

Judges

Lesson 17

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.”*¹¹ *Gideon went up by the way of those who lived in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and attacked the camp when the camp was unsuspecting.*¹² *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)

Gideon had learned that the two Midianite kings were in *Karkor*. *Karkor* means *a safe enclosure*, and it sat not far from Succoth and Penuel. It was in the desert wastelands on the east of the Jordan River. We do not know where Karkor sits because it is the name the Hebrews gave the location in memory of the events that took place there. It was not a village or town at the time. The two kings had *about 15,000 men, all who were left of the entire army of the sons of the east*. For Gideon and his three hundred men, fifteen thousand men presented a formidable force to face. It was the third in the battles with the Midianites in two or three days.

We also learn in this passage that the two kings had already lost one hundred and twenty men in the previous two battles with Israel. Gideon, with his original three hundred and the addition of the men of Ephraim, had struck quite a blow to the Midianites, killing more than eighty-two percent of the Midianite troops.

To get to Karkor, Gideon and his men took a path by the tent villages of *Nobah and Jogbehah*. *Nobah* was of the tribe of Manasseh, and he was granted land in the area called Gilead on the east side of the Jordan River (Numbers 32:42). *Jogbehah* was a tent town built on the border of the tribe of Gad and Manasseh on the east side of the Jordan River (Numbers 32:35). The mention of these two names meant that Gideon was almost directly east of the Valley of Jezreel and on his way to *Karkor* in the desert sands.

When Gideon arrived in Karkor, the text says he *“attacked the camp when the camp was unsuspecting.”* It is safe to say that the two kings thought they were a safe distance away from Gideon and could safely take a rest. Because Gideon named the place Karkor, it is probably safe to say that the location was some sort of enclosed area, such as a sheepfold or perhaps a secluded area between two mountains on the edge of the desert sands. Nevertheless, as Gideon arrives, the two kings ran again. But Gideon caught up with them, capturing them and killing the fifteen thousand men with them. Not one is saved.

(h) Gideon Disciplined the Relatives

The men of the Midianite kings were dead. The kings were in his hands. Time had come. Gideon disciplined the relatives. Verse 13. *“Then Gideon, the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres.”*¹⁴ *And he captured a youth from Succoth and questioned him. Then the youth wrote down for him the princes of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men.”*¹⁵ *He came to the men of Succoth and said, “Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, concerning 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 weary?”’ ”*¹⁶ *He took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and he disciplined the men of Succoth with them.”*¹⁷ *He tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.”* (8:13-17)

What is the “*ascent of Heres?*” *Heres* should be translated into English as *the sun*. The ascent of Heres is the *ascent of the sun* or the *rising of the sun* or *sunrise*. Gideon had attacked the two kings and their army at night. With the army dead, and the kings in hand, Gideon returned to Succoth.

In Succoth, with the Midianite kings in hand, Gideon “*captured a youth ... and questioned him,*” asking for the names of the rulers of Succoth and the names of its seventy-seven elders.

Into Succoth, Gideon went with the intent of disciplining the who would not give aid to his men when they were hungry. In tow, Gideon had Zebah and Zalmunna. He repeated what they had said to him when they sent him off without food. Then, he disciplined them with thorns and briars. What does that mean? Did he kill them? We do not know? Here is what we do know. In the villages, such as Succoth and Penuel, the people had no control over the decisions made by the elders. Therefore, Gideon would have been out of line to discipline the entire town. In Gideon’s case, he would only discipline those who made the decision. In this case, it was the elders. The Hebrew word translated *discipline* in verse 16 means *to teach*, not to punish. But in the context, Gideon taught the elders a lesson with the use of thorns and briars. The Targum tells us that Gideon broke the thorns and briars upon these seventy-seven men in what we would call scourging. Their flesh was torn by the thorns and briars, but did it lead to their deaths? We do not know.

After dealing with Succoth, we see Gideon moving on to Penuel. There the outcome was different. There the famed tower of Penuel was torn down and the elders killed. The writer did not tell us what the men of Penuel had said to Gideon in the first place. Whatever it was, must have been worse than what the men of Succoth said, for Gideon’s response differed. Succoth was taught a lesson; Penuel was delivered a death punishment.

(i) Gideon Killed the Kings

After dragging Zebah and Zalmunna through Succoth and Penul, Gideon turned his attention to these two kings. Gideon killed the kings, but he questioned them first. Verse 18. “*Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, ‘What kind of men were they whom you killed at Tabor?’ And they said, ‘They were like you, each one resembling the son of a king.’*”¹⁹ He said, “*They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if only you had let them live, I would not kill you.*”²⁰ So he said to Jether his firstborn, “*Rise, kill them.*” But the youth did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a youth.²¹ Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, “*Rise up yourself, and fall on us; for as the man, so is his strength.*” So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments which were on their camels’ necks.” (8:18-21)

Here we have the only entry in the Bible dealing with Zebah and Zalmunna killing the brothers of Gideon at Tabor. Mount Tabor stands in the land of Zebulun on the border with Issachar. It was on Mount Tabor that Deborah and Barak took their first stand to lure Sisera away from his home base to defeat him. But that was more than forty-seven years before. In addition, the Midianites were not allies of Sisera and did not participate in that battle.

Furthermore, Deborah and Barak won that battle. How could Gideon’s brothers be that old and part of that battle? Surely, even if they had been young soldiers in that battle, they would not have been killed by these two kings. Therefore, these two kings must have killed Gideon’s brothers sometime in the last seven years at Tabor. The details we do not know.

We see the entry of Jether now into the story, Gideon’s first-born son, who was still a youth. This is important because it gives us an idea of how old Gideon was when the LORD selected him to be the deliverer of Israel. Gideon was just a young man too. With a first-born son still in his youth, Gideon was probably near thirty-five years old at the time. Of course, we see that Jether did not have the inward strength to kill the two kings, and that is understandable. Gideon had to do the job. That is understandable too.

Nevertheless, over the next forty years of Gideon’s life, he will sire seventy sons with many wives and one son with a concubine. We will address this again when we reach verse 30 in this

chapter, but for now, we can give a short introduction. To have many wives in Israel was not honorable. The law in Deuteronomy 17:17 says to the men, *“He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away....”* Gideon will do it anyway. Gideon will retire after this conquest to his home in the tribe of Manasseh. He will not be the king of Israel, but the people will act like he is the king and, evidently, not be challenged by the religious leaders when he takes the multiple wives because he is symbolically the king of Israel and cannot be questioned. After all, he was chosen by the LORD, and his victories proved it. Polygamy was a sin; nevertheless, the rulers of Israel adopted it anyway, as we will see in Judges 10:4 and 12:9. Of course, we will also see it with Kings Saul, David, and Solomon. It is still a sin.

Moving on in this passage, Gideon *“...took the crescent ornaments which were on their camels’ necks.”* The Hebrew word for *ornaments* means *little moons*. But it is not the regular word for *moons*. This Hebrew word means *moon-god*. These crescent-shaped adornments were made of gold or silver. They are still commonly used today to decorate animals in cultures that worship the *moon god*, especially Arabs. They are mentioned in Isaiah 3:18 in the same context of thought for female attire and animals. Gideon took these for from the camels. We do not know what Gideon did with the camels of the two kings.

(5) Gideon’s Collapse

Gideon had started well and followed the LORD completely. However, after the campaign, things were not so good with Gideon’s leadership. We come to Gideon’s collapse. Verse 22. *“Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, ‘Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son’s son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.’”*²³ But Gideon said to them, *“I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you.”*²⁴ Yet Gideon said to them, *“I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil.”* ~~*(For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.)*~~²⁵ They said, *“We will surely give them.”* So they spread out a garment, and every one of them threw an earring there from his spoil.²⁶ The weight of the gold earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the neck bands that were on their camels’ necks.²⁷ Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household.” (8:22-27)

The request for Gideon to become the ruler of Israel did not come from the three-hundred men army. It came from all the men of Israel. Gideon had saved Israel from the oppression. As ruler, it would be his duty to continue to protect Israel in the future. But Gideon rightly declined. He also declined to allow his son Jether to one day be the ruler or any of his grandchildren. Gideon did all this right.

We might say that Gideon had it well within his right to ask for a financial gift from Israel to lead the campaign. But with that gift came Gideon’s collapse as Israel’s deliverer. He made an ephod with some of the gifts he was given, and that item became a source of idolatry.

The high priest’s ephod was described in the book of Exodus.

*They shall also make the ephod of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet material and fine twisted linen, the work of the skillful workman.*⁷ *It shall have two shoulder-pieces joined to its two ends, that it may be joined.*⁸ *The skillfully woven band, which is on it, shall be like its workmanship, of the same material: of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet material and fine twisted linen.*⁹ *You shall take two onyx stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel,*¹⁰ *six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, according to their birth.*¹¹ *As a jeweler engraves a signet, you shall engrave the two stones according to the names of the sons of Israel; you shall set them in filigree settings of gold.*¹² *You shall put the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of memorial for the sons of Israel, and Aaron shall bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders for a memorial.*¹³ *You shall make filigree settings of gold,*¹⁴ *and two chains of*

pure gold; you shall make them of twisted cordage work, and you shall put the corded chains on the filigree settings. (Exodus 28:6-14)

This passage that we have just read from Exodus is part of the high priest's dress before the LORD. It is not something to be worshiped. Looking at the gifts the men gave Gideon, he had all he needed to construct a similar ephod for himself. Concerning this ephod, the text says, "*and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household.*" Gideon's ephod became a garment that was worshiped by the people of the nation of Israel. Worshiping a garment instead of the LORD is idolatry, and it breaks the LORD's covenant and commandments. But the garment was also "*a snare to Gideon and his household.*" Like a snare, it leads to destruction for both Gideon and his family.

(6) Gideon's Conclusion

Finally, the writer brings us from Gideon's victory to Gideon's conclusion. Verse 28. "*So Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not lift up their heads anymore. And the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon.*" (8:28)

Midian was defeated by Gideon. Midian had suffered a great casualty at the hand of Gideon. Israel, even playing the harlot with Gideon's ephod, was simply "*undisturbed for forty years*" while Gideon was still alive. But Israel was not sinless by any means.

(a) The Introduction of Abimelech

The writer interjects the introduction of Abimelech at this time, Gideon's son born to Gideon's only concubine. Verse 29. "*Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house.*"³⁰ *Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives.*³¹ *His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech.*³² *And Gideon the son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.*" (8:29-32)

Gideon lived in Ophrah, but in this passage, we learn that he had a concubine who lived in Shechem. The son by this concubine was named *Abimelech*, which means *my father is king*. We would normally miss this point because, as English-speaking people, we rarely grasp the meaning of the word pictures behind Hebrew names. Gideon, living in Ophrah, was not the king of Israel, but from this passage, it seems clear that the rest of the nation thought of Gideon as their king. The writer told us in verse 23 that Gideon turned down that offer, but Gideon had not stopped the thought from being in the people's minds.

Furthermore, as the son of Gideon's concubine, living in Shechem rather than in Ophrah, the son's name told the people of Israel who he was. He was *the son of the king* – Gideon. That is what his Hebrew name means. Because he was not Gideon's firstborn who was still a youth at the time of Gideon's victory, it can be assumed rightly that Abimelech was born years after the campaign when Gideon was living in Ophrah. How Gideon came to have a concubine in Shechem, we do not know. But he did, Abimelech was his name, and his name told the nation that Gideon was his father.