

Introduction

I've shared with you before of my love for epic sci-fi / fantasy novels. Authors like Brandon Sanderson create masterful worlds with wonderful and amazing cultures and histories, characters with incredible complexities, and plots that are both moving and believable—and sometimes downright shocking. I love character development that is not merely static. Some characters are one-dimensional. Often, “the bad guy” is this way. He's only evil all the time. The real world is far more nuanced than this. Rarely is a good guy good all the time. The truth is we're all a mixed bag of good and bad, sometimes at the same time!

Millennials grew up with the show “Spongebob Squarepants”, a cartoon that follows the extremely excitable and optimistic sea sponge. His enthusiasm for life is simply fun. He's also utterly irresponsible. There is an amazing fan theory about the show. The seven main characters each represent one of the deadly sins. Spongebob is filled with lust *for everything*. Patrick Star is sloth. Squidward is wrath. Mr. Krabs is greed. Sheldon Plankton is envy. Sandy Cheeks is pride. Gary the Snail is gluttony.

I love the show's character development along these lines. Though it's a silly cartoon with largely absurd plotlines, the characters truly follow their tendencies, though not perfectly. Squidward, for example, hates everyone. He's miserable. Full of wrath. He's always angry, yet he's incredibly talented musically. The only time he ever shows joy is when he's playing music.

I love when an author makes his characters about something more than the plot. There's an overarching theme. A character is as symbolic as he or she is actual. Yes, in the story the character is a real person engaging in real activities, yet the character represents something more. I love that sort of story writing. The character is actually larger than himself and his role in the particular story.

Gideon is one of those characters. Yes, Gideon was a real man in a real time in a real place. Yes, the things written of Gideon really happened, yet Gideon's “character” is much larger. At the same time he's a real man with real weaknesses and real strengths, and he has real faith and just as real doubt. He's also a stand-in for us, for our faith is both real...and not real. You've heard the story of the man who exclaimed, “Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!” Gideon is a real-life embodiment of this. In real ways Gideon represents Israel, and he represents us, and he represents the priesthood...and he represents the King who is coming.

We're in Judges 8 this morning. In our text we're going to see Gideon change—almost in real time. And we will see where I believe he went wrong, and that has a warning and an encouragement for us today.

Jdgs 8:1 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. ² And he said to them, “What have I done now in comparison

with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer? ³ God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. What have I been able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger against him subsided when he said this.

⁴ And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing. ⁵ So he said to the men of Succoth, "Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian." ⁶ And the officials of Succoth said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?" ⁷ So Gideon said, "Well then, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers." ⁸ 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 Succoth had answered. ⁹ And he said to the men of Penuel, "When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower."

¹⁰ Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor 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 the sword. ¹¹ And Gideon went up by the way of the tent dwellers east of Nobah and Jogbehah and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. ¹² And Zebah and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and he threw all the army into a panic.

¹³ Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. ¹⁴ And he captured a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men. ¹⁵ And he came to the men of Succoth and said, "Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?'" ¹⁶ And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson. ¹⁷ And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

¹⁸ Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor?" They answered, "As you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king." ¹⁹ And he said, "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you." ²⁰ So he said to Jether his firstborn, "Rise and kill them!" But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man. ²¹ Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength." And Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels.

Judges 8:1-21

Reprise

It is important to remember the story of Gideon up to this point, that we may see more clearly what is happening in Gideon. Israel sinned against God by worshiping false gods. Rather than trust in the one who rescued them from Egypt and who performed miracles for them in the wilderness and who protected them during 40 years of wandering and who gave them the land of Canaan and caused the walls of Jericho to fall down and who promised them blessings and prosperity, they instead worshiped the Baals in pursuit of that prosperity. Because of this God allowed the Midianites to oppress them.

The aim of allowing this wasn't Israel's harm, but Israel's repentance. God wanted to bless them. He wanted to grant them prosperity and peace. He knows this peace does not come from the Baals or the Asherah so he disciplined his people that they might return to him and receive those blessings.

After seven years of having their crops stolen and their flocks and herds stolen by the Midianites, God appeared to Gideon to call him to be Israel's deliverer. Gideon was fearful and doubted his own ability to lead. God assured him the victory was actually his and God would give it to Gideon. God himself would use Gideon to drive out the Midianites along with their allies the Amalekites and the people of the East.

Gideon was not ready, however. After God told him he would rescue Israel from their oppression Gideon wasn't convinced. He protested that he was *just Gideon*—the least in his father's house! Besides, he said, the Lord has forsaken his people; that's why they were in the mess to begin with, completely forgetting how Israel had sinned, though the very real evidence of Israel's sin was right in front of him.

God had to build him up, *change* him by strengthening his faith. The Lord appeared to him as a man so Gideon offered him a meal. God touched that meal with his staff and caused the rock it was placed upon to burn it up and become a sacrifice. Gideon then built an altar to the Lord. Later that night God instructed him to tear down his father's altar to Baal and chop down his father's Asherah pole that was right next to the altar. He was to use the wood from that Asherah pole as firewood to offer as a sacrifice one of the two bulls he used to tear down the massive altar.

Gideon obeyed the Lord in tearing down the altar and making the sacrifice, but he did so at night so no one but the men who helped him could see. Still, the next day the men of the city were so angry their community worship center had been destroyed they were ready to murder Gideon for it. God protected him through his father, however.

Gideon still wasn't convinced so he pleaded with the Lord for a sign. God granted him the sign: the fleece was dry even though the ground around it was thoroughly wet. Then the Lord offered him a further sign. Gideon crept into the Midianite camp where he overheard a conversation about a man's dream in which a small loaf of barley bread destroyed the Midianite camp. Another man told him the loaf was Gideon, and Gideon would be victorious over them. Gideon's initial response was to worship the Lord for the kindness of this sign and the assurance of victory.

By the time he recounted this to his tiny band of 300 men the ensuing conflict was "for the Lord *and for Gideon*". We see in this a very mixed bag for Gideon. He was fighting for the Lord, but some of himself was coming out. Still, his battle plan was not a plan for battle but a plan for worship. His men would light torches and sound trumpets, which were a call

to worship, while the Lord fought for Israel. In the confusion and in the fear sent by the Lord, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East fought themselves and did most of the damage in defeating their massive coalition force. Only then did Gideon call out more Israelites from the northern tribes to also fight—including the tribe of Ephraim.

The men from Ephraim pursued two Midianite princes and captured Oreb and Zeeb and killed them. They brought their heads to Gideon and threw them at his feet. Then we come to chapter 8.

Wise Leadership?

Verse 1 picks up right after the Ephraimites arrive with the heads of Oreb and Zeeb. They're angry they were not called to the initial fight. The truth is most tribes were not called. In fact, most of the 32,000 who were called to fight were sent back home by the Lord himself! God's plan was to rescue Israel with just 300 men. We saw, however, that they didn't go home; they returned to their tents nearby. After God sent the Midianites running Gideon called them to engage in the battle by pursuing the fleeing soldiers.

The men of Ephraim were angry they were not called as part of that initial group. This is because the Ancient Near East was an honor / shame culture, and they were in a particularly vulnerable location. Attackers could focus on the middle of the land of Israel so as to divide the northern tribes from the southern tribes. If the tribe of Ephraim were perceived as being weak, they would be vulnerable to attack. When they arrived where Gideon was they blasted him over this, with his failure to allow them in on the "action" earlier. Gideon doesn't tell them he merely played a trumpet while the Lord fought, however.

He demonstrates one of two things. He either shows wise leadership in how he deals with the men and their anger or he shows masterful manipulation. He's either very wise or very shrewd, and it's hard to tell which it is, given the fullness of the text. It's more likely *both*.

He offers them a simple comparison: what he has done compared to what they have done. Gideon has pursued enemy soldiers but the men of Ephraim have captured and killed two princes of Midian. These are men who would seek to regroup their forces and avenge their defeat had they been allowed to live. But consider Gideon's question: "What have I done?"

What has Gideon done? Gideon has been called by the Lord to a specific role. Gideon has been sanctified by the Lord for that role. The Lord did these things, though. Gideon stood with his 300 men and worshiped the Lord by holding up torches and blowing trumpets. What has Gideon done? Gideon has *faithfully served the Lord* in this, but here he discounts faithfulness.

He discounts it in order to make the comparison. While he and the 300 men from his clan "harvested" the Midianites, the men of Ephraim came after that "harvest" and gleaned an even greater harvest! They captured the two princes. They were honored in battle while Gideon was merely chasing. Again we see a bit of a mixed bag with Gideon. He acknowledges in verse 3 that God has given them into their hands. God is the victor here, even if he used the men of Ephraim for that victory.

In doing this he's overlooking a significant fact: of the 135,000 Midianites and Amalekites and people of the East who assembled for war in that valley, 120,000 had already fallen. The men of Ephraim captured two men; God defeated 119,998. By emphasizing their honor in

battle he was defusing a volatile situation. These men were very angry with him. To make this emphasis, however, he discounted the incredible act of God in delivering them when Gideon's 300 trumpeters sounded the call to worship. Gideon realizes that what *he* has done doesn't result in his glory, but in God's glory. He's forgetting that this was the very purpose of reducing his army to just 300 men!

It was wise to defuse the anger of the men of Ephraim. He did so in a way that robbed God of his glory—even as he claimed God's role in defeating Oreb and Zeeb. Honoring the Lord is so much more than merely saying the right things. You're not honoring the Lord simply by *mentioning* him in a conversation. Gideon's entire demeanor, his actions and his words, his attitudes and his desires, are all components of serving the Lord in a way that honors him. By demeaning his act of worship and his faithful obedience, he's robbing God of his full glory.

Too often we think of faithful ministry as ministry that is big and exciting and "successful". Faithful service to the Lord is service that is faithful. We are not called to success in service, but to faithfulness in service. The Lord is responsible for whatever "success" comes.

The outcome of the battle was only ever in the Lord's hands, no matter how clever Israel's battle plan was or how hard they fought. Whether Gideon defeated Oreb and Zeeb or the men of Ephraim did, God was the victor. The author of Hebrews described this victory in terms of faith, which is to say, God is the one who was victorious. After listing several men and women of faith the author wrote this:

Heb 11:32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Hebrews 11:32–34

Faith necessarily points away from one's self to the Lord. This is why faith honors him. This is why saying with your mouth what your heart doesn't also believe is not really honoring the Lord. Gideon is a mixed bag. Yes, he responds in faith, but he keeps pulling back just shy of truly honoring the Lord.

Growing Self-Importance

In verse 4, having calmed down the men of Ephraim, Gideon cross the Jordan river in pursuit of the fleeing army of Midianites. Notice carefully what the author says: "he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted and pursuing". You can't tell in English but in Hebrew "exhausted" and "pursuing" are plural words, indicating they apply to Gideon and the 300. Gideon *and the 300 men* are exhausted. Gideon *and the 300 men* are pursuing.

They stop at a city called Succoth. They are in Israelite territory still. He asked the men of the city for loaves of bread. Understand this isn't later that same night, the night in which they broke their jars, lighted their torches, and sounded their trumpets. Some time has passed as Gideon and his men continue to pursue the enemy. Asking for bread is reasonable. Surely they are hungry! Notice what Gideon specifically says, however.

Jdgs 8:5 So he said to the men of Succoth, “Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.”

Judges 8:5

The author said Gideon *and* the 300 men are exhausted and pursuing. Gideon says the 300 are exhausted and he—*singular*—is pursuing. We saw that he claimed the battle was “for the Lord *and for Gideon*. We’re starting to question how much was for the Lord and how much was actually for Gideon.

He says he’s pursuing two specific men: Zebah and Zalmunna. Why? They are fleeing Israel. They are close to their homes. Why is he pursuing these two men in particular? We’re about to find out. Gideon and his men need some food, for they—all of them—are exhausted yet they are continuing their pursuit.

The officials of Succoth aren’t willing to intervene. If Gideon wins, great, but if he loses? They’re on the frontier. They will be attacked first in retribution for helping the enemies of Zebah and Zalmunna. They doubt Gideon and his exhausted men stand much of a chance. It’s very likely they saw how many men Zebah and Zalmunna had when they passed through that same area some time earlier.

Their answer is simple: those men aren’t in your hands, yet, so neither is our bread! Then in verse 7 we see again Gideon’s faith. He says, “When”—when, not if!—“when the Lord has given them into my hands, I will flail your flesh with thorns and briers”. When we first met Gideon he was flailing wheat so he could make himself some bread, but he was doing so in a winepress out of fear. He was essentially hiding what he was doing for fear of someone coming along and stealing his small harvest of wheat. Now he’s threatening to flail his own countrymen for not *giving* him bread!

He has faith—“when the Lord has given them into my hand”—but then he has something that’s not faith. He expresses great confidence in the Lord, that the Lord will give him victory, then he declares he will get his revenge on them for their disrespect. Could it be that Gideon still feels the sting from his encounter with the men of Ephraim? Then he was merely chasing while they had captured and killed two princes. The men of Succoth remind him he is still chasing something.

In verse 8 he continues on and has a similar experience at a town called Penuel. They said essentially the same thing. If he beats them, great, but if he loses to Zebah and Zalmunna, they will be first to suffer for it. This time he tells them calmly, “When I come again in peace”—hear the faith! God will give me the victory! The next time you see me I won’t be running in fear. You don’t need to be concerned with Zebah and Zalmunna any more. I will come back *peacefully*—well, not for you. For you I will tear down your tower, which likely indicates Penuel is a fortified town.

They continue their pursuit and come upon Zebah and Zalmunna in Karkor with all that remains of their army. Here is where we learn how large it had been. Of the 135,000—those who lay across the valley like locusts in number—only 15,000 remain. Gideon’s “army” is still 300. We’re told the Midianite army felt secure so they didn’t post any guards. They were very close to home. Surely the Israelite army they ran in fear from would not have pursued them this far, yet when Gideon attacked they ran in fear again. This time, however, Gideon captured these two kings. *His hands are no longer empty.*

Violent Retribution

In verse 13, with these defeated kings in shackles, Gideon begins returning home. On the way he caught a young man from Succoth and forced him to write a list of names of all the officials and elders of Succoth. There were 77 in total. When he came to the city notice what he said.

Jdgs 8:15 And he came to the men of Succoth and said, “Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, ‘Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?’”

Judges 8:15

He essentially says, “Hey, looks what’s in my hand now!” Notice what has really angered him: “about whom you taunted me”. Gideon felt disrespected. Gideon! The least in his father’s house! The one who will still thresh wheat, but in secret. The one who will tear down his father’s altar of Baal, but in secret! By his own admission Gideon was a nobody but somehow these men failed to notice who he is, how important he is! Gideon no longer thinks of himself as least in his father’s house. Now he’s somebody, and you better put some *respect* on his name!

In verse 16 the author tells us he took these village elders “and taught them a lesson”. He had his men strip off their shirts and he flailed them with thorns and briars, all because they failed to show him the respect he was very obviously due. Then we come to verse 17.

Jdgs 8:17 And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

Judges 8:17

He was not content to merely destroy the town’s primary defense: he killed their men. Remember the role of a judge in Israel. A judge imposed justice. This justice is first seen in God’s people freed of their foreign oppressors. *God has done this through Gideon*. The Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East are defeated. They no longer oppress Israel. *God did this through Gideon*. Gideon, however, has chosen to oppress his own people because they wouldn’t give him bread.

He then turns to Zebah and Zalmunna. He has chased them for over a hundred miles on foot. Why? We find out why in verse 18. He asks a very specific question: where are the men you killed at Tabor? What men? This is the first we’ve heard of this! The narrator has waited to reveal Gideon’s motivation in pursuing these specific kings this far.

Apparently some time before, at some point during the seven years Midian oppressed Israel, these kings killed some men at Tabor in Israel. Zebah and Zalmunna reply with heavy sarcasm and scorn: where are they? Dunno, but they looked just like you. *Kingly*.

Gideon informs they why they resembled him: they were his brothers. Here we see his resolve in pursuing these men. Gideon is after revenge. This is why he whipped the men of Succoth. That was a message for these kings. This is why he killed the men of Penuel. That, too, was a message for these kings. This is the very reason he chased these two kings for

over a hundred miles. He tells them if they hadn't killed his brothers he would have allowed them to live, but because they killed them, he swears an oath to the Lord that they will die.

Strangely, he tells his son to kill them. Specifically, he tells his firstborn son to kill them. Why? For a man's son to succeed him as king, he must prove himself worthy. Surely killing two kings would prove him so. His son Jether, however, was still young. Afraid. Uncertain. Lacking confidence—kind of like Gideon when we first met him. His son refuses to kill these unarmed men.

Zebah and Zalmunna mock Gideon. They basically tell him that if he's man enough, he has to do it himself. Gideon proves he's somebody, that he matters, that he's powerful, that he's worthy, and kills these unarmed men who no doubt have their hands tied. Then he took the gold jewelry that was on their camels as signs of their status as kings.

Application

We've seen that Gideon has received more assurance than any other judge in Israel. God has repeatedly told Gideon that he—God—would deliver Israel through Gideon. Gideon's role was to worship God through it. He was to point others to the Lord and what he was doing for Israel. God reduced his army to less than a hundredth of what it was, that Gideon and all Israel might know for certain the Lord had delivered them. Gideon failed to see this.

The truth is Gideon was chasing something, and it wasn't really Zebah and Zalmunna. He *was* chasing them, but they were a means to an end. He was chasing something far greater in his mind. He was chasing meaning and significance. How many times had he fantasized about killing these two kings after they had killed his brothers? How many times had he dreamed of glory in battle, with himself standing over their fallen bodies? Gideon took his opportunity when it was presented to him, only it wasn't the opportunity for his glory.

You see, Gideon had stopped looking to the Lord and had begun looking to himself. Rather than the Lord God of Israel being the standard and being the one who offered an identity to his people, Gideon began to look to himself and began to make comparisons to who he had been. He began to find meaning and significance in himself and in what he could do. Remember the reason God reduced his army so much.

Jdgs 7:2 The LORD said to Gideon, “The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’”

Judges 7:2

No longer is he the young man hiding in a winepress. No longer is the fearful man acting secretly in the dark. Gideon recognizes how far he has come. Now he's the head of a powerful army that has defeated an army 450 times larger. In comparison to the boy who worked in secret, he's come far. No longer is he empty-handed in battle. Now he has accomplishments. Now he has a resumé. Now he has a kill list. Now he has bona fides. Now he can say, “My own hand has saved me.”

Gideon has changed—but only in emphasis. What we see here is Gideon's pride, pride that has been with him from the beginning, from when he was flailing wheat in a winepress.

We tend to think of pride from only one particular perspective, but pride has two sides. Pride is either thinking too much of yourself or thinking of yourself too much.

When we first met Gideon his focus was entirely on himself, on who he is and his relative worth in the world. Though he was from a great and powerful family, he was “least in his father’s house”. This is sort of like Alice Walton, from the Walmart family, claiming to be least in her father’s household because she *only has* ninety-six billion dollars. Each of her surviving brothers has more.

What is first and foremost in Gideon’s mind *is Gideon*. In his pride he thinks of himself too much. His focus is on what he has or doesn’t have, on what he can or cannot do. His focus should be on the Lord! What changed, then? Gideon went from thinking of himself too much to thinking too much of himself.

This is the sort of pride we more readily recognize. The braggart. The guy who boasts about himself all the time. This is the same pride that has simply shifted its focus. Rather than bragging about how pitiful and inconsequential he is, he is now bragging about how great and important he is. “How dare you not recognize who I am! I will flail your flesh and I will kill you for failing to recognize how great I am!” Gideon didn’t really change. He remains, essentially, *unchanged*.

Pride is the opposite of faith, for faith looks outward toward the Lord. Faith recognizes who God is and faith recognizes what God has done. Faith also acknowledges how God uses people to accomplish his purposes, but faith does not allow the focus to remain on the person. Faith always returns its gaze to the Lord.

Faith recognizes that we have no righteousness. We have no claim on God. We have no grounds for boasting. Faith recognizes that God has placed a claim on our lives, a claim he paid for with his own blood. Faith acknowledges that God can do anything with us and through us, without needing us to be great.

Whatever God is doing in our church, whatever God is doing in your life, whatever God is doing in our spheres of influence around us, let us always remember God is the one doing it. He’s not doing great things because we’re great. He’s doing great things because he is great. We can acknowledge the ways he is using us without making it about us.

The truth of the matter is God is the greatest author of all. He is writing the story of this world. Each one of us is a character in God’s story—but it’s *God’s* story. As the author of Hebrews tells us, let us run with endurance the race God has set before us, *looking to Jesus*, the author and finisher of our faith. Our lives begin and end with Jesus.