

October 16, 2016
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Judges
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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WHAT CAUSES FIGHTS Judges 8:1-21

God wrote through James: What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:1-6).

That pretty much sums up what can be expected in a society where every man does that which is right in his own eyes. That is how the writer of this book assessed the nation of Israel during the period of the judges which lasted over three hundred years. Twice the writer pointed out this sad conclusion: *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6). In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25).*

Can you imagine living in a culture where people ignore laws as a way of life, and where there is no respect for authority? And worst of all, where people are just unaware that there is a God who sets up governing officials for the good of the people? The current circumstances of the American culture don't leave too much to the imagination.

Why did the people of Israel keep going through the cycles of sin, oppression because of sin, crying out to God, God raising up deliverers, living in peace, then sliding back into sin? Why was there constant conflict not only between Israel and the various people groups who lived around them, but even within the society of Israel itself? Or, to make a current application, why has the presidential race become a sick joke, an embarrassment to the nation, making us the laughing stock of the world? I never imagined that the process of choosing a leader of this great nation would ever look like the petty conflicts one might see on the elementary school playground. How incredibly, unexplainably ridiculous this has become.

Actually, the mess in Israel in Gideon's day and the cultural disaster of our day flow from the same quagmire. We all are born with the sin nature. The more we set God aside, the more a society ignores God's rules, the more a nation will be left to demonstrate the innate wickedness of the human soul. Bickering, fighting, war, all flow out of the sinful desire to put self first, even before God. That was the original sin that Satan committed. It is what we look like when we reject God. It is why Gideon had to defeat the Midianites and why he had conflict with his own peers. It is why Gideon seemed to quickly quit relying on God and relied instead on his own desires. It is a sad story about the sad condition of the human heart.

"You Didn't Include Me!" (vv.1-3).

The people of Ephraim were put out. *Then the men of Ephraim said to him, "What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight with Midian?" And they accused him fiercely (v.1).* The leaders of Ephraim were jealous because of Gideon's victory. Of course, there is no indication anywhere in the story that they would have showed up even if Gideon had invited them from the outset. Every indication is that they were satisfied to stay secure in their mountain enclaves.

But now that Midian had been routed in the most amazing way, the leaders of Ephraim were really upset that Gideon had not begged them to help. Reading between the lines, we might conclude that they were angry because a nobody from the little tribe of Manasseh (their brother tribe, the other son of Joseph) was the hero instead of

someone from the tribe of Ephraim. We might wonder why they were so upset when in fact Gideon had enlisted the soldiers from Ephraim who successfully captured important river fords and killed two Midianite rulers (7:24-25). Yes, but that was after the amazing battle.

This looks a lot like sibling rivalry which is a very common and well known sin. It is the kind of sin most of us are familiar with. This sibling rivalry goes all the way back to Jacob's blessing on the two boys Manasseh and Ephraim. Because Joseph was Jacob's favored son, he received a double blessing through his two sons. That is why there was no tribe of Joseph, but he was represented in the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, his two sons.

According to the story, when Jacob blessed the boys he placed the younger Ephraim before the elder Manasseh. Joseph was quite sure his father had erred. *And Joseph said to his father, "Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations." So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying, 'God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.'" Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh. Then Israel said to Joseph, "Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your fathers. Moreover, I have given to you rather than to your brothers one mountain slope that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow" (Genesis 48:18-22).* And it was true that Ephraim was historically the dominate people group of the two.

In light of that background, we might understand why Ephraim's leaders leveled a fierce false accusation against Manasseh. The wording of the text means they argued with Gideon sharply or even violently. Manasseh was supposed to be the inferior of the two people groups. And Gideon was from a family of nobodies in the inferior group. How dare he defeat the mighty and perennial enemies without their help!

How would you respond to this fierce accusation if you were Gideon? You didn't want to go to do God's will to begin with. You had tried to beg, off but God wouldn't let you. Finally, you conceded

and in the process God taught you amazing lessons about His grace and provision. Now you were basking in the glory of God's amazing work in your behalf. Then your Christian brother comes along and chides you quite seriously for doing God's will the wrong way. How will you respond?

At this point in life, Gideon practiced the important principle that a soft answer turns away wrath. The victorious warrior helped the angry people realize that he realized he was not important. *And 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 grape harvest of Abiezer?" (v.2).* This is called humility. He reminded the angry relatives that he did not even represent the tribe of Manasseh. He only represented the lowly family of Abiezer who could not compare to Ephraim. What he and his insignificant people accomplished throughout history was nothing compared to the importance of Ephraim. In fact, God didn't need the men of Ephraim at all to accomplish His work.

Gideon reminded them that God had used them too. *"God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. What have I been able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger against him subsided when he said this (v.3).* They had already captured and killed Oreb and Zeeb. Gideon was still chasing Zeba and Zalmunna, two important ruler/warriors of Midian. Again, he was simply trying to show how much better than he, the Ephraimites were.

It is difficult for me to respond like this. The leaders of Ephraim were dead wrong. They were not just criticizing Gideon but were actually criticizing God and God's choices about His work. The natural thing for Gideon to do would have been to put them in their place. He could have laid down the facts that proved they were arrogant, immature fools who were ignorant of God and His sovereign choices. But God had taught Gideon how to rest securely in Him alone. People who really trust God are able to follow Solomon's advice: *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Proverbs 15:1).*

Sadly, people who really trust God at one trial in life, do not have the guarantee that they will always trust God.

Vengeance is supposed to be God's (vv.4-17).

The citizens of Succoth rejected God's chosen deliverer (vv.4-7; 13-16). They showed their rejection by refusing to offer help and mocking the servant of the LORD. *And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing. So 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 after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian." And the officials of Succoth said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?"* (vv.4-6).

Apparently the Israelite's pursuit of the fleeing Midianites fell into disarray because now only the 300 men from the previous night's battle were pursuing. We already know that the Ephraimites had quit the pursuit and wanted to argue. Gideon, realizing the battle was not complete yet, pursued with his 300 exhausted men. It was right and to be expected that Gideon would ask fellow Israelites to assist them with food and drink.

The people of Succoth did not comply as one would expect. This was a seriously wrong response. For fellow Israelites to refuse to help the deliverer defeat the common enemy was treason. The citizens of Succoth were guilty of rejecting God's will when they rejected God's servant. They didn't trust God, so they didn't trust Gideon. This was not a personal issue for Gideon. These were God's people intentionally impeding God's will. God gave them freedom to put themselves in harm's way because of their unbelief. Gideon warned that to hamper God's will can have serious consequences. *So Gideon said, "Well then, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers"* (v.7).

Did the LORD bring about His vengeance through a human instrument? *Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. And he captured a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men. And he came to the men of Succoth and said, "Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your*

hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?'" And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson (vv.13-16).

God had just used Gideon and his meager army to punish the Midianites for harassing God's people. Now God would also use Gideon to punish His own people for their obstinance. They were probably quite surprised when Gideon showed up with the two Midianite rulers by whom the citizens of Succoth had mocked the little army. He approached the city from a different direction than he had left (the accent of Heres, v.13), which was unexpected. The people probably never saw them coming. As he and the army came near the city, Gideon learned the names of the seventy-seven city council members (v.14). And suddenly there was Gideon in the town square with the two Midianite rulers in tow. Did the people expect God's servant to make good on his warning? Gideon did exactly what he had promised so that God would teach them a lesson about impeding His will.

The citizens of Penuel (also known as Peniel) rejected God's chosen deliverer (vv.8-12, 17). They too had hearts of unbelief like the citizens of Succoth. *And from there he went up to Penuel, and spoke to them in the same way, and the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered. And he said to the men of Penuel, "When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower."* Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about 15,000 men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East, for there had fallen 120,000 men who drew the sword. *And Gideon went up by the way of the tent dwellers east of Nobah and Jogbehah and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. And Zebah and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and he threw all the army into a panic* (vv.8-12).

After the men of Succoth had rejected him, Gideon continued to pursue the Midianites five miles further east to Penuel. The men of Penuel also rejected Gideon's request for help. Their response makes us wonder if these people who lived on the east side of the Jordan River felt independent of the rest of Israel and thought they did not need to help their brothers. Notice that by now the massive Midianite

army had shrunk from 135,000 to 15,000. Probably 120,000 had been killed either by their comrades' swords in the melee or by the Israelites' swords in the pursuit. Still 15,000 against 300 would require God's help.

Somewhere about ten miles Southeast of Penuel, Gideon caught up with the remnant, defeated them, and captured the two commanders Zeba and Zalmunna. What would come of Gideon's warnings now? The people paid dearly for their unbelief. *And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city (v.17).*

It would seem that Gideon punished the people of Succoth first and then made his way over to Penuel to do the same, or worse. The text states that he returned in peace (v.9), which characterization doesn't fit the picture very well. Actually, there was peace in that there was no more battle with Midian, but there was no peace for the people in Penuel.

Is it possible that Penuel's tower was its symbol of strength and power? Fifteen years ago, Islamic terrorists chose to attack the twin towers in New York for that very reason. They concluded that those two imposing towers declared the financial prowess of the greatest nation in the world. They counted it a great victory to smash those symbols to the ground and rejoiced as they viewed the smoke rising from the ashes of the once mighty symbols.

As we read through this story, it almost appears that there is a digression in Gideon's attitude. He dealt so humbly and kindly with men of Ephraim whose honor had been bruised. In verse seven Gideon had warned that the LORD would deliver the enemy leaders into his hand. But the LORD's name does not show up again until verse nineteen, and even there it appears only as an oath. Is it possible that Gideon was showing some personal vengeance in punishing the leaders of Succoth? The same might be true regarding Gideon killing all the men of Penuel.

Did Gideon Pursue Personal Vengeance (vv.18-21)?

At issue in this part of the story was the death of Gideon's brothers. At an earlier time the leaders of Midian had killed the brothers. *Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor?" They answered, "As you are, so were*

they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king." And he said, "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother" (vv.18-19a).

In this part of the story, it appears that Gideon took the two captives to his home town Ophrah. His young son Jether was present, and it is highly unlikely he had been part of the army of 300. Also, the Midianites had committed the crime Gideon brought up at Mount Tabor, just north of Gideon's town. The crime was that Zebah and Zalmunna had not killed Gideon's brothers in battle but in a treacherous murder. Probably the Midianites had moved their flocks and herds into the region. Some conflict must have arisen and they killed Gideon's brothers.

At any rate it is clear that now Gideon was in control of the situation. He told the wicked leaders, *"As the LORD lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you."* So he said to Jether his firstborn, *"Rise and kill them!" But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man (vv.19b-20).* Gideon mentioned the LORD's name but only in an oath, not to invoke His leading, wisdom, and help. That has no redeeming value. Even wicked men like Saul, who thought he controlled his own destiny as well as the lives of those around him, pasted God's name into their oaths.

Now it is clear that Gideon was taking vengeance for himself. It would have been different if he had killed the leaders because they were the enemies of God's people and had done harm to them. This was personal payback for a crime against his family. Yes, there was God's law about the avenger of blood, but that isn't how Gideon was going about this matter. In fact, Gideon was really rubbing it in to give opportunity for his young son to humiliate the kings in their death.

Gideon's actions in dealing with the people of Succoth, the people of Penuel and the Midianite rulers revealed his heart. What was the real reason why he executed the enemies? *Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength." And Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna (v.21a).* This came down to a man-to-man issue. Who was the strongest, who was in charge, who was the real man here? Why did he take the ornaments? *And he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels (v.21b).* Obviously, the ornaments were

valuable. It is doubtful that God would be opposed to Gideon taking the gold ornaments as plunder from battle. However, the Midianites' ornaments will figure significantly in the next part of the story. Gideon will gather gold items from the people, and maybe he contributed these ornaments as well, to make what became an idol to replace God.

The quick downward spiral in Gideon's life is revealed even on the heels of God's amazing victory. This is a very important lesson in the deceitfulness of the human heart. God called Gideon, who was an insignificant nobody, to deliver His people from the enemy who oppressed them. Gideon argued with God, God won, and matured Gideon over the intervening hours. Finally, we see Gideon as a man who trusted God implicitly. We were actually amazed at Gideon's faith in God's word and his willingness to act according to that faith. But in short time the true heart of Gideon is exposed. He quickly resorted to personal vengeance. He quickly revealed that his focus was on himself, not on God and not on God's people.

The heart is indeed deceitful and terribly sick. That is why we must keep pulling ourselves back to God as He reveals Himself in His word. If we do not draw near to God, we will be governed more and more by the desires of our sinful nature, our flesh. Our hearts will lead us into all kinds of foolishness until we find ourselves trapped by sin that God never intends to have dominion over us. If Gideon, who experienced such an amazing deliverance by God, can so easily succumb to the desires of the flesh, what hope is there for us? We must stay close to God by meditating on Him in His word and by talking to Him in prayer.