

Gideon – a victim of success

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[0 : 00] Welcome to a time of worship here from Buccaloo. Hopefully only one more week after this thought of being online and then we're shifting. Hopefully everyone's heard 10.30 morning services, 5.30 evening services, both in the church building, both being live streamed. So that'll be nice to get the study back into the church building. We've got two weeks to go in our study in the life of Gideon as well, so we'll get there momentarily. But let me begin reading from the letter of James chapter 1 and at verse 16, where we read, Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. Let's pray together briefly as we begin. Lord our God, we want to stop and pause and consider with thankfulness all your gifts to us this day. We thank you for the gift of life.

We know that you are the author and the sustainer of life. We thank you for our health and our strength, for our families and our friends. For those of us who have opportunities to work, we thank you for our work. We thank you for money that we have, the food that's in our cupboards and our fridges.

We thank you for the opportunities that we have being in this part of the world. We thank you for the beauty of the summer months, for the sunshine that we have enjoyed, for hearing and seeing so much of life.

We thank you for the gift of education and healthcare. And Lord we thank you for the gift of your word in our own language. We thank you for the gift of the church, for your design of the church as a way to reveal the gospel, the good news, the good news, for our love in our own language.

[2 : 34] As your kingdom, an expression of your kingdom here on the earth. Lord we thank you for the sending of your son Jesus, to be that promised saviour who would take away the sin of his people by dying in our place, as that sacrifice that would turn away the wrath that we deserve to face. As Jesus would take that on himself so that we might be able to enjoy peace with you and from you to enjoy eternal life.

So Lord as we spend this time together will you give us that sense of gratitude and thankfulness? Especially as we think about the danger of success and that complacency that can come in, the forgetfulness of you that can come in.

May we be a people dependent on you. And we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. So we're going to read together from the book of Judges and Judges chapter 8.

And we're going to read the first 21 verses of this section of the Gideon story. Not such a familiar story perhaps. The 6 and 7 tend to be well known.

This is in some ways the forgotten aspect of the Gideon story. But there's important lessons for us in this. So Judges chapter 8 verse 1.

[3 : 59] Now the Ephraimites asked Gideon, Why have you treated us like this? Why didn't you call us when you went to fight Midian? And they challenged him vigorously. But he answered them, What have I accomplished compared to you?

Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer? God gave Oreb and Zeb, the Midianite leaders, into your hands. What was I able to do compared to you?

At this, their resentment against him subsided. Gideon and his 300 men, exhausted yet keeping up the pursuit, came to the Jordan and crossed it. He said to the men of Succoth, Give my troops some bread.

They are worn out and I am still pursuing Zeba and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian. But the officials of Succoth said, Do you already have the hands of Zeba and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your troops?

Then Gideon replied, Just for that, when the Lord has given Zeba and Zalmunna into my hand, I will tear your flesh with desert thorns and briars. From there he went up to Peniel and made the same request of them, but they answered as the men of Succothad.

[5 : 00] So he said to the men of Peniel, When I return in triumph, I will tear down this tower. Now Zeba and Zalmunna were in Karkor with a force of about 15,000 men, all that were left of the armies of the eastern peoples.

120,000 swordsmen had fallen. And Gideon went up by the route of the Nomads east of Nobat and Jogbah and attacked the unsuspecting army. Zeba and Zalmunna, the two kings of Midian, fled.

But he pursued them and captured them, routing their entire army. Gideon, son of Joash, then returned from the battle by the pass of Heres. He caught a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And the young man wrote down for him the names of the 77 officials of Succoth, the elders of the town.

Then Gideon came and said to the men of Succoth, Here are Zeba and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me by saying, Do you already have the hands of Zeba and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your exhausted men? He took the elders of the town and taught the men of Succoth a lesson by punishing them with desert thorns and briars.

He also pulled down the tower of Peniel and killed the men of the town. Then he asked Zeba and Zalmunna, What kind of men did you kill at Tabor? Men like you, they answered, each one with the bearing of a prince.

[6 : 04] Gideon replied, These were my brothers, the sons of my own mother. As sure as the Lord lives, if you had spared their lives, I would not kill you. Turning to Jether, his eldest son, he said, Kill them. But Jether did not draw his sword because he was only a boy and was afraid.

Zeba and Zalmunna said, Come, do it yourself. As is the man, so is his strength. So Gideon stepped forward and killed them and took the ornaments off their camels' necks.

Amen. This is God's word. So we're thinking today about the danger of success. I guess if we grew up in church, in Sunday school, we would have loved the Gideon of chapters 6 and 7, the humble hero and his remarkable victory from God.

Chapter 8, however, it doesn't often feature in our thinking, doesn't often make its way to our Sunday school lessons. But there is an important lesson from Gideon and it's a reminder of the danger of success.

Because what happens in Gideon's life? There is a gradual, well, in many ways, a quick slide into forgetfulness of God's grace, that it was God who had won this remarkable victory.

[7 : 21] There is a movement, a swift movement towards self-importance, where he's putting himself centre stage, trust me, trust my strength, not trust God. And the impact is that his dealings with his enemies and with his friends, with the people of God, become ugly.

Because Gideon and not God is central. We've probably seen, we've probably read stories where someone is a victim of their own success, as it's often called.

Maybe the young footballer who quickly becomes the global star but can't handle the pressure and his career never takes off and perhaps personal life spirals. The business professional who enjoys quick promotions, rapid rise, a rising star in their industry.

They start believing their own hype and they become a terrible boss. Well, our focus today isn't so much on that, it's on the danger of spiritual success, where perhaps we enjoy some kind of success as a gift from God but we're taking glory to ourselves, where we're taking God for granted, where we're basing our identity not on the reality that we're saved by God's grace but we're basing our identity on our success.

And so to help us to see the danger of success, we're going to look at the good, the bad and the ugly in Gideon's dealings with others.

[8 : 49] So let's begin with the good in the way that he deals with Ephraim, the people of Ephraim in the first three verses. Now one backdrop we begin to see in the story of Gideon is that God's people are slipping into old and bad ways.

The book of Judges has got this cycle that God raises up a judge and the people sort of turn back to God but as soon as that judge is gone they turn back, they start worshipping false gods, they turn to evil and God sends oppressors and then the people cry out and God sends another judge in his grace.

Well, we see God's people even here slipping into old bad ways. We see disunity, we see a lack of trust that Ephraim here has towards Gideon. Here there is tension after the battle.

So Gideon and his 300 remarkably, that is God who wins the battle, are dominating Midian. Midian's on the run. Ephraim are called out and they capture these two leaders, important leaders, Oreb and Zeb.

But there's tension straight after the battle because Ephraim's saying why didn't you call us out first? The implication is we are the elite, Gideon. There is pride going on in the hearts of this people group and what we see, and we see it so often, don't we, pride is ugly and pride tends to damage and sometimes even to destroy relationships.

[10 : 15] Now we see relations strained because of Ephraim's pride but Gideon's response is one of grace. This is where he makes a good response. Proverbs chapter 15 says a gentle answer turns away.

Rah. That's what Gideon's answer is like, isn't it? What have I accomplished compared to you? Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer?

Your leftovers are better than my feast, Gideon is saying. He's humble and he's gracious and the outcome is that the temperature in the room is cooled.

He keeps God's people together for now. This is a case of so far so good. But then there's a turn, verse 4, all the way to verse 17 we can see the bad as Gideon deals with Succoth and with Peniel.

And again, as we see sort of issues within the people of God, what we see from them is fear and also a lack of faith. But Gideon comes with his troops in verse 4.

[11 : 25] Gideon and his 300 they're exhausted, they're pursuing the enemy, they came to the Jordan, they crossed over the Jordan and Gideon said to the men, he said, give my troops some bread, they're worn out and I'm still pursuing.

And then he goes and he says the same to the people in Peniel. My troops, they're tired, they're hungry, can you give us some food? Can you refresh us? And remember, Gideon and those 300, they're fighting the Lord's battle and remember, Succoth and Peniel are in the promised land.

So these are friends, not enemies. They are border towns, they're close by each other, they're on the outer edges of the promised land. But these are among God's people. But there is fear.

Fear that comes out in a sense in disrespect. Verse 6, the officials of Succoth said, do you already at the hands of Ziba and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your troops? And then Peniel answers in the same way.

And there's the fear. Gideon, we're not sure that you're going to win. And if Gideon doesn't win, then these border towns are directly in Midian's firing lane.

[12 : 31] And so what they choose to do, they choose to sit on the fence. We'll help you. Come back for bread once you have won that victory. So again, it's not a great sign spiritually, is it?

Here is Gideon clearly filled with the Spirit, appointed by God to be the people's leader and judge, but they don't choose to follow. They don't choose to give aid in this battle that God has established against his enemies.

Now, how does Gideon respond? And this is where we begin to get evidence of what we're calling the danger of success. Verse 7, because you don't give me bread, I'm going to tear your flesh with desert thorns and briars.

Now, is that a right response? Is that a gracious response? No. And just as important, is that a command from God? No.

Verse 9, when the people of Peniel say, when I return in triumph, I'll tear down this tower. Now, is that an appropriate response? Is that an appropriate measure? You don't give me bread, so I'm going to smash down your city tower.

[13 : 40] The problem that we're beginning to see is that when Gideon knew his weakness, chapter 6, chapter 7, when Gideon knew his dependence on God, we see him as a man who worships.

And we see him as a man of prayer. We see him as a man who entrusts himself at every point dependent on God.

He's been dependent on God's strength. But now that he's got a sense of his strength, that reliance on God is gone. And it's replaced by a need to be recognised, a need for his strength to be seen.

He's become, in that sense, too tied to his success. He's claiming it as his own. So now he's furious when these two towns don't recognise his power and the certainty of the success.

The outcome is a bad one. The outcome is a terrible one. Verse 13 to 16, first thing he does is he captures a young man of Succoth. He interrogates him, gets this list of the 77 town leaders and he gives them that lashing that he promised.

[14 : 52] And then in verse 17 it gets worse. He goes to Peniel and just as he said he pulls down the tower but he doesn't stop there. In his rage he engages in murder.

Now it's so important for us to recognise that not every action in the Bible is an action that God approves of. Not every action in the Bible is an action that comes from God.

At times evil and folly are highlighted and here we see wickedness and folly from Gideon. What Gideon discovered and dealt with so badly is the reality that sometimes God's people, people in God's church will disappoint us.

Sometimes they will turn on us and be hostile to us if we are in leadership perhaps as elders. People will not listen to us perhaps but we must be careful not to lash out.

We must be careful not to forget God's grace and to pass that grace forward. God's grace and on the flip side we must strive personally not to be the cause of disunity not to sap energy away from God's work because we're either in pride or a lack of faith we're just causing problems.

[16 : 31] So that's the bad. Things are going to get even worse. Let's think about the ugly as he deals with Ziba and Zalmunna. Now we know this and we don't have to go too far in history we can see it I think in some of the stories playing out in different nations even today.

Tragic stories where a leader or a group of leaders come to power and prominence and they use that status use that role to then take personal revenge.

on opponents to continue a vendetta where there's no concern for national interest but just a concern for settling personal scores a level of injustice see it and we have seen it through history and in our world but what happens with Gideon and these two Zs Ziba and Zalmunna he interrogates them and it becomes clear is that he's focusing on one specific thing when he asks them what kind of men did you kill at Tabor Gideon replied in verse 19 these were my brothers the sons of my own mother surely as the Lord lived if you'd spared their lives I would not kill you you killed my brother so I'm going to kill you this has become this has become a family thing and we see that it's become a family thing and it's become a personal thing because of what happens with poor Jether Jether I'm not sure how to say his name but Gideon's eldest son Gideon wants to as it were to blood him to get him used to this kind of activity turning to Jether he said kill them but Jether did not draw his sword because he was only a boy and was afraid and as we read this

I think the author wants us to have sympathy for Jether against his furious dad Gideon who's engaged in this personal vendetta but Gideon concludes this campaign of personal revenge and what we see is that he's set in a sense a sad pattern that will then repeat in the life of Samson Samson another one of those famous judges but so often where Samson is using his God-given strength it's to settle personal scores it's about his own self-interest rather than the national interest and we begin to see that in the story of Gideon and it's ugly isn't it the story of God's victory against his enemies who are oppressing God's people is now tainted by Gideon's scores settling in brutal revenge and so the danger of success I hope becomes clear to us in the life of Gideon he lost his appreciation of

God's grace so quickly with the result that he's claiming glory for himself and what we don't see him do is we don't see him pray we don't see him seek God's wisdom or direction in this whole thing he's going his own way pursuing his own course and so chapter eight stands for us as an object lesson both individually and as a church to be on guard when things are going well for us so let's just move it to the level of personal just for a few moments to examine our own lives how do we how do you and I how do we handle success perhaps perhaps you want to put yourself in the workplace setting in your career or in your field of study perhaps you want to put it in a family setting to think about the success of children or grandchildren perhaps maybe you want to think about projects and plans that you have put in place and they have prospered when they go well when they have gone well do we see some of Gideon in us where we can easily forget that every good gift comes from

[20 : 41] God we forget his gift we forget his grace towards us have we become puffed up in pride where we're boasting to others where we're lording over others because of our success where we use it as a springboard to claim authority over others it's the danger of success that can so easily creep into our own lives what's the better way as Christians what's the better way well it's to remember what we read in the James chapter 1 that every good and perfect gift is from God therefore should we receive a thankfulness 1st Corinthians 4 Paul writes to them with their tendency towards pride what do you have that you did not receive he says and why are you boasting since everything you have comes as a gift from God so the right response is the response of humility of thankfulness to God to God and even directing others away from praising us to see

God's hand not in a pious way but in a real way recognising all we have comes from God and that we would be prayerful because if Gideon teaches us anything he teaches us that we need to be on guard against pride because Gideon seems to change so quickly after the battle so we need to be on guard against pride and against self-reliance when things go well so easy to work on the basis of our own skill set on the basis of our own personality or temperament or record of success rather than being thankful for those but constantly entrusting ourselves day by day situation by situation to God and asking for his help but what about in our church if you're involved in a ministry or a service how does it play out then do we find that we are quick to claim glory or to look for the praise of others or do we want to honour others and to honour

God most of all will we face opposition of whatever kind are we gracious in dealing with that or do we find ourselves asserting our credentials to say listen to me and follow my way will we gladly highlight our weakness our failures our absolute dependence on God in order to celebrate that God's grace is sufficient for us and that his strength is made perfect in our weakness let me read from Ephesians chapter 2 and at verse 8 where we read for it's by grace you have been saved through faith and this not from yourselves it's the gift of God not by works so that no one can boast so God saves by grace and all room for boasting is removed and then verse 10 for we are God's handiwork created in

Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do God strengthens us with his grace and we work by grace as we are in Christ Jesus that we do that for God's glory and not our own that we remain servants we don't think of ourselves as kings and queens but we are servants of our God so that success wouldn't change us and pull us away from our God and then as we close let's consider Jesus Jesus the one who is the greater than Gideon Gideon's problem as we've seen is that he lost sight of God's grace and he began to pursue his own campaign and his own agenda and the result was that his leadership was tainted he is a flawed leader what we see is the people of God being torn apart rather than brought together and it becomes evident that Gideon is not the kind of leader that

God's people need but Jesus Jesus is so different isn't he Jesus always pursued his father's will and his father's glory now he would say to the crowd I say and do nothing except what my father gives me to say and do and that ultimately would lead him gladly to die on the cross for proud self-reliant sinners like us and how does Jesus deal with his people's weak faith when he finds it remember Jesus' heart Jesus said I am gentle and lowly you'll find rest for your souls Jesus Jesus is the one who will not crush the bruised reed and so we see it with his disciples he graciously restores them beyond their failures beyond running away beyond their misunderstanding he prays for them in their weakness and he shows them more and more of his love and his grace he draws them graciously to himself so we can take heart for Christians

[26 : 17] Jesus is not going to be the leader who's going to whip us into shape who's going to smash us for our weakness rather he will extend to us that gentle loving correction he will seek to point us back to him and to trust in him so that we would come to celebrate more and more God's grace to us in Christ to see that Jesus is the one we need to trust in the one we need to look to so we are to beware the danger of success of attributing it to ourselves and losing sight of our God but we are also to be encouraged be encouraged by the success of Jesus be encouraged by the success of God's salvation plan that Jesus has died to take away the sin of his people he has died to bring us to

God he has risen to give us eternal life he has sent the spirit as he promised he will not leave us he will not abandon us he will not fail to save his so while we watch out for the danger of success and what that can do to our hearts we never want to lose sight of the glorious success of Jesus in the gospel let's pray together briefly Lord we recognise in our own hearts our tendency for success to be a difficult thing to handle for the times that we become complacent or we become cocky for when we take glory to ourselves and we forget to be thankful for the way that it makes us rely on ourselves and think that we figured things out rather than trusting you Lord please help us to learn humility and thankfulness and prayerful dependence help us to learn from

Gideon but more than that help us to be looking to Jesus thank you that he succeeds where we fail thank you for his complete success of his rescue mission and the good news that that brings for us and thank you that when we fail that Jesus doesn't crush us and condemn us the way Gideon did to sucketh and penneil thank you that he is willing to gently and humbly correct and restore so please help us in this coming week to be looking to him we pray in Jesus name amen well let's conclude the time that we have together singing first of all yet not I but through Christ in me a great reminder of that humility and ongoing dependence and then we'll also sing Psalm 63 the first eight verses what gift of grace is Jesus my redeemer there is no more for heaven now to give he is my joy my righteousness and freedom my steadfast love my deep and boundless peace to this

I hold my hope is only Jesus for my life is wholly bound to his oh how strange and divine I can sing all is mine yet not I but through Christ in me the night is dark but I am not forsaken for by my side the Savior he will stay I labor on in weakness and rejoicing for in my need his power is displayed to this

I hold my shepherd will defend me through the deepest valley he will lead all the night has been won and I shall overcome yet not I but through Christ in me the no fate I dread I know I am forgiven the future sure the price it has been paid for for Jesus bled and suffered for my pardon and he was raised to overthrow the grave to this

[32 : 34] I hold my sin has been defeated Jesus now and ever is my plea oh the chains are released I can sing I am free yet not I but through Christ in me with every breath I long to follow Jesus for he has said that he will bring me home and day by day I know he will renew me until

I stand with joy before the throne to this I hold my hope is only Jesus all the glory ever more to him when the race is complete still my lips shall repeat yet not I but through Christ in me when the race is complete still my lips shall repeat yet not I but through Christ in me O God you are my

God alone I seek your face with eagerness my soul and body thirst for you in this dry weary wilderness I've seen you're in your holy place your power and glory held my gaze far better is your love than life and so my lips will sing your praise my soul in your love and my love throughout my life and raise my hands to you in prayer my joyful lips will sing your praise my soul is fed with richest fear upon my bed

I lie awake and in my thoughts remember you I meditate throughout the night and keep your constant love in view because you are my help alone in shadow of your wings I'll sing you hold me up with your right hand to you oh

God my soul will cling the oh I love you and can you