

FROM TRIUMPH TO TRAGEDY

By Steve Zeisler

Many of us wondered what it would have been like to experience the terrible, unexpected tragedy of the Oakland fire last weekend. Now, I would like you to imagine the opposite: how you would react if God were to bestow upon you an extraordinary and unexpected blessing that would overturn your life for good. Gideon, whom we began to consider last week in our study of the book of Judges, had just that experience. We've come to chapters 8 and 9 which continue his story.

When we first meet Gideon, he describes himself to the angel of the Lord as the youngest member of the least significant family of the smallest tribe in Israel. He is living a defeated life--defeated by the Midianites and defeated by self-doubt. And yet the Lord chooses him to be the "valiant warrior" who will save his people. The victory of 300 soldiers of Israel over 135,000 Midianite, Amalekite, and eastern oppressors, described in chapter 7, was miraculous; it could not possibly be explained in any other way. In fact, in chapter 7, verse 2, the Lord specifically said that the reason he orchestrated Israel's victory with so few men was to keep Israel from saying, "My own power has delivered me." There is no possibility of boastfulness in such a miraculous victory.

In chapter 7, verse 15, we recall that Gideon, in a moment of fear, was directed by the Lord to listen to the dream of the Midianite warriors. He realized that the Lord had demoralized them and had caused fear and consternation by spiritual means. So Gideon, hearing that God has acted, is emboldened to lead the charge. With the warriors of the Lord wielding only a torch and a trumpet, the enemies of the people of God destroy themselves and are defeated. Gideon, as the leader of the victory, receives blessing from the miracle. It raised him from the depths to the heights. He became the most influential man of his generation, and he is increasingly looked to as the spiritual and political head of the nation.

Ordinary Spiritual Warfare

What follows is less obviously the work of God. Beginning in verse 24 of chapter 7, we hear Gideon giving orders as a military leader. He calls on the Ephraimites and says, "Cut off the escape route at Beth-barah and the Jordan." And then in chapter 8, verse 4, Gideon himself leads his band of 300 in pursuit of the bad guys across the Jordan. They engage the enemy at a place called Karkor and win another battle. After the night of the miracle we find the warriors of the Lord using military means to win battles. They're fighting with swords and strategy. They're making plans and using human initiative to bring about victory. Now the Lord deserves just as much credit for the victories in the battles of Karkor and Beth-Barah as he received the night of the trumpets and torches. But the problem is that, when we are taking the initiative ourselves, it's easier to forget that "the battle belongs to the Lord."

What took place in Gideon's experience in leading his warriors against Midian takes place in our experience as well. Many of us can recall some time in our lives when God did something for us that was overwhelming and miraculous; God clearly gets the credit for these happenings. But we also know that spiritual warfare requires initiative from us. It requires that we think and act. We have to discipline ourselves to choose one course and to reject another. It requires our courage, alertness, and perseverance. Theologically, we know that God deserves the credit for these occasions as well--he makes us willing and able to do what is right. Yet we desire for our hard work to be acknowledged and our contribution to the victory to be praised.

At our men's retreat a couple of years ago, a friend of mine was impelled by the Spirit of God, walking down a hallway, to step into a room where two other men were seated--one was a Christian and the other was not. The Christian had invited his non-Christian friend to the retreat. My friend entered the room, locked eyes with

the non-Christian man, and began to tell him that he should receive the Lord. Almost immediately, the man agreed with him and prayed to receive Christ. My friend got up, walked out, and felt almost as if he had not been there. There was a sensation of being overwhelmed by the Spirit--God acting without my friend's conscious involvement.

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What lessons follow from such an experience? Most of the time our will is not miraculously overridden by the Spirit. The Lord expects us to be thoughtful, courageous witnesses for him. Gifted evangelists supply strategic leadership to the church in bringing men and women to Christ. Character is developed through faithful obedience in the cause of the gospel. We credit the Lord for miracles and must do so as well for the larger process of making us disciples.

Many have had the experience of kneeling and praying to God without any preparation. The minutes pass, and you realize that you've been praying and pouring out your heart to God without any effort or discipline. Yet, questions remain: Will we learn to pray? Will prayer become a habit for us? Will we make time in our life for prayer? Will we study the prayers of scripture and learn to pray in more depth so that we're praying by choice, deliberately and thoughtfully? The immediate sense of God's presence gives way to a life that is transformed walking by faith, not by sight.

Gideon's Rise To Power

Gideon's story will help us see these truths. We'll begin reading verses 22-32 of chapter 8:

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." But Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you." 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.) And 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. And 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.

And 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. 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. Then Jerubbaal [Gideon] the son of Joash went and lived in his own house. Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. 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.

As I mentioned last week, the highest point of faith in Gideon's life comes when he is asked to be king of Israel in verse 22 of chapter 8; he denies the request. The undermining of Gideon's faith, sadly, begins the very next moment when he asks for an earring from each of the people.

Let's review the progress of the story from the middle of chapter 7 to verse 22 of chapter 8. What made the people of Israel want him to be king? The decisive battle was followed by significant leadership on Gideon's part--bringing in the Ephraimites, who were the most powerful tribe of the day, and enlisting them in the fight. He has to deal with their pride later because they want credit for what they do. They behead Oreb and Zeeb, the Midianite kings, and drag their heads by the hair across the Jordan River to Gideon and say, "We want credit for what we've done." Gideon, a savvy leader, says, "You've done much more than anyone else. You're

Ephraimites, aren't you?" He mollifies them and puts them in place as part of the coalition. Then he leads his own 300 men in war against another band of Midianites. They fight the battle of Karkor where he captures "two kings of Midian." In this campaign two Israelite cities in the trans-Jordan region refused to help Gideon. They wouldn't give his men food as the 300 marched through wearily in pursuit of the enemy. Gideon promises to return and punish them. After he succeeds in battle and brings prisoners of war back, he returns to these cities, Succoth and Penuel. He kills the men of Penuel and mutilates, beats, and humiliates the people at Succoth. Everything he does raises him to a more powerful position of leadership, making his name greater in Israel and more feared by others. He is the key figure who takes the initiative and receives accolades for what happens.

But by reading carefully you can see him beginning to lose his way. When the Ephraimites demand credit for the battle they fought, he doesn't say to them, "The credit belongs to the Lord alone." He gives the Lord credit, but also makes sure that their fleshly desires are mollified as well. When he is able to capture his enemies and punish the towns who refuse to support his men, you can see a concern for justice on his part, but angry revenge also motivates him. Over time Gideon begins to like the position of power to which he's been raised, using it for ends that aren't entirely right. He continues to credit God (most of the time) for what's done, but he also believes more and more that the human contribution should be rewarded.

Gideon And Gold

This is the same man who flatly rejects the people's request that he be their king in verse 22 of chapter 8. He says that the Lord will be their king. And then he adds a very important note for the rest of the story, saying, "And neither shall my son be king." Yet in verse 24, Gideon says to them, "I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil." This seems like a fairly small request. It's just one earring each. The Ishmaelites wore earrings as part of their war paint. They had been despoiled in the battle, and everyone collected earrings from the slain Midianites. But Gideon is speaking to people who want to make him king in the place of God. They don't want to trust Yahweh; they want a human savior. His small request for earrings turns into an avalanche of gold--1700 shekels of gold. He refuses to be king formally, but he has opened the door for an informal testimony to his greatness.

He has some conscience in the matter so he decides to do something religious with some of the spoils. He takes some of the gold and makes it into an ephod. An ephod was a garment which was worn by the priests, the high priest especially, and Gideon, a Benjamite, had no right to make such a garment. He didn't take the ephod to Shiloh where the ark was located and where the priests functioned. He took it to his own home town. Small decisions build on one another to suggest that Gideon liked prestige and royal treatment, while continuing to claim, "the Lord shall rule over you." The ephod became an idol.

Gideon had many wives as well. The way kings established their greatness in the ancient Near East was to have large harems which called attention to their wealth and authority. He had seventy legal sons and at least one bastard son. Do you see what he was doing? Gideon said that he would not be king, but he allowed himself to have all the perquisites of being king--riches, wives, and acclaim. He got the right answer when the formal question was asked, but he lived as if he were the king. And the people lost their commitment to Yahweh--Gideon's golden ephod caused spiritual harlotry in Israel and became a snare for his family.

Congress has received some bad press for exempting itself from the laws that it passes and expects everyone else to follow. Ordinary people must pay for things when they buy them, but not members of Congress. They buy lunches and are never called upon to pay for them. It's a scandal for the people in leadership to create a world in which they make rules that apply to everyone, except themselves. Accepting special treatment, gathering perks, growing comfortable with power and using it selfishly is sin. But this happens all the time in life. It happens with pastors. I was preaching here two or three weeks ago, and at the end of the first service, some people clapped. It was disconcerting for me, primarily because I liked it. We talk a lot about not having senior pastors at PBC and how there's no difference between clergy and laity. But it satisfies the flesh to have the benefits of the high office and to have people look up to you. Parents do the same when they say to their children, "Do as I say and not as I do." Gideon said that he would not be king, but then behaved and was treated like a king. Eventually, the people's faith in God faded because Gideon allowed them in subtle ways to

regard him as a king.

The Awful Abimelech

Moses warned the people of Israel about the time when God would give them a king. In Deuteronomy 17, he said: "Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself . . . Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself." Yet Gideon violated the advice of Moses on precisely these points, even though he didn't claim to be king. The worst outcome of Gideon's behavior was the destructive environment that he created for his son Abimelech, the child of his Shechemite concubine. Gideon should not have had many wives in the first place, and he certainly should not have had concubines in addition to wives, especially not a Canaanite concubine. Shechem was a city that had come under the rule of Israel but was inhabited primarily by Canaanites. In his unrestricted self-indulgence, Gideon procured a Shechemite concubine and had a son by her who would never have the advantage of legal standing. In addition, Gideon foolishly created unrealistic expectations in his bastard son by naming him Abimelech, which means, "my father is king." Abimelech never had the honor of his father's good name, and he grew up without roots--neither Canaanite nor Israelite. He also fantasized that he would be king one day.

Chapter 9 tells the story of this angry and later violent man. It sounds like a story of the Mafia. Abimelech convinces the people of Shechem to attack the Israelites. When the Shechemites want to rebel later, he has the Israelite army attack them. Abimelech began his career by moving into Ophrah, the city of his father, and executing seventy legitimate half-brothers on a single stone--bloodthirsty, no remorse. He is finally killed without honor when a woman drops a rock from a tower on his head. His story is sordid; there is no good side to the man.

In the contemporary world, he most closely resembles Saddam Hussein who came from roughly the same stock. His people lived in approximately the same part of the world. He was abandoned by his father and raised by uncles and others to long for the power and authority that he could never get by legitimate means. He was raised to be a violent man. When he had the opportunity to take power, he was ruthless and killed everyone in his way. It is easy to predict that he, too, will die by the sword and be mourned by no one.

In the moment of public temptation to self-aggrandizement, Gideon gave the right answer. Immediately afterwards, he began the incremental process of undermining it--a few perks, a bit of gold, a few extra wives, an idol. His life deteriorated, and though he didn't suffer most from it, the next generation suffered horribly because the son he left behind was an angry, godless man.

There's another hero of the faith whose life ends differently. In II Timothy chapter 4, verse 6, the aged Paul says at the end of his life: "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." These are words that Gideon could not say. At the end of his life, he was in no position to even think in terms of faith. Paul goes on to say: "There is laid up in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing." Paul lived a life of credit to Christ, a life of service to others, a life caught up with eternal things. He knew that the reward would come in eternity, not in this life. And he refused to be seduced by any of the temptations that might have snared him. He is writing to his son in the faith, Timothy (who was almost certainly abandoned by his father). Paul called Timothy, "My son in the faith." Timothy became a man of God because the man he learned from was a man of God throughout his life.

I watched George Beverly Shea sing one of his songs on television the other night at a Billy Graham crusade in Central Park. He's an old man now, and he said, "I want to sing to you a song that I wrote a long time ago. It hasn't ceased to be true." Having gotten near the end, he refuses to be different. May our lives testify to the truth he sang:

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold;
I'd rather be His than have riches untold;
I'd rather have Jesus than have houses or land.
I'd rather be led by his nailed-pierced hand...

I'd rather have Jesus than men's applause
I'd rather be faithful to His dear cause;
I'd rather have Jesus than worldwide fame.
I'd rather be true to his Holy name,
Than to be the king of a vast domain
Or be held in sin's dread sway.
I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today.

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