

JUDGES—WEEK 8

SLIPPING



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Judges, Week 8 — Slipping
The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany

Gideon was doing just great—following the LORD, giving Him all the credit, resisting the offer to be king. But the relentless pull of sin eventually drags him down. He makes an ephod (which is a big no-no) and has dozens of kids by multiple wives and even one concubine.

This sets the stage for yet another round of apostasy. Sigh.

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Joshua, Week 8 — Slipping
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1 Judges 8:18–21

And he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, “What kind of men were they whom you killed at Tabor?”

So they answered, “As you are, so were they; each one resembled the son of a king.”

Then he said, “They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the Lord lives, if you had let them live, I would not kill you.” And he said to Jether his firstborn, “Rise, kill them!” But the youth would not draw his sword; for he was afraid, because he was still a youth.

So Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Rise yourself, and kill us; for as a man is, so is his strength.” So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments that were on their camels’ necks.

The Bible doesn’t record Gideon’s brothers being killed at Tabor. Tabor is mentioned, in Joshua 19 and Judges 4, but only as a mountain where people gather; so we can’t know exactly what Gideon is getting at in his questioning of Zebah and Zalmunna.

But this does show that the Midianite raids went beyond just stealing food. They had pursued the Israelites into the mountains and killed them. Even so, this kind of vengeance is wrong. This whole endeavor is supposed to be about God and His glory, not some personal vendetta.

And Gideon training his son in vengeance is even worse. The Hebrew word translated as “youth” (נָעַר, *na-ar*) means a male older than a child (יָלֵד, *yel-id*), but not yet a man (עֶשֶׂה, *eesh*). “Adolescent” is close.

It’s appropriate for a T-rex to train its adolescent offspring in killing, but not for Gideon.

And so it begins. The great and recurring lesson of the Old Testament—that even heroes are deeply flawed—is starting to play out in Gideon’s life. The relentless tug of sin always makes an entrance.

Notice the last sentence in today’s passage—*So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments that were on their camels’ necks.*

What’s up with the ornaments? Were they religious symbols or symbols of royalty?

They may have been both. In any case, Gideon should have left them alone. Yes, they seem innocent enough. “Hey! Shiny thing! Wouldn’t want it to go to waste, right?”

But no. Notice that the details are curious in an ominous way. The jewelry is hung on the camels, not on the kings. Also the camels don’t just have random jewelry; they all have crescents—the symbol of the moon (and of Asherah).

Of course, crescents don’t have any power of their own. Gideon taking them is what matters.

That’s the lesson. Countless American adolescents mess around with the occult and with occult symbols.

A symbol doesn’t have any power, but the choice to mess with it does.

2 Judges 8:22–28 (ESV)

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 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. 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 forty years in the days of Gideon.

Good news! Gideon melts down *the crescent ornaments and the collars that were around the necks of their camels* to make the ephod. Whatever their symbolism was, it’s now gone. Maybe Gideon taking them had no symbolic meaning after all; he just wanted them for their metal content.

Bad news! They used it to make an ephod. That’s the priestly outer garment specified in Exodus 28. You don’t just go and make another one because you think they’re cool. There’s only supposed to be one, and it’s supposed to be worn only by the high priest.

So, it’s not surprising that *all Israel whored after it there* (whatever *whored after it* means). Come to think of it, what does that mean?

Whored after it is an analogical reference to unfaithfulness—allegiance to other gods or idols. We can’t know precisely what they did with the ephod, but they treated it as more than just a piece of art.

And so it *became a snare to Gideon and to his family*.

This is a great example of the slippery slope of unfaithfulness. Gideon turning down their offer to make him king sounds like he has the right attitude, but then he demands their earrings to make the ephod.

But the real problem is what they did with the ephod. An ephod is more than just a garment; it held the Urim and Thummim, which were used to discern the LORD’s will.

And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD. — Numbers 27:21 (ESV)

Gideon had already built an altar back in chapter 6. Now he’s made another part of the tabernacle.

For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods. — Hosea 3:4 (ESV)

Like Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, Gideon is carelessly messing with things he should leave alone.

3 Judges 8:29–35

Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and dwelt in his own house. Gideon had seventy sons who were his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, whose name he called Abimelech. Now Gideon the son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god. Thus the children of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.

Having seventy sons by many wives is creepy enough by itself, but the Hebrew in this passage proves that Gideon was slipping badly by the time he died. The Hebrew word for father is *abba*. Add the suffix for “my” (ee) and the combination reduces to “abee” (spelled abi) for “my father.” The Hebrew word for king is “Melech.” Put them all together and you get Abimelech, which means “my father is king.” Not surprisingly, it’s a common name in the Old Testament for princes and kings.

Gideon called one of his kids (one by a concubine, no less) Abimelech. He never forgot that the people wanted him to be king. He turned their offer down (for all the right reasons) but it stayed in the back of his mind.

He couldn’t let it go.

Gideon said no to the offer of kingship once, but he couldn’t say no every day for the rest of his life. That’s what the offer felt like, and it messed with his head.

The lesson here is that sin is tireless in its pursuit of us. No matter how mature you get, no matter how close to the LORD, sin is patiently waiting for an opportunity to take over. Here it was Gideon’s sinful reaction to the offer of kingship. For us, it’s something else—but it’s always something.

And the secondary lesson is the biggie—those who look the least at risk can be the most at risk.

The problem is overconfidence. In the spiritual realm, almost all confidence is overconfidence. Never, ever think that you’re safe.

Better still, never ever think that your pastor is safe. Pastors are educated, trained, wise, mature Christians. Unfortunately, that makes us think they’re bullet-proof. They’re anything but.

“Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” — Lord Acton

But this applies to more than just power. Fame has a similar effect. Any form of success can be dangerous. Just having a few dozen people look up to you puts you at risk.

Kill the humility, and you kill the man.

4 Judges 9:1–6

Then Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem, to his mother's brothers, and spoke with them and with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying, "Please speak in the hearing of all the men of Shechem: 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal reign over you, or that one reign over you?' Remember that I am your own flesh and bone."

And his mother's brothers spoke all these words concerning him in the hearing of all the men of Shechem; and their heart was inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." So they gave him seventy shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless men; and they followed him. Then he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers, the seventy sons of Jerubbaal, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, because he hid himself. And all the men of Shechem gathered together, all of Beth Millo, and they went and made Abimelech king beside the terebinth tree at the pillar that was in Shechem.

Any fact recorded in scripture is actually two facts: the fact recorded plus the fact that God chose to include it in His word. There are no throwaway lines in the Bible.

We must not ignore the fact that Abimelech was the son of a concubine in understanding how he grew to commit mass murder. He was presumably despised and mistreated as an illegitimate child. This left deep wounds. Gideon may have even given Abimelech his noble name to compensate for his ignoble origin.

If so, that backfired big time. His regal name morphed into a plan for how to get even with everyone who had picked on him. He has dozens of his brothers murdered to get them out of the way so that he's the heir to the throne.

Except that there's no throne. Gideon said, in Judges 8:23, *"I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you."*

Abimelech's name pointed him down a path to perdition.

Killing off heirs to the throne seems to be a thing—in the Bible and throughout human history. But why?

The answer is, as always, sin, but that doesn't tell the whole story. Why does this variation on sin seem to reach such a fevered pitch when it comes to royalty?

Well, we know power corrupts. Being king is a lot of power. Can just coveting power corrupt?

The truth is that it's not the power that corrupts in the first place. All power does is bring to the surface the corruption that's already there. And yes, just coveting power can have the same effect.

Our corruption is constrained by our civilization. Laws, and the people that enforce them, train us to behave. Take those constraints away and our evil nature breaks out in full bloom.

That's the message of *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding.

5 Judges 9:7–21 (ESV)

When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and cried aloud and said to them, “Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’ But the olive tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?’ And the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?’ And the trees said to the vine, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?’ Then all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come and reign over us.’ And the bramble said to the trees, ‘If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.’

“Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house and have done to him as his deeds deserved—for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian, and you have risen up against my father’s house this day and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his female servant, king over the leaders of Shechem, because he is your relative—if you then have acted in good faith and integrity with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech.” And Jotham ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother.

Jotham shows incredible courage in showing up after narrowly escaping death at Abimelech’s hand. He flees at the end, but not until he’s made a brilliant argument. Notice the crops he uses in his analogy. Olives, figs, and grapes are valuable. People spend a lot of time planting and tending their trees and vines. Converting their function to ruling is losing a lot. Each plant makes that point in declining to rule.

But the bramble is entirely noxious; it bears no fruit. If people spend time “tending” a bramble, it’s to get rid of it. Diverting its function to ruling loses nothing. Thus, when “*all the trees*” offer to let the bramble rule, it gets suspicious. “*If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.*”

This is a huge insult. Abimelech is just a useless weed. Jotham even tightens the analogy by repeating the bit about fire, “*But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech.*”

As we will see, this turns out to be all too accurate.

Jotham’s doesn’t claim that he should be king. This unselfishness lends credibility to his argument.

This is a key principle in evangelism. People look for a selfish motive. Make sure there’s no way that fits.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you seen someone hurt by the occult?
2. How do you draw the line between art and idolatry?
3. Who are you assuming is safe?
4. Have you witnessed someone become corrupted?
5. How do you emphasize unselfishness in evangelism?

Items for prayer: