

Violence in Israel

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[0 : 00] If you haven't been here for the last few weeks, we're in the middle of a series where we're looking at Gideon's life. And I suppose just before, I'm going to read the passage that we're looking at in a minute, but I suppose I just wanted to front this wake up by saying, it's a really heavy passage that we're looking at. It's heavy in its content. I suppose you could say it's not pleasant.

And I think it's also quite heavy in how it applies to our lives because it's how we're going to start to look at Gideon's downfall. His life is one that Ebsen flows really between the high point of his life, which is probably what we looked at last week, when the Lord gives him victory through Gideon's own great weakness.

So I'm going to read it and then I'll pray for us and then we'll look at it together. So we're going to start just at the end of Gideon of Judges 7.

There's a little bit of overlap that I'm reading from last week's reading. So we're starting at verse 23 and we're going all the way through to 821.

So let me read it for us. So at verse 23, chapter 7, And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtalai and from Asha and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian.

[1 : 29] 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 Barra and also the Jordan.

So all the men of Ephraim were called out and they captured the waters as far as Beth Barra and also the Jordan. And they captured the two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeb. They killed Oreb at the Rock of Oreb and Zeb, they killed at the Wine Press of Zeb.

And they pursued Midian and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeb to Gideon across the Jordan. Then the men of Ephraim said to him, What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?

And they accused him fiercely and he said to them, What have I done now in comparison with you? It's not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiza.

God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeb. What have I been able to do now to do in comparison with you? Then their anger against him subsided when he said this.

[2 : 37] 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 Zuceth, Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted and I am pursuing after Zebra and Zalmona the kings of Midian.

And the officials of Zuceth said, Are the hands of Zebra and Zalmona already in your hand that we should give bread to your army? So Gideon said, Well then, when the Lord has given Zebra and Zalmona 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 Zuceth had answered. And he said to the men of Penuel, When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower.

Now Zebra and Zalmona were in Karko 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 with the sword. And Gideon went up by the way of the tent dwellers east of Nobor and Djogbaha, and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. And Zebra and Zalmona fled and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebra and Zalmona.

[3 : 57] And he threw all the army into a panic. Then Gideon, the son of Joash, returned from the battle by the ascent of Heros. And he captured a young man of Zuceth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Zuceth, 77 men.

And he came to the men of Zuceth and said, Behold Zebra and Zalmona, about whom you taunt in me, saying, Are the hands of Zebra and Zalmona 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 Zuceth a lesson. And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

Then he said to Zebra and Zalmona, Where are the men whom you killed at Tobor? 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 would have saved them alive, I would not kill you. So he said to Jethra, his firstborn, Rise and kill them.

[5 : 05] But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man. Then Zebra and Zalmona said, Rise yourself and fall upon us. For as the man is, so is his strength.

And Gideon arose and killed Zebra and Zalmona. And he took the crescent ornaments, though on the necks of their camels. This is God's word. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we thank you for your word, the Bible. And we praise you and thank you that this is the way that you've chosen to speak to us.

We thank you that all your word is used, is breathed out by you, and is used for teaching, for correcting, for rebuking, and for training in righteousness to equip us for every good work.

And so we pray, Lord God, that you would open our eyes and our hearts to see you, to know you.

And we ask for the power of your Holy Spirit to help us to think about some of these things that we might leave here changed, that we might leave here more looking like Christ.

[6 : 19] And we know that we need your help. That's the work of your spirit in our hearts is down to you. And so we ask for that, Lord God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

So last week, the big place where we landed, I've reminded you of it already, in the story of Gideon's life, it was how the Lord brought about a great victory and how he used Gideon's weakness to bring that about.

And it's fair to say, I've just mentioned, I think this is the high point of his life. Everything goes downhill from here. And last week, we saw that the big feature was it was the Lord testing Gideon the whole way through.

And in his fear, how Gideon didn't turn on the Lord, but he turned to him. In today's passage, we don't see him facing the Lord's testing, but he does face temptation. He does face temptation.

And we know, don't we, that temptation doesn't come from the Lord. James 1 verse 13 says, Let no one say when he's tempted, I'm being tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.

[7 : 36] But each person is tempted when he's lowered and enticed by his own desire. And we know that as well as our own desire, we know that Satan is called the tempter in the garden, he lies to Adam and Eve regarding God's word, and their own desires, he appeals to their own desires, and they're enticed, they seem more appealing than God's goodness.

Gideon is tempted here, he's tempted. And the big question that seems to, that I think comes out as in this passage, is where will Gideon turn to when he's tempted?

We saw where he turned when he was tested, where will he turn when he's tempted? Will he do what he did before and turn to the Lord for help, or will he be lowered and enticed by his own desire?

In a way, that is the question that we should be asking when we're tempted. We're all tempted by Satan and by our own desires, they make them appealing.

Where do we go? Where do we turn? That's the big question that I think we should be thinking about. Just a quick reminder, I've done this in the other two weeks, just to remind about the structure of what's going on in judges, that it's structured around these repeated cycles, and in each cycle, Israel's people gradually get worse and worse.

[9 : 12] So there's sort of five elements to it. The first one, the people disobey the Lord. The second is God sends a foreign nation to conquer them, he sent them Midianites. The third, the people cry out to God for help.

Fourthly, the Lord sends a deliverer, Gideon. And then the last step is that God uses this deliverer to defeat the foreign nation, and Israel has a time of peace in the land.

And that's kind of where we are, we're towards the end of one of these cycles now. And as we've gone through it at each sort of stage in Gideon's story, we've seen sort of twists in the story, and as we look at this, this is no different.

Let me just read verse 22, chapter 7, this is kind of from last week. It says, when they blew the 300 trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade, and against all the army.

That's the Midianite army, and the army fled as far as Bethsheta towards Zorara, as far as the border of Abel Mahola by Tabath. At that point in the story, you expect that to be the end of it.

[10:23] That they've defeated the army, surely that it's going to go to the fifth point of the cycle, that they're going to go to peace in the land, that the deliverers come, they've won the battle, now there's peace in the land, there's going to be peace in Israel.

But at the very high point of his life, of Gideon's life, there's a twist in the story. You might remember how at the beginning of Gideon's life, during his call, we saw a few weeks ago how similar I said that call was to that of Moses.

You might remember, like Moses, Gideon grew up with pagan idolatry surrounding him. Josh, his dad, led bar worship in his back garden. Pharaoh, he was sort of the leader, if you like, of pagan idolatry in Egypt.

Like Moses, Gideon thinks he's not qualified to carry out God's plan. God's people are under oppression. The Egyptians with Moses under the Midianites with Gideon. And the link to Moses, I think, it's purposeful.

At the high point of Gideon's life, the thought is, will Gideon lead God's people like Moses did? Is he going to do that?

[11:38] After they've been, after they were set free from Egyptian oppression, after Israel set free from Midianite oppression under Gideon, will he lead them in the same way? Perhaps he will.

Will the law be restored? Will God's people flourish once again? And then we come to verse 23. And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtalai and from Asher and from Oman Asae, and they pursued after Midian. This is the start of the downfall.

Reminder, how many were called to fight? How many were called to win the battle? Just 300 men. Gideon at the end of the battle calls on the men who've been, some of them, who've been sent home.

Forget operating by faith and guidance from the Lord. He chooses to rely on human brute strength in what can only be looked at as sort of a mopping up operation to finish the job.

[12:45] Just calls on as many men come and help me and will mop up the rest of the army. And there's two things to notice from here on in.

The voice of the Lord is not heard again and neither is the spirit of the Lord. The voice of the Lord is not heard again and neither is the spirit of the Lord. This is not going to end well.

In today's passage, there's three groups of people Gideon interacts with and he responds differently to all of them. He's tempted and instead of looking to the Lord, he looks to himself.

And so we're going to, the way that it's going to be structured this evening is we're just going to look at how he interacts with these three groups. So we're going to look at it in three points. The first group, he flatters those he fears.

The second, he tortures those he looks down on. And the third, he seeks revenge when he's bitter. He flatters those he fears. He tortures those he looks down on. He seeks revenge when he's bitter.

[13:48] So let's dive into it at the first point. So he flatters those he fears. The Ephraimites, they're well known as one of the strongest tribes in Israel.

They've got lots of money and a big army. And what we see is that they're not happy being called to help so late in the battle.

That's the big issue with them. Just look with me from the end of verse 24. So all the men of Ephraim were called out and they captured the waters as far as Beth Barat and also the Jordan. And they captured two princes, Amidian, Aureban Zeeb. They killed Aureban, the Rock of Aureban Zeeb. They killed the winepress of Zeeb. Then they pursued Amidian and they brought the heads of Aureban Zeeb to Gideon across the Jordan.

That's the role they play, but they're livid. They're totally, they're so mad. Look what they say to, just the next verse on, chapter 8 verse 1. What is this that you've done to us?

[14:48] Not to call us when you went to fight against Amidian and they accused him fiercely. They feel slighted. Hard done by.

They wanted some of the glory of the battle. Exactly what the Lord did not want to happen is happening. He was right to insist, wasn't he? The Lord knew what was going on. He was right to insist that Gideon only used 300 men. Remember, that's why he said chapter 7 verse 2. The reason he chose 300 men, lest Israel boast over me saying, my own hand has saved me.

If Gideon had stuck with the 300 men in the first place, this episode with the men of Ephraim, it wouldn't have happened. Now what they've seen what's going on, he's called them to help and they're jealous.

The men of Ephraim want the Lord's glory for themselves and they're demanding an answer from Gideon. Fiercely, we read. The reason we fear is when we think we've lost control of a situation and to rectify this perceived lack of control, we adjust our behaviour to compensate.

[16:03] That's what we do when we're afraid. The old fight or flight comes into play. And Gideon here, he chooses flight, he runs.

He hides from what he should do and he flatters them. Do you see where the temptation is? Do you trust God's word that you only need 300 men?

And now do you trust the Lord that if you give the glory to him, he'll still have the power to do it all in your weakness? Gideon doesn't believe that anymore and he's scared.

He's back in that place, he's scared of them. And he could do one of two things at this particular juncture. He could tell them what happened and give the glory to the Lord.

Pointing them to him. He could remember how unlikely it seemed that they were going to actually win in the first place, that the Lord's power came through his weakness.

[17:06] He could do that. He could point the Ephraimites to the Lord, but he doesn't. That would have been the right thing to do, but he flatters them. He appeases them.

He gives them some of the glory that belong to the Lord. He praises them. What have I done now in comparison with you? God has given into your hands the princes of Midian.

He's telling them what they want to hear. Ephraim, we couldn't have done it without you. The reason we won the final battle, it's because of you, men of Ephraim. You killed the princes.

That's all down to you. He praises men to save his own neck. It's so different to before. It's so different to before.

Before in his fear, he took it to the Lord, asked for a sign, the fleece. He asked for a sign for reassurance. Now he looks to himself. He flatters because of fear.

[18:07] It's what we see in the school playground, isn't it? Kids side up to the bully because they're scared and don't want to be bullied. But in doing so, they become bullies.

They control the bully. They say it's illusion that they're not in control. They're not in control or they're in control. So they try to gain some control over the bully.

Being in control is an illusion. The lack of control we feel should just make us aware that we never actually were in the first place.

We've never been in control. Gideon's never been in control. It's circumstances that make us aware we're not.

And so the question does come back when things seem out of control, out of joint, when we're tempted to act in a way to try to regain control, well, we turn when we're tempted, turn on God or turn to Him.

[19:18] Believe in His Word or doubt it. Looking to sort things ourselves isn't the answer.

When we're tempted, that's sometimes what we try to do. I understand this is, it's hard to grapple with because there are things that will happen when we will be genuinely afraid.

I'm not saying those things will happen. Listen, there's times that we all get scared. I sometimes we get scared about small things, big things. I sometimes even get scared about the way school is going to get scared about, my kids going to school and some of the stuff they get taught.

Now how do I react to that? I could be tempted to react in the wrong way. I could turn to God in my fears, in my temptation. You'll have things that you fear.

Don't push your fears into the recesses of your mind because it will come out in some other way in how you relate to one another and actually to the Lord.

[20:29] Bring it to Him. It might even be, we have an amazing church community here. It might even mean tell someone about it. Even if it sounds, to ourselves, it might sound ridiculous.

What will they think? We don't want fears to be a breeding ground for sin. Bring it to the Lord or bring it to someone else.

Let's move on to the next group that He meets. He speaks and treats them completely differently. He doesn't flatter them. This is the men of Sukkoth and the men of Penuel.

We're going to go to our second boy. He tortures those he looks down on. What we do know about these two groups is that they're a much smaller group than Ephraim and Gideon.

It's quite obvious he doesn't fear them. The temptation he faces is to look at... He looks at what God has done through him, through these 300 men, and he compares it to what God has done through them.

[21 : 48] When he's done that, he's proud and looks down on them. He's not going to appease them, but actually he's still going to control them. And it's because he thinks they're not worth what he is.

Do we see he's gone from being a nobody to thinking that he's a somebody? He's gone from being a nobody to thinking that he's a somebody that he's special.

Despite the miraculous victory of the 300 men that was all down to the Lord, Gideon in a short space of time now sees it in a whole different light. And he wants some credit.

He expects some admiration and honour for what the Lord has done through him, that he's special and his 300 men are special, that he's been chosen for such a special task.

He's gone from a nobody to be to thinking he's a somebody. Look at what he expects them to do, verse 5. Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me for they're exhausted and I'm pursuing after zebrans or one of the kings of Midian.

[22 : 57] Where the special 300, look at what we've done. You can see the cogs turning in his brain. As you can see him almost thinking about these men, he didn't call you to do this, men of Sukatham, Penuel.

He called us and therefore you should serve us. We've been specially chosen by the Lord for this appointed task. Give us some bread. Nobody's compared to us.

And these two groups, men of Sukatham, men of Penuel, they basically answer Gideon the same way. They basically say, no, we're not going to serve you and we're not going to serve you until you've got these men in your hands.

You've not got these men in your hands yet, you're still chasing them. You know, we're not going to serve you. Basically, they're edging their bets. If they're edging a bet Gideon and he loses, then what they expect is the kings, zebrans or money, they'll get themselves back together and come after them.

So they don't want to be seen as edging an bet Gideon. Instead of Gideon being scared, it's now God's people that are scared.

[24 : 13] And Gideon has learned nothing. Remember how when Gideon was scared and he went to the Lord and the Lord stooped down in his fears to reassure him.

They need Gideon to stoop down and reassure them in their fears as deliverer, as God's man. They need to be assured by God through his man.

Will he stoop down and reassure them in their fears? The short answer is no.

And it's pretty horrific. To the men of Sukath, I will flail you with the thorns of the wilderness and with briars.

To the men of Penuel, when I come again in peace, I will break down this tower. That's exactly what he does. Verse 16, and he took the elders of the city and he took thorns of the wilderness and briars and with them taught the men of Sukath a lesson.

[25 : 21] And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city. It's the first time since Israel's been called a nation that is on Israelite violence.

He looks down on people and he treats them as a commodity. A few weeks ago, our TV stopped working. We haven't had it fixed yet.

It's on the to-do list. But once we've had a look at it to get it fixed, if it's completely bust, we'll have it thrown away. I guess I should probably say take it to get recycled.

It's a commodity and if it doesn't serve its purpose, that's what we do, isn't it? We get rid. The men of Sukath and Penuel don't serve Gideon's agenda.

They're a useless commodity. So he tortures and kills them, his own people. He tortures and kills God's people.

[26 : 28] And it's brought about by the one called to lead them. To get rid of oppression and oppression comes from within. Top down.

They're not as treated as sheep to be shepherded and cared for, just discarded as a problem, slaughtered at Peniel. How God's people are treated matters.

It really matters how they're led matters. They're not a problem to be discarded, not a commodity to be toyed with or disposed of.

This leader, Gideon, is no more valuable in God's eyes than the rest of the people he's leading. He's there to serve the people. There are no little people in God's church that can be trampled on. Unfortunately, throughout the history of the church, even in recent times, there's been leaders who have chewed people up and spat them out because they didn't get on board with the leader's personal agenda.

[27 : 33] Now, for all of you, I don't know what your background in church is. I don't know whether you've had good leaders, bad leaders, but there might be some among us who have experienced that have been chewed up and spat out where the church has harmed you.

I want to say, if that is any of us, I'm genuinely really sorry that that's happened and it is wrong because it is totally the opposite to the pattern that Jesus sets out for in his own leadership and what you should experience in the church.

It should be a place of love and care and compassion and kindness of feeling like it's a place of belonging where you're safe.

Every person is made in the image of God, Christian or not. Your neighbor's made in the image of God. Look at Jesus, Matthew 9.36.

Look at his attitudes. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

[28 : 51] That word for compassion, it's that gut-wrenching compassion, so much compassion for the people that it hurt. When he looks at people who were lost, who were lesser than him, he saw that they were image bearers and had compassion on them.

I am the good shepherd, says Jesus. That's how Jesus leads. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they'll never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

No little people in the kingdom of God.

The last people who Gideon deals with is these two kings, Zeba and Zalmone. As we turn to our last point about Gideon, I'm just going to look at this one briefly.

The third point, he seeks revenge when he's bitter. This is quite remarkable actually because we think he's chasing Zebra and Zalmone to get rid of the median out of oppression once and for all.

[30 : 07] That would seem pretty logical, but his questions to the king reveal something else that he's not actually bothered about the oppression anymore. That's not why he's chasing them.

And then he's going to look at me in verse 18. Where are the men whom you killed at Teobor? And they answered, as you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king.

And he said, and he said, that's Gideon, they were my brothers, the sons of my mother. And then he ex... Look what he does.

To sort of sanctify this personal vendetta, he exploits the Lord's own name. As the Lord lives, if you would save them alive, I would not kill you.

This is just a personal vendetta. It's revenge driven by bitterness. He's not interested in the Lord's people anymore. We know that he's just killed quite a lot of them.

[31 : 04] And so he executes them. Gideon's name, if you didn't know, it literally means hacker. And he sure lived up to it.

And so we've seen three things that we see in Gideon's life. Fear, pride, and then bitterness, or wanting to get even.

Where do we go when we're tempted? Where did Gideon go when he was tempted? Turn on God, or turn to him.

And it is shocking. It is really shocking. And I'm pretty sure that those three things, fear, pride, bitterness, at some point, will have been the receiving end of those and will have dished it out to others.

Fear, pride, looking on down on others, and bitterness wanting to get even. Disobedience or responding to temptation in that way, in Gideon, leads to disaster.

[32 : 16] And if we see that in ourselves, and we will at some point, if we don't deal with it, it will lead to disaster. Flattery, people pleasing out of fear, looking down on others because of pride, wanting to get even, we're all susceptible to it.

There's a temptation when we look at this passage to think, I hope this is not, I hope not even for a nanosecond, this is according to anyone's mind, that you look at it and think in, thank you God that I'm not like Gideon.

What an absolute moron. Don't entertain that for even a nanosecond. Rather, if it can happen to Gideon, it can just as happen to easy to any one of us.

That's the humble response. If it can happen to Gideon, clothed in the Spirit of the Lord, speaking with the Lord, with the angel of the Lord, it can happen to any one of us.

I don't say that so that we feel down on ourselves, quite the opposite. I'm saying it so that we feel needy for the Lord to keep us on that narrow path.

[33 : 34] Gideon's fall is there to warn us, I feel like Gideon. I know it's been a bit heavy sermon, and believe me in preparation for this, it's felt weighty on my own soul, and I'm grieved myself by how I've fallen short in these areas, and that we do actually need a better leader, don't we, than a human, just merely a human leader.

We need Jesus. How different and magnificent is Jesus compared to this? He's magnificent. He's absolutely magnificent.

Just think about his crucifixion, how he's totally the opposite. He knows his Father is in charge, in control.

Gethsemane, yet not my will, but your will be done. I said that last week, he's afraid in Gethsemane, he's terrified, but he knows his Father's in control.

He goes to Calvary, he goes and walks that lonely road. He doesn't look down on anyone, nor he's the most humble man who ever lived, values others above himself to the point of death and a cross.

[34 : 58] Is he bitter? You might even say that you might even think, well, he has every right to be against those who nailed him. What does he say on the cross?

Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they do. And do you know death by crucifixion, it's actually by asphyxiation. You suffocate as you're hanging, as you're weighing down, the way it crushes your lungs, and the only way to speak, for Jesus to speak when he was on the cross, is to push his hands on the nails and push his feet on the nails, pushing up his thorax so that he could take enough breath in to then exhale and speak.

And he does all that, pushes down on his hands, pushes down on his feet to take a breath in to say, Father, forgive them.

All of this so that all the fears, the pride, the bitters in our hearts, where temptation has got the better of us, could be washed away, made clean, white as snow.

We have a magnificent Savior. A Savior who is not fearful, proud or bitter, but courageous, humble and full of forgiveness.

[36 : 36] Let me pray.

Lord Jesus, we just thank you for what a Savior you are, what a leader you are, and we just see how beautiful you are, and we just see the way that you lived your life, and we praise you.

And we recognize that at times we have done things, said things, and we've acted in fear, we've acted proud, and we've been bitter, but we thank you that you're not like any of these.

These qualities are nothing like you. You had all the courage, the humility and the forgiveness. It was on your heart to go to the cross to die in our place, so that we could have life in you.

And so we thank you and we praise you, and we pray that you'd lift our own hearts. I pray that this word that we've read tonight would remain with us, and that you'd remind us of it all week, just to help us to live and work for your praise and glory.

[38 : 07] And so we ask for your blessing upon us now in Christ's name. Amen.