

OUTLINE 5

Judges 7:16 to 8:35

The LORD gives the victory

Introduction

The previous Outline ended on a note of strengthened faith. That faith immediately bore fruit. Upon returning to his camp, Gideon called out to his men, “Arise, for the LORD has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand” (7:15)

He repeated what he had overheard: The LORD has delivered. The decision is final.

This was not news for Gideon. But a believer needs continuous encouragement in the faith.

The antithesis between the seed of Satan and the seed of the woman continued. Although it was God who sent enemies to discipline Israel (to bring them back to obedience), Satan used their hatred of Israel to pursue his own aim of destroying God’s people in order to stop the Christ from coming. Each and every war fought by Israel foreshadowed the final battle, in which Christ will destroy all His enemies – on Judgment Day. Article 37 of our Belgic Confession writes about that day in a very comforting manner.

The LORD breaks the yoke that oppressed Israel (7:16-25)

Israel’s army was equipped with unusual weapons. Each man held a trumpet in the one hand, and a clay jar containing a burning torch in the other. Gideon’s intent was to confuse the enemy. Upon his signal, his men would smash the clay jars, hold the burning torch high up in the air, blow the trumpet, and shout loudly. The Midianites waking to this sound would think a large army was attacking them and be paralysed with fear.

The result was as Gideon had expected. In the darkness of the night the Midianites assumed each man was an enemy, and began attacking each other. The Israelites did not have to do anything but stand by and watch as the LORD fought for them.

As the army of Midian fled, Gideon called back the soldiers he had earlier dismissed. All were needed to pursue the enemy.

As God gave victory, the yoke of Midian which had oppressed Israel was broken. We read about this victory also in Isaiah 9:4 and 10:26, and in Psalm 83:9.

A soft answer turns away wrath (8:1-3)

God had given victory, but Israel failed to see this. This fact becomes clear in Judges 8. Ephraim came to Gideon immediately after the battle. They were angry that the tribe of Manasseh had received the glory for the battle rather than themselves. Gideon's answer showed both wisdom and faith. His "soft answer turned away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1)

He praised the sons of Ephraim for killing Oreb and Zeeb, two princes of Midian. Yet, in this praise, Gideon gave the glory to God, for he said that the LORD had given the princes into the hands of the men of Ephraim.

The Ephraimites were appeased, and Gideon was able to carry on with the battle.

Succoth and Penuel (8:4-17)

Further unbelief was shown by the men of Succoth and Penuel. When Gideon asked for food, a reasonable request, they scorned him, mockingly asking where the princes were. The men of Succoth and Penuel did not see Gideon as a servant of the LORD, fighting the LORD's battles.

Gideon did not punish the men of Succoth and Penuel immediately. Instead he promised that upon his return he would beat the men of Succoth and destroy Penuel's tower.

Gideon continued the pursuit, probably accompanied by the original three hundred men. He found the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, at ease with their men. The Midianite army had shrunk from an original size of one hundred twenty thousand men to fifteen thousand men. It was still a large army compared to Gideon's men.

Gideon and his men surrounded the camp, caught the Midianites unawares and defeated them. After chasing Zebah and Zalmunna, Gideon captured them and returned with his men to Succoth and Penuel.

With proof of the LORD's victory in his hand (the two Midianite kings) Gideon captured and beat the leaders of Succoth – teaching them to respect the LORD's servants. He destroyed the tower of Penuel and put the leaders of that city to death.

Gideon avenges himself (8:18-21)

Gideon had conducted himself in everything as God's obedient servant. He had been fighting the war of the LORD. However, after the enemy had been defeated he dishonoured the name of the LORD by avenging himself for the death of his brothers.

Suspecting that the two Midianite kings had killed his brothers, he asked them: "What kind of men were they whom you killed at Tabor?" (8:18) Their answer confirmed it. "As you are, so were they."

Killing the two kings as Gideon did, was murder. By departing from the path of justice he obscured the LORD's work of reformation.

Gideon's Ephod (8:22-27)

The men of Israel asked Gideon to "rule over us" (8:22) This was the third time (see 8:3 and 8:4-9) that they failed to recognise God's hand in the battle against Midian. But Gideon refused, answering them: "The LORD shall rule over you." He confessed that the victory over Midian did not belong to him, but to the LORD.

However, he did become their leader in another way, setting up an ephod in his home town of Ophrah.

Israel's high-priest wore an ephod, a vest, when he offered sacrifices in the tabernacle (Exodus 28:4). On its shoulders were fastened two stones in which the names of the tribes of Israel had been engraved. In its front was a pocket for the Urim and Thummim (Exodus 28:30).

The ephod is also known in the Old Testament as a pagan object used in the worship of idols (see Judges 17:5, Judges 18, and Hosea 3:4). We also read in 1 Samuel 22:18 that the priests at Nob wore "a linen ephod." There it is a linen dress.

It is not certain that Gideon wanted to use his ephod in the worship of other gods. But by making it and setting it up in Ophrah he turned the focus of Israel's worship away from the tabernacle in Shiloh. He took charge of how the Lord was to be worshipped.

The people did however take Gideon's disobedience a step further and began to "play the harlot" with his ephod.

Play the harlot may be understood as 'prostitute themselves', that is: give their love to other gods (see also 8:33).

The people forgot the LORD their God ... (8:28-35)

After the Midianites had been defeated the land had rest for (another) forty years (8:28). True peace was however not possible as the remainder of this chapter shows (8:33-35).

Gideon's lifestyle – he took many wives, had seventy sons, a concubine in Shechem and her son (8:30-31) – was not in accordance with God's law. In view of this, the question has been asked how it is possible that he (and others) can be included in the list (in Hebrews 11) of people who acted "by faith" – or also: "through faith."

It should be understood, however, that Hebrews 11 does not list people who were without sin, but people who did the deeds mentioned there by faith.

“... through faith [they] subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.” (Hebrews 11:33-34)

Questions

1. *Why was it not news for Gideon what he overheard the Midianite man say: “God has delivered Midian and the whole camp” into his hand? (7:14)*
2. *What did Ephraim accuse Gideon of? How did Gideon answer? What was Gideon’s wisdom in his method of answering?*
3. *Was Ephraim right (in 8:1)? Why (not)? Why had they not answered Gideon’s call to arms?*
4. *What is meant by: “Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer”? (in 8:2). Was Gideon right in saying this?*
5. *Was Gideon justified in punishing Succoth and Penuel?*
6. *Why was it wrong of Gideon to avenge himself? How did this obstruct God’s work of reformation?*
7. *What is Psalm 83 about? Which verses refer to this Outline? What is being prayed concerning the enemies of God’s people? Is Israel better in God’s eyes than these enemies?*