

Judges

Chapter 8

Zebah and Zalmunna

Now the Ephraimites asked Gideon, “Why have you treated us like this? Why didn’t you call us when you went to fight Midian?” And they criticized him sharply. ² But he answered them, “What have I accomplished compared to you? Aren’t the gleanings of Ephraim’s grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer? ³ God gave Oreb and Zeeb, the Midianite leaders, into your hands. What was I able to do compared to you?” At this, their resentment against him subsided. ⁴ Gideon and his three hundred men, exhausted yet keeping up the pursuit, came to the Jordan and crossed it. ⁵ He said to the men of Succoth, “Give my troops some bread; they are worn out, and I am still pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.” ⁶ But the officials of Succoth said, “Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your troops?” ⁷ Then Gideon replied, “Just for that, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will tear your flesh with desert thorns and briers.” ⁸ From there he went up to Peniel and made the same request of them, but they answered as the men of Succoth had. ⁹ So he said to the men of Peniel, “When I return in triumph, I will tear down this tower.” ¹⁰ Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with a force of about fifteen thousand men, all that were left of the armies of the eastern peoples; a hundred and twenty thousand swordsmen had fallen. ¹¹ Gideon went up by the route of the nomads east of Nobah and Jogbehah and fell upon the unsuspecting army. ¹² Zebah and Zalmunna, the two kings of Midian, fled, but he pursued them and captured them, routing their entire army. ¹³ Gideon son of Joash then returned from the battle by the Pass of Heres. ¹⁴ He caught a young man of Succoth and questioned him, and the young man wrote down for him the names of the seventy-seven officials of Succoth, the elders of the town. ¹⁵ Then Gideon came and said to the men of Succoth, “Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me by saying, ‘Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your exhausted men?’ ” ¹⁶ He took the elders of the town and taught the men of Succoth a lesson by punishing them with desert thorns and briers. ¹⁷ He also pulled down the tower of Peniel and killed the men of the town. ¹⁸ Then he asked Zebah and Zalmunna, “What kind of men did you kill at Tabor?” “Men like you,” they answered, “each one with the bearing of a prince.” ¹⁹ Gideon replied, “Those were my brothers, the sons of my own mother. As surely as the LORD lives, if you had spared their lives, I would not kill you.” ²⁰ Turning to Jether, his oldest son, he said, “Kill them!” But Jether did not draw his sword, because he was only a boy and was afraid. ²¹ Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Come, do it yourself. ‘As is the man, so is his strength.’ ” So Gideon stepped forward and killed them, and took the ornaments off their camels’ necks.

8:1 *Ephraimites*. Contrast Gideon, who placates the wrath of this tribe (vv. 2–3), with Jephthah, who brings humiliation and defeat to it (12:1–6). (CSB)

The tribe of Ephraim was as proud as it was powerful, resentful that Gideon had not enlisted soldiers from its ranks to assist in what had become a great victory. (TLSB)

8:2 *gleanings*. Leftover grain after the main gathering of the harvest (see note on Ru 1:22). Here Gideon implies that Ephraim has accomplished more than he and all the other forces involved in the initial attack. (CSB)

Leftovers from the harvest, what was dropped or discarded. (TLSB)

Abiezer. Gideon's clan (see note on 6:11). The name means "My (divine) Father is helper" or "My (divine) Father is strong." (CSB)

8:3 *their resentment ... subsided*. "A gentle answer turns away wrath" (Pr 15:1). (CSB)

"A soft answer turns away wrath" (Pr 15:1). Gideon's question sounds like a compliment to Ephraim and a humbling of his tribe, Abiezer (6:11). The Ephraimites walked away satisfied, but they also exposed their vanity for sly ridicule by Gideon's troops. (TLSB)

God has given ... Oreb and Zeeb. Gideon was a persuasive diplomat, highlighting and complimenting the men of Ephraim's greatest achievement in the conflict and making them God's choice for this victory. (TLSB)

8:4–9 Gideon sought support for his most loyal men and was turned away. Succoth and Penuel, east of the Jordan, were close to the territory of the Midianite and Amalekite soldiers who fled. This may explain why these Israelites refused to help, since they would fear revenge. (TLSB)

8:5–6 *Succoth*. Along the Jabbok River, c 32 mi from the original battle site, identified today usually as Tell Deir Alla. See color map 1. *loaves ... exhausted*. Though Gideon's request seems reasonable and respectful, the princes of Succoth responded sarcastically. The leaders at Succoth did not have confidence in Gideon's ability to complete this victory. (tlsb)

8:5 *kings of Midian*. Zebah and Zalmunna may have belonged to different Midianite tribes (see Nu 31:8). (CSB)

8:6 *hands*. See note on 7:25. (CSB)

Why should we give bread ... ? The officials of Succoth doubted Gideon's ability to defeat the Midianite coalition and feared reprisal if they gave his army food. (CSB)

8:7 *I will flail your flesh*. Instead of gentle diplomacy, Gideon met disloyalty and treason with threats. (TLSB)

8:8 *Peniel*. The place where Jacob had wrestled with God (Ge 32:30–31). (CSB)

Where centuries before, Jacob had wrestled with God. The men here also denied Gideon support. (TLSB)

8:9 *I will break down this tower*. Apparently, Penuel's pride was its fortress tower. Gideon's mission had now become a personal campaign for recognition and retribution, and he would use Israel's troops for revenge. (TLSB)

8:10–12 Gideon's anger toward Succoth and Penuel took second place to his mission of crushing the Midianites. (TLSB)

8:10 *Karkor*. Oasis beyond the borders of Canaan and likely in the territory of Ammon, over 100 mi from Succoth and Penuel. (TLSB)

15,000 men ... 120,000 men. The Midianite army had been greatly reduced. The dead Midianites are ironically described as those "who drew the sword," which they could no longer do. (TLSB)

8:11 *tent dwellers*. Families living like today's Bedouin. (TLSB)

felt secure. They weren't expecting an attack in their own region. (TLSB)

8:14 *wrote down*. Incidental detail demonstrates that writing was a common skill. Canaanites were among the first people to move beyond picture writing to an alphabet with fewer than 30 characters. (TLSB)

8:15 *you taunted me*. Total victory did not soften Gideon's personality. His greatest opposition came not from the enemy but from those who were supposedly his allies. (TLSB))

8:16–17 *taught ... a lesson*. Polite description of a likely deadly act. Cf v 7. (TLSB)

killed the men of the city. Gideon's character was transformed—but this time, not for the better. He learned zeal but not mercy. (TLSB)

8:18 *killed at Tabor?* Along the Zebulun-Issachar border, on or near Mount Tabor. This incident is not recorded. (TLSB)

As you are ... resembled the son of a king. Ambiguous attempt at flattery. (TLSB)

8:19 *my brothers*. Gideon's interest in the men of Tabor became clear. The Midianites had killed his brothers, and he suspected Zebah and Zalmunna were personally responsible for their deaths. Some military historians suggest that the brothers were deployed near Tabor to block the advance of the Midianites. (tlsb)

sons of my own mother. In an age when men often had several wives it was necessary to distinguish between full brothers and half brothers. (CSB)

In a polygamous time, it would not always have been obvious that they were full brothers. (TLSB)

I would not kill you. Seems rhetorical given what Gideon did to his fellow Israelites at Succoth and Penuel (vv 16–17). (TLSB)

8:20 *young man.* Gideon’s command to Jether added to his insult against the Midianite kings, but it put the boy in a difficult position. If he disobeyed his father, he would have appeared rebellious and unmanly. If he complied with his father’s demand, he would have become an accomplice in his father’s vengeance. He also may have hesitated because of his low status or rank, which did not accord him the honor of slaying a king. (TLSB)

8:21 *do it yourself.* Dying at the hands of a boy may have been considered a disgrace (see 1Sa 17:42). (CSB)

Seems mocking. The Midianite kings are defiant to the end. (TLSB)

ornaments. Crescent necklaces, as in Isa 3:18. (CSB)

Probably moon amulets to ward off evil spirits. (TLSB)

8:1–21 In pursuit of the Midianites, Gideon acts magnanimously toward the Ephraimites jealous of his victory, but bitterly toward other countrymen. A desire for personal gain, recognition, or revenge can also cloud the actions of God’s people today, though our actions may seldom be as physically cruel as Gideon’s. Such vengeance arises from the sinful flesh. However, battle against spiritual enemies is proper. Fight the good fight of faith; our warfare is not against flesh and blood but against the enemies of the Savior (Eph 6:12). He has won the victory, which is ours through faith. • Lord of hosts, strengthen us to fight the good fight of faith. In our Savior’s name we pray. Amen. (TLSB)

Gideon’s Ephod

²² The Israelites said to Gideon, “Rule over us—you, your son and your grandson—because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian.” ²³ But Gideon told them, “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you.” ²⁴ And he said, “I do have one request, that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder.” (It was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings.) ²⁵ They answered, “We’ll be glad to give them.” So they spread out a garment, and each man threw a ring from his plunder onto it. ²⁶ The weight of the gold rings he asked for came to seventeen hundred shekels, not counting the ornaments, the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian or the chains that were on their camels’ necks. ²⁷ Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.

8:22 *men of Israel.* A delegation, perhaps representing only the 300 (v 4), or only those northern tribes most affected by the Midianite oppression. (TLSB)

Rule. There is no mention of the Israelites praising God for this improbable victory. Instead, they turn to the human agent of victory. This is the first record of Israel asking for a king (cf Dt 17:14–15). Cf 1Sm 8. (TLSB)

8:23 *I will not rule ... The LORD will rule.* Gideon, like Samuel (1Sa 8:4–20), rejected the establishment of a monarchy because he regarded it as a replacement of the Lord's rule. God's rule over Israel (theocracy) is a central issue in Judges. (CSB)

Theocracy (God's rule over His people) is an important theme from Ex to 1Sm. Though Gideon's reply sounds like a pious refusal of kingship, his previous and subsequent behavior betray his bartering for leadership. Gideon's response magnifies his humility yet still secures his power. See the barter process in Gn 23:12–16. (TLSB)

8:24 *earring.* Or possibly "nose ring" (see Ge 24:47; Eze 16:12). (CSB)

Ishmaelites. Related to the Midianites (Ge 25:1–2) and sometimes identified with them (vv. 22, 24; Ge 37:25–28; 39:1). See note on Ge 37:25. (CSB)

These people of the east were descended from Ishmael and thus were related to Midian and were sometimes associated with them. They apparently had the custom of wearing earrings, which may have distinguished them from the Israelites. (TLSB)

8:25 *cloak.* Commonly used for carrying things, slung over the back. (TLSB)

8:26 *1,700 shekels of gold.* Depending on the weight of the shekel used, this was 40–75 lb of gold. See p cx. This wealth ensured Gideon's position as a ruler. Such rich spoil would also have strengthened the northern tribes. (TLSB)

pendants. Drop-shaped decorations such as earrings. (TLSB)

8:27 *ephod.* Sometimes a holy garment associated with the priesthood (Ex 28:6–30; 39:2–26; Lev 8:7), at other times a pagan object associated with idols (17:5; 18:14, 17). (CSB)

An article of clothing. Ordinarily, the God-approved upper garment made of linen, which the priest wore in performance of religious duties. Gideon's ephod must have been heavily laden with gold thread and ornamentation, and it may have been formed in the shape of a statue. (TLSB)

And all Israel whored after it. Israel's lapse into idolatry is described with an indelicate term. God's people were guilty of horrific unfaithfulness to Him. Chem: "Gideon out of good intention made an ephod out of the booty of the Midianites, which brought his own house into ruins. On the basis of this the worship of Baal and other gods flourished among them, although Gideon had established it on the excuse that the people were really desiring to serve the true God" (*LTh* 2:576). (TLSB)

a snare to Gideon and to his family. Gideon's actions might be construed as misplaced piety. Luth: "How strange was the fall of that wondrous man Gideon.... Let everyone see to it

that he is certain his worship and service of God has been instituted by God's word, and not invented by pious notions or good intentions" (AE 35:271, 273). (TLSB)

Gideon's Death

²⁸ Thus Midian was subdued before the Israelites and did not raise its head again. During Gideon's lifetime, the land enjoyed peace forty years. ²⁹ Jerub-Baal son of Joash went back home to live. ³⁰ He had seventy sons of his own, for he had many wives. ³¹ His concubine, who lived in Shechem, also bore him a son, whom he named Abimelech. ³² Gideon son of Joash died at a good old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. ³³ No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god and ³⁴ did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side. ³⁵ They also failed to show kindness to the family of Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) for all the good things he had done for them.

8:28 *forty years.* A conventional number of years for a generation (see Introduction: Background). (CSB)

The Midianites never again asserted themselves as a great nation or power, but their importance as traders continued. (TLSB)

8:22–28 Gideon's apparently pious refusal of kingship masks a heart already sold to monarchy. His request for gold from his supporters allows him to make an idol that leads Israel into idolatry. Even the lowliest person may have the heart of a tyrant. With fame, popularity, power, and material success comes the danger that one's heart may be turned away from the Savior. Yet the God of persistent grace continues to work on our stubborn hearts. • Lord, let us never fall victim to our own wishes or devices, but keep us humble, as was Jesus, who took on the form of a servant and became obedient to death on a cross to forgive our pride. Amen. (TLSB)

8:29 *Jerub-Baal.* See note on 6:32. (CSB)

Gideon (cf v 35). (TLSB)

8:30 *seventy sons.* A sign of power and prosperity (see 12:14; 2Ki 10:1). (CSB)

Multiples of seven typically symbolized completeness. In a polygamous society, a powerful man like Gideon could well have had numerous wives and concubines and a large number of children. Abdon also had 40 sons and 30 grandsons (12:14). (TLSB)

8:31 *concubine.* She was originally a slave in his household (9:18; see note on Ge 16:2). (CSB)

Shechem. Important city for the tribe of Manasseh. Its population was composed of both Israelites and Canaanites, a significant detail as the story in ch 9 unfolds. (TLSB)

Abimelech. Appears elsewhere as a royal title (Ge 20:2; 26:1; Ps 34 title) and means “My (divine) Father is King.” Gideon, in naming his son, acknowledges that the Lord (here called “Father”) is King. (CSB)

“My father is king.” Name makes Gideon’s feelings about kingship clear. (TLSB)

8:32 *at a good old age*. A phrase used elsewhere only of Abraham (Ge 15:15; 25:8) and David (1Ch 29:28). (CSB)

Used elsewhere of Abraham (Gn 15:15) and David (1Ch 29:28). (TLSB)

tomb. Cave or rock-hewn chamber owned by the family. After a corpse decomposed, bones were often moved to make room for another corpse. (TLSB)

8:33 *As soon as Gideon died*. Gideon instilled no lasting change in the hearts of his people. (TLSB)

Baals. See notes on 2:11, 13. (CSB)

Baal-Berith. Means “lord of the covenant”; the same deity is called El-Berith (“god of the covenant”) in 9:46. There was a temple dedicated to him (see 9:4) in Shechem. The word “covenant” in his name probably refers to a solemn treaty that bound together a league of Canaanite cities whose people worshiped him as their god. Ironically, Shechem (v. 31), near Mount Ebal, was the site at which Joshua had twice renewed the Lord’s covenant with Israel after they had entered Canaan (Jos 8:30–35; 24:25–27). See also note on 2:11. (CSB)

“Lord of the covenant.” The Israelites made a covenant with the lord Baal, but Baal was not the Lord who had made a covenant with them. Though Gideon was not directly responsible for their return to the Baals, his ephod encouraged idolatry and superstition. (TLSB)

8:35 *all the good*. Celebrates Gideon’s leadership, which could have done the people more good if loyalties had endured. However, the chaotic condition left by Gideon’s polygamy and idolatry was directly responsible for the disturbing events with his son Abimelech (ch 9). (TLSB)

8:29–35 Despite military success, prestige, and wealth, Gideon’s judgeship brings Israel little lasting good. One of his many sons will now seek to gain the crown Gideon ceremoniously rejected. Career accomplishments and material wealth may be overshadowed by foolish choices and unrestrained ambition. What matters is not what people think about us but what God has declared about us. Christ’s forgiveness pardons even the worst of our failures, and we become new creatures, eager to do good. • “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps 51:10). Then I will serve Your people with true honor and humility. Amen. (TLSB)