

Shooting at the Saints

Beyond the Fleece – Part IV

Judges 7:24-8:21

Introduction

I was recently reading of a British and French skirmish in the early 1700s. I believe Louis the XIV was reigning as France's monarch. An English captain, whose ship lay off the coast of France awaiting the call to war, did not want to waist time. So he ordered his men to practice target shooting with their canons at a nearby castle. In typical French fashion, the castle was adorned around the top with imposing plaster reliefs of patron saints. So these men began practicing and spent their hours in the harbor sharpening their aim.

Interestingly, when they were called to war, it was so sudden that they were unable to refurbish the ship. They had to set sail immediately. And they lost the battle at sea, not because they were out-manned or out-maneuvered, but because they ran out of ammunition. They had spent far too much of it shooting at the saints.

I believe one of the common problems when we face the real enemy in the real battle is, not that we are out-manned or out-maneuvered, but that we spend far too much time and way too much ammunition shooting at the saints.

This is the problem of believers getting along with believers, and it is not a new problem. In the New Testament, we read that the church in Corinth was struggling with one believer suing another believer in court. We read as well, that Paul was begging the members of the Ephesian church to pursue doctrinal unity. The Galatian church had developed a

reputation for intense in-house fighting and were struggling in the real war because of it. In the church at Philippi, there were two women who were so at odds with one another that it had torn the church.

Paul even gave the names of the women in the church at Philippi as he compelled them to get along. One was named Euodia, whom someone renamed "Odious". The other was named Syntyche, whom someone renamed "Soon-touchy". I do not know how accurate these nicknames are.

Divisiveness over anything and everything is a contemporary problem as well. It is something that you and I battle. We are either part of the problem or part of the target.

It is thrilling to be able to preach a message from a passage of the Old Testament that stresses unity, and believe that we are unified in our objective and our purpose. However, as we study the books of the Bible and address issues that are raised, perhaps God is giving a warning to us of what can happen, or even of what may be happening that I am not aware of.

We will continue our study of Gideon today, looking at Judges chapters 7 and 8. Gideon will face the most devastating problems he has yet to face.

How Gideon Handled Criticism

Now earlier in my study of this book, since it was my first time preaching through the book of Judges, I thought Gideon's greatest struggle would be against the Midianites. They were the real enemy. They would cause the most trouble. However, as I studied further, it became apparent to me that his most

difficult moments in following the will of God, came from what he had to face with his own people; his own Hebrew brothers and sisters. They should have been encouraging to him, but instead, were discouraging to him.

The last part of Judges 7 is really the mopping up expedition. Gideon's army of 300, as you may remember from our last discussion, had stood on the hillside around the Midianite camp and had waved some torches, shouted a little bit, and blown their trumpets. They routed the enemy, and 120,000 of them took each other lives. Gideon never raised a sword.

However, 15,000 Midianites escaped. They were on camels, so as Gideon tries to catch them and finish the job, speed is of the essence. He radios ahead; that is, with one of his own men, and he asks the Ephraimites to do something for him. Look at Judges 7:24.

Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against Midian and take the waters before them, as far as Beth-barah and the Jordan." So all the men of Ephraim were summoned and they took the waters as far as Beth-barah and the Jordan.

Gideon asks the men of Ephraim to cut the Midianites off at the pass, in other words. We read what they did in Judges 7:35.

They captured the two leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb, and they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and they killed Zeeb at the wine press of Zeeb, while they pursued Midian; and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon from across the Jordan.

The names of the two Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb, could literally be rendered "raven" and "wolf". They must have been two unusual soldiers. The men of Ephraim killed "raven" at the rock and "wolf" at the wine press named after them, and brought their heads to Gideon. This was kind of gruesome, but was in the typical fashion of that day as proof that they had indeed, conquered.

Now the tribe of Ephraim brings proof of their victory to Gideon. They have not seen him for awhile, but have heard the story of Gideon's 300. If I had not read further, I would expect a whole lot of back slapping and congratulations and "Hallelujah! Isn't God wonderful?!"

However, we are told what happens instead, in Judges 8:1.

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.

This is fascinating. Let us back up and try to understand why this happened. I believe it is because Ephraim had a problem that had developed over the years.

At this point in their history, the tribe of Ephraim is the most prominent tribe. They claim men from their tribe like Joshua. Ephraim was the son of Joseph and they were proud of that heritage, as well. They also have within their borders the two religious centers – the tabernacle is housed in their territory in Shiloh and Bethel is also within their domain. We find them at this time, the most prominent, largest tribe, used to people coming from all over the promised land to them. They have evidently, grown proud of the fact that they are the tribe that is the most prominent.

The key words, in understanding the way the Ephraimites treated Gideon, are the words "contended," which could be translated in terms of "a sharp public conflict," and "vigorously," which means "violently". They literally jumped all over Gideon's back, saying perhaps, "Why in the world would you leave us out? We are Ephraimites! We are the most prominent. You would dare go to battle without checking with us first?!"

Nehemiah faced a similar struggle with his enemies who saw him rebuilding the wall and they were not part of the plan. They said, "Oh, Nehemiah, the only reason you want to rebuild the wall is so that you can be the king."

Perhaps the Ephraimites said to Gideon, "The only reason you took 300 is so you could get all the glory, wouldn't have to share the loot with many people, and your name would be known as "The Baal Contender".

Now the way Gideon handles his critics is incredible to me because, if I tried to slip into his sandals, I would have responded in the exact opposite way. Let me give three ways he handles these critics.

1. The first way Gideon handles his Ephraimite critics is with tact.

Tact is the ability to take into account the feelings of another person and respond in relation to how *they* feel.

I was recently reading a book by Chuck Swindoll, in which he retold an old, but humorous story about a husband who lacked tact. Let me share it with you.

This husband's wife was going on a European tour. The day she left, flying to New York first, their cat died. She called from New York and said, "Honey, how is everything going?"

He just bluntly came out and said, "The cat is dead."

She was shocked and chided him through tears, "You should have been more tactful."

He asked, "Well, what should I have said?"

Husbands say things like, "What should I have done?"

She replied, "Well you could have told me in degrees; little by little. When I arrived in New York, you could have said, 'Honey, the cat is on the roof.' Then, when I arrived the next day in Paris, you could have said, 'Honey, the cat fell off the roof.' Then, the following day, when I would be in Rome, you could have told me, 'Sweetheart, the cat is at the veterinary hospital and it doesn't look too good.' Finally, a few days later, you could have told me, 'I'm sorry, but the cat died.'"

He thought about it and said, "You are so right. I apologize for my tactlessness."

They kind of made things right and continued to talk. A little later in the conversation, she asked, "Oh, by the way, how is my mother doing?"

After a long pause, he answered, "Well, she's on the roof."

This is a classic illustration of what tact is not! Tact is the ability to understand the way someone else might feel and to respond in that way.

Someone once wrote, "Tact is making someone feel at home when you really wish they were."

Whether right or wrong, Gideon, in this passage, has every right to nail Ephraim's hide to the wall. He could perhaps say, "You come to me complaining about the fact that you didn't get an invitation to fight? God chose me. He called me. He empowered our little force. We didn't plan it that way. We wanted 32,000 men."

Instead, however, look at what Gideon says to these men of Ephraim, according to Judges 8:2. It is incredible.

But he said to them, "What have I done now in comparison with you? . . ."

I am saying, "Come on, Gideon, these windbags didn't do a thing. You put your neck on the line with 300 men, and you're saying, 'What have I done now in comparison with you?! There's no telling how many soldiers they had in capturing 'raven' and 'wolf'."

Is Gideon just flattering these Ephraimites? No, he is literally, seeing it from their perspective – which is very tactful. From their perspective, Gideon had done nothing. He had never raised a sword. He had never involved himself in hand-to-hand combat. All he had done was shout and wave a torch. They were the ones who got involved in hand-to-hand combat and captured "raven" and "wolf". So Gideon, seeing it from their point of view, responds very tactfully.

2. The second way Gideon handles his Ephraimite critics is with humility.

Gideon is big enough to highlight their achievement. Look at Judges 8:3.

God has given the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb into your hands; and what was I able to do in comparison with you? . . .

In truth, Gideon had not fought hand-to-hand. He very humbly, steps down, which is very difficult to do, especially when you have just done what Gideon did, and looks at them and, in a sense, considers them greater than himself. This, by the way, is a New Testament command given to you and me.

Gideon understands that, at this point, disharmony could split the tribes into a bitter dispute. He recognizes the fact that collective harmony is much more important than collecting honor.

3. The only correction that Gideon makes to this tribe of Ephraim is found in his third way of handling them, which is with focus.

Gideon implicitly states, as we just read in Judges 8:3, that God is in control. In fact, the only correction that Gideon makes to these men is that they seem to be leaving God out. He is not troubled with the fact that *he* is not getting the credit; he is troubled with the fact that *God* is not getting the credit.

Look at Judges 8:1 again.

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?” . . .

The men of Ephraim said, “Why didn’t you call us when *you* went to fight against Midian?”

Gideon is saying, “Uh-uh, you’re missing it.”

In Judges 8:3, Gideon subtly implies, as he says, . . . ***God has given the leaders of Midian, . . . into your hands . . .***

He is subtly reminding them, “Listen, you didn’t get ‘raven’; you didn’t get ‘wolf,’ and I didn’t do what I did. I submitted to God, and God through me, God through you, accomplished what He did.”

When you study the lives of men and women in the Old Testament, who are godly, you will discover the reoccurring common ingredient that they are all too anxious to give God the credit for whatever has happened.

For those who criticize – an illustration!

Now for those who criticize, there is an illustration in this text. Let us pull apart the complaint of the tribe of Ephraim to find what it is really revealing about them.

1. First, the Ephraimites’ complaint reveals that they are more interested in their own involvement than in God’s intentions.

The Ephraimites were political Christians, as it were. They were the right people to be seen with and they would make sure that they were always involved in the right things. And, by the way, routing the Midianites would have looked wonderful on their tribal resumé. They are a little upset that they do not have that feather in their cap.

This reveals the attitude that it is not what God is interested in that is important, it is what they can do to develop their own reputation.

2. Secondly, the complaint of the tribe of Ephraim reveals, obviously, that they were more concerned about receiving glory than in giving glory.

At this point, I would expect them to come across the Jordan with the two defeated kings, slap Gideon on the back, and say, “Isn’t God wonderful? Let’s share stories of what God has recently done.”

However, they are more interested in receiving the glory than in giving it. In fact, they are acting like very spoiled little children who have not gotten the present they wanted to get.

I was in the grocery store a couple of days ago, which is one of my least favorite places to be on God’s green earth. I know that some of you men go to the grocery store with your wives and that is wonderful. I know that some of you even do the shopping and I admire you greatly. I never want to be like you, but I admire you! Every once in a while, however, I go to the grocery store for that gallon of milk or that loaf of bread. Typically, I arrive at the checkout line behind a gal with a little kid in the cart who is throwing a fit.

You have been to the checkout lanes and know that they are a study in themselves. To your left, right at eye level with the average lady’s height, are all these tabloids with headlines. I usually get a chuckle out of them. The other day, there were the latest Elvis sightings and a woman abducted by an alien spaceship. Now, I do not believe any of this, but if you buy these things, I am sure there is something behind them! Then, do you know what is on your right in the checkout lane? Candy – row after row of candy. The bottom shelf is all the way down to the ground. No adult can comfortably reach down that low, but a kid can. And the top shelf is no higher than a two year old’s ability, from their cart seat, to reach up and grab.

This is what this kid in front of me was after. I was just standing there, between the Elvis sightings and this mom, just glad I was in and out of there. Bless her heart, he was pitching a fit.

Do you know what is really bad? It is when an adult pitches a fit because they do not get their way. Now they do not usually say, “Wah,” and stamp their feet. But they may make a power play; they may manipulate; they may criticize. What they are, in effect, saying is, “I’d like to be a little more preeminent here. You left me out.”

This is what is happening with the Ephraimites. If you think I am reading this tribe wrong, turn to Judges chapter 12. The same thing happens again. This is unbelievable! Look at Judges 12:1.

Then the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, “Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling

us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you.”

The men of Ephraim are there and say, “You left us out. We’re going to burn your house down.”

How immature this is. The Ephraimites had a problem. They had better be included or you are going to feel the wrath; they had better be given the preeminent spot or they are going to make trouble.

How Gideon Handled Disunity

The second problem Gideon had with his own people is very similar to the first problem of their criticism, but slightly different. It is the problem of disunity. Let us notice the way Gideon handles it.

Look at Judges 8:4 and note the last phrase.

Then Gideon and the 300 men who were with him came to the Jordan and crossed over, weary yet pursuing.

If you have ever needed a theme verse for following God – as a housewife, as a businessman or businesswoman, or wherever you are serving the Lord and are worn out – this is the verse,

. . . weary yet pursuing.

Continue to Judges 8:5-6.

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.” The leaders of Succoth said, “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your army?”

The phrase, “are the hands,” may allude to the practice at that time of dismembering those whom they had conquered as proof that they had won. Many times they dismembered the hands as proof, so that may be the meaning of this phrase in this verse. Continue to Judges 8:7.

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 briars.”

Gideon, as the judge, is saying, “You will be disciplined.”

We are given a clue as to what is going on in Judges 8:8-9.

He went up from there to Penuel, and spoke similarly to them; and the men of Penuel

answered him just as the men of Succoth had answered. So he spoke also to the men of Penuel, saying, “When I return safely, I will tear down this tower.”

What is happening? Succoth and Penuel are western tribes located on the other side of the Jordan river. What they are facing is fear. They probably also enjoy a brisk trade with the Midianites as they come through their region for their annual pillaging of the Canaanite lands. They are also facing the fact that if Gideon loses and the Midianites discover that these western tribes have helped Gideon, who do you think is going to be the first they attack with revenge in their minds? These two tribes.

These tribes are struggling with their choice of enemies. They have chosen wrongly because basically, they have said, “We would rather have God as our enemy. We would rather have the people of Israel at odds with us than the enemies of God.”

Fear makes us do strange things. These two tribes are struggling with their security; their fear; while the tribe of Ephraim is struggling with its pride; its status.

How does Gideon handle their fear and the disunity it causes? Let me give a couple of ways.

1. The first way Gideon handles the disunity is that he does not allow it to distract.

Look at Judges 8:10.

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.

The Midianites took on each other and lost all but 15,000. Continue to Judges 8:11.

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.

In other words, the Midianites, who have had camels to their aid, thought, “Oh, Gideon can’t come this far. He can’t reach us here. We’re safe.”

It is at that point that Gideon arrives and attacks. He is not distracted by those who in fear, want to fight in his walk of faith. He does not allow their insecurity in God’s promises and God’s power to paralyze his own walk.

Ladies and gentlemen, you will at times perhaps, be referred to as a person who is doing something that cannot be done. Perhaps you lack experience or knowledge. Someone who should be encouraging you might say, "You can't do that."

We find basically, that these two tribes are taunting Gideon. This goes beyond their fear; it actually states that they were saying, "Gideon, there's no way in the world you'll ever do it."

They had become as Gideon's enemies. However, he never allowed it to distract him.

2. The second way Gideon handles the disunity is that he does not allow it to develop within the nation.

Look at Judges 8:15.

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?"

In other words, "You taunted me. You said I couldn't do it."

Continue to Judges 8:16-17.

He took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and he disciplined the men of Succoth with them. He tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

It is interesting that Gideon tore down this tower because it was their position of security; it was their safety; it was where they ran when the enemy attacked. Gideon says, "You have been depending on this tower way too long. We're going to take it away. You depend on God."

So Gideon returns as God's judge to discipline. He takes the lives of the elders because they had become as the Midianites. They refused to follow God and God, in effect, through Gideon, says, "Disunity cannot be tolerated in the land of Canaan."

Disunity cannot be tolerated as well, in the church.

For those whose fear/faithlessness affects the church – a warning!

I do not want to torture this text in making applications, but let me give a warning from this for

those whose fear or faithlessness affects the church. Although I see vast differences between Israel and the church, there are some overarching truths that translate to the church of this century. Let me give a couple of them.

1. The first warning is that God never intended for His people to function disunified.

When I talk of disunity, I am not talking about some method or some practice, I am talking about the essentials, the doctrines that we, as a church, hold dear. Inerrancy is not up for grabs. The literal interpretation of scripture is not being voted on. If we ever become disunited on the virgin birth of Jesus Christ or on a literal resurrection of Christ from the grave, we are, in effect, saying, "God, You might as well just write right over the door, "Ichabod," because we can't function with that."

You may remember that "Ichabod," in Hebrew means, "the glory has departed". (I Samuel 4:21)

Romans 16:17 says,

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.

This literally means to avoid these people; to step around them.

A disunited church is a disabled church. Our unity comes from our allegiances to the Bible and to our Lord, the Shepherd, who wrote it.

Now Satan does not care what the issue it is; he just cares that we are divided.

2. The second warning goes a little further in that God never allows His people to minister effectively, divided.

Revelation chapter 2 tells the story of a church that is divided in its objective. They have lost their first love; their first priority to honor and glorify God and to reach their world. They had forgotten this and although they were seemingly existing, they had ceased to minister effectively. Jesus Christ's words are powerful as He says to this church, "Repent or I will come and take the lampstand away." (Revelation 2:2-5)

What is Jesus saying? He is telling this church, "You can go on functioning, but I'm going to take away your potential for effectiveness; I'm going to

take away your testimony; I'm going to take away your light, your saltiness."

Application

Let me make two further applications.

1. **First, it is possible for a church to exist without experiencing effectiveness.**
2. **Secondly, it is possible for a church to function physically without experiencing fulfillment spiritually.**

In other words, it is possible for this church to have its policies, its programs, its officers, its leaders, its laity, its worship, its singing, its music, and all of these things, yet in all of this, someone is missing – His name is God. This is possible, but a unified church is the most powerful force on planet earth. And you and I are here, in this century, at this moment, in this city to be His tool in reaching His world.

I love Acts 17:6, where the city officials in Thessalonica said of the church leaders and the church testimony,

... These [people] who have upset the world
...

Who are we to upset? Each other? No. The world. We are to turn it upside down for His cause.

There is no greater need in this church for the development of unity than now. In six or seven weeks, we are going to leave this school where we have been temporarily meeting. We are going to leave the folding chairs – the extremely comfortable black chairs and the brown chairs with backs that fall out! We are going to leave the classroom where the teachers push the tables against the wall to make room for kids; the nursery where the workers take desks and shove them against the wall and then, set out the equipment. We are going to leave and then, look back and recognize that these things created and developed unity more than anything else.

When we get into the new facility with its permanence, it will be so easy for us to make some method the law, to make inspired some practice, to refuse to change or develop, to refuse to take the next step in faith. It will be much more difficult than it is

now because we know everything about us is temporary.

If there is ever a call for unity and an awareness of fear, pride, status, and security as the enemies that they are, it is in Judges chapter 8.

An issue of the *National Geographic* magazine had a photograph of the fossilized remains of two saber tooth cats that have long been extinct. It is interesting because evidently, these cats had been involved in a war between themselves. Let me quote what the accompanying article said, "One of the cats had bitten deep into the leg bone of the other, a thrust that trapped both in a common fate. The cause of the death of the two cats was clear."

In other words, the cats were unable to disentangle from their conflict and both died.

Let me read the words of the apostle Paul,

But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. (Galatians 5:15)

Let us search our hearts this morning. Are we seeking God's glory or our glory? Are we following God's purposes or our purposes? Are we following God's direction or our designs?

Do you know how you can answer these questions? By answering, first of all, individually. Whose agenda are you following?

Together, we simply put into cooperate form what we, individually, do, and how we, individually, live. If we are a unified church, by His grace – and I believe we are – it is only because we are each, individually, stepping down and recognizing the value, the merits, and the accomplishments of others. We are handling criticism with tact and with focus. And we are at odds with anything that will disunify us – we, like Gideon, will *not* allow it to exist.

You and I have been given a tremendous responsibility and privilege. God has uniquely blessed this church. We are poised to see that potential magnified a thousand times over when we move. And, by His grace, it will happen, if we seek His plan, His purpose, His glory, His honor, His cause. May it be.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/15/1992 by Stephen Davey.

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