

### The Book of Judges

#### Lesson 14 - Chapter 8

We have entered a fascinating and most relevant section of Judges that begins with our study of Gideon and then moves on to the aftermath of his era as a judge when one of his sons assumes a leadership position. The lessons contained here prove that while on the one hand we must always understand the meaning of the bible within the context of its culture and its time, on the other we must also see that because God sets down immutable patterns that make human behavior predictable and unchanging, human history is invariably cyclical and repetitive. Like a clock, mankind progresses in a foreseeable way that moves step by step from one stage to the next, yet the stages have been visited countless times before in exactly the same order and it will continue that way until the Lord intervenes in the not distant future to end the cycle.

The time of the Judges represents an era of a downward spiral of Israel's faithfulness towards God and of mankind's declining morality. That era would end with the coming of a King, sent by God, to bring a new order of governance to Israel and the better establishment of God's kingdom on earth. The era of the Judges was 11 o'clock on the timepiece of historical cycles, and we find ourselves today at that same hour (perhaps only a few seconds from midnight). We stand here in 2008 on our planet's crumbling foundation of confusion, fear, greed, selfishness, and immorality at the precipice of immense change that is but one tick of the cosmic clock away. That the world doesn't see it is completely understandable; that much of God's church is oblivious to it is inexcusable.

We moved into chapter 8 last week (we'll finish it this week) and read of Gideon having completed the first phase of the campaign to rid the land of the Midianite and Amalekite invaders who always came at harvest time to plunder Israel's food supply. These nomadic locusts didn't come because they necessarily hated Israel; they came because they wanted what Israel had. They came because nomads don't know how to produce what they want and need, they only know how to pilfer it.

Chapter 8 opened with the tribal leaders of Ephraim, the most powerful of the 12 tribes, coming to Gideon complaining that they were not given deference in Gideon's plans and actions. They feign ignorance and insult because they weren't included in the battle strategy; but in reality they simply wanted credit and they wanted what they considered to be their right to some of the large amount of the spoils of war that had been collected. Ephraim knew full well what was going on, they just wanted to stand on the sidelines and wait for the dust to settle so they could best position themselves for whatever the outcome according to whoever might be the victor.

The warrior leader Gideon found himself forced into being a diplomat and kowtowing to the arrogant Ephraimite leaders in order to avoid the very real danger of inadvertently igniting

intertribal warfare and thus further dividing the Israelites instead of unifying them (at least to some degree).

As we continue reading in Judges chapter 8 keep in mind a very important geopolitical dynamic about Israel in the Promised Land at this time: it has already essentially divided itself into a number of loyalties. Judah formed the basis for a coalition of tribes living in the southern part of Canaan and Ephraim formed the basis for a coalition of tribes living in the northern part of Canaan. This is in addition to the obvious split between the tribes occupying land on the east side of the Jordan River and the tribes occupying land on the west bank. And despite the north, south, east, and west coalitions each of the 12 tribes first and foremost sought to improve their own position and standing.

### RE-READ JUDGES CHAPTER 8: 10 to end

Gideon and his 300 were in hot pursuit of the remnant of the Midianite-Amalekite band of marauders when he finally caught up to them at a place called Karkor. We need to get our bearings and remember that Gideon was now operating on the eastern side of the Jordan River. There remained 15,000 enemy soldiers, still a sizeable number for a mere 300 Israelite troops to take on; but Gideon and his men were properly confident that with Yehoveh on their side the outcome was already decided and their rout of the 135,000 in the Valley of Jezreel made what was about to come seem like certain victory. The nomads were apparently completely unprepared for Gideon's band of brothers to follow them into what they must have considered a safe zone. The invader's army was further reduced and **Zevach** and **Tzalmuna** (the two Midianite leaders) were captured.

It is interesting to note that up to this point in the bible the Midianites were prominently mentioned and painted as a formidable nation. But from here on there is scant mention of them; thus it seems that Gideon's determination to end the Midianite threat once and for all had its desired effect.

Beginning in verse 13 we find out why Gideon delayed executing Zevach and Tzalmuna; he wanted to use them as an object lesson for his eldest son and he wanted to demonstrate to the people of the villages of Succoth and Penuel that they never should have doubted him. So he took those two Midianite leaders with him on his way back home and stopped at Succoth to carry out the vengeance that he promised when the townspeople refused to offer customary and expected hospitality and rest for his 300 men (remember, the people of Succoth were brother Hebrews). So just as he had promised some days earlier, he used thorns and thistles to tear the flesh from the bodies of the leaders of Succoth to teach the people a lesson. He then moved on to Penuel and tore down their watchtower and put several of the city's leading men to death.

Why such a harsh reaction by Gideon? Well the decision of the people of Succoth and Penuel in refusing to aid their fellow Israelite Gideon was a great sin against God. They had refused to help a servant of Yehoveh who had been anointed as a Shophet to carry out the Holy War that the Lord had assigned him to fight. Rather than fulfill both the letter and spirit of the promise

made to Moses nearly 200 years earlier to always stand with their brethren who took up the challenge of entering the Promised Land (led by Joshua), these members of the 2 ½ tribes of the Trans-Jordan decided to look out only for themselves. They ought to have been more than willing to see the great mutual benefit of eradicating or at least diminishing Midian and Amalek; instead they were fearful of reprisals by these nomads if Gideon failed. They were simply not willing to believe that the same God who gave Gideon and his 300 men victory over 135,000 enemy would give Gideon victory over the remaining 15,000. Their unbelief cost them great pain, a loss of an important piece of their infrastructure (the watchtower), and for many of them their mortal lives.

The people of Succoth and Penuel had been given a choice by Gideon: stand with Israel and God, or stand with the enemy. It is an amazing thing that with all the admonitions in the bible that to NOT stand with God and His people is the same as rebelling against Him that many large Christian denominations as well as our USA government have chosen to behave as the citizens of Succoth. Neutrality is not a legitimate option in spiritual matters. Evenhandedness is not an option when it comes to God's people. You can't be an aid BOTH to God's people and to the enemies of God's people. Only politicians and wrong-minded religious leaders can plead for tolerance of the oppressors of God's chosen as a godly thing to do.

Gideon was God's earthly hand of wrath against those who chose to rebel against the Lord's will. Before we move on to the execution of the two Midianite leaders I want to pause to speak briefly about a couple of other vital God-principles at play here. Recall that I've mentioned on numerous occasions that it is the Torah that develops the divine principles by which men are to live and abide if they want to be in harmony with God. What follows the Torah relies on those principles; and thus we are going to see those principles played out in either a negative or positive fashion in the remainder of the bible. The punishment of the men of Succoth and Penuel was one such demonstration of what happens when a violation of Torah principles occurs.

Let's talk for a moment about the value of persistence because it is something that we all are faced with on a nearly daily basis. Gideon is one of the finest examples in the Tanach of persistence in service to the Lord. Gideon had achieved a resounding and major victory over Midian and Amalek in the Valley of Jezreel, and most reasonable men would have stopped there. In fact stopping the fighting upon the majority of military objectives being attained was the hallmark of Joshua and those Israelite leaders who followed him.

As great as Joshua was, and as venerated as he remains in the eyes of Holy Scripture and of the Hebrews, Joshua didn't finish the job. His task wasn't only to win major battles; it was to fully eradicate the evil enemy. The reason that Israel is under the enormous pressure from all sides that it is today is because Joshua and those who followed him lacked persistence. The people who hate Israel and vow to wipe it off the map are the descendants of the people who ought not even exist; they are the descendants of people that God ordered Israel to annihilate, but didn't.

Gideon did what all the earlier and later leaders of Israel were supposed to do: not stop until the Holy War was complete. Therefore Gideon followed the mere 8% of the Midianite enemy

that remained for a distance of 150 miles in order to confront them and wipe them out. The problem of finding food for his men was ever present, and even the two Israelite cities in the Trans-Jordan that could and should have helped him refused. How discouraging that must have been but Gideon pressed on and refused to cave in. And thus the Midianites from that time on ceased to be a problem for Israel.

What we find is that the biggest source of Gideon's discouragement was NOT the enemy, but those who ought to have been friends and allies. His own brethren were so interested in maintaining a comfortable lifestyle, in not rocking the boat, in assuring that they suffered no inconvenience that they preferred co-existence with the enemy rather than a tight bond with their own people and with God.

The people of Succoth and Penuel weren't asked to go and fight with Gideon, only to help provision them and to not stand in the way.

First it was the Ephraimites who approached Gideon (immediately following his battle) with their complaining and they effectively hindered him from doing his job in order to suffer their self-centered and egotistical demands. Then it was the townspeople of those two Israelite cities in the Trans-Jordan who denied co-operation and support while he was on his way to finish off the enemy.

What might you or I have done in Gideon's place? Would we have had the sheer guts, unshakeable faith and iron will to continue to fight the good fight even though the very people we are fighting for try to block our way at every turn? Gideon could easily have seen this opposition from his own people as a sign to turn back and quit; why should he put he and his loyal men at such risk for the sakes of people who wouldn't even give him so much as a loaf of bread?

Loved ones this is such a sharp warning for us. It is Israel who stands on the front lines; 6 million Jews are surrounded by 200 million Arabs who want to take what is rightfully Israel's. A billion Muslims stand with their Arab brothers and threaten all who wish to stand with Israel. Give us Israel, they say, and the reason for their Jihad will end. Stand with Israel and you might suffer.

You and I are at such relatively small risk compared to those brave and dedicated Jews who risk it all to live in the Holy Land that God gave to Jacob's descendants, and defend it, and prepare the way for the return of Messiah. We are as the people of Succoth and Penuel. We are quite literally Israel's brothers who ought to willingly stand with them and help them in every way. But instead we tend to complain, often refuse to help them beyond a pittance, and then we carefully position ourselves so that no matter what happens to Israel we're covered.

We're not being asked to strap on battle gear and fight for them; we're merely being asked to aid them with our money and support and unconditional love. We're being asked to NOT give the enemy more armaments, food, land, and political cover. But for the vast majority of the world, and for too many Christians, and sadly for a huge portion of Jews living outside of the Holy Lands, our behavior and response is as that of the leaders and citizens of Succoth and

Penuel; we don't want to be involved. And I can confidently assure you that in time God's vengeance will be manifest on those who behave as the citizens and leaders of Succoth and Penuel did 3300 years ago. Maybe the current worldwide financial meltdown is but a taste of what those who oppose the Lord and side with His enemies will face as a consequence. May he who has ears to listen, hear.

In verse 18 Gideon determines its time to bring Zevach and Tzalmuna to justice. Gideon prefaces this with an inquiry that basically allows these 2 leaders to indict themselves; "tell me about the men you killed at Tabor". This is speaking about Mt. Tabor; and the people living there had no part in the battle. But this shows that not only did the Midianites plunder Israel but they also committed terrible acts among the Hebrew population simply to intimidate and control. Their answer was that these men they killed at Tabor looked an awful lot like Gideon. And Gideon tells them that there is a good reason for that: those men were his family, his siblings. They were, as the bible says, my mother's sons. So they were direct blood, not distant relatives. Therefore Gideon says, "if you had spared them, I would NOT kill you".

It was usual to NOT kill captured kings and military leaders. Oh, it happened for sure; but the general custom was to respect their station and to allow them to live. Killing them served to dishearten the enemy but also to in time arouse their anger. But Gideon had a duty; his brothers were killed unjustly. Therefore Gideon was compelled to be their next of kin avenger; their blood avenger. He instructed his firstborn son to execute Zevach and Tzalmuna but he was too intimidated to do it. **Yeter** was still young, not at all accustomed to killing men, and certainly not such fierce and hardened men as stood before him.

The 2 Midianite leaders seeing that the boy was not yet physically mature, and was scared witless, then made a request of Gideon: you kill us. These were brave warriors, who did not fear death, but they wanted their execution to be swift and as painless as possible and they knew **Yeter** was incapable. Gideon granted them their request. Then verse 21 says something that is easy to overlook: ".....then he took the **ornamental crescents** from around their camels necks".

In other words Gideon took (as spoils of war) these crescent shaped pendants that hung around the necks of the camels that Zevah and Tzalmuna had owned and ridden. The crescent is referring to the crescent moon. Verse 24 says that the reason the enemy had crescents and certain other ornamentations on their camels and on their persons is that they were Ishmaelites (descendants of Ishmael). What prominent modern group of people who claim an attachment to Ishmael employs the crescent moon as their symbol? Islam.

Before you jump to conclusions, though, let me explain. Islam did not exist in bible times, not even in New Testament times. The founder of Islam, Mohammed, was born in the late 6th century AD. However Islam is an odd mixture of Judeo-Christian principles, Arab folklore, and the ancient moon-god religion of the Sabeans. The symbol of the moon-god is (and has always been) the crescent moon.

But even the Sabean religion doesn't go back to the time of the Judges. That said the worship of the moon-god goes back even further than the time of Gideon to a time before Abraham and

it was very prevalent in the city of Ur where Abraham's father Terach made and sold god idols. In fact during Abraham's day it appears as though Ur was the moon-god center of the region.

The point is that even as early as 1300 B.C. (the time of Gideon) the Arabs had already adopted many elements of moon-god worship and we find it right here in the bible. All the symbols that ancient tribes wore were inherently religious in nature. Moon-god worship changed form until today it is realized in the Muslim religion. Even the signaling of the time of Ramadan, the most holy season for Islam, is at the appearance of the crescent moon.

Now interestingly, in modern times, Islam has become somewhat embarrassed at all of its moon-god heritage and so has taken to denying it as of late. In fact a few decades ago some of the Muslim sects began to remove the chapters in the Koran that spoke directly to it. Not all that long ago a British man wrote a book about this cover-up and named it "The Satanic Verses"; the man's name is Salmon Rushdie and some of the Islamic religious leaders ordered him killed for exposing it. He's been in hiding and seclusion for years.

The so-called Satanic Verses are the verses removed from the Koran to hide the direct moon-god beginnings of Islam as forthrightly stated in their holy book. Of course all of the Islamic crescent moon related symbols and rituals, the observances all timed on the appearance of the crescent moon, even the name of their God Allah, all refers directly to the moon-god.

So here we have in the book of Judges moon-god worshippers, sons of Ishmael, bedeviling Israel beginning over 3000 years ago. God full well knew that the violent and murderous intent of the Muslims to rid the world of all vestiges of God's people would do nothing but increase as a result of Israel's reluctance to deal with moon-god worshipping Arabs and Midianites and other Middle Eastern tribes when they first began to occupy Canaan.

Do you see what I mean about the cyclical nature of history? The entire world is subject to it. The only real question before us is: is this the final cycle or is there another one to follow? That's important to know (if we can know) because the final cycle will end with the return of Yeshua.

Verse 22 reveals something startling, but expected. In fact I suggested in the introduction to Joshua (some weeks ago) to watch for it. Recall that I told you that the purpose for the era of the Judges was to convince Israel that they **MUST** have a king to rule over them. It was God's intent that Israel has a king but they didn't want one. They'd had enough of kings; the king of Egypt was the last king to rule over them and that hadn't worked out too well. Let me be clear: despite the prevalent and completely misguided teaching within Christianity that God did **NOT** want Israel to have a king, nothing could be further from the truth. It's only that God wanted Israel to have **HIS** king who would be a godly king in the mold of a shepherd/servant as opposed to the self-serving, power seeking, wealth oriented, charismatic type of king that the world always seeks. The first God approved and provided king would be David, and the next God-approved king will be Yeshua when He returns to set up His kingdom.

But after Gideon defeated the Midianites some of the 12 tribes had been oppressed so many times, had gone through such hardships, that they were finally beginning to realize that they



were not going to make it unless they banded together under one leader. Therefore some of the tribal and clan leaders went to Gideon and offered him the job as king over them. Indeed this was a major turn of events.

However Gideon (even though he was deeply flawed) knew enough of God to refuse the offer. Gideon was an anointed **Shofet**, not a **melech** (a king). So he told the people that Yehoveh was their king and there was no need for any other.

A couple of things to consider about the evolving society and attitudes of the Israelites: first is that there was a growing understanding that a more robust and CONTINUING leadership was of real benefit for the people. And second, coupled with that is that a Judge was ONLY raised up AFTER a long period of subjugation. And when the Judge delivered the people that Shophet would rule until he died but with no successor. Thus the leadership ended and then the next cycle of oppression would begin because Israel had no leader. By accepting a government over them based on a monarchy there was a natural means of succession (the king's son usually took over). Further by that king actually being a head of a sovereign government a standing army would be formed and then the possibility of PREVENTING another foreign subjugation became realistic. People of all eras are very practical and thus there were real and pressing circumstances behind the Israelite tribal and clan leaders' sudden willingness to cede their personal autonomy to a king.

Are you able to bring this principle forward to today and see where the entire world (including the USA) is headed in that regard? We have watched within the last several days as the United States has all but nationalized our mortgage and lending systems. Britain has overtly purchased majority shares in the nation's banks thus making them de facto government owned (and the US is seriously considering doing the same). But it happened as a practical matter, not as a coup; the prospect of a worldwide financial Armageddon is so real and imminent that these steps were deemed unavoidable by panic-stricken politicians, Billionaire business leaders and even by a majority of these nation's citizens.

When Barak Obama went to Europe he was hailed as a world leader (almost as a global Messiah of sorts) even before this financial system mess hit home. Folks, the world wants a king, it's our God-given nature. The Lord is driving the world towards a king. If I heard it once, I heard it a hundred times on our financial TV channels over the past several days that there is little choice but to quickly begin to integrate our money and credit markets into one world-wide system because the pell-mell globalization of the last several decades has so entangled the world's corporations and governments that if we don't integrate them there will be no way to manage fiscal and monetary policies.

On October 8th for the first time in history, the US and several other nations worked in concert with their various national banking systems to lower key interest rates precisely in lock-step so that money would not flow from one nation to another in order to seek better terms. This is at least as big an event and change in direction of the world as when some of the leaders of Israel asked Gideon to become the first king of Israel.

The world wants a king and soon we're going to anoint one; Christians know him as the Anti-

Christ. God WANTS us to have a king, but not the one we will choose, and the one that will betray us. God wants us to have His Son as our king, our perfect king; but we simply won't be ready for Him and the world will not accept Him until we've experienced the final horror of a worldwide kingdom, run by an evil man of our own choosing.

As much merit as Gideon showed by not accepting the position of king, there is no doubt that the trappings of being a king intrigued and ultimately seduced him. Because in verse 24 he says that while he humbly refuses the offer of kingship, he would appreciate it if they would offer him tribute! Gideon asks that all who helped to fight, and who had received some of the spoils of war from the Midianites would give to him all the gold earrings they had taken from the defeated enemy. The people complied and included also some of the crescents, pendants, and even some very valuable purple cloth that was worn by kings and royalty. So while Gideon may not have been a king, he would certainly live like one.

But then Gideon took yet another step that is very troubling; he may have refused to be Israel's official king, but he obviously attempted to create a new alternative to the existing priesthood by making himself equivalent to the High Priest. He took much of the roughly 50 pounds of gold and made an ephod, a ritual vest worn by the High Priest. He used it in his personal hometown of Ofrah.

I mentioned in earlier lessons that one of the reasons that Israel was constantly flirting with idolatry and then going through these cycles of apostasy, punishment by God, oppression (as part of that punishment), deliverance and then restoration and a long period of peace, is that the priesthood was not functioning properly. It was probably due to a combination of the people paying little attention to them (the priests had no actual civil authority over the 12 tribes), the people not giving the priesthood their tithes and offerings so the priests had little choice but to work for a living, and the priesthood losing respect over their corruption.

The Tabernacle at this point was located in Shiloh; so for Gideon to make for himself a High Priest ritual vest and keep it in Ofrah demonstrates how far from any Scriptural teaching Israel was operating. Verse 27 says that the people looked up to that ephod of Gideon as an idol. More accurately it says they went whoring after it; but the point is that they accepted the ephod and its wearer as the real thing. Soon it became not a tool of God but an object to be worshipped: an idol.

God had ordained one High Priest only, but now Gideon (who had refused the civil role as a king) turned right around and created the spiritual/religious role of High Priest for himself. This sort of thing would be copied many years in the future when the Israelites of Samaria broke away from the Jerusalem based priesthood and created their own separate and independent priesthood and even built their own temple that was in operation in Jesus' day.

Despite all of Gideon's foibles and delusions of grandeur, Midian was defeated, the northern tribes of Israel were delivered, and Gideon settled in as the Judge over that area of Canaan. His office would last for 40 years, and there would be peace and rest for God's people (at least in the north of Canaan) all during that time.



But to demonstrate Gideon's rather inflated view of himself, verse 30 explains that he had 70 sons by as many wives. Having 70 wives takes a lot of wealth (do you remember much earlier Gideon had explained to God that he couldn't possibly be a Savior for Israel because his clan was the poorest of the tribe of Manessah?). Having many wives was also something decidedly looked down upon by God and was only deemed acceptable in Hebrew society if royalty produced such a harem.

Then in the following verse is the set-up for the next chapter and we're introduced to a fellow named **Avimelech** (Abimelech). This man was Gideon's son by means of a concubine from the city of Shechem. That does NOT mean that **Avimelech** was illegitimate; but it does mean that he automatically carried a lower status than his brothers.

The chapter ends with Gideon's death; it says he lived to a ripe old age meaning that he had received God's blessing of a full life span. But as soon as he died, Israel immediately started chasing after the Canaanite gods again. They went so far as to actually officially name Ba'al Brit (Baal of the covenant) as their god.

Good leadership is essential in God's plan. But any human leader is subject to failures; Gideon was no different. What he couldn't have known, though, is what his example would do to his family after his death.

**Avimelech** means, the father is king; it is a regal title. **Avimelech** is a title, not a name. In other words this is NOT the formal name that this son of a concubine was given shortly after birth (we are not told what it was). Rather it was a title given to him later on in life by Gideon; probably when this son was an adolescent. Thus we see Gideon's propensity to serve out his time as a judge in a very kingly manner. Now such a title is given to a son because the father has high aspirations for him. And we're going to see in Judges 9 that **Avimelech** fully embraced those aspirations.

I want to end today with this note: it is absolutely astounding how fast a person, a family, or an entire nation can forget God's blessings that made them who and what they are, and turn away to idolatry. Israel just could not resist the pull towards Ba'al because the people that lived among Israel were Canaanites who were permitted to continue to worship Ba'al. This pagan Mystery Babylon religion must have been awfully attractive to most Hebrews because it seems that they couldn't wait to get back to it the minute a godly leader wasn't there to insist on their allegiance to YHWH.

Yet in all of this one should not overlook the power of Satan to bring delusion. He had deluded the Israelite people in the first place to follow this false way and now he was able (rather easily) to do the same all-over again despite the awesome and unmistakable lessons God had taught to Israel. One must never underestimate the power of the great and continuing enemy of God and God's program of redemption.

We'll take up the story of **Avimelech** next time.