

STUDIES IN JUDGES No. 11

Judges 8:22-35

October 3, 2004

Review

After winning an astonishing victory over an overwhelmingly larger army – a victory that was given in such a manner as to demonstrate that it was and only could have been the work and the gift of the Lord – Gideon has had his head turned. He has become no longer the timid, reticent, and unwilling deliverer, but a self-confident and tyrannical leader. We saw him last week kill a town full of Israelite men for not having come to his aid. We saw his faith in the Lord, summoned up in the first place by the impossible odds he faced in doing battle with the Midianites, virtually disappear in the glory of his great victory. Prosperity and success were his downfall.

Text Comment

- v.22 Once again the Lord's name is omitted from a statement in which we would expect it as a matter of course. Gideon saved Israel, the people said, not the Lord, but, once again, Gideon does not correct them. We are not told precisely who among the Israelites made this request to Gideon but the request is certainly that Gideon become their king. The word *king* is not used, but the offer of a hereditary rule – not only Gideon but his descendants – indicates that this is what is, in fact, in their view. There is no evidence that Israel is concerned whether God has himself chosen Gideon to be king, just as she has forgotten that it was the Lord who defeated the Midianites. Israel, as she will later in Samuel's time, simply wants a king like other nations have. She is taking her ideas from the world, not from the Word of God. Her theory of success and of national security is a Canaanite theory, not a covenantal one.
- v.23 Gideon gives a pious answer. The problem is that in what follows Gideon acts every bit the king. He arrogates to himself the privileges of a king. In some ways, he has already been acting as an oriental king: 1) he treated his subjects ruthlessly; 2) his actions were driven by personal considerations rather than by national interest; and 3) he claimed for himself the symbols of royalty taken from the captured Midianite kings. [Block, 299] There will be more of this kind of ANE royal behavior to come.
- v.24 This request of a gold ring from each man amounted to the men making a symbolic gesture of submission to Gideon. It is what they would have been required to do by a king. The Ishmaelites, remember, were Abraham's descendants through Hagar, Sarah's servant. The Midianites were descendants of Abraham through his concubine Keturah. Here they are linked together, either because the Ishmaelites were part of the Midianite confederation or because the terms gradually came to overlap.
- v.26 The amount of gold gives the impression of royal treasure. 43 pounds of gold from the gold rings alone. Gideon also kept for himself the royal robes and the neck bands he had taken from the camels of the Midianite kings. He may have said that he would not be

king, that the Lord should rule over Israel, but Gideon took full advantage of the opportunity to amass wealth like a king. What is most significant is that in Deuteronomy 17:17, in regulations laid down for Israel's future kings, we read: "He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold." As we will see, Gideon did both.

- v.27 There is a question about the meaning of the term *ephod* as it is used here. Elsewhere in the OT, the ephod is the special breastpiece worn by the priest in the sanctuary. But it seems not to be a garment or part of a garment here. One suggestion is that the term came to refer not only to the garment but to the idol on which the garment was placed. In this case the image would have been encased in some gold overlay, not unlike the items that were covered with gold in Solomon's temple. In any case, having torn down a sanctuary to Baal in his home-town, Gideon now erects another idol in the same place. Only now it is not just Gideon's family and town that were corrupted by this false worship, but "all Israel."

Perhaps you noticed, by the way, the similarity between this episode and that of the making of the golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai in Moses' day. We noticed that the narrator, earlier in his narrative of Gideon, presented him as a kind of second Moses. But now instead of being the defender of the right worship of God, as Moses was, he is the corrupter of it, as Aaron was. Both images were made of earrings taken from foreigners and both became a focus of illicit worship. [Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 126]

- v.28 The land enjoyed some peace from external aggressors, but the other, more fundamental crisis, that of Israel's spiritual defection from the covenant the Lord had made with her, has become more acute. [Webb, 153]
- v.30 Taking many wives was forbidden in the law of God, as we saw, but it is very much the typical behavior of an ancient near Eastern king. The fact that he is named Jerub-Baal in the lead-in to this statement suggests that this behavior was due to the Canaanite in him not the Israelite.
- v.31 It is not certain whether we are being led to assume that Gideon's concubine was a Canaanite woman, though that seems a strong possibility. The description of her as a "Shechemite" (The NIV's "she lived in Shechem") may suggest that. There was a temple to a Canaanite god in Shechem we learn in 9:46. If so, Gideon is flaunting another of the commandments of Deuteronomy, viz. that Israelites were not to marry Canaanites. In there being seventy sons of his wives and one son of his concubine are found the seeds of the fratricide that will be narrated in chapter 9.
- v.33 However disappointing Gideon's behavior was in the latter half of his life, he apparently still served as some check on Israel's complete embrace of Canaanite idolatry. His death opened the floodgates to a complete capitulation of Israel to the worship of Baal, a chief God of the Canaanite pantheon.

v.35 Again, it appears that Gideon, though formally rejecting the throne of Israel, did, in fact, for all intents and purposes, serve as a king. His sons were considered his dynasty and the nation did not fulfill whatever promises it had made concerning them.

Now, clearly, we are to notice the parallel. Gideon's story began with his pulling down a sanctuary to Baal that was located on his own property. God required that Gideon cleanse himself of his idolatry before he would use him to deliver Israel. Now, after the dramatic and decisive deliverance has been achieved, Gideon goes back to his idolatry like a dog to his vomit. We are left stunned by this. It seems to a pious reader of the Bible so utterly nonsensical that Gideon should do this after all the Lord has shown him and done for him. It is hardly only here, however, that we are left scratching our heads in this way.

We think of Israel marching out of Egypt, being delivered from centuries of cruel bondage as on eagles' wings. Then, when the Egyptian army gave chase, she escaped through the parted waters of the Reed Sea and the following Egyptian army was drowned. Then when she complained about the lack of food and water, the Lord marvelously and miraculously supplied her needs. But, when asked to enter the Promised Land she refused for fear of the warlike people she would encounter there. We shake our heads in wonder at the stupidity of it all. How could she possibly doubt that God would grant her victory after all he had done for her. The Canaanites may have been warlike, but theirs was not an Egyptian army; not by a long sight. And God had disposed of the Egyptian army by himself.

And the same is true again and again in Israel's history.

1. Elijah bests the prophets of Baal in the most dramatic of all possible ways on the summit of Mount Carmel. The people who were there were terrified by what they saw. But it caused barely a hiccup in Israel's rapid descent into a Canaanite faith and worship.
2. During the reign of Amaziah the king of Judah, once again, in the face of an enemy, the Lord told his king to reduce the size of his army. Amaziah obeyed and sent his hired Israelite soldiers home and God gave him a great victory. But Amaziah took the idols of the people he conquered back to Jerusalem and set them up as his own gods and worshipped them. He had, as it were, defeated them in battle, and now he is going to worship them? Hello?! [2 Chron. 25:15]
3. Later still the Lord delivered Jerusalem and Judah from Sennacherib in the days of King Hezekiah and, once again in a very dramatic way, killing hosts of the Assyrian's soldiers and forcing his withdrawal, and yet the mad dash to assimilate the Canaanite gods and their worship continued almost unabated.

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,

That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the angel of death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride:
And the form of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow and the rust on his mail;
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

That is Lord Byron's account of the devastation of the great Assyrian army without the small and pitifully helpless Israelite army, bottled up in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage, even lifting a finger. Surely we would think such an event, such a demonstration of the power of the Lord over all nations and all their idols, would call Judah back to the Lord and to his covenant. But within a few years Manasseh was king and Judah became a nation indistinguishable in its paganism from the nations round about. How could this be? How could a people not fail to see how preposterous, how irrational her unbelief was?

And here we have the same. Gideon destroys the Canaanite shrine on God's orders, God gives him a total victory with a handful of men, and then Gideon rebuilds the shrine. What is going on here?

Well, sin is going on, that's what! We are always underestimating the virulence of this force and influence in human hearts – and in our hearts! – and the Bible is always reminding us of what a dark and sinister power sin is and always is. In the Bible we are made to see sin for what it is, however little people, even Christian people want to, are even willing to acknowledge these facts.

There is *in the first place*, sin's *subtlety*. That is what accounts for what Gideon did. Reasons, quite sensible, presented themselves to his mind, that very subtly, but no less powerfully, undermined his loyalty to God. Believe me, when Gideon made that ephod and set it up in his home town, he would never have said he was forsaking God. His statement in v. 23 in refusing the offer of kingship, is indication enough that he still had loyalty to the Lord. He simply didn't realize how hypocritical he had become, how insincere, how divided in his loyalties. And here,

like Aaron before him, he did not intend to replace the worship of Yahweh with the worship of another God. He wasn't building a shrine to Baal. He was just, as they say, bringing Israelite worship up to date. He was making it meaningful to people of that time and place, using the forms of their culture. He would have been, I am sure, quite surprised and offended had you suggested to him that he was rejecting the covenant of the Lord and becoming nothing but an ancient near eastern idolater. This was the story of Israel all along. She began intending to worship God alone but when she accommodated that worship to the forms and ways of ancient near eastern paganism, it was not long before she was worshipping other gods beside Yahweh and had embraced a genuinely pagan view of God, as one among many.

Even as late as Jeremiah, some of the darkest days of Israel's defection from the covenant and her assimilation of the pagan theology and practice of the peoples around her, she still counted on the Lord to help her, his temple to be her protection, his covenant promises to be a bulwark against foreign enemies.

Sin is always insidious, always far more dangerous because of the way in which it insinuates itself so reasonably, so attractively, so persuasively into our minds and wills.

And, then, *in the second place*, there is sin's *virulence*. This is an ugly, evil, and deadly power at work in the world and the hearts of men. We see this in both forms of Gideon's sin. He did not, I'm sure, expect that his ephod would be the undoing of the remnants of Israel's loyalty to the Lord and his covenant. But that is what it was. And the idolatry that was to follow upon Gideon's sinful and selfish and proud decision – after all, sponsoring a sanctuary was what kings did in those days – was to bring still more death and devastation upon the people of God, both because of God's judgment and because her idolatry sapped all remaining spiritual strength from her heart.

And then there is Gideon's violence. Fact is, sin made Gideon slaughter a whole town full of men, devastating the lives of all those families, just to satisfy a personal pique. Sin made him think this the proper thing to do. Sin gave him satisfaction in doing it. Sin justified it in his mind. Sin made him look down on other people. But the proof of how inexcusable and ugly and deadly that violence really was comes in the next chapter, which we will find is full of blood and gore. Seventy of Gideon's sons murdered by the seventy-first. That son, a violent man himself in the image of his father, burns to death the population of a whole town – men, women, and children – and then, in divine retribution, dies violently himself. Gideon wasn't planning on that being the issue of his own violence, but it was. I'm sure Gideon could have given us his reasons for what he did at Succoth's tower, and they would have sounded very sensible to many people of that time and place. But the fact is that what he did was terribly wrong and, as a result, would have terrible consequences.

That is what sin is and what it does. It makes people who ought to know better think it right to do the worst conceivable things. We see this everywhere we look in our world. We need to see it. We need to have our noses held to it until we are thoroughly revolted by it. And we need to be stripped of our little prejudices which keep us from realizing how universal and how terrible the power of sin is in human life.

I've been reading lately about the run up to the Second World War. We have all heard about the brutality of the Japanese occupation of large parts of China in the years before the War. It was brutality of the ugliest kind. It was pure evil. Still today, all these years later, it turns the stomach to hear Japanese men tell what they did. When they went looking for food they regularly found women hiding. It was typical for them to rape the women and then just as typical for them to kill them afterward. Japanese soldiers were blooded, were taught to be violent and unthinking of the value of the lives they were taking by being made to behead bound and blindfolded Chinese men and women. Not enemy soldiers, just people grabbed from a nearby village.

“I went into a village and saw a girl about fourteen or fifteen year old,” Enomoto-san told me years later. “I approached her, and her father appeared. I wanted to rape her. I thought, Well, if he were her father he probably wouldn't be very happy if I were raping his daughter, so I shot him. I killed him. She started crying and she was shaking. She knew what was going to happen to her. I just raped her and then I killed her. It just took one thrust of the bayonet and then she fell over.”

Incidents like these are recounted by the hundreds in the historical literature covering Japan's rape of China. Upwards of 30 million human beings lost their lives, very few of whom were killed in battle. 200,000 young girls and women were forced into prostitution to service the Japanese army in China. Each girl had to service at least forty men per day. Of those 200,000 only about 10% survived the war. And what is so horrifying is that everyone admits that, at the time, hardly any Japanese soldier had any conscience whatsoever about what he was doing.

Ah, but we look at that from our distant vantage point as Americans and think to ourselves that such would not happen here. But, of course, it did. We did it too. And one of the great ironies of the run up to the Second World War is that the aspect of the American criticism of their adventurism in China that most offended the Japanese was their criticism of their violence against the Chinese. Had not the Americans done precisely the same thing and just as violently when they were creating their empire? It was alright for the Americans to brutalize and exterminate a people whose land they wanted for themselves, but the Japanese couldn't do the same thing. The Americans expressed outrage against Japanese barbarity when the Japanese had learned how empires were created from the Americans themselves. As one Japanese delegate to the League of Nations put it:

“[Of course Japan has been] exceedingly annoying [to China]. And what country in its expansion has ever failed to be trying to its neighbors? Ask the American Indian or the Mexican how excruciatingly trying the young United States used to be once upon a time.” [James Bradley, *Flyboys*, 65]

One of the most shameful episodes in the Westward expansion of the United States was the murder of 150 Indian women, children, and old men at Sand Creek in Colorado in December of 1864. But you may not know that the volunteer cavalymen who led the force that massacred that Indian village was a Methodist minister by the name of John Chivington, or that, some days later, he gave an account of the massacre to a cheering audience in Denver and that the audience went wild when the private parts of the dismembered men and women were displayed. The

people of Denver were so grateful to Chivington that they made him a deputy sheriff, a job he held for 48 years, until he died in his sleep at 71 years of age. [Bradley, 10]

The Japanese knew about that, of course, but they knew even more about the American treatment of the Filipinos in the Spanish American War. American soldiers would later say virtually the same thing that the Japanese soldiers would say about the Chinese. As one officer wrote, “We had been taught...that the Filipinos were savages no better than our Indians.” The American army would kill a quarter of a million Filipinos during that war; only a small percentage of that number were battle deaths.

One American soldier wrote home,

“We bombarded a place called Malabon, and then we went in and killed every native we met, men, women, and children.”

Another soldier described the fun of killing innocent civilians:

“This shooting human beings is a ‘hot game,’ and beats rabbit hunting all to pieces. We charged them and such a slaughter you never saw. We killed them like rabbits; hundreds, yes thousands of them.” [69]

“I want no prisoners,” one American general ordered. “I wish you to kill and burn, the more you kill and burn the better it will please me.” An officer asked for clarification, “to know the limit of age to respect.” The general replied in writing to kill all those above “ten years of age.” [69]

Corporal Richard O’Brien wrote home about his commander, a Captain Fred McDonald, whose company, which included O’Brien, gunned down the population of a village, including those who were waving white flags because McDonald had ordered “take no prisoners.” Only a beautiful mestizo mother was spared, only to be raped by McDonald and several other officers before being turned over to the men for their pleasure.” No one arrested that Captain. He was never punished for what he did, nor were his soldiers, all young American men who fighting, as one said, “for Old Glory and for America I love so well.” [69-70]

I could turn your stomach with lots more of this: murder, rape, pillage and all by American soldiers – American Christian farm boys – and, what is more terrifying still, all known to the people back home. There was so little conscience about this that many letters home described these massacres in lurid detail expecting that those at home would be glad to hear the news. American newspapers regularly included reports of what would nowadays provoke outrage, as did recently the discovery of the military’s treatment of prisoners at the Abu Grab prison in Baghdad. Killing Filipino prisoners of war was standard army policy. The torture of prisoners was as well. One Major happily admitted that he had made 47 prisoners kneel and repent of their sins before ordering them bayoneted and clubbed to death. President Roosevelt, whom many regard as a president with Christian principles, defended the atrocities as necessary to bring civilization to savages.

It may be deeply embarrassing to admit, but the fact is, the Japanese in China did what we Americans did. They may have done it longer and on a greater scale, but they did what we did. It offended them that we should call them barbarians for doing nothing else but what we had done ourselves. It should send chills down our spines that people nurtured in our country, who were nursed on the convictions that God created all men equal and that men everywhere should be free, could not only do such things, but think themselves right in doing them. *That is sin.*

My simple point, brothers and sisters, is that this is what sin is and what it does and how it blinds people to itself. Christian America did what pagan Japan did with hardly any more conscience. Surely there were those who protested and many of them protested precisely because they were Christians. But don't you see: sin blinded generations of people who thought themselves Christians to the bestial evil they were doing.

Nowadays Americans will say that we have moved far beyond those days. And we have, in one way. But sin has just moved the violence to another place: now we are killing babies while they are still in the womb. We do it even in the most stomach turning, disgusting ways; the most inhuman, the most cruel, such as partial birth abortion. Hundreds and thousands of them and millions, with our whole nation – so outraged by other forms of violence – complicit and comfortably so with this. Sin will always produce idolatry in a heart and in a people; and it will always produce violence.

I used these illustrations – stomach turning as they are – not only because they illustrate the very kind of sin that Gideon committed – and no doubt justified himself in committing (indeed, I'm sure his rationalizations were very like the ones that American soldiers in the Philippines might have used) – but to force a point upon your minds and hearts. *This is what sin is and does.* And Christians though we be, *we are sinners.* That same virulent, subtle, deadly power *resides in us.* Gideon was a believing man. We have the Bible's own testimony that he was. But see what sin did to him and made of his life. Gideon thought he had reasons for his behavior, but he should have known better. What he did was pure evil and it was to bring widespread death and misery. That is what sin does in a person and makes of a person.

We are always toying with our sins; playing with them, when we ought to be hacking them to pieces and refusing to stop until they are destroyed. Let sin have its entrance and let it have its way and there is no telling what it will do to you and what will come of that deadly virus that you have let loose. There isn't nearly the fear of sin in the church or in your heart or mine that there ought to be. And this account of Gideon is intended to remind us of how much we have to fear, both from sin's subtlety and from its virulence. That Gideon should have done what he did after all the Lord had done for him! Oh yes, we can do what Gideon did, many Christians are doing it in one way or another. But the next chapter will warn us of what is likely to ensue.

A narrative like this is meant to make everyone of us serious, very serious about living a holy life, as that life is defined in the Word of God. Very serious about allowing nothing, no matter how seemingly reasonable, how attractive, nothing to interfere with our living out our loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ.