

# Judges

## Lesson 16

As we concluded the last lesson, some Midianites and their allies had escaped from the Valley of Jezreel and made it to the Jordan River Valley. Gideon chased them with his three hundred men and the rest of the men. Gideon also called for the help of the Ephraimites, and they did not disappoint. They took control of the Jordan River Valley and captured and killed the two military leaders of Midian, Oreb, and Zeeb. In the meantime, Gideon had crossed the Jordan River upstream with his men and was making his way south on the east side of the river. The Ephraimites severed the heads of Oreb and Zeeb, crossed the Jordan River, and delivered the heads to Gideon on the east side. You would think all was well. It was not.

## Chapter 8

### (i) Ephraim Offended

At the beginning of chapter 8, we learn that the men of Ephraim were offended by Gideon. Why? Chapter 8, verse 1 answers that question. *“Then the men of Ephraim said to him, ‘What is this thing you have done to us, not calling us when you went to fight against Midian?’ And they contended with him vigorously.”* (8:1)

What is going on here? Why were the men of Ephraim so offended because Gideon did not call them to fight at first? Instead, he called them at the last minute when he thought he needed them. It would have seemed that the men of Ephraim would have been glad to say out of any fight they did not have to face.

But something deeper is going on here. For those of us who live in the western mindset, we fend for ourselves rather than others. But the Israelites were of the eastern mindset. It is a mindset filled with traditions and loyalties to family. These loyalties were strong bonds through multiple generations, yet, they had a pecking order to them. Perhaps, these men of Ephraim were offended because Gideon had broken the pecking order. Of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel, ten were the direct sons of Jacob, but two were Jacob’s grandsons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Manasseh and Ephraim were brothers, the sons of Joseph. What does that mean? It means that anyone in the tribe of Manasseh who needed help and a person of Manasseh could not help, he was to go to his Ephraimite brothers first. That would be the pecking order. If the Ephraimite brother could not help, then he would go to one of his cousin brothers. Gideon had jumped the order and gone straight to his cousins, Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali.

At the last minute, Gideon reached out to his Ephraimite brothers for help. We all live in family units today. We all have family members who get in trouble and try everything else in the world until their backs are against the wall. Then, and only when they have no place else to turn, do they come to where they should have come in the first place for help. By then, the trouble is a crisis. Time after time, they come with a crisis. Each time, it seems that greater and greater humiliation sets in. That scenario is not what is happening with Gideon because he has the LORD on his side. It did not matter who he called for help; the LORD would have made Gideon the victor. It was the LORD’s promise. It was the LORD’s prophecy. Gideon had heard the word of the LORD directly from the mouth of the angel of the LORD under the oak tree at Ophrah. But his Ephraimite brothers had not. They had not heard the voice of the LORD nor the instruction. They were operating solely on their blood relationship. Once called upon, they must have felt like their big

brother had called on them at the last minute because it was now an emergency. They had to have wanted to know why they were not included from the very beginning.

Was not Ephraim the youngest chosen by Jacob for the blessing instead of Manasseh the oldest? In their minds, Ephraim was to be the chosen one of the two. In the dividing of the Promised Land, Manasseh was allotted his land, and then he had to give some of it to his younger brother Ephraim. This single act by Joshua psychologically bolsters the position of the tribe of Ephraim that has dominance over Manasseh in its history. The Greeks called it *hegemony*, a word that had grown in popularity in today's world culture. For example, America holds the position of *hegemony* in the world as the world power to assert its will on all the world nations militarily, politically, and economically. Yet, America makes up only four percent of the population of the world. So too was Ephraim, much smaller than the tribe of Manasseh, but with more power and fidelity to the national cause of Israel, at least in his mind. The men of Ephraim had proved themselves in their minds. They were arrogant about it to Gideon. We will see later in Judges 12 that this arrogance will foster terrible humiliation for Ephraim, but we will wait to cover that part of the story until we arrive at that chapter. For being called at the last minute to help, the verse tells us that Ephraim contended with Gideon vigorously. Arrogantly.

#### (ii) Ephraim Composed

But Gideon, called by the LORD to be the deliverer of Israel, answered the men of Ephraim in a godly manner. From Ephraim offended, we come now to Ephraim composed. Verse 2. *"But he said to them, 'What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?' God has given the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb into your hands; and what was I able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that.*" (8:2-3)

What great noble and self-control Gideon had! His Ephraim brothers attacked him personally, but he was a big enough man to extract himself from the issue at hand. Humbly and unassuming, he did so by asking the questions, *"What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?"* However, before we explain this, we must correct the English translation. The original Hebrew does not have the words *"of the grapes"* in the text. Therefore, the English version should read, *"Is not the gleaning of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?"* In whole, it should read, *"What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?"* In other words, Gideon humbly asks, *What could I have done as great as you?* In that statement, Gideon expresses that the deeds of Ephraim in what they did in the Jordan River Valley were greater than what he and his men did in the Valley of Jezreel. Gideon explains it in the next question, *"Is not the gleaning of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?"* Remember, Gideon was an Abiezerite. As an Abiezerite, Gideon led the original attack on the Midianites in the valley. Just as the workers go to the fields of grapes first to make the harvest, Gideon and his three hundred workers went to the field to harvest the Midianites. But in the Israelite culture, under the law of the LORD, the edges of the vines were always left for gleaning. It was so with the fight against the Midianites, the edges of their field needed to be gleaned, and it was Ephraim's privilege to do the gleaning. As such, Gideon admitted to the men of Ephraim that their gleaning resulted in a bounty much greater than Gideon's original harvest. You see, the word *"vintage"* in this text means *the harvest of grapes*. It comes from an old word that means *vine harvest*. Therefore, the writer tells us that Gideon admitted to Ephraim that his vine harvest was meager in Israel compared to Ephraim's gleaning after Gideon's original harvest. That is why Gideon continued to praise Ephraim's capture of Midian's military leaders – Oreb and Zeeb. After that, Gideon says, *"... what was I able to do in comparison with you?"* As such, Gideon took his place in the *hegemony* below the men of Ephraim. His answer calmed the offense of Ephraim.

## (f) Gideon Shunned by Relatives

## (i) His Request for Food at Succoth

Gideon had calmed the complaints of the Ephraimites, but he would still need to handle the offense of more of his relatives. We will see Gideon shunned by relatives with his request for food at Succoth. Verse 4. *"Then Gideon and the 300 men who were with him came to the Jordan and crossed over, weary yet pursuing."*<sup>5</sup> He said to the men of Succoth, *"Please give loaves of bread to the people who are following me, for they are weary, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian."*<sup>6</sup> The leaders of Succoth said, *"Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your army?"*<sup>7</sup> Gideon said, *"All right, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will thrash your bodies with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers."* (8:4-7)

At this point in the Scripture, where the Midianites had run from the Valley of Jezreel, the writer has made his first pass through the story to tell us about Ephraim and Gideon. If you will remember, the men of Ephraim killed Oreb and Zeeb, took their heads, and delivered them to Gideon on the east side of the Jordan River. Gideon had crossed with his three hundred men to the east side of the river when Ephraim had been called to secure the west side of the river. Now at this point in the story, the writer is making a second pass through the story to tell us what Gideon was dealing with on the east side of the Jordan River when he crossed over with his men. Gideon did not cross the river twice. This part of the story is just an explanation of what Gideon was doing on the east side of the Jordan River while Ephraim was gleaning on the west side.

With that in mind, Gideon and his men have arrived at Succoth on the east side of the Jordan River to pursue the two kings of Midian, Zebah, and Zalmunna. Succoth sat east of the Jordan River. It was the place where Jacob landed after he ran from Esau. There Jacob built a shelter for his cattle. In those days, shelters were called *booths*. The name *Succoth* means *booths*. Jacob had given the village its name (Genesis 33:17). It sat in the tribal area of Gad.

We must consider what the men of Succoth must have had in their minds. Gideon stood there asking for food for his three hundred men, while the men of Succoth knew that the kings of Midian were traveling with fifteen thousand men. Three hundred against fifteen thousand. We have to remember that the men of Succoth did not know the whole story of Gideon facing the one hundred and twenty thousand Midianites in the valley of Jezreel. But no doubt, they did not believe that Gideon and his few men could be victorious against the kings of Midian and their men. It seems that the men of Succoth were fearful of retribution from the Midianites if Gideon was unsuccessful. With that, the men of Succoth did not want to give food to Gideon's *army*. That led Gideon to warn the men of Succoth. When Gideon says, *"I will thrash your bodies,"* he means *I will tear your flesh*. He says he will tear their flesh with the thorns and briers of the wilderness when he is victorious against Zebah or Zalmunna.

## (ii) His Request for Food at Peniel

With his request for food at Peniel, the response from the men was the same as that of Succoth. Verse 8. *"He went up from there to Peniel and spoke similarly to them; and the men of Peniel answered him just as the men of Succoth had answered."*<sup>9</sup> So he spoke also to the men of Peniel, saying, *"When I return safely, I will tear down this tower."* (8:8-9)

It was at Peniel that Jacob wrestled with the divine (Genesis 32:32). Jacob named the place. *Peniel* means *the face of God*. Later, the location developed into a town. After being destroyed, Jeroboam would rebuild the city (1<sup>st</sup> Kings 12:25). But at this time in the story, it was just a town with a large lookout tower. It sat on the north bank of the Jabbok River, which emptied into the Jordan River. No doubt, the men of Peniel relied on the tower for their safety. No doubt it was a false faith that would come to an end when Gideon tears it down.

(g) Gideon Conquered the Midians

We come now to consider the passage where Gideon conquered the Midians. It is also the passage where we learn the number of troops who were in the army of Midian and its allies. Verse 10. *“Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor, and their armies with them, about 15,000 men, all who were left of the entire army of the sons of the east; for the fallen were 120,000 swordsmen.”*<sup>11</sup> *Gideon went up by the way of those who lived in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbebah, and attacked the camp when the camp was unsuspecting.*<sup>12</sup> *When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army.”* (8:10-12)