold enough to do this because he saw God do great things in similar circumstances before. The previous work of God encouraged him to trust God for great things in the present.

Our God has a perfect track record in keeping His promises.

Judges 8:14-17 And he caught a young man of the men of Succoth and interrogated him; and he wrote down for him the leaders of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men. 15 Then he came to the men of Succoth and said, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you ridiculed me, saying, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your weary men?'" 16 And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth. 17 Then he tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

Why didn't Gideon show to the people of Succoth and Peniel the same kindness that he showed to the Ephraimites and simply forgive them their offenses? For one thing,

their offenses were not alike. The pride of Ephraim was nothing compared to the rebellion of Succoth and Peniel. Ephraim was protecting their tribal pride, but Succoth and Peniel were rebelling against God's chosen leader and assisting the enemy at the same time. What good was it for Gideon and his men to risk their lives to deliver Israel if they had traitors right in their own nation?

Leaders must have discernment or they will make wrong decisions as they deal with different situations. Personal insults are one thing, but rebellion against the Lord and His people is quite something else.

C. DEALING WITH THE ENEMY

Judges 8:18-21 And he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "What kind of men were they whom you killed at Tabor?" So they answered, "As you are, so were they; each one resembled the son of a king." 19 Then he said, "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the Lord lives, if you had let them live, I would not kill you." 20 And he said to Jether his firstborn, "Rise, kill them!" But the youth would not draw his sword; for he was afraid, because he was still a youth. 21 So Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Rise yourself, and kill us; for as a man is, so is his strength." So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments that were on their camels' necks.

When Gideon arrived back home at Ophrah, leading Zebah and Zalmunna captive, the procession must have been as exciting as a ticker-tape parade. Gideon was a true hero of Israel. He had brought his royal prisoners back, plus whatever spoils the men had gathered along the way.

Gideon had a personal matter to settle with these two kings because they had been guilty of killing his brothers at Tabor. The text doesn't tell us when this wicked act took place, but it must have occurred during one of the previous annual Midianite raids.

D. A GREAT ANSWER, BUT A TERRIBLE REQUEST

Judges 8:22-23 Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian." 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."

The people asked Gideon to be their king, something altogether new for the nation of Israel. This was one way they could reward Gideon for what he had done for them. Actually, their request was a confession of unbelief, because God was their king. Gideon rejected their generous offer purely on theological grounds.

Moses warned, in Deuteronomy, that Israel would one day want a king like the other nations and forget that they were a unique nation, unlike the Gentiles. The form of government for Israel was to be a theocracy. What other nation had the Creator, the Lord of heaven and earth, as their King?

If Gideon stopped here, he would go down as a wonderful man of God. But he had to go on for his selfish motive.

Judges 8:24-28 Then Gideon said to them, "I would like to make a request of you, that each of you would give me the earrings from his plunder." For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites. 25 So they answered, "We will gladly give them." And they spread out a garment, and each man threw into it the earrings from his plunder. 26 Now the weight of the gold earrings

that he requested was one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments, pendants, and purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the chains that were around their camels' necks. 27 Then Gideon made it into an ephod and set it up in his city, Ophrah. And all Israel played the harlot with it there. It became a snare to Gideon and to his house. 28 Thus Midian was subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted their heads no more. And the country was quiet for forty years in the days of Gideon.

After rejecting the throne, he requested gold earrings from the plunder. Gideon ended up with over forty two pounds of gold, plus the wealth he took from Zebah and Zalmunna. Gideon became quite wealthy, partly from the spoils of battle and partly from the gifts of the people.

But at this point the man of faith led the people into idolatry. Because Gideon made an ephod, and the people "played the harlot" with it. This meant that they stopped giving their true devotion to the Lord and used the ephod for an idol. Gideon may have made the ephod as a representation of Jehovah, to "help the people" in their worship, but a good motive can never compensate for a bad action.

If the ephod was indeed a copy of the high priest's garment, then Gideon was definitely out of God's will in duplicating it and using it, because Gideon wasn't a priest. If it was a standing idol, Gideon was disobeying God's Law and corrupting the people as well.

E. A BAD ENDING OF THE NATIONAL HERO

Judges 8:29-35 Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and dwelt in his own house. 30 Gideon had seventy sons who were his own offspring, for he had many wives. 31 And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, whose name he called Abimelech. 32 Now Gideon the son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. 33 So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god. 34 Thus the children of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; 35 nor did they show kindness to the house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.

Even though Gideon told the people of Israel that God is their King, he certainly lived like a king. This portion of the Scripture describes the lifestyle of a monarch, not that of a judge or a retired army officer. He had many wives and at least one concubine. His wives bore him seventy sons, his concubine bore him one.

In fact, he named the son of the concubine 'Abimelech', which means "my father is a king." This son later tried to live up to his name and become ruler over all the land.

Nobody would deny that this courageous soldier-judge deserved honor and rewards, but his "retirement plan" seemed a way out of line. Gideon's refusal to be a king was humble but his actions were not. It is easier to talk about humility and service to God than it is to actually live it.

Gideon missed a great opportunity to bring reformation and perhaps revival to the land. He had torn down his father's idols, but there were many households in Israel that were still devoted to Baal, and those idols needed to be destroyed as well.

The great victory over Midian gave Gideon good reason to call the nation back to the Lord and obedience to His Law. But instead of using the occasion for God's glory, he used it for his own profit. And the nation eventually lapsed into sin once again.

What caused Gideon's spiritual decline? I think it was pride. Before the battle against Midian, Gideon humbly and completely depended on the Lord. After the battle you don't find Gideon honoring the Lord or calling the people together to make a new covenant to obey the Lord or building alters to worship Him. Gideon started out as a servant, but now he was an important celebrity. The result was decline for him, his family, and his nation.

The saintly Scottish Presbyterian pastor Andrew Bonar said, "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle." That is a great counsel for all of us who are living for the Lord.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) It is important how we live, but it is equally important how we finish our lives.

It isn't enough for us to begin well with God. We must continue on throughout our whole Christian life.

1 Corinthians 9:27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

2) Our good motive can never compensate for a bad action.