

# Gifted Leaders and Gilded Ephods

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[ 0 : 00 ] Friends, I wonder if you'd stand and pray with me. Our gracious God, we pray that you would help us to hear your word today and to respond in faith and obedience.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks, friends. I just thought you'd been sitting for a while. And I thought it was probably good to get some blood running as well as my own.

Well, it was a blog that went viral. And the author was an Australian palliative nurse who had counseled the dying in their last days.

Her name was Bronnie Ware. And her blog was called Inspiration and Chai. She recorded their thoughts in the last 12 weeks of their life.

And particularly, she noted the most common regrets that people had as they faced the end of their lives. And startlingly, her regrets, the regrets that they expressed had nothing to do with things like having more sex or having Miss Bungee jumping or whatever it might be.

[ 1 : 11 ] None of those things. Now, the top regrets recorded by Ware were as follows. One, I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself and not the life others wanted me to live.

Two, and she said this was unanimous by men, this next one. Two, I wish I hadn't worked so hard. Three, I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.

Four, I wish I had stayed in touch with friends. Five, I wish I had let myself be happier. Friends, the rite of Ecclesiastes tells us that it is better to go to funerals than to parties.

The reason being, a funeral wakes you to the reality of life. It reminds you that death is the destiny of us all. Facing or observing death urges us, the living, to take these things to heart and to work out what life is all about.

The regrets from patients in palliative care remind us of this, don't they? They remind us that it is better to live life in the light of death than to live it absorbed in life and denying death.

[ 2 : 27 ] Friends, take those regrets, listen to them, and with them ringing in your brain, listen to another man at the end of his life. His name is Paul, and he had lived a life of zeal for God, only to find himself mistaken and then confronted by God and then confronted by Jesus.

And he had found that his life could now be reoriented. And he's writing in the latter years of his life to a young protégé. And he says these words in the second epistle to Timothy.

Friends, it's a rather morbid way to start.

A Bible talk. But I wonder how your dying days will find you. That is, will your life be filled with regrets? Will it be filled with things undone?

Or will it be filled with the expectation that you will stand before your maker? And with all that that means. It is a sober way to begin a Bible talk, isn't it?

[ 3 : 53 ] And yet this passage that we're going to look at today, I think, raises this question. You see, our main character here began life well or life before God well.

However, today we'll find out how he went on. And his story will help us think about how we might go on and how we will face the rest of our lives. Observing Gideon's life may very well be like visiting a funeral for us.

It may instruct us about life. So that rather stark beginning, let me remind you where we are and where we've been. And I'd encourage you to have your Bibles open at Judges chapter 8.

Now, let me give you the context. If you've got my outlines there, you might see my little Bible road map, which will help you see where we're up to. It maps the story of the Bible as a road.

And I put the relevant parts of it in your outlines. We start, you see, the Bible at Eden. We then go through the Bible to about chapter 11, where we take a little sideline off into Babel.

[ 4 : 53 ] Babel represents human beings raising themselves up against God. Then we move back to God's promise to Abraham and the promise of the land.

And that's what that next little icon is about in Canaan with the promise of land, children and blessing. Then after a little while, we end up going out to Egypt, as we heard in our children's talk. And then we come back from Egypt into the land of promise again. And in my little icon there, you can see a sword, which represents conquest of the land. And that brings us to the book of Judges. You see, after they have conquered the land, they find that they have left Canaanites in the land. And those people are in the land. They're mixing with them. And those people bring their gods or have their gods.

And the Israelites get tempted by those deities. They begin to worship them. Israel sins against God. However, God has mercy on them and he raises up for them rescuers, which we know as judges.

[ 5 : 57 ] And in our story, we come to one particular person. We met him in chapter six. And you might remember that he was a somewhat timid man. However, he has done since then some mighty things under God and with God's help.

In chapter seven, he has routed the invading enemy forces with a mere band of 300 men and the great hand of God. And all of this has happened on the west of the Jordan.

And in this last at this last event, we're going to look at now. We move across the Jordan into the Transjordan area to the east of the Jordan.

And just before he goes, Gideon acts with great diplomacy and skill conflict management with one group of Israelites. But then he crosses.

So have a look there at chapter eight, verses five following. Gideon and his men, they cross the Jordan River. They take we'll take a quick skim through what happens. In verse four, we find that the men are exhausted.

[ 6 : 57 ] They are apparently famished as well. In verse five, they arrive at an Israelite town called Succoth. Food is asked for. And there are a number of things to observe. We're told we're also told that Gideon, what Gideon is doing in the Transjordan at this point.

We're told that he's pursuing two men, a zebra and a zalmunah, two kings of Midian. In the original, the word I is very strong. I am doing this.

There is no hint that this is the Lord's business. This is Gideon's personal business he's doing in the Transjordan. Anyway, in verse six, the Israelite men of Succoth side with the Midianites.

Remember, they are Israelites, these men. They're not foreigners. They are Israelites. And perhaps they know the risks of getting on the wrong side of the Midianites. And that they're on the geographic geographical area close to the Midianites.

Perhaps they realize that the request for bread is to break allegiances with the Midianites. Anyway. What Gideon does.

[ 7 : 58 ] Well, in fact, notice what they say. They say to Gideon, do you already have the hands of Zeba and zalmunah in your possession? Why should we give bread to you?

It's full of sarcasm, isn't it? Gideon's reply comes back in verse seven. Gone is the diplomacy we saw earlier on with the in verses one to three. He's full of aggression and he sounds a note of revenge.

Just for that, he says, when the Lord has given Zeba and zalmunah into my hand, I will tear your flesh with desert thorns and briars. In fact, it is actually, I will thresh your flesh with desert thorns and briars.

In verse eight, Gideon journeys on to Peniel. He gets a similar response that he got in Succoth and he replies similarly. When I return in triumph, I will tear down this tower.

In verses 10 and 11, Gideon then takes his 300 and he takes on 15,000 remaining and unsuspecting troops of Zeba and zalmunah. And then in verse 12, they flee, but are pursued and are captured.

[ 9 : 03 ] And now we go through an encounter with Succoth, Peniel and Zeba and zalmunah again in that order. First sucker. In verse 14, a young man of Succoth is interrogated.

He gives the names of 77 elders of the town. Gideon comes to that town. He reminds them that they had taunted him and he then takes them and he brutalizes them with thorns and briars.

And the NIVs taught them a lesson is a lot softer than the original probably was. He probably did as he promised, thresh them with thorns and briars.

And then he moves on to Peniel. And as promised, he pulls down their tower. Then he kills the men of the town. Finally, in verse 18, he confronts Zeba and zalmunah. And we find out that they had

killed his brothers.

And Gideon urges his son to kill the men who killed his uncles. But he's only a lad. And timid as Gideon himself had once been. Zeba and Zalmunah urge Gideon to step up to the task himself. [10:07] And he does in verse 21. And in verse 22, we're apparently back on the other side of the Jordan again. And we hear about the aftermath of all of this. The Israelites invite Gideon to rule over them.

The slayer of kings is offered rule or kingship himself. They don't use the word king, but they do use the word rule. And they invite dynastic rule. Not just Gideon, but his son and his grandson are to be kings.

But there's more. Did you notice verse 22? Look at the end of the verse. It is not the Lord, they say, who saved them from Midian. Who is it? It is Gideon, they say, because you saved us.

That is exactly what God had wanted to avoid way back when he called Gideon in the first place and diminished his military force to 300. He said he did not want Israel to boast that their own strength had saved them.

Anyway, Gideon replies in verse 23. And it's pious and it's theologically correct. Have a look at it. I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you.

[11:08] But then look at what happens in verse 24 following. The good of verse 23 is tainted by the bad of verse 24 and following. Gideon accepts payment. He's quick to take up the fruits of his position.

He requests earrings from each of his warriors and he uses them to make an ephod. By the way, where have you ever heard of people throwing gold things onto the ground in front of someone? We heard about it in the story, didn't we? In the children's story. We heard about it, didn't we? When Aaron takes gold trinkets and turns them into a golden calf.

This echo here is meant to be like that. This is not a good thing that is happening. Effectively, Gideon is probably taking up the role of being a sponsor of cultic or religious activity in Israel. And it is something a king might typically do. But the ephod is placed in Ophrah, where God had appeared to Gideon in the first place. But look at the second half of verse 27.

[12:09] And Israel, just like their predecessors at the bottom of Mount Sinai, prostituted themselves by worshipping it there. And it became a snare to Gideon and his family.

Finally, do you notice how the end comes? Verse 28. No matter what we feel about what has happened here, the results are that Midian is subdued before Israel. It does not raise its head again.

And what's more, for the last time in the book of Judges, we are told that the land had peace or rest for a specified number of years. Forty years in this case. So friends, there's the story.

Now, what do you think is going on here in this story? What does the author want us to hear? What does he want us to think? Let's see if we can work it out together. First, let me ask you what your impressions were when you heard the passage read out loud.

Did you feel perhaps a little embarrassed that the children were around? What did you feel? And how have your impressions changed as I've talked to you about the text again and pointed out some of its content?

[13:11] At the very least, this story is a very different picture of Gideon than we've seen up till this point, isn't it? You see, our first encounter with Gideon is of him timidly hiding in a winepress, backing away from his call from God.

Then in chapter 7, we see a move in him. He's clearly for the Lord. But you might remember that his battle cry was what? For the Lord and for Gideon.

So there's already a change. But now the Lord, if you listen to the story, has disappeared completely. The Lord does not appear to direct or sanction Gideon's actions at all.

In fact, the Lord is downplayed in the story. Now it is as though the story is all full of Gideon and his actions appear brutal, vengeful, excessive.

We may be used to hearing about Yahweh war in the Bible, but this is something else. God's people are the victims here and it is harsh and unnecessary toward the people of God as well as the enemies of God.

[14:17] And then there are the questions that arise out of the end of the account. What is going on with that ephod? What is Gideon doing? Friends, let me see if I can unlock this a little bit for you.

You see, there's a key passage that does unlock the passage as a whole. Look at verses 18 and 19 with me. So chapter 8, 18 and 19. And let me take you through it just a little more carefully. I want you to look at Gideon's questioning of Ziba and Zalmunna.

In verse 18, he asked them a very specific question. He says to them, what kind of men did you kill at Tabor? He's investigating a specific incident.

And somehow we feel that this incident lies behind his actions in the rest of the chapter. And I want you to look at the reply. Can you see what he says? Men like you, they replied.

Each one with the bearing of a prince. Now, the original language is even stronger. The original reads like this. They were like you. Each one had the appearance of sons of the king.

[15:21] Now, there are two things that could be said here. It may be that they're treating Gideon as a king and saying, well, they look like you, a king. That is, they had the appearance of being sons of the king.

Linked to this, they may be hinting that Gideon is beginning to look like a king. Or it could be that they're saying, they look like you. That is, they look like the sons of the king.

Now, look at verse 19 and you'll see it explained a bit more. Gideon says, these, those were my brothers, the sons of my own mother. What do you reckon that means?

First of all, it's strange, isn't it, that Gideon talks about his mother rather than his father, which you would normally do in Israel. It may be that he's implying that his mother was of royal birth, of royal blood.

Perhaps she was of royal Canaanite blood. That might explain, because there were no kings in Israel at this point, it might explain why there was a statue of Baal and an Asherah pole at his father's place.

[16:24] In other words, the statement by Ziba and Zalmunna may be indicating that Gideon was of royal stock. Half blood, perhaps. Half Canaanite.

Half Israelite. However, that's not at the core of what's going on here. The core of the matter is we now know, don't we, what lies behind Gideon's actions. You see, he is on a quest.

A quest to avenge the death of his brothers. Oh, there might be some slight justification for him in Israelite law, but it is only very, very slight. What is going on here is that we are being told that when the Ephraimites brought the heads of Oreb and Zeb to Gideon in verse 25 of the previous chapter, they brought the wrong heads.

They should have brought the heads. Of these other two men. And because they didn't, Gideon pursued them.

He wanted the heads of those who'd killed his brothers. And when he does not have their heads, he engages in a personal pursuit. And his anger and his vengeful spirit caused him to act well beyond the appropriate action for a judge.

[17:35] He acts not for the Lord, but for himself and his own interests. He uses God's forces for his own vendetta. And that brings us to the ephod.

As I indicated to you before, I think all the echoes are that this is, while it may look like an ambiguous thing, in the end it is not. It has a double meaning. He is clearly doing something he thinks might be considered as godly and associated with the real God.

But underneath it all, it is not. I think underneath it at all is something very close to idolatry. And with Gideon in full of self-interest, with his interest in the Lord diminishing, it will not be surprising to find that this ephod shifts in the same direction as Gideon himself.

And the end result will be that Israel will shift back toward where they had started. Ofra was a place where the story began and it had a bar worship, bar was worshipped there.

It changed. It became a place where the Lord was worshipped, but not for long, it appears. At the end of our story, it is a place where false deities are worshipped again.

[18:45] It seems as though, remember what Gideon's father's challenge had been? Jerubal. Let Baal contend with him. Do you know what's happened?

Baal has contended with him. And Baal has won the day. For the gods of other nations are now being worshipped where God should be worshipped.

The Lord's altar has now become a place where Israel prostitutes itself. Friends, let me just wrap up this talk with a few comments. First, it is appropriate for us to acknowledge that what we see here is yet another failed saviour, another failed human.

Gideon is made of the same stuff as Adam and Eve. All so very human, so very independent, so very sinful. He's not the saviour we're looking for, is he?

There's only one that's worth worshipping. There's only one worth bowing before. There's only one who has rescued us from ourselves, from the great ruler of the kingdom of the air, from our gratification of our sinful nature.

[ 19 : 55 ] There's only one true saviour, that's the Lord Jesus. And through him God has raised us up with Christ and seated us in the heavenly places with him. False saviours like Gideon only serve to point us toward him in whom alone we can have hope.

So that's our first response, to acknowledge the real saviour that Gideon is not. But it's not the only thing we learn here. Friends, when we look at the life of Gideon, we can see a string of contrasts. Let me go through them with you. First, let's think about the Gideon we met at the start. Gideon at the start is a man whose actions were initiated by God. He was dependent upon the Lord. He's a timid hacker. Remember that's what his name meant, hacker? He's a timid hacker. Passive and fearful but dependent. He succeeds by grace.

He is a Yahweh warrior and the result is success and Baal is overcome. But compare him with what we have seen in this chapter. His actions are not initiated by the Lord but by him.

[ 21 : 00 ] He is self-assertive, forceful, brutal. He's aggressive. He's a vengeful hacker. And the result is what? Failure in faith. The idols are victorious and the Lord is overcome.

Friends, it is a story, let me tell you. Oh so common. Think about it. A young man. A young woman. A young woman. Godly.

Devoted. Prayerful. Devout. Committed to God. Committed to living a life before God.

And then life takes over. Faith diminishes. The Lord himself diminishes. Prayer drops. Devotion dribbles away.

Godliness gradually dies. Dependence upon God is replaced by independence. And you have the older man. The older woman. Who becomes much more conventional.

[ 22 : 04 ] More canny. More self-reliant. And before long. Ungodly conduct becomes commonplace. Divine agenda.

Things that were never before countenanced by them. Become acceptable. Divine agendas become overcome. By personal agendas. Sins once shunned.

Are now hidden. But inside welcomed. And friends, I wonder if that might be you. I wonder if it's us. Let me tell you.

It is so, so common in the Bible. And in life. To start well. And to end badly. So, so common.

It is hard to end well. Friends, how are you going in this? As you approach your death.

[ 23 : 02 ] Because you are closer today than you were yesterday. Will the one regret be left. That you have left. Will be the God you left in your youth.

And the faith of your youth. If so. I want to urge you today. To return. Friends, do not forsake.

The God of your youth. Do not forsake the faith of your youth. Finish well. Let me say that I have. I've had the privilege here.

At Holy Trinity. In the last three and a half years. Of seeing numerous godly people. Finish well. But I urge you to be the same.

I urge you not to be like Gideon. Because his is a common story. Friends, the Christian life is a long haul. It is a daily battle. And I want to urge you today.

[ 23 : 57 ] To finish well. You see, fight on. So that you might be able to say. With the Apostle Paul. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race.

I have kept the faith. And now there is in store for me. The crown of righteousness. Which the Lord. The righteous judge. Will award me on that day.

And not only to me. But also to all who have longed for his appearing. Friends. The Christian life is a long haul. Finish well.

Don't finish like Gideon. Let us pray. Father, we pray that you would help us to fight the good fight. To finish the race. To keep the faith. Father, may it be that there is for us.

[ 24 : 59 ] Waiting. The crown of righteousness. Which you, the righteous judge. Will award on that day. To all. Who have longed for his appearing. Father, we pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen. Friends, let's stand and sing together. Thank you. David. Father, may it be that Celec Department. Hear that we pray that you wear now. To change life to God. Thank you very much.

Thank you. mille men at sein of you. Thank you. Thank you. Hallelujah. Father, may it be that there is not a moment. A PRE Certain way, is it just a moment to file? With Light. Let go. To do it, this way. To the power, of God. ■■■■, just one of the time.

Now, I think a moment to compete. countries is to deliver a song. We're going to do it. So, we're going to agree with him here. By the way, the one of God. You are going to be that, please. I do we look for this idea?