

July 24/25, 2021

**The Danger of Success**  
*Messes. Choices. Faithful God Series*  
**Judges 8:1-35**  
Pastor Ryan Harmon

As we've been working through the book of Judges this summer, I've been reminded again and again just how tragic it is to watch this cycle that we see Israel go through. Repentance, calling out to God, followed by, eventually, rebellion. It's tragic to watch. It's tragic to watch a group of people do this. It's tragic to watch on an individual level too. I've been looking at our world and thinking about how tragic it is when people that we have looked up to, maybe even people that we would call a personal hero, fall. It's tragic, isn't it? It's devastating when that happens. Of course, in our world, it seems like it happens all too often. You don't have to watch the news very long until you learn about another person that had admiration from everyone, and then, eventually, something was revealed that kind of showed the world that who they were publicly was not the same person that they were privately. It's tragic when heroes fall.

Now, of course, I think there's nothing more tragic in this whole realm than when that happens within the people of God. When that happens in the church, it's particularly devastating and we have, unfortunately, way too many stories like that recently. The one I've been thinking of recently that really impacted me, not because he was a hero—but for some he would be considered a hero—is what we've learned about Ravi Zacharias. A man of such great faith, who impacted so many, and then we learn that he was not who we thought he was. It's tragic when heroes fall.

Many people consider Gideon a hero. Often, we present him that way: a hero of the faith. And his life makes an interesting study. Of all the judges that we will look at throughout this series, Gideon's life is the one that we know the most about. More words in Scripture, more chapters in the book of Judges, are given to Gideon's story. We know more details than we know about any other judge. We learned about him for the past two weeks. This man that was unassuming, that you wouldn't think would become a judge of Israel, but God takes him, and God does something incredible.

And now as we come to Chapter 8, we are coming to the close of Gideon's life and, unfortunately, we sit on the edge of a tragedy. It is tragic when heroes fall. But surely God intends for us to learn something, even within that fall. That's what we're going to talk about this morning. If you have your Bibles, open with me to Judges 8.

We're going to be looking at the end of Gideon's life and, of course, we're going to be picking up right where Tim left off last week. So, I want to give a bit of context and talk about what we've looked at these past two weeks. You'll remember, two weeks ago, Jeff introduced us to Gideon, this unassuming, unlikely judge, a person that, from a human point of view, you would never select to be a judge of Israel. But, because of God's call and God's empowerment, he did become a judge because God was with him. And the one who went from asking a question, "Who am I?" to realizing whose he was, stepped out in faith and God called him to incredible things.

And then, we turned last week to Judges, chapter 7, and we learned that the Midianites, this massive, oppressive army, was camped out in Israel, right in the heart of Israel, in the Valley of Jezreel, threatening the Israelites. And God called Gideon to lead an army against them, an impossible task. Israel, as it was, was outnumbered four-to-one, but God looked at that and said, “You know what? Those odds are a little too good for Me. Let’s winnow that army down.” And so He winnowed the army down to 300 men. Three hundred against 135,000. And those Israelites set out, not with swords, but with torches and with pitchers and with trumpets, a strategy that, of course, makes no human sense. And they blew the trumpets, and they broke the pitchers, and they held the torches in the air, and Midian was thrown into confusion and chaos. They turned their swords on one another, and the rout began, and the rout was all God’s doing. Israel did not lift a sword. It was just an incredible scene—an incredible scene, brought about by God. And then, as Tim finished last week, we learned the chase was on. Midian was fleeing and Gideon and his 300 were in pursuit. They called some of the other clans of Israel, the tribes of Israel, to come and help cut them off. And they called Ephraim last, and said, “Come, stop them before Midian moves too far south.” Ephraim did just that, and that’s right where we pick up in Chapter 8, Verse 1:

**Then the men of Ephraim said to him, (that’s Gideon) “What is this thing you have done to us, not calling us when you went to fight against Midian? And they contended with him vigorously. But 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? God has given the leaders of Midian, Oreb, and Zeeb into your hands; and what was I able to do in comparison with you?” Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that. (\*NASB, Judges 8:1-3)**

So, this is so interesting. We left off last week with a chase; a pursuit had begun. And so, you would think chapter 8 would start with this pursuit of Midian, and we’d learn how the chase is going. But, instead, the author of Judges takes us to a different conflict—an internal conflict—Israelite in conflict with an Israelite. Ephraim was a large tribe, a powerful tribe in Israel. And Gideon called them last to come and help in this battle with the Midians. Ephraim knew that when you go and fight an army like the Midians, there are spoils, there is plunder—plunder that comes along with a victory. And what Ephraim is thinking right now is, “We were the last one to get called; we had the smallest part in the whole battle; are we going to get the goodies that come with victory? When Midian goes down, are we going to get plunder?” It’s a selfish ask—ultimately Ephraim concerned about themselves. And I’m sure, for Gideon, this was an exasperating thing, right? They’re on pursuit, in pursuit of this massive army and yet, within the ranks of Israel itself, there is dissension.

Now, part of what we see in Gideon’s response is an incredibly shrewd and crafty response by this young leader. He turns to them and basically says, “Look at you. You’re Ephraim. You are big, bad Ephraim. I am little, tiny Gideon. How can you possibly be jealous of us?” He says the gleanings of Ephraim—so what’s left over after the harvest—is so much bigger than what my little clan has when we do the entire harvest. How could you possibly be upset?” This would be like me looking at my son at Christmas—my five-year-old—and saying, “You know what? Jacob has more gifts than me. That is no fair.” It’s ridiculous, right? And Gideon is basically saying, “Look at you. You’re asking a ridiculous thing.” He’s essentially flattering them. “Look how powerful you are!” And it works. Ephraim relents. They say, “You know what, we are pretty powerful.” The flattery works, but this little conflict shows us a little problem that’s growing within the ranks

of Israel and that Gideon is going to have to handle, and that is conflict and disunity within Israel itself. But the flattery works; the internal conflict is avoided, and the pursuit of Midian continues to the Jordan River and then south. Now, what we know is that Midian turned east, and they were heading towards the wilderness. And so, that's right where we pick up in verse 4:

**Then Gideon and the 300 men who were with him came to the Jordan *and* crossed over, weary yet pursuing. He said to the men of Succoth, “Please give loaves of bread to the people who are following me, for they are weary, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.” The leaders of Succoth said, “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your army?” (Vs. 4-6)**

So, Gideon and his men leave, and they begin to pursue the Midianites again. They come to a town that is an Israelite town, a town called Succoth. And once again we see conflict and disunity within the ranks of Israel. Gideon comes to them. I'm sure, once again, he was overwhelmed, exasperated, and he's asking something that is very normal to ask. “Hey, we're fighting on your behalf. We're driving the oppressors out of Israel. Can you give us a little food, give us a little water?” And the men of Succoth said, “Hey, not yet. You haven't finished the job. We don't see the kings here in your midst; you've got some work to do still.” And, ultimately, their response shows us a little bit about what the men, the leaders of Succoth, were fearing. They wanted to make sure that, if the Midianites won, they hadn't backed the wrong army. They'd have to pay, so they weren't quite ready yet to give their allegiance to Gideon. They wanted to hold out, and so they said, “Show us the kings; then we'll give you the food.” So, once again, we see conflict internally in Israel.

It's a particularly brutal line when it says, “The hands of the kings are not yet in your hand, are they?” It was customary in this day—this is a brutal time—and it was customary that, when you defeated an army, you'd cut off the hands of those you defeated so you could have an accurate count. Just brutal! But, essentially, it's a way of saying to them, “You haven't finished the job, Gideon, and we're not quite ready to back you.”

So the question is: how would this leader of Israel, how would this judge respond, this judge that is tasked with delivering the people of Israel? Would he rally them? Would he encourage them? Would he say, “Hey, don't forget who God is?” How will he respond? Verse 7:

**Gideon said, “All right, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will thrash your bodies with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers.”**

Now, I don't know how you'd respond in that moment, but Gideon is obviously fed up. And what we see is the meek and timid Gideon of chapter 6—the shrewd Gideon who handled the Ephraimites—is showing a few signs of being an angry leader in this moment. Those words **I will thrash you** basically means, “I'll scourge you; I'll whip you, probably to the point of death.” Then, he continues. After giving that response to the men of Succoth, he continues to march up the hill towards where the Midianites are. Verse 8:

**He went up from there to Penuel and spoke similarly to them; and the men of Penuel answered him just as the men of Succoth had answered. So he spoke also to the men of Penuel, saying, “When I return safely, I will tear down this tower.” (Vs. 8-9)**

So, same interaction...an angrier response...more violent response from Gideon. The tower was probably the primary defensive tower for that city. Of course it would be devastating if that defensive tower was gone. So, the men of Penuel get a more violent response from Gideon. And we have to stop at this moment and just ask ourselves: “What is going on in Gideon? What started with a meek and humble leader, now certainly seems, in some way, that he’s a borderline tyrant, a violent leader, a threatening leader. And of course, if you’re like me, you might resonate a little bit with Gideon’s response, right? Like, part of you wants to say, “Hey, help us out here.” Maybe these guys had it coming to them. Maybe the men and the leaders of Succoth and Penuel, they had it coming to them. But we can’t forget the task that Gideon had embraced. He’s the judge of Israel. He’s the leader of Israel. He’s supposed to deliver Israel, not start to act like an oppressor himself. What’s going on with Gideon? There is a turn, and he is angry, and anger always seems justified. But, in this case, it’s completely out of place.

I think, as we think about this scene, we can’t lose sight of two things. First, these are not Gideon’s enemies. These are his very own countrymen. These are Israelites. Not only that, but these are Israelites that have not benefitted from just watching what God did up in that Valley of Jezreel. They haven’t seen God rout the Midians. They haven’t seen the miraculous way the Israelites were delivered, and this army was, essentially, defeated and put on the run. They haven’t seen any of that. They are fearful. They are timid. They look a lot like Gideon did in chapter 6. These aren’t his enemies; these are his countrymen, and they’re afraid of the army. They haven’t benefitted from seeing God do the miraculous things He just did.

The second thing, though, I think about as I look at this passage, is: what, up to this point, has Gideon done? Has he done anything? It is God that routed the Midians. It is not Gideon that did anything. He placed his confidence in God. He responded to God’s call, but God provided the victory. And, yet Gideon is indignant. It almost starts to feel like maybe Gideon is looking at God’s success, God’s victory, and starting to think *he* brought about the victory himself. He’s indignant because it almost feels as though, “Hey, give me a little bit of respect here.” It seems as though he’s becoming a prideful tyrant, taking God’s success and calling it his own.

So, back to the action. Gideon and his men are *weary yet pursuing*. I love that line. They continue this march up into the hills. Frustrations are mounting. Tension is rising. It seems that Gideon’s pride is also on the rise. Verse 10, we go back to the Midians:

**Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor, and their armies with them, about 15,000 men, all who were left of the entire army of the sons of the east; for the fallen were 120,000 swordsmen. Gideon went up by the way of those who lived in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah and attacked the camp when the camp was unsuspecting. When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army. (Vs. 10-12)**

So, what’s clear is the Midians have been routed by God: 135,000 soldiers strong to start out with; now they’re down to 15,000; 120,000 swordsmen destroyed by God. And what God began, now

Gideon and his men are about to finish. And they take a route that is basically a nomadic trail that the nomads would follow, and it was an unlikely route, so they were able to surprise the Midians. And so they come on the Midians in the camp, and they finish the rout and they capture the kings, and it seems as though the oppressors have been defeated.

And now, this is the moment throughout Judges when we would expect the author to say, “The Midians were defeated; Israel had peace in the land, and Gideon lived such-and-such number of years,” and we’d turn to the next moment. But that’s not what happens here. We’re only about halfway through this story, and it seems as though God has some things that He wants to say to us through these extra details that are included. So, we turn to Verse 13:

**Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. And he captured a youth from Succoth and questioned him. Then *the youth* wrote down for him the princes of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men. He came to the men of Succoth and said, “Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, concerning 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 weary?’” He took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and he disciplined the men of Succoth with them. He tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city. (Vs. 13-17)**

Gideon has not forgotten the mistreatment that he felt from these leaders of Succoth and Penuel. He hasn’t forgotten, and what began as what seems like a job to drive out the oppressors, has now become what feels a lot like a vendetta. Gideon will get his revenge. And so he returns to these leaders in Succoth and Penuel, and it says he **disciplined** them. Make no mistake, it sounds as though he executed them. If he did just discipline them, it was a scourging that would have left a mark. This was a violent act. And then he goes to Penuel; he tears down this tower, and then he kills the men of the city. What began as a fight to drive out Israel’s enemies has now become a vendetta for Gideon. And we can’t lose sight of the fact that what we have in these short few verses is we have a judge of Israel violently attacking Israelites. What is going on with Gideon?

**Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, “What kind of men *were* they whom you killed at Tabor?” And they said, “They were like you, each one resembling the son of a king.” (Feels as though the kings are trying to flatter Gideon a little bit.) He said, “They *were* my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if only you had let them live, I would not kill you.” So he said to Jether his firstborn, “Rise, kill them.” But the youth did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a youth. Then, Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Rise up yourself and fall on us; for as the man, so is his strength.” So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments which were on their camels’ necks. (Vs. 18-21)**

So, what was hinted at with the men of Succoth and Penuel is now confirmed. This has become a personal journey of revenge for Gideon. We learn that his family was murdered, murdered by the hands of these Midian kings. And so Gideon turns and continues what feels like a bloodthirsty quest to get his revenge. As I was studying this, I couldn’t help but remember that phrase: “Vengeance is mine saith the Lord.” But here it feels as though it’s Gideon’s vengeance that will be done. So Gideon continues, and what we see in his act of turning to his son and asking his son

to finish this brutal murder, tells us a little bit about where his mind was, where his heart was. The text tells us twice that the son—his son Jether—was still a youth. Two times! And you have to look at Gideon and say, “What has gotten into you? You’re so blinded. You’re so clouded at this point.” And so, he finishes off the kings himself. And now we must wonder, now that the job is done—Midian has been completely defeated, kings killed—how will the people of Israel respond to their judge, their judge that just wiped out the leaders of two Israelite towns? Verse 22:

**Then, the men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son’s son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.” But Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you.” Yet Gideon said to them, “I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil.” (For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) They said, “We will surely give *them*.” So they spread out a garment, and every one of them threw an earring there from his spoil. The weight of the gold earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple robes which *were* on the kings of Midian, and besides the neck bands that *were* on their camels’ necks. Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household. (Vs. 22-27)**

So, make no mistake. This is the climactic moment of Gideon’s story. We’ve seen Gideon’s great ascent and now we see his descent. And as the leader goes, so goes the people, and we see the beginning of this tragic spiral that is going to repeat itself among the people of Israel. We start with them. They turn to him, and they say, “You become our king. Rule over us!” They know that only God can appoint their king. They also know that God Himself is their King. “Rule over us,” they say. And we’re going to learn next week that, in some ways, they get their wish, and we’re going to see how that goes. Gideon’s response is just right. It is 100% accurate. It is aligned with what God intends. He says, “No, I won’t rule over you. The Lord will rule over you. God is Israel’s king, not Gideon.” His statement is 100% accurate, the right profession.

But then Verse 24 starts with this little word: **Yet**, and what follows after that *yet* is Gideon begins to take on all the trappings of a king. He won’t take on the title, but he certainly is willing to play the part. He has Israel give him a portion of the spoil. Essentially, he collects taxes, gathers gold from all of them—1,700 shekels—which is 42 pounds of gold—a million dollars in today’s currency. He gathers the robes, these robes from the kings. You’ve got to imagine that’s just to use them himself. And then, to top it all off, he creates an **ephod**. Now an ephod was a priestly garment, basically that the people of Israel would use to kind of ask God questions, to request of God, and to discern what God’s will is. And it was intended that only the priests should wear it. We don’t know whether that was Gideon’s intent, whether he was trying to make his home city the focus of worship or whether he intended that ephod to be put on idols. We don’t know for sure, but what we do know is that ephod became a stumbling block, and Israel began to worship it rather than God. And it caused Gideon and Israel and his entire household to stumble!

We opened by talking about what a tragic thing it is to watch heroes fall. And this is not how we wanted Gideon’s story to end, is it? He is a complex character. Incredible steps of faith, but then also tragic missteps. His life is a mixed bag, and we’ll see that in what follows. Verse 28:

**So Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not lift up their heads anymore. And the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon. Then Jerubbaal (that is Gideon's name) the son of Joash went and lived in his own house. Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives. His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. And Gideon the son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. (Vs. 28-32)**

So, on the one hand, peace. Midian is defeated. That is good. God used Gideon and his faith to defeat these oppressors of Israel. Seven years they'd been oppressing Israel. And through that step of faith, God used Gideon, the judge, to overcome these oppressors, and forty years of peace ensued. It's going to be the last time Israel has peace like that. We want to look at Gideon; we want to emulate that faith in God, believe that, with God, anything is possible. The impossible becomes possible.

But, again, we say that Gideon's life is a bit of a mixed bag. We see these steps of faith, but then we also see these tragic missteps, one after another. And for me, it serves as a reminder that, as God's people, we can never place our faith in a leader. Our faith has got to be in God and God alone. God raises up leaders, and that is a good thing, but our faith, our trust, our confidence can never be in that leader to bring about a delivery that only God can bring about. We see that in what follows in Gideon's life. We said just a second ago that he had the right answer. He wouldn't take on the title of king. But he certainly was willing to act as the king. And we see it again in this short summary. We see all the trappings of a monarchy. Gideon had many sons—seventy! He had many wives, sounds a lot like a king. He had concubines, all indications that Gideon was willing to play the king even though he wouldn't take on the title. And if there's any doubt about his willingness, all we have to do is look at the name of his son: Abimelech. The name literally means, "My father is king." Not so subtle. A tragic end. Great steps of faith, but a tragic end, and then we see the beginning of that cycle that we see throughout Judges. The people of Israel first calling out to God, but then slowly descending and rebelling against Him.

**Then it came about, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god. Thus the sons of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel. (Vs. 33-35)**

End of the chapter. It is tragic when heroes fall. But surely God has something for us to notice, something for us to learn, even in those failures. So, as we sum up Gideon's story, as we wrap it all up, what can we learn from his life, from this last chapter of his life? I think the first thing that we can just be reminded of again and again—I just named it—but we don't place our faith in leaders. God raises up leaders. We are thankful for that, but if they ever become the object of our trust or our confidence, we are on a path to tragic failure. God is the source of our trust. He is the object of our trust.

But there's more. As we look at Gideon's life, I think there is a cautionary tale for us about the dangers of success. As individuals, yes, we want to make sure we remember we don't place our

confidence in leaders. But when we think about our own life, I think there is a typical trend that all of us walk through when we start to have some success. We start to think that success was brought about by us. I'm sure you resonate with that. It seems like that's the human course of events, right? That's what our heart does. We pursue success; we chase after it. You have a goal and you're running after it. You're pleading with God, "Help me!" And then you reach it, and it seems like it's just about one or two days later that, suddenly, the fervor of passion for God starts to fade and we start to forget God. We start to forget that it was God that brings the victory.

I'm sure that some of you in here today, you are probably riding high. It's a good time. Things are going well. Maybe you invested in Zoom stock over the past year, right? It's a good year. Maybe things are going well with your family. Maybe things are going great with your job. It just feels like success after success. If that's you, that is great. But let us not forget God. In the midst of success, let us not be a people that forgets our God—that He is the one that brings success.

Maybe that's not you. Maybe you're lowly. Maybe things aren't going well. Maybe your family is in disarray. Maybe your job is not going well. Maybe you're looking for a job, and you're pleading with God. You're asking Him to show up. "Deliver me from this situation." And that is the exact right posture to have. We believe, by faith, that God will do it. He will bring us into pleasant places. But when He does, let us not forget God. So often our tendency is that we start to think *we* are the heroes. I think Gideon started to feel like he was the hero, but God is the hero. God is the focus. God is the victorious one. He is the deliverer. And so, Church, let us never forget that. Whether things are going well, whether things are going poorly, let us be people that stir one another up to remember our God—to not forget our God is the victor. He is the one that brings about the deliverance.

As we come together to know Jesus, become more like Him, and help others do the same, let us remind one another of our God, our great God that delivers us in ways we could never deliver ourselves. And let us never stop praising our King Jesus who has delivered us from the power of sin and death that, exactly when we were helpless, He did what only He can do by dying on the cross and freeing us from the power of sin and death. Let us never forget our God.

Will you join me as we pray?

*Lord Jesus, You are our King. You are the only one in whom we can assuredly place our confidence. It is You, and You alone. So, Lord, direct our hearts. Help us to remember that You are the only one who is strong enough, who is sturdy enough, the only one that is worthy of our trust. We praise You for doing for us, what we could never do for ourselves, by delivering us from sin and death, that we might live with You. We pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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