

Gideon II: Work and Downfall

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[0 : 0 0] fantastic thank you so much to Jamie for leading us in the first part of our service thank you so much to Neil and to Rachel that was not an easy reading to deal with and my deep appreciation for that last week I said that we would see God shown mighty and weakness perhaps you were there and you saw this slide on the screen and I thought that was a fair summation for our section this week but as I've read about it read it and talked to others about it I've maybe realized that that is a good summary of some of the passage but it takes a back seat to the fact that God continues to be shown gracious in folly so if you can forgive my mistake please dig in with me as we see what God as we see God again being remarkably gracious to his people despite their outrageous folly at almost every turn there are three major themes they're not on the screen which go into displaying God's grace despite our folly they're the fact that there is one source of victory in God rather than in our strengths and abilities there's one source of guidance in God rather than in what our world says or what we might think is good and there is one source of unity for God's people and that will be found only in God one source of victory one source of guidance and one source of unity and you'll see these themes appearing and disappearing at different parts of our passage as we said it's rather long there's a six point breakdown which ties into each of the sections that

Neil and Rachel read respectively and so there's too many soldiers and in verses one to eight of chapter seven there's these pagan dreams in verses nine to fourteen there's Israel actually being delivered the actual battle and the pursuit in fifteen to twenty three and then in that weird little section of a chapter seven twenty four over to eight three we have this odd a dialogue between a Gideon and Ephraim then eight four until twenty eight the bulk of chapter eight we see this odd kind of a situation with the towns of Succoth and Peniel and then finally we get to verse twenty two to twenty eight where we have this odd description of Gideon being asked to become king and this rather odd ephod business at the end so that that's the the brief overview of where we're going this evening I hope that we'll get there in relatively good time leading on from last week perhaps you weren't here last week or perhaps you've forgotten already we saw Gideon raised up rather begrudgingly as a judge he wasn't the most willing of volunteers and he's taken from among a battle worshipping family far less than perfect circumstances and he has just called up the surrounding tribes of Israel to join him he has a army around him to expel these Midianite invaders he's just been reassured twice that God is with him that God will do what he says that he will do and then we come into verses one to eight of chapter seven but our first section it's a surprise it's not what we would expect we would expect following this story along that Gideon went with his army and rode down into the valley and conquered everything before him but we find God intervening in Gideon's battle preparations Gideon has a serious problem he has too many men I certainly have never been in a battle I don't think I've ever been in anything

I don't even think I've particularly been in a fist fight and perhaps I would say something of my character and if I had been but I don't think there is ever a time or a place where you're in physical conflict with someone someone or some group other than yourself where you think too many men I won't bother with that last little group of folk that I could call out to this occasion I'll just go myself but God has a problem with Gideon's army there are too many men so God gives them two opportunities to leave the army firstly by their own choice if they are afraid and then by this water test and if you want some sort of a visual sense of of how the army stack up here's the relative sizes at the beginning each of those tiny little squares is 300 people approximately and so you start off with this rather uneven battle the Midianites the green massively outnumbering this small army of Israel but God says that this isn't good enough and so at the first opportunity that people have to get out of this battle they run in their droves 22,000 men leave the army could you imagine being one of the 10,000 left if you weren't scared at the beginning certainly you would be terrified now 10,000 against 135,000 and then eventually the one red square 300 men against this colossal army a great deal has been said about how God has whittled down his people here particularly about that second test perhaps you've heard that these 300 men are the most alert they're the most tactically aware there's something special about how they've drunk the water but as we read the passage I hope that you caught that that doesn't quite fit with what the test was the test the purpose of these culls to the army are not that God would pick out the brightest or the brightest or the best but purely to remove the possibility of Gideon and Israel congratulating themselves when God saves them God knows Israel's heart God knows Gideon's heart and he knows each one of our hearts he knows what we're like that we are so keen to take the the credit for things that happen we're so keen to appear the hero we're so keen to be able to tell the best story we want to be able to say we want to be able to claim the victory but there is only one source of victory and God is that source yet how often do we come to this passage and we try to congratulate

Gideon for his brilliance I flicked the internet on a few days ago and started scrolling through sermons and just from the sermon titles on this chapter time and time and time again the title was isn't Gideon great isn't Israel doing it wonderfully isn't this a fantastic thing that Gideon does and I hate to be controversial but that is completely not the point of what happens here the point is that Israel is a complete underdog and God takes them as an underdog and strips them of all strength so that nobody else can get the credit but God and this is our same God and perhaps we can bring this idea forward a few thousand years into our lives and perhaps there's something of a similarity don't we sometimes hear the statistics of Christianity in our society and we are dismayed we hear

I think it's Robert Murdoch who's been saying it most frequently at least in my hearing that under 2% of Scottish people are evangelical Christians but that's us only outnumbered 98 or 99 people to 1 these Israelites were outnumbered 450 to 1 and yet God chose to win through those people if God can relieve his people back then against these odds he's certainly able to relieve his people here and now regardless of what government we find ourselves under regardless of what line we see our nation going down we may feel weak and we may feel outnumbered we may tremble for our lack of strength and worry for our little ability but our God is able even now but let us be clear there is only one source of victory by God's power working through broken people like you and like me this strategy looks utterly foolish and Gideon is dismayed but God preempts any of

[10 : 24] Gideon's attempts to make excuses he tells Gideon to go and to scout out the camp of Midian and this is perhaps one of the strangest parts of our story did you notice in the reading that the Midianites are described as both a plague they're like locusts in the valley but they're also blessed the same way Israel should be did you notice that it said that their camels outnumber the sand of the sea on the seashore that was the promise made to Abraham of his descendants of his chosen people but here is this Israelite deliverer Gideon the one who is the truly chosen one he knows what God would have him do but rather than listening to God and being confident based on his word he hears he goes and he hears this improbable dream and it's impossible interpretation isn't it funny a barley loaf flying into a tent overturning it's just completely silly but on the basis of these pagan Midianite dreams

Gideon is strengthened to carry out God's will it just makes no sense why would Gideon believe these dreams but not believe what God has said to him several times was it that this was corroboration this was somebody else saying it and therefore he could kind of take that I don't know or was something so messed up in Gideon's mind that this dream makes more sense than God speaking to him and yet so often we can go through similar experiences I have a friend who came to mind when I was reading this section and I messaged him and got him to share a bit of his story with us this is what he says basically I hadn't a clue of what I was supposed to do and at that stage couldn't even really see why I had even went to Bible college we just played volleyball and everyone else was inside and I was lying on the grass looking at the sky and didn't they they being the miners club that's over the back of the Bible college didn't they just start playing don't stop believing by the journey it was so weird but it was like a word to me that night and probably the beginning of me getting out of the rut that I was in and then he laughs at the end and says thankfully I got more clear guidance from the Bible after that though now this is a good friend of mine

I'm not criticizing Johnny in any way shape or form but doesn't that just sound like me that I would need the pagans to play a completely un-Christian song about something completely inappropriate and completely nothing to do with my situation for me to actually take God serious in what he's told me to do and to go and do what he's told me I'm not telling that story to show how silly Johnny is but rather I want us to see how easily we like Eve in the garden will slip into a complete lack of confidence in God's word and the only reason that any of us are still here the only reason that any of us are still believing the only reason that any of us are still listening to God's word is because of his work in our life it's not our wisdom and it's not our insight it's purely God's grace and likewise with Gideon he was seeking guidance from all of the wrong places but God graciously gave this dream to this pagan the interpretation to another and had them just at the right place at the right time that Gideon could go and hear so that he could go and deliver Israel there's the story moves on

Gideon is given strength by the hearing of the dream and he goes back and he arms his people you think great the story's going to get going we're going to get some good gory story here he goes back and he arms his people and what does he give them?

he gives them trumpets and torches this is the famous part of the story that we know and I love a bit of military history but of all the strategies I have ever heard of this is definitively the worst that I have ever come across notice the lack of weapons notice taking this tinily outnumbered force and dividing it even more so that it's even more scattered and less potent notice that their whole plan is that the enemy would kill themselves which normally isn't a good plan when you go to war all of this is pure folly in the eyes of this world but then we look at the results and even though the text is silent about whether God told Gideon to use this plan or whether Gideon just dreamed it up on the spot we must conclude that God was working in it we cannot help to see that this was a truly great plan here this little dot that you can probably barely see the force under Gideon the massive section over here the massive force that started out under Midian's control and the red the number of folks that fell to Gideon's strategy

[16 : 40] God used these 300 men with their trumpets and torches to rout the entire army but did you notice the true folly that appears here verse 8 and then again in verse 20 there's this you could call it a slip of the tongue a sword for the Lord and for Gideon twice the author brings it to our attention this isn't just some passing information this flies in the face of what God has already been up to God has taken such drastic action to ensure that his people would not claim the victory but here they are and they're already showing signs that they're going to give the credit to Gideon and as we consider that there is only one source of victory in his gospel and not in our plans perhaps we should take a moment to ask ourselves whether we're falling into the same error as Gideon's little group will our tongues slip when God does great things with us do we think back to the great men and women of old and maybe not of that long ago and do we put our trust in them and in their legacies in their ability to preach in their ability to see people converted and do we find ourselves slipping into this very same folly of these Israelite soldiers oh it was great when so and so was preaching oh wasn't it wonderful when those campaigns were on

God did great things yes but it was God that did great things yet God does not abandon these men God still graciously uses Gideon despite this problem and perhaps there's a comment that needs to be made we should never look at the work of Christian ministry and think that it reflects how honoured God is through that ministry what I mean is everyone who speaks the word of God is a flawed vessel right and every person reached by any gospel ministry is reached and converted purely by God's grace and sometimes we look at how well some people do and we put it down to their abilities and sometimes we look at others and see how little fruit there is of their preaching and conversions and we think that they are bereft of God but the opposite is true there's a lot more that should be said about that but this is not the time for it but there is one source of victory and that is God there is also one source of unity the Midianites are routed and all the Israelites of the surrounding tribes all those who were sent home come down to join the pursuit but Gideon sees a brilliant opportunity he calls out the tribe of Ephraim who are down here at the bottom the battle happens up here up around Ophrah and Mount Tabor

Ephraim down here at the bottom are in a brilliant position to go ahead of the retreating army to capture rivers and river crossings to stop the Midianites from going home safely and whether again this is part of God's strategy or whether this is Gideon being clever we don't see but clearly God is using it the Ephraimites managed to control much of those crossing the Jordan to the east and they managed to capture these two Midianite commanders Oreb and Zeb the raven and the wolf but Ephraim isn't happy with this they're not content remember that there is still no king in Israel it's not comfortably united by a single monarch and Ephraim seems to consider itself as one of the more prominent tribes they're one of the good guys and here's this so-called judge from little tribe Manasseh who's he to be leading us in battle?

there's a bit of tribal rivalry going on here and it threatens Gideon's position in leadership they don't seem to care that God has raised him up as a leader or that he has done great things through God but Gideon's very deft in how he answers Ephraim he uses this lovely little bit of flattery to sate their wrath and their resentment just dissipates it's a brilliant example of what Proverbs 15 talks about a soft answer turning away wrath it's an excellent example but as I come across this I start to wonder when's the foot going to fall?

you see when Gideon does something right it usually has something behind it that's wrong but no this seems to be good until we get to the next little bit we get this larger section of Gideon and his soldiers needing supplies from these two Israelite towns Succoth and Peniel these two towns are just over the Jordan on the eastern banks of the Jordan and we maybe need to remember a couple of background things here if you lived on the east of the Jordan the Midianites had nothing stopping them from raiding your land and for seven years the Midianites have been strong these towns would have been oppressed most of anywhere in Israel and they had no ability to really stop anything that was going on the past seven years have doubtless been a harrowing time for these towns and can you imagine the position that Gideon puts them into with this request they can align with this nobody called Gideon who's managed to win one battle who has only 300 men following him and what happens when Midian recovers they'll come back and they'll wipe us from the face of the earth

[23 : 47] I doubt many of us would stand on the walls of those cities and look at Gideon and his little group of exhausted men and say that's who we're siding with and they taunt Gideon oh Gideon you're going to kill Midianite kings oh very good where are they then are they in handcuffs with you oh maybe if that happens maybe then we'll give you bread and Gideon promises revenge on them and there's irony incredible irony in verse 9 when I come in triumph I will tear down this tower that word triumph it can also be translated peace what sort of peace is this going to be if the first thing he does is come back and destroy Israelite towns as we read that Gideon pursues his enemies the numbers are still outrageously against Gideon but the Midianites think that they're safe and in the comfort of their own camp they're attacked they're routed and the two kings are captured and so Gideon returns to Succoth and in a brutal fashion he disciplines the elders of the town then in Peniel he comes tears down their stronghold and kills their townsfolk and we read that and we wonder what on earth is going on here here is Gideon the victorious judge

God has just delivered his people this should be the pinnacle of the story but his wrath against his own people is repulsive these are Israelites these should be brothers and sisters these aren't the enemy the battle's over Gideon stop killing yes they were misguided yes they made the wrong call but was Gideon's revenge really necessary?

no and I think the detail that the author is giving us here is pointing us to Gideon's character as a warning bell here's a judge here's a deliverer used by God but that doesn't sanctify what Gideon does here we see Gideon's strength seeping out and I hinted to this way back when we were talking about Gideon's call God says go and deliver Israel by the strength that you have and here we see this strength and it's beastly it's fearsome it's indiscriminate Gideon's relying on his own strength he has no pity no compassion for his fearful fellow Israelites surely there's no application of this to us as Christians no preacher or group that has ever seen God's blessing has ever demonised others who failed to support them at a time of trouble it was interesting that this coincides with our morning teaching on Philippians where Paul is talking about our need to be united and of one mind and perhaps some of us have been party to some very hurtful disunity in the past whether we play the part of treacherous Succoth or vengeful Gideon or somewhere in the middle do we need to have our names written in a letter by Paul to cause us to take steps to mend those bridges

I hope not in this section we also find Gideon dealing with Ziba and Zalmunna it seems that they've murdered Gideon's brothers in some sort of an altercation at Tabor it doesn't seem that they were killed in battle rather that they were murdered and again we see Gideon's character coming through clearly he wasn't going to kill these pagan kings who caused so much trouble for Israel but on discovering that these men were responsible for the death of his brothers he is set on vengeance and he attempts to use his child as a way of shaming the memory of these kings a character building exercise if ever I've heard of one but his son Jether he looks like a younger version of Gideon he isn't self-assured and full of wrath and spite rather he's like the man that we met at the beginning timid and fearful and halting and so Gideon steps up and executes the kings in cold blood he's proving what sort of man he is and I doubt many of us are thinking that he's showing stellar qualities in many areas our last section as we come into this we have a quite interesting little finisher we see what sort of man

Gideon is and we're repulsed or at least I hope we are but the people of Israel they've forgotten the characteristics that God requires for a king they're just set free from one set of tyrants foreign tyrants and instantly they begin to think that maybe another bloody tyrant will help them maybe we'll give Gideon the reins for a while maybe he'll reign well as a king and don't think that they're fulfilling what Deuteronomy is talking about and setting over a king over themselves who is one who is caring about God's law and who is just rather they're looking for a king in the same pattern as all the Canaanites around themselves and our hearts sink when we hear them making this request of Gideon because Gideon almost always does the wrong thing but Gideon surprises us in a good way he rejects the offer has Gideon finally got it has he finally twigged is this whole tale going to end well with Gideon finishing well after a few rocky parts maybe Gideon's going to turn around his life and God's going to use him as a good judge that's going to lead his people well under God not as a king but as a judge and we read his response and it sounds great

[30 : 54] I'm not going to be your king my sons aren't going to be your king no no no no God's your king but he doesn't stop he then makes just one request I just want one thing from you what he asked for we may not quite get it from what's said in the text it's the spoil that a king would be due in winning a battle and the people have no problem with giving Gideon what he wants 19 kilos of gold were collected over 19 kilos at current day gold prices were talking well over 600,000 pounds to give you some sense of the monetary amount and that's beside the spoil taken from the Midianite kings which would have been substantial and he takes all this gold and he puts it to fantastic use he invests it into making an ephod now there's controversy over this we can't be exactly sure what it was or what it looked like it could have been kind of styled on what the priest wore at the tabernacle a kind of a top breastplate it could have been some sort of an idol or some sort of an image we're not quite sure but whatever intention there was in

Gideon's mind it certainly wasn't particularly well thought out there was no reason for him to make this except if he was attempting to resurrect the Baal worship that his father sponsored and that he put an end to himself at God's behest this wasn't in the law he wasn't commanded by God to make this thing this isn't sanctioned by God in God's worship Gideon is acting like a Canaanite king sponsoring his preferred religious cult and we find that the end of Gideon is even worse than the beginning he starts off the son of a man who sponsors Baalism that seems to capture this area just around Ophrah and now Ophrah becomes the place of established idolatry for the whole nation of Israel and again Israel just plays the whore and forsakes Yahweh who should be their

God yet we get this incredible summary at the end of our passage and it doesn't look like it fits in it flies in the face of everything that we would expect despite the depravity despite the disunity despite the idolatry and the utter stupidity displayed by all and sundry in the passage we get to the end and we read so Midian was subdued before the people of Israel and they raised their heads no more and the land had rest 40 years in the days of Gideon God used Gideon as flawed as feeble as wayward as he was to bring about this incredible salvation for his people and I don't know where many of our minds are at

I don't know what you think about the state of our nation I don't know what you think about what's going on in your life but surely we can take comfort that if God can use Gideon he can use anybody if God can bring good from what happens in Gideon's story he can bring good from anything if God can use Gideon to give his people rest for 40 years what can he do with each one of us as we seek to follow God's word as we seek to hear from him as we seek to live by his standards place because I think we all agree there is one source of victory it is God there is one source of guidance it is God and there is one source of unity it is God and if we get all that that Gideon completely missed how much more should we be able to accomplish through

God's power in our lives can we pray just before we finish Father we're very aware that there is a lot to take in in this passage there's a lot of material and this has been but a scratching of the surface and yet Father we long that we would have heard your voice we long that you would have spoken and that you would continue to speak and as we seek to do your will as we seek to see your name glorified as we seek for you to bring the victory in our lives and to this nation that has wandered far from you we pray that you would do incredible things in these days that you would open our mouths to speak that you would give us courage

[37 : 01] Lord that you would unite us to go and to tell this world of ours the incredible good news that you have for them Father we need your help and Father we long that you would get all of the glory in Jesus name Amen