

## Making Faithful Choices (Part Two)

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Today, we are going to continue with the story of Gideon. This is Part Two of "Making Faithful Choices." But to begin with, I would like to speak about another man just for a sentence or two.

Hebrews 11 tells us, because Moses was a man of faith, he was able to see the invisible, to choose the imperishable, and to do the impossible. In other words, he had vision, desired God's Kingdom, and lived according to God's will.

Please turn with me to I John 5, verse 4. Now what was true for Moses centuries ago can be true for God's people today, but men and women of faith seem to be in short supply. But this does not mean that faith does not exist in the church. Our personal lives involve faith every day as we live to glorify God. What we do not see as much are those great and stupendous miracles that happened back in ancient Israel.

**I John 5:4** For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

Christians are either overcome because of their *unbelief* or overcomers because of their *faith*. And remember, faith does not depend on how we feel or what we see or what may happen.

The familiar and exciting account of Gideon's wonderful victory over the Midianites is really a story of faith in action despite our human weaknesses. It reveals to us three important principles about faith. If we are to be overcomers, and not to be overcome, we need to understand and apply these principles. Very simple and very short.

1. God tests our faith.

2. God encourages our faith.

3. God honors our faith. Or another way of saying that is: God recognizes our faith.

Let us look at the first important principle about faith related to the story of Gideon and we find that in Judges 7, verses 1 through 8. Now a faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted. And too often what people think is faith is really only a warm fuzzy feeling about faith or perhaps just faith in faith. People are not sure what faith is oftentimes. If as a church we say we are simply going to have to step out on faith, it begs the question: whose faith? We can follow men and women of faith and share in their exploits, but we cannot succeed in our own personal lives by depending on someone else's faith.

God tests our faith for two main reasons. First, to show us whether our faith is real or counterfeit. And second, to strengthen our faith for the tasks He sets before us. God puts us through testing in overcoming the world before allowing us to reach victory.

Now, let me pose the first test as a question. Is our faith real or counterfeit?

**Judges 7:1-3** Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the wall of Harod, so that the camp of the Midianites was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley. And the Lord said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.' Now therefore, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever is fearful and afraid, let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead.'" And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained.

God tested Gideon's faith by sifting his army of 32,000 volunteers until only 300 were left. If Gideon's faith had been in the size of his army then his faith would have been very weak. By the time God was through with him, less than one percent of the original 32,000 ended up following Gideon into the

battlefield. God told Gideon why he was decreasing the size of the army. He did not want the soldiers to boast that they had won the victory over the Midianites. Victories won because of faith bring glory to God because nobody can explain how that could have happened without God. Too often we are like King Uzziah. You do not have to turn there but that story is found in II Chronicles 26:11-16.

King Uzziah, who was marvelously helped by God but, "When he was strong, his heart was lifted up, in his destruction." People who live by faith know their own weakness more and more as they depend on God's strength.

**II Corinthians 12:10** [Paul says] Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

In telling the fearful soldiers to return home, Gideon would have recognized that God's instruction to him agreed with what God instructed through Moses. This would have made obeying God's instructions easier because of the precedent God set earlier in His written Word in Deuteronomy 20:8, where he says, "The officers shall speak further to the people and say, 'What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his.'"

Pride after the battle robs God of glory. Fear during the battle, robs God's soldiers of courage and power. Fear has a way of spreading, and one timid soldier can do more damage than a whole company of enemy soldiers because the morale can deteriorate so rapidly and cause a retreat. Fear and faith cannot live together very long in the same heart. Either fear will conquer faith and we will quit or faith will conquer fear and we will triumph.

Now let me pose the second test as a question. Will God strengthen our faith for the tasks He sets before us? Well, here in Judges 7, let us read verses 4 through 8.

**Judges 7:4-8** But the Lord said to Gideon, "The people are still too many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. Then it will be, that of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' the same shall go with you; and whoever I say to you,

"This one shall not go with you,' the same shall not go." So he brought the people down to the water. And the Lord said to Gideon, "Everyone who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself; likewise everyone who gets down on his knees to drink." And the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people got down on their knees to drink water. Then the Lord said to Gideon, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the other people go, every man to his place." So the people took provisions and their trumpets in their hands. And he sent away all the rest of Israel, every man to his tent, and retained those three hundred men. Now the camp of Midian was below them in the valley.

God put Gideon's surviving 10,000 men through a second test by asking them all to drink down at the river. We never know when God is testing us in some ordinary experience in life to weed us out—even the simplest of tests.

What significance was there in the two different ways the men drank from the river? It may be that the men who bowed down to drink were making themselves vulnerable to the enemy with the 300 who lapped from their hands. But the 300 who lapped from their hands stayed alert. But the enemy was four miles away waiting to see what the Israelites would do and Gideon would not have led his army into a dangerous situation like that.

So could it have really been those who stayed awake or stayed alert? Possibly.

Or it may be that the 300 men drank as they did so they could keep their eyes on Gideon, their leader. Or it may simply have been that God chose this method of sifting the army because it was simple, unassuming, and easy to apply. No soldier knew he was being tested. I do not know which one it was. It was possibly one of those or all of those.

Please turn with me to I Samuel 14. Obviously, all 10,000 did not drink at once because they would have stretched the army out along the water for a couple of miles if they had done that. And since the men undoubtedly came to the water by groups, Gideon was able to watch them and identify the 300.

And it was not until after the event that the men discovered that they had been tested.

I Samuel 14, verse 6 records King Saul's son Jonathan's words just before defeating the Philistines

**I Samuel 14:6** Then Jonathan said to the young man who bore his armor, "Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the Lord will work for us. For nothing restrains the Lord from saving by many or by few."

Numbers do not matter to God one bit. It is the same with God preaching His gospel to the world, to giving His commission to the church, whether it be by 300 people or by thousands. But if it is done by a small flock, as it is being done, we will have no doubt that it was done by a miracle of God. And maybe that is the same principle working here as worked there.

Some churches today are mesmerized by statistics and think they are strong because they are big and wealthy. But numbers are no guarantee of God's blessing. In Deuteronomy 32:30 Moses assured the Israelites that if they would obey the Eternal, one soldier could chase 1,000 and two would put 10,000 to flight. All Gideon needed was 27 soldiers to defeat the whole Midian army of 135,000 men. But God gave him 300.

It is clear from Judges 7:14 that the Midianites knew who Gideon was and no doubt they were watching what he was doing. And we cannot help but wonder what the Midianites thought when their spy saw Gideon's arming seemingly falling apart. Did it make the Midianites overconfident and therefore less careful or did their leaders become even more alert wondering whether Gideon was setting them up for a tricky piece of strategy.

Now, God graciously gave Gideon one more promise of victory. Verse 7 says, "By the three hundred men who lap will I save you." By claiming this promise and obeying God's directions, Gideon defeated the enemy and brought peace to the land for four decades. The soldiers who departed left some of their equipment with the 300 men. Thus, each man could have a torch, a trumpet, and a jar. These were strange weapons for fighting a war.

The second important principle about faith is that God encourages our faith. That is parallel, so to speak, with Judges 7:9-15. The eternal wanted Gideon and his 300 men to attack the camp of Midian that night. But first God had to deal with the fear that persisted in Gideon's heart. The very leader had fear.

He had already told Gideon three times that He would give Israel the victory. And He had reassured him by giving him three special signs: fire from the rock, the wet fleece, and the dry fleece. After all this divine help, Gideon should have been strong in his faith, but he was not. And we have to ask ourselves, how many signs would we need before our faith was strong enough to do such a tremendous feat, so to speak.

Turn with me, if you will please, to James 1. Today, we should be grateful that God understands us and does not condemn us because we have doubts and fears. He keeps giving us wisdom and does not scold us when we keep asking.

**James 1:5-6** If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.

Now jump back to Judges 7. You already know that Judges 7 and 8 are the pivotal chapters for today.

God encouraged Gideon's faith in two ways. First, God gave Gideon another promise.

**Judges 7:9** It happened on the same night that the Lord said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand."

The Eternal told Gideon for the fourth time that He had delivered the Midianite host into his hand. And since God promised it, it was as if it had already been done because it had already been decided by God that it would be. Although the battle must be fought, Israel had already won. The 300 men could attack the enemy multitude confident that Israel was the victor.

It is the same in our lives today. God has already given us promises. We have the promise of salvation and it is guaranteed and it is as if it has already happened, but it is conditional and that is that we are to overcome, but it certainly is a gift that God provides. And He will see that we do overcome and see what our part is.

Some people have the idea that confident, courageous faith is a kind of religious arrogance. But just the opposite is true. Christians who believe God's promises and see Him do great things are humbled to know that the God of the universe cares about them and is on their side and they claim no merit in their faith or honor from their victories. All the glory goes to God because He did it all. And if we do not have that attitude, then we are going to be in trouble because our faith is going to be of our own accord and it is going to cause us to have pride.

Hope and love are important Christian virtues. Nevertheless, God inspired the apostle Paul to devote an entire chapter, Hebrews 11, to the victories of faith won by ordinary people who ventured to believe God and acted upon His promises.

God encouraged Gideon's faith in a second way. God gave Gideon another sign.

**Judges 7:10-12** But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant [God speaking to Gideon there], and you shall hear what they say; and afterwards your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp." Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outpost of the armed men who were in the camp. Now the Midianites and the Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude.

This is the first mention in the Bible of camels being used in warfare and certainly they would have given their riders speed and mobility on the battlefield. So not only was there a valley full of what looked like locusts but there were camels and people and so on. But Gideon's army knew the advantage that it gave over them.

**Judges 7:13-15** And when Gideon had come, there was a man telling a dream to his companion. He said, "I have had a dream: To my surprise, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to a tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent collapsed." Then his companion answered and said, "This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp." And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel, and said, "Arise, for the Lord has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand."

So it took courage for Gideon and his servant to move into enemy territory and get close enough to the Midian camp to overhear the conversation of the two soldiers. God had given one of the soldiers a dream and that dream told Gideon that God would deliver the Midianites into his hand. God had already told Gideon this fact, but now Gideon heard it from the lips of the enemy.

Turn with me, if you will please, to Jeremiah 23. In the biblical record, you often find God communicating His truth through dreams. Among the believers He spoke to through dreams are Jacob, Joseph, Solomon, Daniel, and Joseph, the husband of Mary. But He also spoke to unbelievers or unconverted people this way, including Abimelech, Nebuchadnezzar, Joseph's fellow prisoners, Pharaoh, and Pilate's wife. However, we must not conclude from these examples that this is God's normal method of communicating with people or that we should seek His guidance in our dreams. Today, dreams can be deceptive; and apart from divine instruction, we cannot know the correct interpretation of them.

**Jeremiah 23:32** "Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams," says the Lord, "and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all," says the Lord.

The best way to get God's guidance is through the Word of God, prayer, and fasting as we watch the circumstances. Be very careful of interpreting



dreams. We all have them. Most of the time I think the dreams do not make a bit of sense. And from what I understand scientifically, it seems that they are our minds processing, maybe the events of the previous day or maybe it is just relaxing the mind so we can get started in the morning. I do not know. But there are explanations for it.

It is significant that Gideon paused to worship the Eternal before he did anything else. He was so overwhelmed by God's goodness and mercy that he fell on his face in submission and gratitude. Before we can be Christ's or God's soldiers, we must first become God's worshippers. Gideon did the exact thing he should have. He worshipped God and he worshipped Him by thanking Him.

It is important to notice how Gideon quotes God's promise to the victory to the people in Judges 7:15, which the Eternal promised in verse 9. He was relying wholly on the Word of God. "Arise, go down against the camp, for I [the Lord] have delivered it into your hand." This victory was won by the power of God because their weapons were useless in battle. So Gideon received the knowledge that he needed to proceed with his attack on them by the Word of God. And how do we receive information from God on what to do in our own lives today? By the Word of God. He received it verbally, we receive it in written form. There is no difference at all. They are both inspired by God.

The third important principle about faith is that God recognizes our faith. As I said before, God honors our faith or He recognizes our faith. This is found in Judges 7:15-25. Faith means more than simply trusting God. It also means seeking God and wanting to please Him.

**Hebrews 11:6** But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

We do not trust God simply to get Him to do things for us. We trust Him because it brings joy to His heart when His children rely on Him, seek Him, and please Him. Our goal is to please God, to submit to God, to obey Him.

Now, how did God reward Gideon's faith? In two ways. First, God gave him wisdom to prepare the army.

**Judges 7:15-16** And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel, and said, "Arise, for the Lord has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand." Then he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers.

The pitchers would hide the light of the torches and would also make a great deal of noise when broken. These effects, added to the shouting and the blowing of trumpets, would certainly rouse the enemy.

The vessel, torch, and trumpet also have spiritual significance here. We must be clean, we must be we must be yielding vessels for God's use, then we must let our light shine. We must trumpet out a clear witness for God by how we live our lives.

The steps in Gideon's victory are easy to trace. He has a promise to believe, an altar to build, a vessel to break, a lamp to burn, and a trumpet to blow. That is the order of the steps God gave him: a promise to believe, an altar to build, a vessel to break, a lamp to burn, and a trumpet to blow. And God gave the victory.

**Judges 7:17-18** And he said to them, "Look at me and do likewise; watch, and when I come to the edge of the camp you shall do as I do [Gideon speaking]: When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp, and say, 'The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!'"

See Gideon, remember, knew that they knew what the sword of Gideon was because he overheard them talking in the camp about the sword of Gideon.

Now Gideon was a new man when he and his servant returned to the Israelite camp. His fears and doubts were gone as he mobilized his small army and infused courage into their hearts by what he said and did.

Faith sees the invisible, it sees victory in a battle not yet fought. And it is the same in our spiritual lives. Faith does the impossible and it wins the battle with few men and unusual weapons. So we never know how God is going to work something out when we are facing a trial, facing some spiritual battle. Quite often, God does not do it the way we think He will, He does not solve it the way we think He will solve it. But if we ask according to His will and that His will will be done, all good will come from it.

Gideon was the example for them to follow. "Watch me," "Follow my lead," "Do exactly as I do," is what he was saying. Gideon had come a long way since the day God found him hiding in the winepress. No longer do we hear him asking if and why and where. No longer does he seek for a sign. God can give anyone a new start and a new life if it is according to His will, and if he can take a doubter like Gideon and make a general out of Him, He can do wonders with each and every one of us as well. No matter how bad our background was, no matter how weak we have been character-wise or no matter how much abuse we had taken earlier, God can do it with an unbelievable amount of ease. He is so powerful!

Second, God gave him courage to lead the army.

**Judges 7:19-22** So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers—they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing—and they cried, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" And every man stood in his place all around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled. When the three hundred blew the trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his companion throughout the whole camp; and the army fled to Beth Acacia, toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel Meholah, by Tabbath.

Finding themselves surrounded by sudden light and loud noises, the Midianites assumed that they were being attacked by a large army and the

result was panic, sheer panic. They even turned their swords against one another. They did not know who they were trying to defend themselves from. The Eternal intervened and put a spirit of confusion in the camp and the Midianites began to kill each other. And then they realized that the safest thing to do was flee. So they took off on the caravan route to the southeast with the Israelite army pursuing.

**Judges 7:23-25** And the men of Israel gathered together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and pursued the Midianites. Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the mountains of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites, and seize from them the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan." Then all the men of Ephraim gathered together and seized the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan. And they captured two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued Midian and brought the heads of the Oerb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side of the Jordan.

So God gave him opportunity to enlarge the army. This was after they showed the faith that they needed after God had given them the courage that they needed. Then God allowed them to have more people to support them because the cleanup was going to take many more people than the 300. It was obvious that 300 men could not pursue thousands of enemy soldiers. So Gideon sent out a call for more volunteers and many of the men from the original army of 32,000 probably responded to Gideon's call and even the proud tribe of Ephraim came to his aid.

To them was given the honor of capturing and slaying Oreb, whose name meant "raven" and Zeeb, whose name meant "wolf," the two princes of Midian. The story of Gideon began with a man hiding in a winepress and it ended with the enemy prince being slain at the winepress.

God's great victory over the Midianites became a landmark event in the history of Israel because it reminded the Israelites of God's power to deliver them from their enemies. The day of Midian was a great day that Israel never forgot. It is referenced in Psalm 83 and also Isaiah chapters 9 and 10.

The church today can also learn from this event and be encouraged by it. God does not need large numbers to accomplish His purposes. Nor does He need naturally gifted leaders. Gideon and his 300 men were available for God to use and He enabled them to conquer the enemy and bring peace to the land. And when the church starts to depend on largeness, big buildings, big crowds, big budgets, then faith becomes misplaced and God cannot give His blessing. When leaders depend on their own education, skill, and experience rather than in God, then God abandons them and looks for a Gideon.

The important thing is for us to be available for God to use just as He sees fit. We may not fully understand His plans, but we can fully trust His promises. And it is faith in Him that gives the victory.

Now so far in Gideon's life, we have seen his responses to God's call to defeat the enemy. At first, Gideon was full of questions and doubts, but then he grew in his faith, believed God's promises, and led his army to victory. Now we arrive at Judges chapter 8 which focuses on Gideon's responses to various people after he had won the battle. This chapter tells us how he handled some difficult situations, which we can certainly learn from. Gideon handled the new challenges by responding differently to each one.

Here is how Gideon handled some difficult situations. He had a soft answer for his critics. Ephraim had not been included in the original army in Judges 6:35. But Manasseh, the sister tribe, *had* shared in the battle.

**Judges 8:1-3** 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 sharp sharply. [they attacked him verbally, they criticized his decision] 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 [the enemy's crops]? God has delivered into your hands the princess 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.

He basically complimented them and said, your actions were much greater than mine were, knowing that they were a large and important tribe, second only to Judah, the Ephraimites were a proud people. Gideon was from Manasseh, the brother tribe of Ephraim and Ephraim was insulted because he did not call them to the battle. But why would such an important tribe want to follow a farmer into battle anyway? The Ephraimites had assisted Ehud in chapter 3 and Deborah and Barak in chapter 5, but that was no guarantee they would help Gideon.

When we reflect on the way the attack on Midian was handled, it was wisdom on Gideon's part that he did not call for volunteers from Ephraim. This proud tribe would have been incensed if Gideon had told the frightened men to go home and their volunteers would not have tolerated his thinning out of the ranks to only 300 soldiers. So even ahead of time, God knew how the Ephraimites would have reacted and he just kept them out of the whole thing to begin with.

If Gideon had called them and then sent most of them back, they would have created a far worse problem before the battle than they did afterward. And Ephraim was on hand to help in the mopping up operations and that is what really counted. Ephraim, however, missed out on acquiring some valuable spoils of war from over 100,000 soldiers and this may have been what irritated them the most. It was an aspect of their greed rather than their pride. But it sounded like it was both pride and possibly greed.

Human nature is always the same. Usually when people criticize something we have done, there is a personal reason behind the criticism and we may never find out what the real reason was. And since David's unselfish law governing the dividing of the spoils of war, recorded in I Samuel 30:21-25, had not been established yet, those who did not participate in the battle did not share in the spoil. And when the men of Ephraim should have been thanking Gideon for delivering the nation, they were criticizing him and adding to his burdens. That actually happens to God's ministers on occasion as well. Same attitude behind it.

Later, Gideon called Ephraim to capture the two infamous princes, which they did. But they were provoked! How easy it is for human nature to act

even when God has given a great victory. Gideon could have told them off, but instead he practiced the principle later recorded in Proverbs 15:1, "A soft answer turns away wrath." Paraphrased, Proverbs 16:32 warns, "It is better to control our feelings than to conquer a city."

If Gideon had offended his brethren, he might never win them back. And so Proverbs 18:19 teaches us, "A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a castle." So once a person is offended, it is much harder to win them back than it is just to give a soft answer to begin with or a soft answer certainly later to repair as best we can.

As a victorious general, a national hero, and the people's first choice for king, Gideon might have used his authority and popularity to put the tribe of Ephraim in its place. But he chose to use the sensitive and tactful way of diplomacy. Perhaps Gideon's immediate feelings were not that cordial, but he controlled himself and treated his fellow Israelites with kindness. Proverbs 16:32 says, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes the city."

So Gideon proved that he could control not only an army but also his temper and tongue. It did not cost Gideon much to swallow his pride and compliment the men of Ephraim. Peace was restored and Gideon returned to the important tasks at hand.

Here is another way Gideon handled a difficult situation. He had a stern warning for his skeptics. That almost seems like a contrast to a soft answer. But let us read on.

**Judges 8:4-17** When Gideon came to the Jordan, he and the three hundred men who were with him crossed over, exhausted but still in pursuit. 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." 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?" 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!"

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. So he also spoke to the men of Penuel, saying, "When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!" 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. [this is really a blood-filled war] 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. When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them; and he took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna. [I do not know why they put their names so many times, but they want to make sure we know who they were.], and routed the whole army.

Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from battle, from the ascent of Heres. And he caught a young man of the men of Succoth and interrogated him; and he wrote down for the leaders of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men. 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?'" And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth. Then he tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

So Gideon and his men were pursuing two of the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, knowing that if they captured and killed them, the enemy's power would be crippled and eventually broken. The army crossed over the Jordan to Succoth in Gad hoping to find some nourishment, but the men of Succoth would not help their own brothers. They were Israelites.

The two and a half tribes that occupied the land east of the Jordan did not feel as close to the other tribes as they should have. And Gad had sent no soldiers to help either Deborah and Barak or Gideon. While others were risking their lives, the people of Gad were doing nothing to defend Israel. In



Deuteronomy 23:3-6, the Ammonites and Moabites, relatives of the Israelites through Lot, failed to help Israel with food; and God declared war on them. Hospitality is one of the basic laws of the East and custom demands that the people meet the needs of strangers as well as relatives.

Please turn with me to I Peter 4, verse 8. Hospitality was also an important ministry in the early church because there were no hotels where guests might stay. And in times of persecution, many visitors were fleeing from countries of persecution.

**I Peter 4:8-9** And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins." Be hospitable to one another without grumbling.

Helping a hungry brother or a brother in need is an opportunity to help and serve Jesus Christ. The men of Succoth did not think feeding a hungry brother was an opportunity to show love, but it was a risk they did not want to take and they were rather impudent in the way they spoke to Gideon since Gideon received the same response from the men of Penuel. He warned both cities that he would return and discipline them, which he did.

God gave Gideon and his army and his men victory and triumphantly, Gideon retraced his steps and kept his promise to the men of Succoth and Penuel. Gideon chastised the 77 leaders in Succoth, apparently by beating them with thorny branches. He then went to Penuel and wrecked their tower, killing the men who had opposed him.

Why did Gideon not show the people of Succoth and Penuel the same kindness that he showed to the Ephraimites and simply forgive them for their offenses? For one thing, their offenses were not alike. The pride of Ephraim was nothing compared to the hardheartedness and rebellion of Succoth and Penuel. Ephraim was protecting their tribal pride, a sin but not a physically costly one. But Succoth and Penuel were rebelling against God's chosen leader and assisting the enemy at the time. Theirs was the sin of hardheartedness toward their brethren and treason against God.

Judges 8, verse 18, if you will turn back to that, please. Leaders must have discernment or they will make wrong decisions as they deal with different

situations. Personal insults are one thing, but rebellion against God and His people is quite something else. Likewise, brethren must not disrespect God's ministers lest a worse thing come upon them.

How did Gideon handle some difficult situations? Third, is that he had a solemn question for his enemies.

**Judges 8:18-21** 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." [this is Gideon speaking] 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. So Zebah and Zalmunna said [this was to Gideon], "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.

So Gideon had a personal matter to settle with these two kings because they had been guilty of killing his brothers at Tabor. It does not tell us when this evil act took place, but it must have occurred during one of the previous annual Midian raids that I spoke about in the first sermon; where every year Midianites were coming in and taking the crops, destroying the livelihood of the Israelites. How Gideon's brothers became involved and why they were killed it does not say. But the suggestion is that the act was an unconscionable one, a brutal one, a cruel one, that was not necessary.

The two kings were shrewd in the way they answered Gideon, flattering him by comparing him and his brothers to princes. Someone has said that flattery is a good thing to taste, but a bad thing to swallow. And Gideon did not swallow it. He could not spare these two evil men who had taken food from the mouths of Israelite women and children and had brutally killed Israelitish men.

In those days how a soldier died was important to his reputation. Abimelech did not want to die at the hand of a woman and King Saul did not want to fall into the hands of the Philistines. For a child to kill a king would be the

ultimate humiliation. Thus, Gideon told his young son Jether to execute the two criminals. By doing so, Jether would not only uphold the law of the land and humiliate the two kings, but he would also bring honor to himself. For the rest of his life he would be known as the boy who executed the Midianite kings Zebah and Zalmunna. And I think that may have been what went through Gideon's mind, but the boy was not ready for either the responsibility or "the honor."

Even when people are guilty, enforcing justice in the land is a serious thing and must not be put into the hands of children. Because of his fear, Jether hesitated in avenging the murders of his uncles. So the two kings got Gideon to do it. Why would they do that? There seems to be a bit of sarcasm in their words, which may be paraphrased, "You kill us, Gideon. Let's see what kind of man you are or are you also just a child?"

So Zebah and Zalmunna did not want the inexperienced Jether possibly to execute them because he may have muddled the whole thing and made their deaths even more painful. You know, a child would have to hack somebody to death and it would be pretty brutal, whereas a soldier would do it cleanly, I guess. And it is not even cleanly. So how do you use nice and clean? You cannot. So it would have been a quick one for them. It may be that that is the way the reason they were goading Gideon on, for a clean death, as they call it, or a quick one.

Gideon and his 300 men pursued the two kings of Midian, but the men of Succoth and Penuel would not assist them. Their attitude provoked Gideon and he promised to avenge himself. This seems to have been the beginning of his backsliding because God certainly would have dealt with these rebellious men in His own way. Romans 12:19 says, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."

**Judges 8:22-23** Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson also; 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."

So we see there that even though Gideon was making mistakes, he knew that God was their King and was their King all the way through the ages of the judges until Saul was made king. But they wanted a king all along, just like the Gentile nations. But Gideon had the wisdom and also the faith in God and worship of God to realize that God was their King, whereas the rest of the people did not. So this was a puzzling reply for his friends.

The story focuses on two requests, one from the people to Gideon and the other from Gideon to the people. The people requested a king. Gideon was so popular that people asked him to set up a dynasty, something altogether new for the nation of Israel. This was one way they could reward Gideon for what he had done for them. But it was also somewhat of a guarantee that there would be a measure of unity among the tribes. (you know, thinking of the reasoning that the people had), as well as the kind of leadership that would mobilize them against possible future invaders.

Now, their request was a confession of unbelief. It was a confession of faithlessness because as Gideon reminded them, God was their King. Gideon rejected their generous offer purely on theological grounds. He would not take the place of the Eternal God. Gideon was loyal to God because of his faith.

Every Israelite should have known that the Mercy Seat in the Tabernacle was symbolic of the throne of God from which He ruled amid His people. To set up a rival throne would have been to dethrone the Eternal. Moses warned that Israel would one day want a king like the other nations and forget that they were a unique nation, unlike the Gentiles. And although it did not happen during Gideon's time, later Israel made it happen when Saul was chosen to be king.

What Gideon said was commendable, but what he did later was very puzzling. After rejecting the throne, he lived like a king.

**Judges 8:24-28** Then Gideon said to them, "I would like to make a request of you, that each of you would give me the earrings from his plunder." For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites. So they answered, "We will gladly give them." And they spread out a garment, and each man threw into it the earrings

from his plunder. Now the weight of the gold earrings that he requested was one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments, pendants, and purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the chains that were around their necks. Then Gideon made it into an ephod and set it up in his city, Ophrah. And all Israel played the harlot with it there. It became a snare to Gideon and to his house. Thus Midian was subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted their heads no more. And the country was quiet for forty years in the days of Gideon.

Gideon used this opportunity to ask for a "lesser" thing: all the earrings and ornaments. And this seemed to be a fitting gift for a great deliverer. But keep in mind that these golden trinkets were associated with idol worship. Crescent ornaments were associated with moon worship. The people were only too eager to share their spoils with Gideon. After all, he had brought peace to the land and had refused to become their king.

Gideon ended up with over 40 pounds of gold just from the earrings, plus the wealth he took from Zebah and Zalmunna. No wonder he was able to live like a king after that! At this point, Gideon, the man of faith, erred by unwittingly leading the people into idolatry. Gideon made an ephod, which was a medallion type of emblem that hung on his official robe or was put on his official staff. And the phrase "all Israel played the harlot" after it is a common biblical term for infidelity. In this case, spiritual infidelity, or more importantly, in a spiritual sense, unfaithfulness against God. It became an idol to them. And since the whole nation of ancient Israel was united to the Eternal by covenant as a wife is to her husband, any act of spiritual adultery or idolatry on Israel's part was considered a breach of Israel's covenant with God. And this meant that they stopped giving their true devotion to the Eternal and used the ephod as an idol.

If you recall at the beginning of this whole story with Gideon that the people of Israel limped between two different opinions. They worshipped both God and the Baals (the Baals being a group of gods), at the same time. Does it not seem like this nation, if a person is in mainstream Christianity, does the same thing? That is exactly what they were doing here except they preferred Baal because it was glitzy, glittery, and all the beautiful lights and the celebrations and the parties and all of that. That is the way it starts and it started there the

same way. And eventually Israel, under the kings of Israel, even some of the kings, sacrificed their children to Moloch and to the Baals. That is how bad it got.

That is like our abortion today, people sacrificing their children to the fertility god, whoever that may be, which is their own selves because that is what they have made themselves. They have made themselves gods over their own unborn children and they are taking their lives and they will suffer punishment. And they do, mentally. Any woman that has ever had an abortion suffers for the rest of her life. Sad. We feel for those ladies who made decisions early in life, messed up. I mean, they are insane. They do not have a clear mentality. They cannot possibly think straight. How sad.

Since the whole nation of Israel was united to the Eternal by covenant as a wife to her husband, this was spiritual adultery in that way. In this case, it is similar to the breach of a marriage agreement between a man and his wife, The Eternal called Himself the husband of the nation of ancient Israel, but their choice to commit idolatrous acts brought spiritual prostitution and adultery, eventually ending in divorce.

Gideon may have made the ephod as a representation of the Eternal, maybe it was done innocently to help the people in their worship. But a good motive can never compensate for a bad action. He knew it was wrong to make an idol. We saw that in his destruction of his father's idols. So his intent was not idolatry. I do not know what he intended, but that is what happened.

The entire nation eventually paid idolatrous worship to the ephod made by Gideon at Ophrah. So the Israelites quickly went back to spiritually prostituting themselves in the idolatrous worship of the ephod. This was easy for them because they had served the Baals before that, That is what they were doing before Gideon came onto the scene.

Now, the ephod was a specific part of the high priest's dress which had to be worn or carried when he went to God on behalf of the people. It seems that since Gideon was the the civil ruler, he desired to have an ephod of his own, kept in his own city, and used by the priests before God on his behalf. So the thought became a snare to Gideon and his family because of the bad choice to overstep his authority in the proper worship of God.

According to Adam Clarke's commentary,

His motive [that is, Gideon's motive] in making the ephod is not well understood; and probably it was done with no reprehensible design. But the act was totally wrong. He had no divine authority to make such an innovation in the religious worship of his country. The ark was at Shechem and there was the proper and only accredited priest. The act therefore can never be excused, whatever may be said of his motive.

So Gideon missed a great opportunity to bring reformation and perhaps renewal to Israel. He had torn down his father's idols and there were many households in Israel that were still devoted to Baal and those idols needed to be destroyed as well. The great victory over Midian gave Gideon good reason to call the nation back to the Eternal and obedience to His law. But instead of using the occasion for God's glory, he used it for his own profit and the nation eventually lapsed into sin once again.

With his vast wealth and his great national reputation, Gideon probably thought that his children were well provided for, but just the opposite proved true. Sixty-nine of his 70 sons were killed by their half brother who himself was slain by a woman dropping a stone on his head.

What caused Gideon's spiritual decline? It was pride among other things, but primarily, before the battle against Midian, Gideon humbly depended on the Eternal. However, during the mopping up operations, he became authoritative and even vindictive. When he carried out his vengeance on those two kings, we do not find Gideon honoring the Eternal or calling the people together to make a new covenant to obey God. Gideon started out as a servant, but later he was an important celebrity. The result was decline for him, his family, and his nation.

It is interesting and instructive to contrast Abraham and Gideon in the decision they made after their respective choices. Abraham took nothing for himself, but made sure that others received their share of the spoils. He especially refused to take anything from the heathen king of Sodom. Instead, Abraham fellowship with Melchizedek king of Salem, Jesus Christ, the High

Priest as we find Him in Hebrews 7:7-8. And in all that he said and did Abraham gave glory to the God of heaven.

Now Gideon did the same thing but only, it appears, that one time.

Judges 8, verses 29-32 is a transitional passage showing that one of Gideon's most fateful contributions to Israel's future was his son Abimelech, whose violent story with a murderous rampage is told in chapter 9. He had many wives as did his father Gideon.

**Judges 8:29-32** Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash [remember Jerubbaal was Gideon, that was his name], went and dwelt in his own house. Gideon had seventy sons who were his offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, whose name he called Abimelech. Now Gideon the son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

Judges 8, verses 29-32 describes the lifestyle of a monarch, not that of a judge or a retired army officer. And Gideon was quite wealthy, partly from the spoils of battle and partly from the gifts of the people. He had many wives and at least one concubine; his wives bore him 70 sons and his concubine bore him one (just quick summary there). In fact, he named the son of the concubine Abimelech, which means "my father is a king." So here Gideon names his son, "my father is a king," meaning that he was calling himself a king when he named Abimelech. And this son later tried to live up to his name and become ruler over all the land. Gideon also seems to have assumed priestly duties because he made his own ephod.

Nobody would deny that this courageous soldier-judge deserved honor and rewards. But his "retirement plan" seemed a bit extra extravagant, do you not think? The subsequent history of Gideon's family is not encouraging. He made many sons and daughters by many of his wives, but these were all slain (except for Jotham) by Abimelech, the son of Gideon's concubine. Furthermore, before Gideon's family was slain, they were not treated kindly by the Israelites. Sadly, the sinful hearts of humans forget both God and the people who have served them faithfully.



**Judges 8:33** So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god.

Baal-Berith means "Baal of the covenant." They were even replacing God who had a covenant with them. Israel made its covenant with one of the Baals and did not remain faithful to its own covenant-keeping God.

**Judges 8:34-35** Thus the children 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 house of Jerubbab (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.

So Gideon made an idolatrous ephod (or image) with more than 40 pounds of gold he collected. What the Midianites could not do by means of swords, Satan accomplished with earrings. For whatever reason, Gideon made the choice to introduce the ephod into the worship of God without any authorization from Him. He may have thought it was a nice ornament or symbol to represent God's authority. Or maybe it was a more prideful, selfish motive of wanting to increase his wealth and take over Israel's religious worship.

Regardless of the reason, he was self-deceived. Whatever it was, it encouraged the people to commit idolatry, which they were inclined to do anyway, and they would often limp between two different opinions when it came to worship of God. They were wishy-washy about obedience and so when Gideon died, the Israelites turned again and prostituted themselves with other gods called the Baals. And in a sense, is that not what people did when Herbert Armstrong died? And most of the Worldwide Church of God went back into Sunday keeping or into other religions or whatever it may be? The same human nature, is it not?

Gideon made a choice that apparently caused himself and his family a lifetime of grief. But obviously, since he is listed as one of the faithful in Hebrews 11, we know that God brought Gideon through the trial that followed, even though he suffered and his family suffered. For God to have put him in that list, Gideon has to have been more faithful than not

throughout his life and even probably lived a good example. But the damage was done. In this, we can receive great encouragement from God's mercy.

Gideon very likely eventually repented of his presumptuous sin of making the ephod. And we too must be cautious not to introduce things into the worship of our God that do not glorify Him.

Jesus Christ lived His life in a way that teaches, not how to *seem* religious, but how to be faithful in our relationship with Him and to make right choices. Even with all Jesus suffered and sacrificed of His own perfect sinless life, it was not enough to cause hard-hearted people to make the right directional choice for their lives. Most people turn away from Jesus, while some few called-out ones eagerly emulate His life and teaching. I say some do, because God's church is a small flock and we are seeing that especially in these days as we approach the end of the age.

Our personal lives in God's church as a whole must be conducted in sincerity and truth, in accordance with God's instructions. Our choices must be decided upon the basis of God's inspired written Word, which is the source book for truth. For this reason, Christ died for our sins. He knew we would sometimes choose badly so He made it possible for us upon repentance to be forgiven for our sins. God knows Himself to be very merciful and patient with us, as He was with Gideon. This does not give us license to sin anytime we want, but it gives us encouragement to know that we can be forgiven if we repent.

**John 10:27-28** "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand."

So we have that guarantee, do we not? It has already happened according to God. But there is a condition and that is whether we are going to submit to God and live our lives in the way that He has directed.

**II Peter 3:9** The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

It is truly amazing to see the love that God the Father and Jesus Christ show toward us in Their willingness to forgive us for the bad decisions that we make throughout our lives. We can be tremendously thankful for the righteousness of God in helping us to make right choices and in helping us to stand steadfast in our service to Him, rather than limping between two different opinions.