

# Judges

## Chapter 8

### *Gideon Defeats Zebah and Zalmunna*

Then the men of Ephraim said to him, “What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?” And they accused him fiercely. 2 And he said to them, “What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer? 3 God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. What have I been able to do in comparison with you?” Then their anger against him subsided when he said this. 4 And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing. 5 So he said to the men of Succoth, “Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.” 6 And the officials of Succoth said, “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?” 7 So Gideon said, “Well then, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers.” 8 And from there he went up to Penuel, and spoke to them in the same way, and the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered. 9 And he said to the men of Penuel, “When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower.” 10 Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about 15,000 men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East, for there had fallen 120,000 men who drew the sword. 11 And Gideon went up by the way of the tent dwellers east of Nobah and Jogbehah and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. 12 And Zebah and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and he threw all the army into a panic. 13 Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. 14 And he captured a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men. 15 And he came to the men of Succoth and said, “Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, ‘Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?’” 16 And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson. 17 And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city. 18 Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, “Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor?” They answered, “As you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king.” 19 And he said, “They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you.” 20 So he said to Jether his firstborn, “Rise and kill them!” But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man. 21 Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength.” And Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels.

**8:1** *men of Ephraim.* 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. 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 anger... 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** *that we 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** *Penuel.* 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** *rise 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** Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.” **23** Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you.” **24** And Gideon said to them, “Let me make a request of you: every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil.” (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) **25** And they answered, “We will willingly give them.” And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil. **26** And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels<sup>[b]</sup> of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were around the necks of their camels. **27** And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. **28** So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more. And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon.

**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. (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)

**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)

#### *The Death of Gideon*

**29 Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house. 30 Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. 31 And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. 32 And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, at Ophrah of the Abiezrites. 33 As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god. 34 And the people of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side, 35 and they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.**

**8:29** *Jerub-Baal.* 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. (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)

*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). (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)