

Introduction:

- A. At the beginning, when Israel was oppressed by their sin and by the marauders of Midian, the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, and to his astonishment, said, “*Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?*” To which Gideon replied, “*Pardon me, my lord, but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.*”

Well, that was the beginning of quite a ride for Gideon. Last Sunday we saw the amazing victory he had over the Midianites with a company of only 300 men—a victory that basically came by scaring the wits out of them till, in the meleé, God caused them to kill each other.

After that Gideon showed a side he hadn’t before. He proved himself a smooth-talking mediator when there is trouble in his own ranks and a ruthless general with enemy collaborators and with defiant enemy kings. **Turn to Jdg. 8**

Back when Gideon tore down his father’s altar to Baal and got away with it his neighbors gave him a new name: **Jerub-Baal, *Let Baal Contend with Him.*** It turned out that Baal was no match for Gideon when God was with him.

Finally, when all was said and done, Gideon had won the loyalty of the Israelites. In **8:22-23**, “*The Israelites said to Gideon, ‘Rule over us—you, your son and your grandson—because you have saved us from the hand of Midian.’ Gideon told them, ‘I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you.’*”

Wow! This guy is a keeper! Let’s all sing, “Rejoice, the Lord is King,” and go home!

I love a story with a happy ending! **V. 28** says, “*Thus Midian was subdued before the Israelites and did not raise its head again. During Gideon’s lifetime, the land had peace forty years.*” That’s what I’m talkin’ about! **So there’s the lesson for us: Let us learn to trust the LORD and he will conquer our enemies and give us peace.**

- B. Oh... wait just a minute. Did you notice **v.33**? “*No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted*

themselves to the Baals.” What?? How did that happen? How did we get from “*The Lord is king*” to that?? Maybe we’d better not go home yet because that dismal outcome repeats itself again and again to this day. And it can happen to me and to you, or to our children.

- C. **Our faith in the LORD is not threatened most when trouble is hard upon us but when peace dulls our love and loyalty to him.**

Here’s what happened right after Gideon insisted that only the LORD would rule over them. Vv.24-27... Isn’t that a weird story? There were basically two piles of loot given to Gideon. One had about 43 lbs. of golden earrings taken from all those fallen Midianite soldiers. The other had all the royal trappings taken from the kings who had been killed. I think Gideon may have just taken the gold in the first pile and made an ephod.

The most important ephod in the Bible was a beautiful, ornate, deeply symbolic covering worn by Israel’s High Priest, beginning some 500 years before this in the days of Moses. Later we’re told that priests wore white linen ephods. **So this gold ephod that Gideon made had a kind of priestly significance, only there was no priest to wear it.** So here was this priestly breastplate made from the earrings of the vanquished warriors of Baal that suggested to the Israelites **that they could have a priestly encounter with God without actually having a priest.** They could be religious without God even being involved. I suppose they used Yahweh-talk when they murmured their prayers and incantations there at that hard-hearted ephod, but there was no love in it, not longing for the LORD.

You noticed, of course, the strong language in v.27, “*All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there.*” In other words, Israel committed national adultery there before that soul-less ephod. They gave their love and loyalty to a golden chest-protector.

I. WE LOSE OUR LOVE FOR THE LORD WHEN OUR RELIGION DOESN’T REQUIRE HIS PRESENCE (8:22-28)

- A. That golden ephod was made from the souvenirs of their salvation, the loot from their defeated enemies. It was much

like the golden calf the Israelites made from the gold of Egypt. They weren't intending to create another god *instead of* the LORD. They just thought people worship better if they have something they can *see*. Gideon figured he was making a kind of tribute to the LORD from these souvenirs of their salvation but he did not know people.

But the Second Commandment says, "*You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...*" Ex 20:4-5.

- B. It is so easy for religious people to give their hearts to the trappings of worship and religion to the neglect of the LORD himself. I'm all for art and artfulness in worship so long as they are *our voices* raised in worship to God. No art, no image or song or building can substitute for the Spirit of God. I think there are times when people love the music of worship more than the Lord of whom we sing. I think we can come to trust the spiritual power of a place or a thing more than we treasure the Lord himself. **We can come to celebrate the souvenirs of our salvation more than our Savior.**
- C. And when that happens the seeds of spiritual adultery have been planted. We may be more religious than ever but the Lord himself is not there. **Frederick Buechner** wrote about Gideon's ephod. "*As soon as you've got a golden god you can shine up and deck out and push around like a doll in a baby carriage, you start thinking God himself is somebody you can push around too. The next step, of course, is that you think the graven image is God, and by that time it has about as much genuine religious significance as a rabbit's foot or a charm against the evil eye.*" [Peculiar Treasures, pp.40-41]
- D. This isn't a long-ago-and-far-away kind of problem. Especially in times of peace and quiet in our lives we tend to be satisfied with a golden touch of religion instead of an intimate relationship with Almighty God. And the slide begins. **We lose our love for the Lord when our religion doesn't require his presence.**

You know how in a movie about real events there is sometimes a screen at the end telling you what happened to the people we've been watching. That happens here in **vv.29-32...** Crouching in the weeds of those verses are some unsettling details. As we saw in **v.23** Gideon refused a royal dynasty. "*The LORD will rule over you,*" he had said. And there's no indication that Gideon reneged on that. We have no indication that he ever tried to *govern*, despite his reputation as a "mighty warrior." But there is a sense he kind of liked some of the trappings of royalty. Sort of king-lite.

Remember all those royal gewgaws in v.26: "*the ornaments, the pendants and the purple garments, worn by the kings of Midian [and] the chains that were on their camels' necks.*" I don't think those made it into the ephod. But I have a hunch that if you'd stopped by Gideon's place there in Orphah **he might have shown you all these kings' things that he kept hanging around his house.** I think he liked the touches of royalty.

Then there's the business of his "seventy sons, for he had many wives." Polygamy wasn't uncommon in those days but *this* much polygamy has a name—a *harem*, and that was usually the privilege (and expense) of royalty. Here's a man who tries to make sure he isn't forgotten! There's one son born to a Canaanite woman, and his name is Abimelek. The next few chapters are about him and he is one bad apple. But here's the curious thing for being the son of a man who would not allow people to crown him king: Abimelek means "*my father is king.*" Maybe it was nothing. Maybe Gideon just liked the sound of it: *Abimelek*. You know, like the Artist Formerly Known As Prince. But you gotta wonder about if Gideon didn't have a bit of king complex.

It isn't just those things. It's the outcome of the story, where... **vv.33-35...** I have no doubt that Israel may well have fallen back into idolatry even if Gideon had been a true prince of the Lord, but there is a warning here:

II. WE THREATEN OUR LOYALTY TO THE LORD WHEN WE START TO ACT LIKE KINGS (8:29-35)

- A. Gideon was a man, I think, who lived like a king. There are **three bad things** about him that stood out to me. One is his **self-indulgence**. What else can you say about a man with

all those wives and one very dangerous concubine? That's **a man who doesn't say no to himself**. That's a man who uses people—those women, especially. He was also rich, with a fortune that I suspect started with the loot from that battle. He could buy what he wanted. And I suspect what he wanted was to **be important**. Remember how he had identified himself to the angel of the LORD? "*My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.*" Not anymore! He made sure of that.

Not only was he self-indulgent, he also had a **sense of entitlement**. One indicator is the son "*whom he named My Father Is King.*" When you read ahead it seems obvious that, kings or not, he assumed his sons would be power players.

One other thing that we see about Gideon in the stories I skipped over in the first part of chapter 8—he was **ruthless**. He could be vindictive and cruel with those who crossed him.

- B. At a time when Israel desperately needed a model of godliness they got Gideon. God had positioned Gideon to be a national model of faith, humility, and worship. He was the man who knew first-hand that *The LORD is peace*, and who destroyed Baal's altar in order to show that Israel was to have *no other gods before the LORD*. But in the end, he was a poor model and a poorer evangelist.
- C. Did you notice in v.29 how the writer switched names from Gideon to Jerub-Baal (Let Baal Contend with Him)? I suspect Gideon preferred that name. It has a kind of bravado about it. Like Dirty Harry. ("*Go ahead. Make my day.*") **Gideon—the warrior Baal couldn't handle**. But, as it turned out, Baal *did* handle him. Satan didn't care about all those Midianites who were killed. He himself is a murderer, after all. When God destroyed Midian Satan/Baal didn't run away with his tail between his legs. He just bided his time till peace and quiet settled into Israel and then Baal quietly contended with Gideon in ways Gideon never even suspected. He was, as it turned out, a sitting duck.

The enemy twisted Gideon’s sense of worship till Israel’s love for the LORD turned to spiritual adultery and he puffed up Gideon’s sense of self-importance till Israel had no idea what it meant to be loyal to the LORD as their king. Peter wrote, *“Be alert and sober! Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”*

- D. Gideon’s body was hardly cold before the Israelites were back bowing before Baal and celebrating lewd fertility rites. It was one thing to call on the LORD when you need a big victory but when you just want good crops without a lot of commitment and sacrifices and all that “love the LORD your God with all your heart” stuff, well—there was no god like Baal. So *everyone did what was right in their own eyes.*

Conclusion

There is a warning in this anticlimactic chapter. As God’s people we must be on our guard. There is no substitute for fellowship with the Lord—for our love and obedience.

They were happy to have a fake gold priest. We need a better priest lest we follow in their footsteps. And we *have* a better priest in Jesus Christ, who lives forever to make intercession for us, to whose throne we can come boldly to find mercy in our time of need, and stands to welcome us into the very presence of God now and forever.

They were happy to have a pseudo-show-king. We need a better king lest we forget the LORD who saved us and who reigns forever. Our King Jesus did not cling to his rightful glory but laid it all aside to come to save us. Our King Jesus was not self-indulgent but rather took on the very nature of a servant, even to the point of dying on a cross for those whom he came to seek and save. Our King Jesus *did* contend with Satan, crushing his head, and making a public spectacle of him on the cross. Our King Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God on high. Though childless he has countless descendants, all of us royally born, all of us a holy priesthood. **Let us never give our love and loyalty to any other King.**