

The Book of Judges

Lesson 13 - Chapters 7 and 8

According to Judges chapter 7 verse 4 the Lord says that the Shophet Gideon had too many troops at his disposal to fight against the invading Midianites and Amalekites; and this was after he had already dismissed about 2/3rds of the Israelite soldiers to go home. In the 2nd round of cut-downs the number was further reduced to 300 men, or only about 1% of all the Israelite tribesmen who had answered Gideon's call to Holy war.

What makes this puny number all the more astounding is that the size of the forces they were going to face was about 135,000, a ratio of more than 400 Midianites to every Israelite soldier. Now the reality is that probably of that 135,000 something around an additional 100,000 were women and children because that's how the nomadic armies from the eastern desert regions traveled and fought: their families traveled with them and they all moved around as a cohesive group.

Why would the Lord insist on this seemingly outlandish tactic? Verse 2 says: ***"There are too many people with you for me to hand Midyan over to them, because I don't want Isra'el to be able to boast against me, 'We saved ourselves by our own strength.'***

The Lord wanted to make this idolatrous generation of Israel acutely aware that He's still there, He's still watching, He's still acting, and He's still saving. He's still Israelite's God, He still loves Israel (despite their unfaithfulness towards Him) and there is no other like Him. That Gideon obeyed God on this (even though we find that he is certainly skeptical about it all) should be seen as to his merit. When we step out of our comfort zones at the leading of the Lord, He doesn't expect us to remain comfortable; that's the whole point. If it wasn't uncomfortable then we've merely stepped from one comfort zone into another. The idea is that we do UNcomfortable things in faith. So don't ever think that you aren't demonstrating sufficient faith when facing a grueling challenge and you have fears and worries along the way. Ask any soldier who has ever been in combat if they were afraid and they'll tell you "absolutely!" The issue is CONTROLLING that fear and still functioning, not dismissing it.

Even so Gideon would have to appear sure and confident among his men; nothing frightens troops more than a wavering leader.

Let's pick up on this story at verse 7.

RE-READ JUDGES 7:7 – end

Well it seems the nervous Gideon needs yet another sign and the Lord was merciful to provide it since obviously He knew every thought that Gideon harbored deep within. So Yehoveh tells Gideon that if he's STILL concerned about what lay ahead he should take a man named **Purah** with him, sneak down the hillside below where the enemy was camped, and listen in to what was being said.

We're told that they went to the outermost area of the Midianite camp; this was where a guard of watchmen would have been set up because surely the enemy were aware of the thousands of Israelite troops that had come to aid Gideon and knew that something was up.

And what Gideon over heard was one guard talking to another, telling him about a dream he had. In this era dreams were considered very important and taken seriously. And the Midianite soldier says that he dreamed that a barley cake fell into the midst of their encampment and hit his tent such that it fell down. The other Midianite soldier interpreted the dream as meaning that the Gideon-led Israelites were about to attack in the name of the God of Israel and that Israel would prevail.

Why would the soldier interpret that dream in such a fatalistic manner and why does he see Israel as being symbolized by the barley cake? First, as I said, they were well aware of the many thousands of Israelite tribesmen who had answered the call of Gideon (around 32,000 in all). If the biblical numbers are accurate that meant that there was around a 4 to 1 advantage for Midian but that still didn't seem to be comforting to this Midianite soldier.

Second, barley was in that era used to make the bread of poor people. Barley was much less desired than wheat for making bread (and if you've ever tried barley bread you'd know why). Yet, of course, much barley was used simply due to the realities of growing seasons (barley naturally ripens in late winter to early spring and wheat was a summer crop). Barley is at times used to symbolize Israel in the bible; and in this particular case notice what season the nomads came. We're told back in Judges 6:11 that the malach YHWH (the Angel of the Lord) first commissioned Gideon when Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress. They came to confiscate the wheat harvest, not the barley harvest.

Now even though most bibles say that it was a barley **cake** that tumbled into the camp, that is just a poor translation left over from the King James Bible era. The Hebrew word being translated is **tselil**; and **tselil** means a round or circular loaf, and it is also a kind of slang that means, "rolling". It's the shape of Bedouin bread that is cooked NOT as a square baked loaf but as a flat bread cooked on a griddle (much like our pita bread). It is a word play that works with the Hebrew word **haphak** that is properly translated as "tumbled". So we have a rolling or round batch of barley tumbling into a tent.

In any case when Gideon heard this it greatly strengthened him, and he fell on his knees in both relief and worship kind of like when we get that biopsy back from the doctor and it turns out that the tumor is benign. Now he was ready to stake his life on the Word of God. So he told his men to arise for the moment has come that the Lord will deliver Israel from the hand of their oppressor.

It was nighttime and a surprise attack was planned. We see throughout the Bible Israel using deception and the dark hours to gain an advantage over the enemy in wartime. Gideon's strategy was to divide up his troops into 3 groups of 100 each. Now we find out why Gideon had those Israelites who had been dismissed to leave their shofars behind; because every one of his 300 men now was armed with one (it was, of course, not usual that every man would have a shofar; usually it was only the leaders). Each man was also given a torch and a clay pot of some kind that they could hold over the torch so that it would conceal its light. They move into positions around the Midianite encampment. Gideon tells his men that they are to follow his lead, and when he sounds the shofar they are to suddenly and in unison begin to blow their shofars. After blowing the shofars for a few moments that are to shout the words, "For Yehoveh and for Gideon". Why those words? Because it fulfilled the dream of that soldier using his own words: (***"This can only be the sword of Gid'on son of Yo'ash, a man of Isra'el. Yehoveh has given Midyan and all its army into his hands."***)

The implication is that the Lord God supernaturally implanted this dream in the Midianite soldier (not an unusual thing by the way) stressing a principle that is often overlooked; it is that despite the completely Scripturally unfounded Christian saying that the Lord will never override a man's will that in fact He did so regularly and we've seen it in numerous stories from the Torah, including the Pharaoh of Egypt and Bil'am the Sorcerer.

This is a dream that soldier would have shared among his fellows, who would have shared it among their own fellows, and so on. Scuttlebutt moves rapidly among troops and that was part of God's plan.

Beginning in verse 19 the attack is launched in earnest at the start of the middle watch, meaning around 10 pm. The whole camp (soldiers, their wives and children) would have been asleep for a while and only the sentries were left to fend for the camp. At the same moment Gideon and his men blew those horns, they broke the clay covers over their torches and held them up high in their left hands, leaving their right hands free to hold their shofars and continued to blow them. I can't even imagine the racket and the confusion it caused. Can you picture being in a deep slumber from a hard day when suddenly this shattering din of 300 shofars interrupts the quiet desert night and startles you awake, and you look out of your tent and in the pitch black darkness you see hundreds of torches that obviously belong to the enemy surrounding you? And that the last you knew 32,000 Israelite soldiers had arrived for the battle?

You see up to this point Gideon's 300 men hadn't even drawn their swords (in fact both hands were busy, one holding a torch the other a shofar); they simply scared their enemy into a panic. Verse 21 says that every man (Israelite) stood in his place. And from there they watched as men grabbed up their wives and children and started running for their lives. The camels would have stampeded. Some of the soldiers began lashing out in the dark at any silhouette that moved, killing countless numbers of their own, certain that hordes of Israelite fighters had descended upon them.

These human locusts took flight and instinctively began to race back towards where they had come from, across the Jordan River to the east and south. All 3 towns mentioned in verse 24

as their exit route were in the general area of Jabesh-Gilead.

Now let's stop for a minute and forget that we're reading Scripture and focus instead on the tale. These nomads were real people responding to a dangerously real situation. They reacted just like people from any society in any era would react. The same went for the Israelites. You don't keep the existence and whereabouts of 32,000 Israelites or a quarter of a million invaders secret. The Hebrew (and Canaanite for that matter) inhabitants of the hill country to the north and south of the valley of Jezreel (where this was taking place) had been carefully watching this situation because they knew that in one way or another they would be affected by the outcome. Unlike we moderns that sleep soundly because we trust our police and our military to protect us, no such condition or thought existed in that day. Tribal and clan leaders watched over their territories 24/7 with a jealous and wary eye at all times. And that watchfulness was not only for the foreign enemies but also for their own brethren from other clans and tribes who often sought to take advantage of a situation for their own benefit.

The initial summons by Gideon to Holy War was to Manessah, Asher, Zevulun, and Naphtali. Even though they were dismissed, they were now recalled. In verse 23 the flight of the enemy led to a general call of Israel to arms. And as one can imagine, everybody loves to join in a rout and take some credit and vengeful enjoyment from it; so Hebrews from several of the tribes started pouring out of the woodwork. But now another tribe was specifically solicited to join in the action: Ephraim. Partly this was due to the paths the fleeing Midianites would have taken through Ephraim's territory as they attempted to get back to home and safety. But it was also due to Ephraim's great status at this time.

The men of Ephraim were prepared and ready to pounce at a moment's notice because they had been observing. So they took up position along the many tributaries and forks of the Jordan River at the fording points in order to intercept the marauders from the east and trap them. Two of the key Midianite leaders were captured: **'Orev** and **Ze'ev** and only their lifeless heads were turned over to Gideon. Notice the names attributed to the two places where they were executed: the Rock of 'Orev and the Winepress of Ze'ev. Probably these two places had no recognized names before these events, but later they were referred to by the actions that took place there. So many place names in the Bible happened in exactly that way, often replacing an earlier place name.

Let's move on to chapter 8 where the saga continues.

READ JUDGES CHAPTER 8 all

The tribe of Ephraim enjoyed a status of supremacy over all the other tribes of Israel, at least the more northern tribes (notice again how we don't see any mention of the southern tribes Judah or Simeon). This stemmed from the fact that Joshua was an Ephraimite, and that Ephraim had been given the special birthright privileges not only over his older brother Manessah, but even over his uncle Reuben. As was Jacob's deathbed blessing back in Egypt more than a hope and a dying man's wish, Ephraim indeed was fulfilling the Genesis 49 prophecy that Joseph (his father) would become very fruitful. Ephraim controlled fertile fields,

lush hills, and had grown large and powerful. Other tribes deferred to them, and Gideon (being of the tribe of Manassah) did the same.

So in verse 1 we have the leaders of Ephraim come to Gideon with a complaint: “Why didn’t you call on us when you went to fight Midian?” Right. As though Ephraim had NOOOOO idea any of this was going on. Here was Gideon, God’s anointed Shophet, who had just risked everything to rid the land of these invaders, and the leaders of Ephraim are upset because Gideon broke protocol in their eyes.

Again it’s good to kind of forget that we’re studying Scripture because too often we lose sight that we’re dealing with real people in real situations, and they responded in ways completely customary for their particular culture in their era. Ephraim was the big dog in Canaan at this moment; and the leaders of Ephraim expected to not only be personally consulted before any grand undertakings near their territory but also be allowed to have their place at the head of the line when it came time for the things that automatically result from victory.

Shiloh and Bethel were undoubtedly two of the most revered and hallowed places for all of Israel and they were both in Ephraim’s territory. So even the religious centers for all Israel bore Ephraim’s mark. But there was an even baser reason for Ephraim’s sharp rebuke of Gideon: 135,000 soldiers plus their families leave a lot of spoils of war behind when they flee, and more is acquired when they’re captured. Understand: robbery, kidnapping, victory in battle, and projection of power were usually the methods used in tribal societies to gain wealth and authority. It was always a zero-sum game: one tribe gained because they took it from another. Back and forth it went over the centuries. As some tribes became more settled and became stable nations (as Israel was in process of doing), they became less predatory among each other and more interested in producing than pilfering. But other societies of the Middle and Far East remained nomads and thus behaved as the figurative term “locusts” suggests.

Gideon proves to be a wise man and responds to the Ephraimite leaders’ accusations with a soft and diplomatic response. He uses a typical farm metaphor to curry favor and says that the leftover grapes on the vines of Ephraim are better than the best crops of Avi’ezer (Avi’ezer is Gideon’s clan). He’s saying that even though it might seem that the full harvest of Gideon’s victory over Midian WITHOUT the help of Ephraim is greater, in fact the mop-up operations (the seeming gleanings or the leftovers of the harvest) of Ephraim were the most important thing, and full and complete victory was impossible without it. The part played by Ephraim (though not so spectacular and widely known as the prime battle led by Gideon) was the real reason for ultimate success, Gideon says. We are witnessing some major sucking-up here in typical Middle Eastern style. Essentially Gideon was helping Ephraim save-face and thus avert a serious insult that almost assuredly would have led to inter-tribal warfare.

Gideon reminds Ephraim that it was they who had the glory of capturing and executing those two key leaders of the Midianites, ‘Orev and Ze’ev. It worked. Ephraim was given their pound of flesh (and undoubtedly MANY pounds of gold and silver), and Gideon publically submitted to them so Ephraim didn’t have their status challenged and so they calmed down.

Interestingly a few years (and chapters) from now this same problem with Ephraim getting their

uppity feelings hurt ended up in far more tragic consequences.

Beginning in verse 4 we find Gideon and his band of 300 giving chase to the fleeing nomads. Gideon was doing exactly as he should; he was doing what Joshua and Joshua's successors failed to do: take the battle all the way to the enemy's front door if necessary and don't quit until the enemy is eradicated.

You know, it's an odd thing among Christians: we talk and speak glowingly of when Messiah will return and evil will end. It's as though this will be some relatively painless, humane and sanitary event. So the discussion of evil eventually winds up in people talking about "he who is without sin throw the first stone", or some other misplaced platitude that essentially relegates evil from reality to a wispy theory and not what it actually is. One of the reasons that the Old Testament is often detested is that some see it as all about a blood thirsty God who orders his followers to carry out a process of bringing evil to justice in a final and harsh way. But somehow at times we can't seem to grasp that evil is only present and active in two forms: spiritual beings and human beings. Evil isn't a thing that stands by itself nor is it something that can be bottled and placed in a museum for study. Evil only exists within beings that have wills. Rocks aren't evil. Oceans aren't evil. Exploding Stars and meteors that hit the earth aren't evil. Trees and plants aren't evil and neither are such fearsome creatures as Lions or Bears. Dinosaurs weren't evil and neither were fiery volcanoes. Hurricanes and Tornadoes, forest fires, flooding rains, none of these things have any element of evil in them. On the earthly side ONLY men are evil and on the spiritual side only Satan and his demons are evil. What I'm getting at is that the eradication of evil by definition MEANS the eradication of evil people and eventually of the spiritual Evil One. But understand; if Satan died today humans would still carry with us an evil inclination and still do evil things. Thus the Lord will at Armageddon wipe out all evil humans and then lock away the chief evil spirit being.

Even then, with no Satan to tempt or accuse, over the 1000-year reign of Messiah some men will give in to evil because they still have vestiges of the evil inclination remaining in their corrupt bodies. Not until we receive new bodies to go along with our new spirits will the evil that dwells in humanity be eradicated.

Throughout the Torah Yehoveh has defined for us what it is that makes people "evil". And it is of course all wrapped up in what they are, whom they worship, and how they behave.

So the next time you ponder why a Messiah was needed, remember what evil is and where it exists. And the next time you think about the horror of a lawful execution, or the violent deaths of Islamic Jihadists, or police shooting and killing a dangerous person remember that what is being dealt with is evil in the only physical form it exists; in humans. And thus it is our sad duty before God to deal harshly with evil, which means dealing severely with people who are evil. Gideon was doing exactly that with the Lord God's full agreement and it is something that should still be happening today and especially as it concerns His reborn State of Israel and those who would take it from His people.

Since the 300 elite troops of Gideon didn't have the usual retinue of some women and children bringing up the rear with supplies and food, they would have to forage as they tracked down

the remnants of the Midianite invaders. They stopped at a town called Succoth and asked for food as they were tired and famished. Gideon explained what they were doing and the leaders of Succoth declined to help; they wouldn't even give them the customary (and required) hospitality of a meal and rest. That the residents of Succoth were Israelites made this offense all the worse and Gideon would see to it later that this offense was not forgotten.

Here's the picture we need to get from this so that we can understand the condition of Israel at this time: those 3 Israelite tribes residing on the east side of the Jordan had taken yet another step away from their former unity with their brethren who lived on the west side of the Jordan in Canaan. Reuben, Gad, and ½ of the clans of Manessah no longer had any sense of brotherhood with the other 9 ½ tribes and certainly no feeling of obligation. They were closer in mindset and allegiance to those "children of the east" who Gideon was chasing than as family of the pursuers.

Thus Gideon said that when he returned there would be severe punishment. Exactly what that punishment was to be (as explained in verse 7) is not entirely clear. They may have intended to drag the offenders over thorn bushes like a sled over the threshing floor, or perhaps use thorn branches like small whips to tear the flesh off of their bodies. The Hebrew word translated here as "tear" (**dosh**) is more normally used to mean, "thresh" (like in threshing wheat). In any case an unpleasant fate awaited those unpatriotic Israelites when Gideon had finished off the enemy. Succoth was located in the tribal territory of Gad. The town of Penuel lay about 5 miles further east from Succoth. At Penuel Gideon made the same request and they gave the same answer. Apparently Penuel had built a watchtower that was well known and important to their survival; Gideon said he would punish Penuel's treason by destroying that tower. Penuel was a well-known place in Hebrew lore because it was there that Jacob had his strange wrestling encounter with a spirit being that donned physical form. Both of these towns in the Trans-Jordan were around 50 miles from the main battle sight in the Jezreel Valley so Gideon's men had reason to be hungry and tired at this point.

Verse 10 explains that two Midianite leaders remained who were his main interest: **Zevah** and **Tzalmuna**. Now in Hebrew **Zevah** refers to a certain class of sacrifices that are voluntary, usually associated with vow offerings. **Tzalmuna** is also Hebrew that means, "withheld its hospitality". Since these leaders were Midianites they hardly had Hebrew names and especially not names with those kinds of meanings; thus these names are what they became called by the Hebrews sometime later and before the editor that compiled the Book of Judges began his work.

These two enemy leaders were in a place called Karkor, a place they must have felt was safe. About 15,000 men remained of the 135,000 enemy fighters and like Sisera in Deborah's time that slept in Ya'el's tent under a false sense of security, so it was for these Midianite men and their leaders. Gideon attacked them and they were totally unprepared for it. Let's face it, who would think that Gideon would follow them all that distance? But they probably still didn't know that Gideon had only 300 men and so the recollection of all that panic but a few days earlier was still with them.

It says Gideon and his men followed this remnant of 15,000 using the "route of the nomads".

Actually this isn't a colorful description of the route it's the formal name of a known desert highway in that era. Huge masses of people couldn't travel like Lewis and Clarke, blazing new trails everywhere they went. They needed established routes, usually beaten down and easily identified that went by the necessary water sources and re-supply points where traveling caravans would know to meet up with travelers.

Verses 11 and 12 explain that eventually Gideon and his men caught up to the army and defeated them, although without doubt they did not annihilate them all. The two leaders did what leaders did in those days; they fled when they knew they were in trouble. But Gideon soon captured **Zevah** and **Tzalmuna** and then headed back towards home, stopping for some revenge along the way.

We'll end here and talk about that next time.