

### Gideon Pursues the Defeated Midianites

#### Judges 8:1-21

Judges 8:1-21 - *“Now the men of Ephraim said to him, “Why have you done this to us by not calling us when you went to fight with the Midianites?” And they reprimanded him sharply.*

<sup>2</sup> *So 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 vintage of Abiezer?”* <sup>3</sup> *God has delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. And what was I able to do in comparison with you?”* Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that.

<sup>4</sup> *When Gideon came to the Jordan, he and the three hundred men who were with him crossed over, exhausted but still in pursuit.* <sup>5</sup> *Then 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 Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian.”* <sup>6</sup> *And the leaders of Succoth said, “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?”*

<sup>7</sup> *So Gideon said, “For this cause, when the LORD has delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers!”* <sup>8</sup> *Then he went up from there to Penuel and spoke to them in the same way. And the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered.* <sup>9</sup> *So he also spoke to the men of Penuel, saying, “When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!”*

<sup>10</sup> *Now Zebah and Zalmunna were at Karkor, and their armies with them, about fifteen thousand, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East; for one hundred and twenty thousand men who drew the sword had fallen.* <sup>11</sup> *Then Gideon went up by the road of those who dwell in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah; and he attacked the army while the camp felt secure.* <sup>12</sup> *When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them; and he took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army.*

<sup>13</sup> *Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from battle, from the Ascent of Heres.* <sup>14</sup> *And he caught a young man of the men of Succoth and interrogated him; and he wrote down for him the leaders of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men.* <sup>15</sup> *Then he came to the men of Succoth and said, “Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you ridiculed me, saying, ‘Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your weary men?’”* <sup>16</sup> *And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth.* <sup>17</sup> *Then he tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.*

<sup>18</sup> *And he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, “What kind of men were they whom you killed at Tabor?”* So they answered, *“As you are, so were they; each one resembled the son of a king.”*

<sup>19</sup> *Then he said, “They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if you had let them live, I would not kill you.”* <sup>20</sup> *And he said to Jether his firstborn, “Rise, kill them!”* But the youth would not draw his sword; for he was afraid, because he was still a youth.

<sup>21</sup> *So Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Rise yourself, and kill us; for as a man is, so is his strength.”* So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments that were on their camels’ necks.”

## Background Notes

Judges 7 is the account of the amazing defeat of Midianites, who had oppressed Israel for seven years. Gideon's army was outnumbered more than 450 to 1, and had few weapons, but they overwhelmingly defeated the Midianites. How was this possible? It was possible because the LORD was with Gideon, and with God all things are possible - then and today.

Judges 8 is the record of Gideon's pursuit of the Midianites who were trying to escape across the Jordan River and run south to the land of Midian. First Gideon summoned the men from the tribe of Ephraim to cut off all the escape routes along that part of the Jordan River. This operation was quite successful. In fact, the men of Ephraim captured Oreb and Zeeb, two princes of the Midianites, who were probably military leaders as well (Judges 7). Meanwhile, Gideon and his faithful 300 men crossed the Jordan and were heading south in pursuit of the Midianite soldiers who had managed to escape across the Jordan River. *"When Gideon came to the Jordan, he and the three hundred men who were with him crossed over, exhausted but still in pursuit" (v4).*

After a big disappointment at the towns of Succoth and Penuel (we'll talk about that in our Doctrinal Point), Gideon closed in on the escaping Midianites. Using another surprise attack, they captured the two kings of Midian. Apparently these two Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, had killed Gideon's two brothers. Verses 18-19: *"And he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, 'What kind of men were they whom you killed at Tabor?'" So they answered, "As you are, so were they; each one resembled the son of a king." Then he said, "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if you had let them live, I would not kill you" (v18-19).*

Gideon asked his son, Jether, who was probably a teenager at the time, to avenge these murders by killing the two Midianite kings. However, his son was afraid, and the kings said to Gideon, *"Rise yourself, and kill us; for as a man is, so is his strength."* So Gideon killed Zebah and Zalmunna and took the crescent ornaments that were on their camels' necks. The kings didn't want to be humiliated by having a young boy kill them. Furthermore, they didn't want the possibility of a slow painful, death from a bungled execution done by a youth. So Gideon granted their wish and killed these two kings of Midian himself.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Christian leaders must press on, even though there are many disappointments.

Gideon had several disappointments while he was doing the Lord's work in pursuing the Midianites. First, there was **the disappointment of internal bickering**: *"The men of Ephraim said to him, 'Why have you not called us when you went to fight with the Midianites?'" And they reprimanded him sharply" (v1).* The men of Ephraim were miffed that they weren't part of the main battle, and were brought in only for the "mopping up" operations. What a disappointment for Gideon! Time was of the essence, and the men of Ephraim were holding up the work of the Lord by their bickering!

Does that sound familiar? That would never happen here in **your** fellowship, would it?! Everyone in your fellowship focuses on the “big picture” - right? But dissension and bickering **can** happen in any fellowship: bickering about the time for services, or about the leadership, or about what color to paint the fellowship hall (etc., etc.). It happens. Christian leaders must press on, in spite of many disappointments.

Then there was **the disappointment of lack of support**. Gideon and his men were exhausted in doing the work of the Lord (v4), and Gideon asked the people of both Succoth and Penuel for some bread for his weary troops. But the people of both towns refused! In fact, the town leaders of Succoth mocked Gideon’s efforts (v6)! What a disappointment! This was really hard to take. Gideon and his men were risking their lives to save those people from the threat of the Midianites, and they refused to support him. They were afraid that Gideon would not be successful in his efforts and the Midianites would return and take revenge. Thanks a lot for that vote of confidence! Again, does this sound familiar?

We, too, will experience disappointments as we press on to do the work of the Lord. Many years ago when I was leading a youth group at our local church, I asked the parents to support the program - but some of the parents refused to support our program! What a disappointment! We were working hard in our spare time to help their kids grow in their faith and develop in their lives as Christians - and some of the parents wouldn’t even help! I felt like saying, “Give me a break!!”

Some of you in leadership positions have experienced similar disappointments, but Gideon pressed on. And so must you! Christian leaders must press on, even though they will encounter many disappointments.

## **2. Christian leaders must discipline others, even though it is not very pleasant.**

When Gideon returned from his victory over the Midianites, he took action against the disloyal towns of Succoth and Penuel. This was not personal revenge. It was discipline for refusing to help carry out the Lord’s command to clear the enemy from the land. Remember that God had commanded **all of Israel** to fight and eliminate any and all enemies that would keep Israel from full occupation of the land. So the people Succoth and Penuel (who were from the tribe of Gad) had the responsibility - and a golden opportunity - to obey the word of the Lord by supporting Gideon. But they disobeyed, and they had to be disciplined.

Some commentators have found fault with Gideon for meting out such harsh discipline, including the death penalty for the men of Penuel, and maybe some at Succoth as well. It’s important to recognize that the Bible never explicitly condones Gideon’s harsh discipline, but it doesn’t condemn it either. In any case, Gideon was justified in disciplining these people who wouldn’t support the obvious work of the Lord. And discipline, regardless of the harshness, is never pleasant.

Discipline is one of the most unpleasant activities that we, as Bible College faculty, sometimes have to carry out – for example, expelling a student as a means of discipline. Discipline is never pleasant, but it must be done. Parents must discipline children. Church leaders must discipline the flock. Christian leaders must discipline others, even though it’s not pleasant.

## **Practical Application**

### **Remember - “a soft answer turns away wrath.”**

That title is a quote from Proverbs 15:1 “*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*” Gideon practiced this biblical principle. Where do we see this? When the men of Ephraim complained and bickered, Gideon could have read them the riot act - but he didn't. He gave them a soft answer. “*So he said to them, “What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?”* (v2).

By using the phrase “the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim,” Gideon meant that the men of Ephraim had captured the Midianite princes Oreb and Zeeb. They were captured after the main battle, just as “the gleanings” of a harvest are the leftovers that are gathered from the fields and vines after the main harvest is complete.

The “gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim” was better than the “vintage [or full harvest] of Abiezer.” In other words, the capture after the battle was better than the main battle fought by Gideon (Gideon was an Abiezrite - Judges 6:11). What a great and diplomatic and “soft” answer! Gideon was a peacemaker. He certainly qualified for the Nobel Peace Prize!

What would we have said to the complainers and bickerers of Ephraim, who were riled up and ready for an internal fight? Chances are we would have responded emotionally, and at best, we would have ended up in an angry shouting match while the enemy escaped to fight another day.

There are lessons here for us. There are so many applications! Remember – “a soft answer turns away wrath.”