

CHAPTER 8

This chapter gives us a further account of Gideon's victory over the Midianites, with the residue of the story of his life and government.

- I.** Gideon prudently pacifies the offended Ephraimites (v. 1-3).
- II.** He bravely pursues the flying Midianites (v. 4, 10-12).
- III.** He justly chastises the insolence of the men of Succoth and Penuel, who basely abused him (v. 5-9), and were reckoned with for it (v. 13-17).
- IV.** He honourably slays the two kings of Midian (v. 18-21).
- V.** After all this he modestly declines the government of Israel (v. 22, 23).
- VI.** He foolishly gratified the superstitious humour of his people by setting up an ephod in his own city, which proved a great snare (v. 24-27).
- VII.** He kept the country quiet for forty years (v. 28).
- VIII.** He died in honour, and left a numerous family behind him (v. 29-32).
- IX.** Both he and his God were soon forgotten by ungrateful Israel (v. 33-35).

<ORRE> JUDGES 8:1-3

GIDEON PACIFIES THE EPHRAIMITES

No sooner were the Midianites, the common enemy, subdued, than, through the violence of some hot spirits, the children of Israel were ready to quarrel among themselves; an unhappy spark was struck, which, if Gideon had not with a great deal of wisdom and grace extinguished immediately, might have broken out into a flame of fatal consequence. The Ephraimites, when they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon as general, instead of congratulating him upon his successes and addressing

him with thanks for his great services, as they ought to have done, picked a quarrel with him and grew very hot upon it.

I. Their accusation was very peevish and unreasonable: *Why didst thou not call us when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites?* v. 1. Ephraim was brother to Manasseh, Gideon's tribe, and had the pre-eminence in Jacob's blessing and in Moses's, and therefore was very jealous of Manasseh, lest that tribe should at any time eclipse the honour of theirs. Hence we find Manasseh against Ephraim and Ephraim against Manasseh, ^{<3021>}Isaiah 9:21. *A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city, and their contentions are as the bars of a castle,* ^{<3089>}Proverbs 18:19. But how unjust was their quarrel with Gideon! They were angry that he did not send for them to begin the attack upon Midian, as well as to follow the blow. Why were they not called to lead the van? The post of honour, they thought, belonged to them. But,

1. Gideon was called of God, and must act as he directed; he neither took the honour to himself nor did he himself dispose of honours, but left it to God to do all. So that the Ephraimites, in this quarrel, reflected upon the divine conduct; and what was Gideon that they *murmured against him?*

2. Why did not the Ephraimites offer themselves willingly to the service? They knew the enemy was in their country, and had heard of the forces that were raising to oppose them, to which they ought to have joined themselves, in zeal for the common cause, though they had not a formal invitation. Those seek themselves more than God that stand upon a point of honour to excuse themselves from doing real service to God and their generation. In Deborah's time there was a root of Ephraim, ^{<0514>}Judges 5:14. Why did not this appear now? The case itself called them, they needed not wait for a call from Gideon.

3. Gideon had saved their credit in not calling them. If he had sent for them, no doubt many of them would have gone back with the faint-hearted, or been dismissed with the lazy, slothful, and intemperate; so that by not calling them he prevented the putting of those slurs upon them. Cowards will seem valiant when the danger is over, but those consult their reputation who try not their courage when danger is near.

II. Gideon's answer was very calm and peaceable, and was intended not so much to justify himself as to please and pacify them, v. 2, 3. He answers them,

1. With a great deal of meekness and temper. He did not resent the affront, nor answer anger with anger, but mildly reasoned the case with them, and he won as true honour by this command which he had over his own passion as by his victory over the Midianites. *He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty.*

2. With a great deal of modesty and humility, magnifying their performances above his own: *Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim, who picked up the stragglers of the enemy, and cut off those of them that escaped, better than the vintage of Abiezer* — a greater honour to them, and better service to the country, than the first attack Gideon made upon them? The destruction of the church's enemies is compared to a vintage, ^{<6418>}Revelation 14:18. In this he owns their gleanings better than his gatherings. The improving of a victory is often more honourable, and of greater consequence, than the winning of it; in this they had signaled themselves, and their own courage and conduct, or, rather, God had dignified them; for thought, to magnify their achievements, he is willing to diminish his own performances, yet he will not take any flowers from God's crown to adorn theirs with: "*God has delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, and a great slaughter has been made of the enemy by your numerous hosts, and what was I able to do with 300 men, in comparison of you and your brave exploits?*" Gideon stands here a very great example of self-denial, and this instance shows us,

(1.) That humility of deportment is the best way to remove envy. It is true even right works are often envied, ^{<2004>}Ecclesiastes 4:4. Yet they are not so apt to be so when those who do them appear not to be proud of them. Those are malignant indeed who seek to cast down from their excellency those that humble and abase themselves,

(2.) It is likewise the surest method of ending strife, for *only by pride comes contention*, ^{<2130>}Proverbs 13:10.

(3.) Humility is most amiable and admirable in the midst of great attainments and advancements. Gideon's conquests did greatly set off his condescensions.

(4.) It is the proper act of humility to *esteem others better than ourselves, and in honour to prefer one another.*

Now what was the issue of this controversy? The Ephraimites had *chidden with him sharply* (v. 1), forgetting the respect due to their general and one whom God had honoured, and giving vent to their passion in a very indecent liberty of speech, a certain sign of a weak and indefensible cause. Reason runs low when the chiding flies high. But Gideon's *soft answer turned away their wrath*, ~~<ORR>~~ Proverbs 15:1. *Their anger was abated towards him*, v. 3. It is intimated that they retained some resentment, but he prudently overlooked it and let it cool by degrees. Very great and good men must expect to have their patience tried by the unkindnesses and follies even of those they serve and must not think it strange.

~~<ORR>~~ JUDGES 8:4-17

GIDEON PURSUES THE MIDIANITES

In these verses we have,

I. Gideon, as a valiant general, pursuing the remaining Midianites, and bravely following his blow. A very great slaughter was made of the enemy at first: *120,000 men that drew the sword*, v. 10. Such a terrible execution did they make among themselves, and so easy a prey were they to Israel. But, it seems, the two kings of Midian, being better provided than the rest for an escape, with 15,000 men got over Jordan before the passes could be secured by the Ephraimites, and made towards their own country. Gideon thinks he does not fully execute his commission to save Israel if he let them escape. He is not content to chase them out of the country, but he will *chase them out of the world*, ~~<ORR>~~ Job 18:18. This resolution is here pushed on with great firmness, and crowned with great success.

1. His firmness was very exemplary. He effected his purpose under the greatest disadvantages and discouragements that could be.

(1.) He took none with him but his 300 men, who now laid aside their trumpets and torches, and betook themselves to their swords and spears. God had said, *By these 300 men will I save you* (~~<ORR>~~ Judges 7:7); and, confiding in that promise, Gideon kept to them only, v. 4. He expected more from 300 men, supported by a particular promise, than from so many thousands supported only by their own valour.

(2.) They were *faint, and yet pursuing*, much fatigued with what they had done, and yet eager to do more against the enemies of their country. Our spiritual warfare must thus be prosecuted with what strength we have, though we have but little; it is many a time the true Christina's case, fainting and yet pursuing.

(3.) Though he met with discouragement from those of his own people, was jeered for what he was doing, as going about what he could never accomplish, yet he went on with it. If those that should be our helpers in the way of our duty prove hindrances to us, let not this drive us off from it. Those know not how to value God's acceptance that know not how to despise the reproaches and contempts of men.

(4.) He made a very long march by *the way of those that dwelt in tents* (v. 11), either because he hoped to find them kinder to him than the men of Succoth and Penuel, that dwelt in walled towns (sometimes there is more generosity and charity found in country tents than in city palaces), or because that was a road in which he would be least expected, and therefore that way it would be the greater surprise to them. It is evident he spared no pains to complete his victory. Now he found it an advantage to have his 300 men such as could bear hunger, and thirst, and toil. It should seem, he set upon the enemy by night, as he had done before, for *the host was secure*. The security of sinners often proves their ruin, and dangers are most fatal when least feared.

2. His success was very encouraging to resolution and industry in a good cause. He routed the army (v. 11), and took the two kings prisoners, v. 12. Note, The fear of the wicked shall come upon him. Those that think to run *from the sword of the Lord and of Gideon* do but run *upon* it. If he *flee from the iron weapon, yet the bow of steel shall strike him through; for evil pursueth sinners*.

II. Here is Gideon, as a righteous judge, chastising the insolence of the disaffected Israelites, the men of Succoth and the men of Penuel, both in the tribe of Gad, on the other side Jordan.

1. Their crime was great. Gideon, with a handful of feeble folk was pursuing the common enemy, to complete the deliverance of Israel. His way led him through the city of Succoth first and afterwards of Penuel. He expected not that the magistrates should meet him in their formalities, congratulate him upon his victory, present him with the keys of their city,

and give him a treat, much less that they should send forces in to his assistance, though he was entitled to all this; but he only begs some necessary food for his soldiers that were ready to faint for want, and he does it very humbly and importunately: *Give, I pray you, loaves of bread unto the people that follow me*, v. 5. The request would have been reasonable if they had been but poor travellers in distress; but considering that they were soldiers, *called, and chose, and faithful* (⁽⁶⁶⁷⁴⁾ Revelation 17:14), men whom God had greatly honoured and to whom Israel was highly obliged, who had done great service to their country and were now doing more, — that they were conquerors, and had power to put them under contribution, — and that they were fighting God's battles and Israel's, — nothing could be more just than that their brethren should furnish them with the best provisions their city afforded. But the princes of Succoth neither *feared God nor regarded man*. For,

(1.) In contempt of God, they refused to answer the just demands of him whom God had raised up to save them, affronted him, bantered him, despised the success he had already been honoured with, despaired of the success of his present undertaking, did what they could to discourage him in prosecuting the war, and were very willing to believe that the remaining forces of Midian, which they had now seen march through their country, would be too hard for him: *Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in thy hand?* “No, nor ever will be,” so they conclude, judging by the disproportion of numbers.

(2.) The bowels of their compassion were shut up against their brethren; they were as destitute of love as they were of faith, would not give morsels of bread (so some read it) to those that were ready to perish. Were these princes? were these Israelites? unworthy either title, base and degenerate men! Surely they were worshippers of Baal, or in the interests of Midian. The men of Penuel gave the same answer to the same request, defying *the sword of the Lord and of Gideon*, v. 8.

2. The warning he gave them of the punishment of their crime was very fair.

(1.) He did not punish it immediately, because he would not lose so much time from the pursuit of the enemy that were flying from him, because he would not seem to do it in a heat of passion, and because he would do it more to their shame and confusion when he had completed his undertaking, which they thought impracticable. But,

(2.) He told them how he would punish it (v. 7, 9), to show the confidence he had of success in the strength of God, and that, if they had the least grain of grace and consideration left, they might upon second thoughts repent of their folly, humble themselves, and contrive how to atone for it, by sending after him succours and supplies, which if they had done, no doubt, Gideon would have pardoned them. God gives notice of danger, and space to repent, that sinners may *flee from the wrath to come*.

3. The warning being slighted, the punishment, though very severe, was really very just.

(1.) The princes of Succoth were first made examples. Gideon got intelligence of their number, seventy-seven men, their names, and places of abode, which were described in writing to him, v. 14. And, to their great surprise, when they thought he had scarcely overtaken the Midianites, he returned a conqueror. His 300 men were now the ministers of his justice; they secured all these princes, and brought them before Gideon, who showed them his royal captives in chains. "These are the men you thought me an unequal match for, and would give me no assistance in the pursuit of," v. 15. And he punished them with thorns and briers, but, it should seem, not unto death. With these,

[1.] He tormented their bodies, either by scourging or by rolling them in the thorns and briers; some way or other he *tore their flesh*, v. 7. Those shall have judgment without mercy that have shown no mercy. Perhaps he observed them to be soft and delicate men, who despised him and his company for their roughness and hardness, and therefore Gideon thus mortified them for their effeminacy.

[2.] He instructed their minds: With these *he taught the men of Succoth*, v. 16. The correction he gave them was intended, not for destruction, but wholesome discipline, to make them wiser and better for the future. *He made them know* (so the word is), made them know themselves and their folly, God and their duty, made them know who Gideon was, since they would not know by the success wherewith God had crowned him. Note, Many are taught with the briers and thorns of affliction that would not learn otherwise. God gives *wisdom by the rod and reproof*, *chastens and teaches*, and by correction *opens the ear to discipline*. Our blessed Saviour, though he was a Son, yet *learnt obedience by the things which he suffered*, ^{CHRIS} Hebrews 5:8. Let every *pricking brier*, and *grieving thorn*, especially when it becomes a *thorn in the flesh*, be thus interpreted, thus

improved. “By this God designs to teach me; what good lesson shall I learn?”

(2.) The doom of the men of Penuel comes next, and it should seem he used them more severely than the other, for good reason, no doubt, v. 17.

[1.] He *beat down their tower*, of which they gloried, in which they trusted, perhaps scornfully advising Gideon and his men rather to secure themselves in that than to pursue the Midianites. What men make their pride is justly by its ruin made their shame.

[2.] He *slew the men of the city*, not all, perhaps not the elders or princes, but those that had affronted him, and those only. He slew some of the men of the city that were most insolent and abusive, for terror to the rest, and *so he taught the men of Penuel*.

~~0088~~ JUDGES 8:18-21

ZEBAH AND ZALMUNNA SLAIN

Judgment began *at the house of God*, in the just correction of the men of Succoth and Penuel, who were Israelites, but it did not end there. The kings of Midian, when they had served to demonstrate Gideon's victories, and grace his triumphs, must now be reckoned with.

1. They are indicted for the murder of Gideon's brethren some time ago at Mount Tabor. When the children of Israel, for fear of the Midianites, made themselves *dens in the mountains* (~~0082~~ Judges 6:2), those young men, it is likely, took shelter in that mountain, where they were found by these two kings, and most basely and barbarously slain in cold blood. When he asks them *what manner of men they were* (v. 18), it is not because he was uncertain of the thing, or wanted proof of it; he was not so little concerned for his brethren's blood as not to enquire it out before now, nor were these proud tyrants solicitous to conceal it. But he puts that question to them that by their acknowledgment of the more than ordinary comeliness of the persons they slew their crime might appear the more heinous, and consequently their punishment the more righteous. They could not but own that, though they were found in a mean and abject condition, yet they had an unusual greatness and majesty in their countenances, not unlike Gideon

himself at this time: they *resembled the children of a king*, born for something great.

2. Being found guilty of this murder by their own confession, Gideon, though he might have put them to death as Israel's judge for the injuries done to that people in general, as Oreb and Zeeb (~~1025~~Judges 7:25), yet chooses rather to put on the character of an *avenger of blood*, as next of kin to the persons slain: *They were my brethren*, v. 19. Their other crimes might have been forgiven, at least Gideon would not have slain them himself, let them have answered it to the people; but *the voice of his brethren's blood cries, cries to him*, now it is in the power of his hand to avenge it, and therefore there is no remedy — by him must *their blood be shed*, though they were kings. Little did they think to hear of this so long after; but murder seldom goes unpunished even in this life.

3. The execution is done by Gideon himself with his own hand, because he was the *avenger of blood*; he bade his son slay them, for he was a near relation to the persons murdered, and fittest to be his father's substitute and representative, and he would thus train him up to the acts of justice and boldness, v. 20. But,

(1.) The young man himself desired to be excused; he feared, though they were bound and could make no resistance, *because he was yet a youth*, and not used to such work: courage does not always run in the blood.

(2.) The prisoners themselves desired that Gideon would excuse it (v. 21), begged that, if they must die, they might die *by his own hand*, which would be somewhat more honourable to them, and more easy; for by his great strength they would sooner be dispatched and rid out of their pain. *As is the man, so is his strength*. Either they mean it of themselves (they were men of such strength as called for a better hand than that young man's to overpower quickly) or of Gideon, “Thou art at thy full strength; he has not yet come to it; therefore be thou the executioner.” From those that are grown up to maturity, it is expected that what they do in any service be done with so much the more strength. Gideon dispatched them quickly, and seized the *ornaments that were on their camels' necks, ornaments like the moon*, so it is in the margin, either badges of their royalty or perhaps of their idolatry, for Ashteroth was represented by the moon, as Baal by the sun. With there he took all their other ornaments, as appears v. 26, where we find that he did not put them to so good a use as one would have wished. The destruction of these two kings, and that of the two princes

(^{<0075>}Judges 7:25) is long afterwards pleaded as a precedent in prayer for the ruin of others of the church's enemies, ^{<0831>}Psalms 83:11, *Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb, and all their princes as Zebah and Zalmunna, let them all be but off in like manner.*

^{<0082>}JUDGES 8:22-28

GIDEON DECLINES THE PROFFERED CROWN

Here is,

I. Gideon's laudable modesty, after his great victory, in refusing the government which the people offered him.

1. It was honest in them to offer it: *Rule thou over us, for thou hast delivered us*, v. 22. They thought it very reasonable that he who had gone through the toils and perils of their deliverance should enjoy the honour and power of commanding them ever afterwards, and very desirable that he who in this great and critical juncture had had such manifest tokens of God's presence with him should ever afterwards preside in their affairs. Let us apply it to the Lord Jesus: he hath delivered us out of the hands of our enemies, our spiritual enemies, the worst and most dangerous, and therefore it is fit he should rule over us; for how can we be better ruled than by one that appears to have so great an interest in heaven and so great a kindness for this earth? We are delivered that we may *serve him without fear*, ^{<0074>}Luke 1:74, 75.

2. It was honourable in him to refuse it: *I will not rule over you*, v. 23. What he did was with a design to serve them, not to rule them — to make them safe, easy, and happy, not to make himself great or honourable. And, as he was not ambitious of grandeur himself, so he did not covet to entail it upon his family: "*My son shall not rule over you*, either while I live or when I am gone, *but the Lord shall still rule over you*, and constitute your judges by the special designation of his own Spirit, as he has done." This intimates,

(1.) His modesty, and the mean opinion he had of himself and his own merits. He thought the honour of doing good was recompence enough for

all his services, which needed not to be rewarded with the honour of bearing sway. *He that is greatest, let him be your minister.*

(2.) His piety, and the great opinion he had of God's government. Perhaps he discerned in the people a dislike of the theocracy, or divine government, a desire of a king like the nations, and thought they availed themselves of his merits as a colourable pretence to move for this change of government. But Gideon would by no means admit it. No good man can be pleased with any honour done to himself which ought to be peculiar to God. *Were you baptized in the name of Paul?* ^{<4013>}1 Corinthians 1:13.

II. Gideon's irregular zeal to perpetuate the remembrance of this victory by an ephod made of the choicest of the spoils.

1. He asked the men of Israel to give him the ear-rings of their prey; for such ornaments they stripped the slain of in abundance. These he demanded, either because they were the finest gold, and therefore fittest for a religious use, or because they had had as ear-rings some superstitious signification, which he thought too well of. Aaron called for the ear-rings to make the golden calf of, ^{<0312>}Exodus 32:2. These Gideon begged v. 24. And he had reason enough to think that those who offered him a crown, when he declined it, would not deny him their ear-rings, when he begged them, nor did they, v. 25.

2. He himself added the spoil he took from the kings of Midian, which, it should seem, had fallen to his share, v. 26. The generals had that part of the prey which was most splendid, the *prey of divers colours*, ^{<0131>}Judges 5:30.

3. Of this he made an ephod, v. 27. It was plausible enough, and might be well intended to preserve a memorial of so divine a victory in the judge's own city. But it was a very unadvised thing to make that memorial to be an ephod, a sacred garment. I would gladly put the best construction that can be upon the actions of good men, and such a one we are sure Gideon was. But we have reason to suspect that this ephod had, as usual, a teraphim annexed to it (^{<2104>}Hosea 3:4), and that, having an altar already built by divine appointment (^{<0126>}Judges 6:26), which he erroneously imagined he might still use for sacrifice, he intended this for an oracle, to be consulted in doubtful cases. So the learned Dr. Spencer supposes. Each tribe having now very much its government within itself, they were too apt to covet their religion among themselves. We read very little of Shiloh, and the ark

there, in all the story of the Judges. Sometimes by divine dispensation, and much oftener by the transgression of men, that law which obliged them to worship only at that one altar seems not to have been so religiously observed as one would have expected, any more than afterwards, when in the reigns even of very good kings *the high places were not taken away*, from which we may infer that that law had a further reach as a type of Christ, by whose mediation alone all our services are accepted. Gideon therefore, through ignorance or inconsideration, sinned in making this ephod, though he had a good intention in it. Shiloh, it is true, was not far off, but it was in Ephraim, and that tribe had lately disobliged him (v. 1), which made him perhaps not care to go so often among them as his occasions would lead him to consult the oracle, and therefore he would have one nearer home. However this might be honestly intended, and at first did little hurt, yet in process of time,

(1.) *Israel went a whoring after it*, that is, they deserted God's altar and priesthood, being fond of change, and prone to idolatry, and having some excuse for paying respect to this ephod, because so good a man as Gideon had set it up, and by degrees their respect to it grew more and more superstitious. Note, Many are led into false ways by one false step of a good man. The beginning of sin, particularly of idolatry and will-worship, *is as the letting forth of water*, so it has been found in the fatal corruptions of the church of Rome; therefore *leave it off before it be meddled with*.

(2.) It became a snare to Gideon himself, abating his zeal for the house of God in his old age, and much more to his house, who were drawn by it into sin, and it proved the ruin of the family.

III. Gideon's happy agency for the repose of Israel, v. 28. The Midianites that had been so vexatious gave them no more disturbance. Gideon, though he would not assume the honour and power of a king, governed as a judge, and did all the good offices he could for his people; so that *the country was in quietness forty years*. Hitherto the times of Israel had been reckoned by forties. Othniel judged forty years, Ehud eighty — just two forties, Barak forty, and now Gideon forty, providence so ordering it to bring in mind the forty years of their wandering in the wilderness. *Forty years long was I grieved with this generation*. And see ^{<0006>}Ezekiel 4:6. After these, Eli ruled forty years (^{<0048>}1 Samuel 4:18), Samuel and Saul forty (^{<4421>}Acts 13:21), David forty, and Solomon forty. Forty years is about an age.

~~(JRS)~~ JUDGES 8:29-35

ISRAEL'S RETURN TO IDOLATRY

We have here the conclusion of the story of Gideon.

- 1.** He lived privately, v. 29. He was not puffed up with his great honours, did not covet a palace or castle to dwell in, but retired to the house he had lived in before his elevation. Thus that brave Roman Who was called from the plough upon a sudden occasion to command the army when the action was over returned to his plough again.
- 2.** His family was multiplied. He had many wives (therein he transgressed the law); by them he had seventy sons (v. 30), but by a concubine he had one whom he named *Abimelech* (which signifies, *my father a king*), that proved the ruin of his family, v. 31.
- 3.** He died in honour, in a good old age, when he had lived as long as he was capable of serving God and his country; and who would desire to live any longer? And he was *buried in the sepulchre of his fathers*.
- 4.** After his death the people corrupted themselves, and went all to naught. As soon as ever Gideon was dead, who had kept them close to the worship of the God of Israel, they found themselves under no restraint, and then they *went a whoring after Baalim*, v. 33. They went a whoring first after another ephod (v. 27), for which irregularity Gideon had himself given them too much occasion, and now they went a whoring after another god. False worships made way for false deities. They now chose a new god (~~(JRS)~~Judges 5:8), a god of a new name, *Baal-berith* (a goddess, say some); Berith, some think, was Berytus, the place where the Phoenicians worshipped this idol. The name signifies *the Lord of a covenant*. Perhaps he was so called because his worshippers joined themselves by covenant to him, in imitation of Israel's covenanting with God; for the devil is God's ape. In this revolt of Israel to idolatry they showed,
 - (1.)** Great ingratitude to God (v. 34): *They remembered not the Lord*, not only who had delivered them into the hands of their enemies, to punish them for their idolatry, but who had also *delivered them out of the hands of their enemies*, to invite them back again into his service; both the

judgments and the mercies were forgotten, and the impressions of them lost.

(2.) Great ingratitude to Gideon, v. 35. A great deal of *goodness he had shown unto Israel*, as a father to his country, for which they ought to have been kind to his family when he was gone, for that is one way by which we ought to show ourselves grateful to our friends and benefactors, and may be returning their kindnesses when they are in their graves. But Israel showed not this kindness to Gideon's family, as we shall find in the next chapter. No wonder if those who forget their God forget their friends.