

The ragged edges of the people of God

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 0 0] Well, friends, we've come to our reading of God's Word, and you might like to turn with me to the book of Judges, chapter 7, and you'll find that if you have one of our church Bibles on page 207, 207.

I'm going to read the last part of chapter 7, and then the whole of chapter 8. But I want to say a few words about it before I read, because it's a fortnight since we were last with Gideon, and I want to just remind all of us of the situation, what Gideon was doing, and what was going on there. It's a great Bible story. Now, Gideon himself was a Jewish man, a member of the tribe of Manasseh. He lived in about 1200 BC, and the Lord brought him to prominence so that he should be the one to deliver or rescue the people of Israel from the Midianites.

Now, the Midianites were a warlike tribe who lived to the east of the River Jordan, and they had been every year crossing the river into the land of Canaan, the land of Israel, and they'd been stripping the land of everything, every beast, every bit of crops and so on.

They were robbing it. And for seven years, this went on with this annual invasion like locusts coming across the river. And the Lord raised up Gideon to be the nation's deliverer. Now, Gideon was very nervous and apprehensive, and he needed a lot of reassurance, but the Lord was patient with him and gave him several supernatural signs to encourage him. And Gideon finally set off with his army, and by the grace of God, they defeated the Midianites. And the story of the great battle is told in chapter seven of Judges, and we'll just pick up the last little bit of it tonight in a moment. But you may remember that Gideon started off with 32,000 men, and the Lord whittled down this number to a mere 300 men. And even those 300 soldiers didn't have to do any more than stand around the valley. The Midianites were all there below them. It was nighttime.

All those 300 men had to do was to blow their trumpets, smash their clay jars, and shout, a sword for the Lord and for Gideon. And the Lord did the rest. And the Midianites fell upon each other, slaughtered each other, and those that could get away ran away and legged it across the river for safety. And the point is made very strongly in chapter seven that it was not Gideon's skill as a general, and it was not the skill or bravery of the Israelite soldiers that won the battle.

[2 : 4 0] Well, it was the Lord himself who did it. So we'll pick up the story at chapter seven, verse 19. And as I say, I'll read to the end of chapter eight. Now, as I read this, and especially chapter eight, let's ask ourselves, why has God included this story? Well, it's a series of episodes, really. Why has God included this material in the Bible? We might even ask, might it not have been better if the rather uncomfortable eighth chapter of Judges had been left out? So here we go, chapter seven, verse 19. So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp, that's the Midianites camp, at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch.

And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew their trumpets and broke their jars. They held in their left hands, the torches and in their right hands, the trumpets to blow. And they cried out a sword for the Lord and for Gideon.

Every man stood in his place around the camp and all the army ran. They cried out and fled. When they blew the 300 trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army. And the army fled as far as Beth-Shittah towards Zerera, as far as the border of Abel-Meholah by Tabath. And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian. Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, come down against the Midianites and capture the waters against them, as far as Beth-Bara and also the Jordan. So all the men of Ephraim were called out and they captured the waters as far as Beth-Bara and also the Jordan. And they captured the two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zerera. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb and Zerera they killed at the winepress of Zerera. Then they pursued Midian and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zerera to Gideon across the Jordan.

Then the men of Ephraim said to Gideon, what is this that you've done to us, not to call us when you went to fight with Midian? And they accused him fiercely. And he said to them, what have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezah? God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zerera. What have I been able to do in comparison with you? Then their anger against him subsided when he said this.

And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted, yet pursuing. So he said to the men of Succoth, please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me for they are exhausted and I'm pursuing after Ziba and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.

[5 : 49] And the officials of Succoth said, are the hands of Ziba and Zalmunna already in your hand that we should give bread to your army? So Gideon said, well then, when the Lord has given Ziba and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briars.

And from there he went up to Penuel and spoke to them in the same way. And the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered. And he said to the men of Penuel, when I come again in peace, I will break down this tower. Now Ziba and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian, were in Karkor with their army about 15,000 men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the east, for there had fallen 120,000 men who drew the sword. And Gideon went up by the way of the tent dwellers east of Noba and Jogbeha and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. And Ziba and Zalmunna fled. And he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Ziba and Zalmunna, and he threw all the army into a panic. Then Gideon, the son of Joash, returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. And he captured a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, 77 men. And he came to the men of Succoth and said, Behold, Ziba and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, Are the hands of Ziba and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted? And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briars, and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson. And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city. Then he said to Ziba and Zalmunna, Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor? They answered, As you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king. And he said, They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the Lord lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you. And he said to Jethar, his firstborn, Rise and kill them. But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man. Then Ziba and Zalmunna said,

Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength. And Gideon arose and killed Ziba and Zalmunna. And he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels.

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian. Gideon said to them, I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you. The Lord will rule over you. And Gideon said to them, Let me make a request of you.

Every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil. For they, that's the Midianites, had golden earrings because they were Ishmaelites. And they answered, We will willingly give them. And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil. And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold. Besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were around the necks of their camels. And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city in Ophrah.

[9 : 40] And all Israel whored after it there. And it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more.

And the land had rest 40 years in the days of Gideon. Jerob Baal, the son of Joash, went and lived in his own house. Now Gideon had 70 sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives.

And his concubine, who was in Shechem, also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. And Gideon, the son of Joash, died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash's father at Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals, and made Baal-bereth their god. And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their god, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side.

And they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jerob Baal, that is Gideon, in return for all the good that he had done to Israel. This is the word of the Lord.

[10 : 57] And may the Lord make it a blessing to us this evening. Amen. Well, friends, do turn up your judges, chapters 7 and 8 again, if you will, please.

And while you're finding them, those chapters, I just have one important announcement to make. And that is, because it wasn't mentioned earlier, ladies' fellowship, tomorrow afternoon, Monday, 2 p.m., all are welcome, of whatever age.

Ladies, it have to be ladies. Okay. Ladies of any age are welcome. And that will be downstairs, Joe, won't it? So do come. You're most, most welcome. It may be summer, but the ladies' fellowship carries on.

Amen. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray for a moment. Amen. Indeed, dear Father, the Scriptures are your word, and we want to humble our hearts before them, because to do that is to humble our hearts before you.

So please speak to us and help each of us, we pray, to know you better. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. So Judges 7 and 8, pages 207 and 208.

[12 : 20] Some of you, I'm sure, will know that my main job is to be one of the tutors on the Cornhill Training Course. And the Cornhill Training Course is a course for training preachers and teachers of the Bible.

And every year, usually in the spring and up to this time of the year as well, a number of potential future students send in their applications to join our course. And always we ask them to supply three references from people who know them well.

And when those references come in, my colleagues and I read them with interest. And broadly speaking, the references fall into two categories.

One which you might call the praise references, and the others that you might call the analytical references. Now, the praise references are full of words like splendid, outstanding, delightful, committed, passionate for the gospel, faithful, trustworthy, charming, intelligent, devoted, that sort of thing.

And as I read paragraph after paragraph of that kind of reference, my spirit begins to droop a little. And I ask myself, has this outstanding young man ever been a bad boy?

[13 : 35] If he's really as wonderful as this reference suggests, why does he need to come to our training course? He's ready to be Archbishop of Canterbury. Now, the other references, the analytical references, are really rather more interesting.

They include praise. But when you read a sentence like, she is struggling to improve in this area, or a sentence like, his obvious weakness at this stage in life is X, or, he talks the talk, but it remains to be seen how carefully he walks the walk.

When you read phrases like that, you think to yourself, aha, this is realistic, because comments like this are going to get me a lot closer to the applicant than the kind of reference that is nothing but praise.

Now, the Bible gives what you might call analytical references on all its main characters. And because God himself is the ultimate author of the Bible, he is always honest and fair in all his analyses.

There are one or two Bible characters who emerge with almost spotless records. Names like Moses and Daniel come into that category, I think. But in almost every other case, the significant players in the Bible's drama have flaws and imperfections, sometimes very serious flaws.

[14 : 59] So you have great leaders like Abraham or Jacob or David or Solomon, all men whose life and behavior was marked by serious moments or sometimes episodes of decline and disobedience.

Now, this is really rather refreshing for us, because it means that when we read these stories of significant Bible characters, we are able to identify with them. They're not held up to us as totally virtuous.

Now, their imperfections are not recorded so as to excuse our imperfections, not at all. But we recognize that these men and women in the Bible are just like us.

And one reason why the Lord has recorded their imperfections is to warn us not to imitate them. The training in godliness, which the Bible gives us, comes to us as much through the bad examples as it does through the good examples.

Now, I think you can see why I'm saying all this in relation to Judges chapter 8. When you first read a chapter like this, you think, did the author of Judges really have to include all these difficult and sometimes unsavory details?

[16 : 10] Couldn't he have spared us? And couldn't he have spared Gideon's reputation? Wouldn't it have been rather nice and friendly if the author had just given us Judges 6 and 7?

And we could have thought then so highly of Gideon that we could have ranked him almost up there with Moses and Daniel. But no, the author of Judges, whose pen, don't forget, was guided by God, decided that it was good for his readers, his initial readers and readers like us, to know the rest of the story as well.

There was a lot more to Gideon's life than the great victory of Judges chapter 7. And the Lord wants us to know about the other features of his life for our good and for our instruction.

And let me put it in a slightly different way. It is so often the harder chapters of the Bible, the less palatable chapters of the Bible, which yield the most formative instruction to us.

Because it's often those chapters that challenge and modify and reshape our thinking about God and man. Our tendency, I think, is to be both lazy and over-simple.

[17 : 20] So we home in gladly on chapters like Judges 6 and 7 because they are Gideon's praise reference and not his analytical reference. So we read chapters 6 and 7 and we say, Wonderful Gideon, Godly Gideon, Outstanding Gideon, Humble Gideon, Obedient Gideon.

But then we read chapter 8 with rather less relish because it's Gideon's analytical reference. It lifts the lid on aspects of his life which are messy and problematical.

And we'd perhaps rather shut the lid down and not listen to what God has to say about the ragged edges of his life or the life of God's people. Well, that's our theme for tonight, the ragged edges of the people of God.

And chapter 8 is our text. And we'll look not only at Gideon but also at the behavior of those who were with him. Now, before we look at some of these rather difficult features of the story, let's notice the story's own final assessment of Gideon.

I say this because it's important that we're fair to Gideon. Look with me first at chapter 8, verse 28. 8-28. It's a kind of summary verse towards the end of the story.

[18 : 36] So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel and they, the Midianites, raised their heads no more and the land had rest 40 years in the days of Gideon.

That is to say, his time of rule and authority in Israel was a good period. After seven years of absolute misery at the hands of the Midianites, there were then 40 years of peace.

That was a huge blessing. Now, verse 32. And Gideon, the son of Joash, died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash's father at Ophra of the Abiezrites, his hometown.

Now, in Bible language, that phrase, a good old age, doesn't simply mean that he had a long life. It means that his life was blessed by God and was a blessing to other people too.

And then look at verse 35. And they, that's the Israelites, did not show steadfast love to the family of Jeroboam, that is Gideon, in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

[19 : 40] So let's be in no doubt. The author of Judges is very clearly commending the life and leadership of Gideon. And we need to read the episodes recorded in Judges 8 in the light of that final commendation.

And think also of one other commendation of Gideon, the only single time that he's mentioned in the New Testament, in Hebrews chapter 11, where the writer says, What more shall I say?

For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, etc., etc.

Now, that is serious commendation. Hebrews 11 is not just about faith, it's about faith demonstrated in perseverance and endurance. So the Lord's final commendation of Gideon in Judges 8 and Hebrews 11 is strong commendation.

And we need to hold that in mind while we read the more difficult episodes in chapter 8. So as we look at the ragged edges, what I'm calling the ragged edges of the people of God, let's notice three thought-provoking aspects of the chapter.

[20 : 54] First, there's the prima donna spirit displayed by the warriors of Ephraim in the first three verses of chapter 8. Just turn back there.

8, verses 1, 2, and 3. Now, the great battle that you might call the battle of Gideon v. Midian comes to its head at chapter 7, verses 21 and 22.

You have Gideon's 300 men blowing their trumpets, smashing their clay jars, and shouting at the top of their voices, and the Midianite army are suddenly woken up. It's the middle of the night.

They look around themselves, half awake. They hear this tremendous yelling, a sword for the Lord and for Gideon. They see these unearthly torches blazing on the hillside above them, and they panic.

What would you do if you were in that situation? You'd seize your sword. You'd start cutting around at people. Of course, it was their own people. And those that are not cut down on the spot take to their heels and run as fast as they can.

[21 : 50] Now, it's at this point, at verse 23 in chapter 7, that messages are relayed, sent off by Gideon, to the men of three Jewish tribes, Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh.

Those are the three tribes whose lands are closest to the scene of the battle. And the warriors from those tribes, they rush out after the fleeing Midianites who are heading eastwards as they want to cross the Jordan and get back to the safety of their own country as fast as they can.

Gideon's next move, verse 24, is to send messengers throughout the hill country of Ephraim. And the message to the Ephraimite soldiers is, rush out, boys, secure the river Jordan and the streams that run into it as well so that we can cut down the Midianites before they get across the river and make good their escape.

So the Ephraimite soldiers do just that at the end of 24, verse 24. And in verse 25, they have the grisly success of catching the two Midianite princes, Oreb and Zeeb, whose heads they quickly cut off and they bring the severed heads back to Gideon to show him how well they have done.

Now, the key thing to notice is the order of events in verses 23 and 24. Naphtali, Asher and Manasseh, the warriors of those three tribes, are called out first.

[23 : 19] Manasseh, of course, was Gideon's own tribe. You might say his pals, his cousins and his relations. But it's only a little bit later, perhaps an hour or two later, that Gideon then sends for reinforcements from the soldiers of Ephraim.

And because he hasn't sent for them first, they feel that Gideon has slighted them. So they say to him in chapter 8, verse 1, what is this that you've done to us? Not to call us when you went to fight with Midian.

They accused him fiercely. Now, they say, why didn't you call us? He did call them. He did call them. Verse 24 in chapter 7 says so plainly. What they mean is, why didn't you call us first?

We are, after all, the best soldiers in Israel, aren't we? We're the SAS, we're the Marines. And you turned to the milksop soldiers of your own little clan first. That's what they mean by it.

Now, Gideon, in verses 2 and 3 there, gives them a most diplomatic answer. He strokes their wounded egos and he bolsters up their pride. So he says, verse 2, what have I done now in comparison with you?

[24 : 27] Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the whole grape harvest of Abiezer? God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. What have I been able to do in comparison with you?

Now, it's a good thing that Gideon had such a skillful tongue and such self-control. Well, other generals, I guess, would have bopped the Ephraimites on the nose for being such prima donnas.

But Gideon brings out this very clever comparison. Isn't the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim, the dog end of the harvest, isn't that better than the whole grape harvest of Abiezer, my little tiny piffling clan?

We're pygmies compared with you muscle-bound Ephraimites. But it's an ugly scene. Raw, fierce pride and tribalism suddenly flare up and they threaten to create in-house bloodshed.

Do you remember Psalm 133? Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. Well, this fierce prima donna spirit is a great enemy of unity.

[25 : 35] That's a reminder to us of how precious the unity of Christian brothers and sisters is amongst the Lord's people in the church. The prima donna spirit.

I have to say that I haven't seen much of that in this church. I've seen it in other churches that I've belonged to. I'm very thankful that it doesn't seem to be much about here. But the prima donna spirit doesn't like to see other people doing well.

It pushes itself forward like these men of Ephraim and says, me first, notice me. No one must upstage me. But where Christian people can learn to admire each other and to value each other's abilities and contributions, then unity and humility and joy are built up together.

The prima donna becomes a lonely and angry person in the end. Well, there's an unpleasant thing. Let's beware the prima donna spirit. Let's brace ourselves against it.

Well, now, secondly, there's a desire here for tough justice, which we see in Gideon himself. And this shows up in his treatment of the people of Succoth and Penueel.

[26 : 45] Now, the geography of Israel helps us to understand this. Look with me at chapter 8, verse 4. Gideon has just smoothed down these angry warriors of Ephraim, but he's still in hot pursuit of the Midianite army, at least what remains of them.

Verse 10 tells us that 120,000 of them have already fallen and only 15,000 remain. But Gideon, having started the job, wants to complete it thoroughly.

So in verse 4, he and his 300 men reach the west bank of the Jordan. Let me just remind you of the geography of Israel. Some of you will know this like the back of your hand.

Others won't. The Sea of Galilee is up here, okay, in the north. And running due south out of the bottom end of the Sea of Galilee is the River Jordan that runs for 60 or 70 miles, and then it falls into the Dead Sea.

And all the land on the west side, the left-hand side of the River Jordan, is Canaan. And that was the main territory given to the Israelites. But they also had a certain amount of territory on the eastern side of the Jordan as well.

[27 : 51] And the Midianites lived beyond them, a little bit further to the east. So here in chapter 8, verse 4, Gideon and the 300, they get to the Jordan, the west bank. They know that the fleeing Midianites have crossed over to the east bank already, but Gideon is determined to hunt them down.

So although they're exhausted, as verse 4 tells us, they cross the river on the tail of the Midianites. Now they are still, at this point, in Israelite territory.

Because as I say, there was some Israelite territory given to the people of Israel by Moses and Joshua on the eastern side of the river. And these two towns of Succoth and Penueel are Israelite towns on the east side of the Jordan.

So Gideon and his 300 very weary men reach the first of these towns, Succoth, and in verse 5, Gideon says to the men of Succoth, Come on, boys, empty your ladders for the sake of Israel.

Feed my 300 exhausted men because we're on the tail of the Midianite army and their kings, Zeba and Zalmunna. And the men of Succoth say, No.

[29 : 03] No. That's not actually what they say. What they say is, in verse 6, Are the hands of Zeba and Zalmunna already in your hands that we should give bread to your army?

Now that's no, but it's putting it in a slightly different way. It was the military custom in those days to cut off the hands of captured enemy leaders as a kind of gory trophy.

Just as in England and Scotland, much more recently, we used to cut off the heads of enemy generals and stick them up on the city walls as a grisly demonstration of victory.

Now, of course, of course these men of Succoth should have fed Gideon and his 300 weary men. Of course they should have supported the cause of Israel and the cause of the God of Israel.

But you can understand why they didn't. There they were living on the east side of the Jordan, very close to the Midianites. So if Gideon and his men had not been victorious, if they had not succeeded in capturing Zeba and Zalmunna and completing their victory, the Midianites might well have come back to Succoth and said to the people of Succoth, our intelligence tells us that you people supported Gideon, that carbuncle, that slimy rat.

[30 : 25] You fed him and his army. And for that, we're going to kill every man, woman, child and baby in your town. Now, you see, we, with the wisdom of hindsight and the Bible open in front of us, we know that Gideon was victorious in the end.

But the people of Succoth didn't know that at that point. So they didn't want to do something which might land them in big trouble. They should have supported Gideon because they were Israelites.

But they wanted to see which way the wind was going to blow. So when in verse 6, the people of Succoth say no to Gideon, he says, verse 7, well then, when the Lord has given Zeba and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briars, which probably means that he would get his men to cut desert thorn bushes full of long hard thorns and he would force the men of Succoth to lie on the ground while his men dragged these thorn bushes up and down across their bodies.

Then at verse 8, Gideon goes on to another Israelite town, Penuel, only a few miles further beyond Succoth. The men of Penuel speak to Gideon exactly as the people of Succoth have done.

And Gideon gives them an even more alarming threat to break down the fortified tower, which I guess was the stronghold of their town. Well, what happens?

[31 : 53] Gideon and his men are successful. They do finally catch up with the Midianites in verse 11. They capture the two kings, Zeba and Zalmunna, and they defeat the army. And having done that, Gideon and his men turn round and head for home via Succoth and Penuel.

Now in verse 14, you'll see that Gideon manages to capture a young man from Succoth. Sit down, young man, he says to him. Here's pen and paper. You must write down for me if you value your life the names of every last elder and leader of your wretched town of Succoth.

So the young man writes down 77 names. Gideon marches straight to Succoth with the two captured kings, and he says to the men of Succoth in verse 15, Behold, Zeba and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, Are the hands of Zeba and Zalmunna already in your hand that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?

And he took the 77 elders of the city and he scraped them with the desert thorns. And verse 17 tells us what he did to the men of Penuel, which was harsher.

And it makes very uncomfortable reading, doesn't it? Warfare stirs up powerful passions. Winston Churchill, talking about the morality of warfare, said, In victory, magnanimity.

[33 : 24] In defeat, defiance. Now, Gideon is hardly magnanimous or generous-minded to the people of Succoth than Penuel. He gives them justice, which is tough to the point of fierceness.

It goes on in the next few verses, 18 to 21. He then says to the captured kings, Ziba and Zalmunna in verse 18, Where are the men that you killed at Tabor?

The question probably means the men that you killed at Tabor, what were they like? Now, Tabor was Gideon's home territory back on the west side of the Jordan. And he knew that those two kings had been there and had killed a lot of people.

And the two kings respond in words that might have been designed to flatter Gideon. They say, Oh, the men we killed, they were just like you. Every one of them looked like the son of a king.

Tall, handsome, distinguished, upstanding men. Just like you, Gideon. But they wouldn't have put it like that if they had known how Gideon was going to respond. He responds with the toughest justice.

[34 : 31] They were my brothers, he says, my own mother's sons. And then he swears in the name of the Lord and he says, If you had not killed them, I would not now kill you.

Then verse 20, it's another strange, fierce thing that seems to well up in Gideon. He turns to his oldest son, Jephthah, who's with him there, a lad of perhaps no more than 16 years of age.

And he says to the boy, Rise up and kill them. But the boy is abashed and terrified. Can't do it. So the Midianite kings say to Gideon, taunting him, Do it yourself then if you're a man.

Don't ask a boy to do a man's work. So Gideon draws his own sword and he runs them through. Tough justice. Now friends, here is the tricky question raised by this section, verses 4 to 21.

Is the author of Judges commending Gideon for courageous and faithful behavior or is he censuring Gideon for being vindictive and vengeful?

[35 : 39] Now do argue this point with me afterwards if you'd like to over the cups of coffee. But for what it's worth, I think that Gideon is being commended here and not censured. I think the author of Judges is saying to the reader, Note Gideon's justice, his commitment to justice, and thank God for it.

That reference in Hebrews 11 that I quoted earlier I think may help us here. Time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, etc., who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, etc.

Now isn't Gideon enforcing justice at this point? His treatment of Succoth and Peniel is very tough, but these towns were being punished because they were unwilling to support the cause of the Lord.

They were unfaithful to the God of Israel. And similarly, Zeba and Zalmunna are put to death as punishment for the murder of Gideon's brothers at Tabor. That is capital punishment.

It's life for life. It's just. Look again at verse 28. The land had rest for 40 years. Verse 35.

[36 : 52] All the good that Gideon had done to Israel. The rest and the peace were the consequences of Gideon enforcing justice.

We mustn't allow the sensitivities of our own time and our own culture to cause us to misread a passage like this. Now the next section from verses 22 to 27 does record a real failure of judgment on Gideon's part and the author of Judges doesn't want us to miss this failure.

So here's our third and last point. Israel's insatiable addiction to idolatry is shown up. Verse 27 puts it in all its ugly reality.

And Gideon made an effort and put it in his city in Ofra and all Israel hoarded after it there and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. Now this section beginning at verse 22 starts well.

Gideon's great victory over the Midianites brings him into great prominence and the men of Israel understandably want him to be their ruler. Not just Gideon but his son and his grandson after him.

[38 : 05] Rule over us you and your son and your grandson. So they want to establish a family dynasty like the Stuarts or the Windsors or whatever. But Gideon rightly says no to this in verse 23.

He says I will not rule over you and my son will not rule over you the Lord will rule over you. He's very much anticipating the thoughts of Samuel a century or more later.

Israel doesn't want a king like all the other nations doesn't need a king like that because the Lord is the true king of Israel. Theocracy that's the way. So Gideon gets very high marks in verse 23 but it's in verse 24 that he makes his big error of judgment.

He asks the Israelites for gold earrings from the spoil of battle and the end of verse 24 explains that there were lots of earrings worn by these fallen Midianite soldiers. Now the Israelite men were only too happy to let Gideon have all these earrings.

After all they were so grateful to him for freeing them from the Midianite scourge. So 1700 shekels of gold were quickly collected. I did my mental arithmetic on this which is not very strong but I think I worked it out that that's nearly 400 pounds weight of gold.

[39 : 22] And Gideon added plenty more in verse 26 including the ornaments of the camels that he'd taken back in verse 21. And he made from all this spoil an ephod.

Now an ephod was a garment. It was a kind of tunic worn by Jewish priests especially when they were seeking guidance from God in prayer. Why did Gideon do this?

Why did he make an ephod? The passage doesn't tell us exactly why so we can only guess. Maybe he made the ephod as a kind of thanksgiving memorial for the great victory over Midian.

People like to make war memorials of different kinds. Or perhaps he made it because ephods were associated with guidance and Gideon wanted a tangible reminder that it was God who'd guided him in the past and it was God who would guide them again in the future.

But the passage is not clear about why. But what the passage is very clear about is that this ephod led to great trouble. Gideon set it up in Ofra his home city and just notice that horrible verb used in verse 27.

[40 : 32] All Israel whored after it there and it became a snare not only to Israel but to Gideon himself and to his family. But this problem of the ephod was just part of a bigger problem in the hearts of the people of Israel.

Look on to verse 33. As soon as Gideon died the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal Bareth their God. And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side and they did not show steadfast love to the family of Gideon in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

And don't you think it's striking that this very unpleasant verb whored is used in verse 27 and then again in verse 33. By repeating that word so quickly surely the Lord wants us to think rather carefully about the human heart and its tendencies.

The verb to whore suggests not only spiritual adultery but also a powerful appetite for spiritual adultery rather like a group of young men rushing breathlessly into a brothel.

What is it in the human heart that makes us want to behave like that? After all isn't God himself wonderful? Isn't God infinitely desirable?

[41 : 58] Wasn't it God who had clearly spoken to Gideon? Wasn't it the Lord God of Israel who had given great victory through 300 men who didn't have to do anything but stand there and shout? Didn't the Israelites know by now after all this that it was their God the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob the only true God who had raised up Gideon to be their savior as he had raised up Ehud and Deborah before him?

Why is the human heart so fickle so ready to prostitute itself to powerless idols when the true God and his son Jesus Christ are so wonderful and are right beside us?

Why do we find God's substitutes so entrancing? Perhaps there are two main reasons. First, idols can be seen but the true God is invisible.

And secondly, idols make no moral demands ten commandments and a lifestyle of discipline.

The Lord Jesus, as we know, requires self-denial and a willingness to lay down our lives literally for his sake. Whereas the idol makes no moral demands.

[43 : 12] And the idol promises us satisfactions and joys even though it can never provide them. The idols are powerless as the Psalms put it.

They have eyes but they can't see. They have ears but they can't hear. Noses but they can't smell. Feet but they can't walk. Throats and tongues but they can't make a sound.

They have no power except their power to ensnare the fickle human heart and to turn its owner into the hollow shell of a human being.

So these powerful painful descriptions of verse 27 and verse 33 are there to warn us of how quickly the human heart can turn from loving and trusting its divine savior to something that is absolutely worthless.

And with idolatry goes forgetfulness. Verse 34 The people of Israel did not remember the Lord who had delivered them from their enemies. and in verse 35 clearly they forgot to honor Gideon as well.

[44 : 22] Well friends are you still with me? Just a couple of more couple of minutes more I want to draw the threads together and then we'll finish. Gideon in the end as I've pointed out I've labored to point out gets warm commendation verses 28 32 35 and Hebrews 11 but he stumbles over this effort business and the people of Israel they prove to be deeply disappointing.

The Ephraimite soldiers they throw their prima donna hissy fit and these men of Succoth and Peniel they fail to follow and support their God appointed leader. And then worst of all this hunger for idolatry grips the people yet again the hunger to worship and be gripped by anything that is not the true and only God.

Now we today in the Lord's Church as we look at this this strange chapter we're bound to see the same kind of ragged edges showing up amongst the people of God.

The Christian life is often less than straightforward. Yes the Lord Jesus has come and we have a very much clearer view of the gospel and of our final salvation than Gideon and his contemporaries could have had.

But the human heart today is much the same as it ever has been. You and I are not yet in the perfection of the new creation. You and I are still tempted to idolatry.

[45 : 50] If there's any person here who is never tempted to idolatry come and speak to me afterwards. I'd like to meet you and shake you by the hand. This chapter of course gives us no excuse for godless behavior but it teaches us to expect to see ragged edges.

Let's not be too surprised when sections of the Lord's people choose false idols and godless values and turn away from the Lord. A chapter like this one forearms us and forewarns us that this kind of thing does happen.

But finally let's take comfort. All the human leaders of God's people in the Bible are flawed but their very flaws and failings act as a foil to the one leader who is flawless.

These flawed leaders whet our appetite for the true leader who is yet to come and we look for his coming with anticipation and with joy to live fully and finally under the kingly rule of Jesus in the realm devoid of idols and devoid also of pain and death is what we have been promised by the one who keeps his word.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we do thank you for Gideon, this servant of yours whom you raised up who expressed faith in perseverance in the midst of great testing and temptation and problem and we thank you too, dear Father, for this eighth chapter of Judges with its warnings that even a man so guided by you as Gideon could make real mistakes and lead his family and indeed his people astray.

[47 : 52] So we pray that you'll help us to follow Gideon in his faithfulness and his perseverance but not in his foolishness. And we pray that you will strengthen us and give us, dear Lord, that growing sense of joyful anticipation of being with your Son, the true and wonderful leader whose kingdom we await and we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.