

March 20

Judges 8 and 9

Hello again, this is Alex Ehly, bringing you the March 20<sup>th</sup> edition of Project 4:4. Today we read chapters 8 and 9 and finished the account of Gideon and his times. While chapter 7 gave us the actual account of Gideon's victory over the Midianites, it is in chapter 8 that we really begin to appreciate the scope of what God used those 300 men to do!! According to the figures given here, there were 135,000 swordsmen in the original army of the Midianites. I'm not much of a mathematician, but I think that means that for each and every Israelite who went into battle there were 450 Midianite warriors. It had to be incredibly obvious that it was the "sword of the Lord," not that of Gideon which had won the day.

We open seeing there unwillingness of the men at Succoth and Peniel to provide support and supplies to Gideon's tiny army is a tragic testimony to the sad conditions in Israel just a few generations after Joshua's death.

Today we really get a sense of the lack of unity. There was no unity because there was no obedience to the Lord. When nations or churches or families have a common commitment to obey the Lord, there is always a sense of unity in the midst. When that obedience is gone, so is the unity and in its place you will always find conflict and dissension, mistrust and anger. The second reason for the startling lack of unity in the nation of Israel is to be found in the fact that they were without strong godly leadership. Unless there are strong leaders, any organization, be it purely secular or religious, is going to suffer from a lack of unity. God sends leaders to shepherd His church and, as we noted yesterday, His first response in times of spiritual decline is to raise up new leaders. The caliber of leadership found in the Book of Judges -- even in the times when someone did arise to lead -- is completely inferior to the caliber of Moses and Joshua. The sad predicaments in which Israel repeatedly found itself are almost predictable. Even the people instinctively understood how badly they needed leadership. That's why they begged Gideon to become their king. The final reason for the shocking lack of unity in Israel is simply this -- there was no unifying vision in Israel. The King James Version of Proverbs 29:18 says, "Where there is no vision the people perish" -- the NIV says, "Where there is no revelation the people cast off restraint." The words are very different but the basic thought is very clear. Leaders see where God wants to go and they communicate that vision from God -- and help others to see it and grab hold. When there are no leaders, there is no sense of destiny -- no clear understanding of where God wants to take US, so everyone decides for themselves where they would like to take themselves!! The end result is chaos every time. Gideon was definitely not the greatest leader that Israel ever had, but he did get a clear picture of what God wanted to do and he inspired others to believe it with him. Leaders do that!

The second thing evident in this account is that in addition to having no unity, Israel had no faith...no faith in God and no faith in themselves. Imagine the scene for a moment. Gideon has 300 men and together they have just routed an army of 135,000 men. Two of the enemy kings involved in the action have already been

taken and 120,000 of the enemy troops are gone. The odds against Israel have dropped from 450 to one to a mere 50 to one. In the face of that kind of miraculous victory, the elders of Succoth and Peniel are saying we can't help you unless you can guarantee that the other two kings are also in custody. It's just too dangerous. What if they get mad and come back to hurt us?? What kind of miracle do these people need to see in order to believe? I don't know if they thought this midnight victory was a fluke -- -- but clearly they did not have faith enough to believe that God had acted and that the hand of the Lord was with Gideon.

The third thing that evidently characterized the whole nation of Israel in Gideon's day and throughout the entire period of the Judges was a very low level of spirituality. Moral standards were at a very low. It is seen all through this account. The spirit of revenge that characterizes the actions of nearly everyone including Gideon is a case in point.

No unity, no leaders, no vision, no faith, no righteousness. No wonder it was a terrible time in the history of God's people.

I also wanted to quickly make note of Gideon's seventy sons and many wives. We do not know whether Gideon was polygamous before God raised him up as Israel's judge, but it is quite evident that the practice of having multiple spouses was widely tolerated in Israel. I am sure that they borrowed the idea from the pagan nations who they failed to drive out of Canaan and probably developed some first class ways to rationalize their sins. I can hear them saying "After all, It is God's purpose that we should develop and populate this Promised Land. The more children we have, the more quickly it can be done. The way to multiply children is to multiply wives. God is going to love this idea of ours." There is no specific condemnation of polygamy either here or in many of the other New Testament passages in which it is mentioned, but it is very clear that polygamy is not acceptable to God. More than that in virtually every passage of Scripture in which we have any follow-up details mentioned, polygamous marriages had uniformly disastrous results. Abraham's multiple wives produced the age-old Jewish/ Arab conflict -- Solomon's polygamous marriages ruined his empire!! Gideon produced a very bitter harvest indeed!!

Gideon's refusal to accept a crown from the grateful people of Israel is a reminder to us that Israel was intended to be a theocracy -- a kingdom without an earthly king because its real king was the Lord. Gideon understood and honored that fact. Unfortunately his opportunistic son Abimelech did not. After slaughtering all of his brothers except Jotham, Abimelech managed to secure a throne of sorts for himself for three years. The extent of his kingdom seems to have been very limited: only Shechem, Beth Millo (which may be the name of a specific tower in the town of Shechem mentioned in verse 46), Arumah and Thebez are mentioned. It was a very small kingdom held by force of violence and after just three years, the man who lived by the sword, died by the sword.

Chapter 9 ends by making a very significant theological point. I hope you caught it. Verse 56 says, "Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father ... God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness." The point is this. God raised up Gideon -- to be the judge over Israel. But the real judge was always the Lord and that judge always has the last word -- Even in our broken and messed up world today, we can rest assured that God is the ultimate judge and justice will be done!

Be blessed as you walk in the unity and victory of Christ.