

Thoughts From Other Minds:

The men of Israel ask Gideon to establish a dynasty: 'Rule over us, you, your son, and your-grandson as well' (v. 22). Although the verb for 'become king' (*malak* is not used (*mashal*, to rule, occurs instead), the Israelites clearly intend a hereditary regime. Gratitude stands behind their offer: 'for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.' One might accuse them of an idolatrous tendency. Should they not have ascribed their salvation to Yahweh (7:2) rather than to his instrument? But the matter is not so simple. They may only be expressing a proper esteem for Yahweh's servant, a gratitude that was lacking at a later point (8:35).

The really sticky question is what to make of Gideon's answer (v. 23): 'I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you; Yahweh will rule over you.' What does Gideon mean? Is this a 'brusque refusal,' showing that the whole notion of monarchy was rejected as improper, and that 'the very idea of monarchy was anathema to true Israelites'? Or, was Gideon's refusal only apparent? Perhaps it was a veiled acceptance of kingship? If so, Gideon is not so much rejecting kingly rule in itself as underscoring the form it must take (not really I - or my descendants - but Yahweh must rule). The context, after all, does contain some evidence of royal status: Gideon's role as religious innovator (vv. 24-27), his keeping a sizable harem (v. 30), dubbing his concubine's son 'My father is king' (Abimelech, v. 31),⁴ and Abimelech's propaganda that rule would surely pass to or continue in Gideon's family (9:1-5). I lean toward this latter view, though I prefer to call it a qualified, rather than a veiled, acceptance.

Whether we prefer a trenchantly anti-monarchical Gideon or a mildly pro-monarchical Gideon, we meet, in either case, inconsistency and disappointment. If he refused kingship, he nevertheless hankered after it (e.g. in giving the name 'My father is king'). If in some way he accepted it he disappoints us in his lack of discretion in his giving opportunity for further apostasy (v. 27b). Most Christians know the struggle to make our practice (v.27) as good as our theology (v. 23). It is ever our danger that after being used of God in some way, we mouth humility but practice pride. We may know occasions of the Spirit's power (6:34) and yet lack the Spirit's wisdom.

This shadow of inconsistency and of disappointment frequently hangs over God's servants. Gideon was hardly a rare exception. This is not to excuse the sins or errors of the leaders of God's people. But let it temper our expectations, let it cushion our despair, and let it lift our gaze to the Leader of God's elect who does not disappoint (cf. 1 Pet. 2:6), in whom is no sin (1 John 3:5), and against whom no charges can be brought (John 8:46). We will never find perfection of office except in our Lord Jesus Christ. Realizing this can save us from cynicism that may come from disappointing servants of Christ.

Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges, Such a Great Salvation*, pp. 111-113.

Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Charge

19 June 2016

Sermon: "Gideon defeated—stumbling by presumption" (text: Judges 8:18-32)

Scripture: Judges 7:24-8:35

Sermon Notes

Introduction: After 7 years of misery as the Midianites laid waste the land, Israel cried out to the Lord for help, and he sent Gideon to be his instrument of salvation; at first he tested him; would trust his might or in the Lord? (6:14). Gideon passed the test; only when he was sure the Lord would go with him would he go.

Then the Lord strengthened Gideon's faith to overcome his fears; he granted his request that there would be dew on the fleece only, and then that there would be dew only on the ground; and then he sent him to hear a dream interpreted for his encouragement; so Gideon was made strong out of weakness (Heb 11:33-34).

1. Gideon—failing the test of success

As the account of his doings continues, it appears he found success difficult; at first he knew himself nothing and the Lord everything, but with success he began to see himself as important, and his conflicts become more personal.

While Succoth and Penuel deserved the justice he inflicted upon them, for the language and savagery of his action makes us uncomfortable. And with the executions of Zebah and Zalmunna this discomfort becomes an unpleasant certainty.

As the enemies of God and oppressors of his people they deserved death—but Gideon made it personal, as his enemies, rather than because they were the Lord's enemies. He would have spared them if they had not killed his brothers; more like a personal vendetta; besides, who was he to spare the Lord's enemies?

So the sad ending of Gideon's exploits warns us of the danger of success, of thinking that because we have achieved something we are somebodies, rather than mere servants of the Lord (Lk 17:10); we forget the warning of scripture against pride (Prov 16:18); we find commands to humility uncomfortable (Rom 12:3).

We must not make a shipwreck of our faith (1 Tim 1:18-20); some were sailing for heaven, but were wrecked on the rocks of sin. Gideon may not have completely wrecked his faith, but he came close, for he led Israel into idolatry; as Aaron made a golden calf, so he made an ephod, which led Israel into spiritual prostitution (8:27).

There are dangers in success; dangers in making progress in the Christian life; dangers in growing understanding of the faith; dangers in 'successful' service for the Lord; danger is supposing we are 'somebodies', of thinking as Gideon did, of 'me' and 'my' and 'I'; danger in shifting our confidence from the Lord to ourselves;

Danger in supposing we can do what is wrong as Gideon did and get away with it; so let Gideon be a warning to us, that we may avoid the rocks of pride and pre-

sumption and disobedience to the Lord, lest we make a shipwreck of our faith, and, even worse, cause others to follow our example to make shipwreck of their faith.

2. Gideon—failing the test of popularity

To learn the main lesson of this passage of scripture we must set it in the wider context of Judges, where the root cause of the disorder, violence and wickedness is that because there is no king in Israel everyone does what is right in their own eyes (17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25).

The solution then must be a king in Israel—and one of the results of Gideon's success was that the men of Israel wanted to make him the king (8:22). The scriptures are ambivalent on this matter; the ideal is the Lord, king among his people (Deut 33:1-5); yet he makes provision for a human king (Deut 17:14-15).

We can see this worked out in the Lord's choice of David, and in scriptures like Psalm 2, where the king is the Lord's Son, and like Isa. (40:9-11) and Ezek. (34:11-24) where the king is the Lord himself. These two strands, the divine and human, are resolved in Jesus, the Lord's choice, Immanuel, the God-man, king among his people.

Gideon knew the Lord had not chosen him to be king; he declined their offer of kingship; he said the Lord would rule over them. Yet he began to assume the trappings of royal power, to be king in fact if not in name. He sought to honour his first born by his killing the kings, and perhaps mark him out for succession (v. 20).

He took the crescent ornaments, and asked for the earrings from the spoil, and from that he made an ephod, probably a cloak modelled on the High Priest's ephod, used to obtain guidance from the Lord (cf. 1 Sam 23:6-12). In this he set up a rival priesthood to the Lord's Tabernacle in Shiloh; he caused Israel to be unfaithful.

We do not want to return to past controversies about worship—but peace because we do not care passionately about the issues is not commendable. Reformed or Presbyterian worship is based on the Regulative Principle; that God is to be worshipped in his way, not our way.

Today many in both Protestant and Catholic communities are impatient with controversy over the doctrines that divide us. But the scriptures censure of Gideon's ephod reminds us that God regards self-made worship as spiritual prostitution, and that if we are to please God it must matter to us that our beliefs be scriptural.

Once we leave the path of unqualified obedience to the Lord we will keep on drifting further from him, as Gideon did; he refused kingship, but lived the immoral lifestyle of a king; he had many wives and children, a concubine, and he named her son Abimelech, 'my father is king'!

Gideon's failure is part of a pattern of failure; we see it in Noah, in Abraham, in Isaac, in Jacob, in his sons, in Moses, in Aaron, in Peter, to name a few; we should be glad, for this tells us that our God saves sinners, by grace, not by their good works, and because it points to our Saviour, who is able to save because he did not fail.

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My Notes:

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why is personal vengeance unworthy of a Christian? (cf. Lev 19:18; Deut 32:35, 41, 43; Matt 5:43-48; Rom 12:19; 2 Thess 1:8; Heb 10:30).
2. What are some of the dangers of success, and how does Gideon warn against those dangers? What are some of the rocks on which we might make shipwreck of our faith (cf. Lk 17:10; Prov 16:18; Rom 12:3; 1 Tim 1:18-19).
3. What is worse than making a shipwreck of our own faith, and how do we see this in Gideon's doings? (Jdgs 8:27; Matt 18:6, 10, 14).
4. What was needed to put things right in Israel? (Jdgs 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25). Why wasn't Gideon the man for the job?
5. Read and reflect on what Deut 33:1-5 and Deut 17:4-5 have to say about kingship in Israel. How and in whom are the tensions between these views of kingship resolved?
6. How does the Lord's verdict on Gideon's ephod relate to issues of worship?
7. What comfort and encouragement can we take from the record of the failures of notable men in the Bible? How do they point us to Jesus?