Lesson 6: Gideon’s Victory and Decline

Teaching Outline — Deliverance Belongs to God
Passage: Judges 7-8 (KJV) | **Suggested teaching time:** 45 minutes
Key verse: “And the LORD said unto Gideon, By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand: and let all the other people go every man unto his place.” (Judges 7:7)

Lesson objective

- Class will:
  - Confess that deliverance belongs to God
  - Pursue continuing obedience after seasons of visible victory

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Opening and introduction (0-4 minutes)

Two halves of one story

- Judges 7: salvation and victory belong to the LORD
- Judges 8: a great victory doesn’t make a servant immune from later compromise
- Gideon begins with three hundred men; ends by making an ephod that becomes a snare
- We need both halves

Theme

- Deliverance belongs to [BLANK: God]
- Spiritual victory requires continuing [BLANK: obedience]

Don’t romanticize Gideon

- God truly used him; Gideon truly failed in ways that harmed Israel
- The faithful reading doesn’t choose between admiration and warning — it receives both

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Background and the reduced army (4-10 minutes)

God’s stated reason (7:1-2)

- Gideon (Jerubbaal) and the people encamp by the well of Harod
- Midian’s camp northward in the valley
- “The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me.”
- That sentence explains every reduction and must govern interpretation
- Israel’s danger: not only defeat
  - The spiritual disaster of winning, then crediting itself
- Thirty-two thousand might still be small beside Midian
  - Would leave room for a story of superior courage or tactics
  - God removes that room; the only explanation will be His power

Don’t over-read the water test

- God wasn’t seeking an elite three hundred
- Scripture never says the test identified the most vigilant soldiers
- It says the LORD selected a small number so Israel couldn’t boast
- Don’t turn an unexplained test into a sermon on tactical alertness
- Stated purpose: God’s glory — no boasting in human strength

The two reductions (7:3-8)

- **First — public and humbling**
  - Fearful may return: 22,000 go; 10,000 remain
  - May have looked impressive by comparison, but the LORD says still too many
- **Second — at the water**
  - Three hundred lapped, putting hand to mouth
  - The rest bowed down on their knees to drink
  - “By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you.”
- Some treat the 300 as more alert or disciplined; the passage doesn’t say that
  - Resist supplying a lesson Scripture hasn’t supplied
  - The revealed lesson is enough: the LORD chose the means; the LORD would save
- [BLANK: three hundred] men were enough because the LORD was the Deliverer

Tender with Gideon's fear (7:9-15)

- If afraid, go down with Phurah and listen in the enemy camp
- A Midianite dream: a cake of barley bread overturns a tent
- The interpretation: "this is nothing else save the sword of Gideon… for into his hand hath God delivered Midian, and all the host."
- Mercy without surrendering God's purpose
  - He has already promised victory; provides encouragement suited to the fear
  - It comes from the very enemy Gideon must face
  - A barley cake — common, unimpressive — overturns a tent
  - The Midianite recognizes God's hand

"He worshipped"

- Before he commanded troops, he worshiped God
- Worship is his first response to assurance — not merely feeling better
- [BLANK: worship] should precede service
- We seek encouragement not to admire our potential, but to trust and praise the God who acts

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Exposition: The LORD gives the victory (10-19 minutes)

The plan (7:16-20)

- Three companies
- Each man: a trumpet, an empty pitcher, a lamp within the pitcher
- "Look on me, and do likewise"
- "The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon"
- Beginning of the middle watch
  - Blew trumpets
  - Broke pitchers
  - Lamps in left hands, trumpets in right
  - Cried the appointed cry

The weapons make the same point as the numbers

- A trumpet ordinarily announces a company — 300 trumpets imply a far larger force

- Broken pitchers reveal lights; shouting multiplies confusion
- Clear instructions followed together
- God doesn't despise order, preparation, or human obedience
- The strategy is an instrument; the LORD is the Deliverer

The decisive statement (v. 22)

- "And the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host."
- The Midianites fled
- Gideon's men obeyed; the LORD created the panic and routed the enemy
- Christian service should be planned and disciplined
- No method, technology, numbers, or personality can produce God's work
- [BLANK: the LORD] set every man's sword against his fellow — He alone gives the increase and the victory

"The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon"

- Doesn't divide glory equally
- Gideon's weakness, God's selection, and God's promise are unmistakable
- Gideon: the appointed human instrument; the sword belongs ultimately to the LORD
- Scripture holds divine action and responsible human action together without confusing them
    - God saves, and His servants obey

"Every man in his place"

- "stood every man in his place round about the camp"
- Didn't require each man to invent a personal plan
    - Listened, kept position, acted at the appointed moment
- For congregational service
    - Not all have the same task; no one performs every role
    - Faithfulness: stay in the place of duty, do the simple thing assigned
    - God joins many acts of obedience into a work larger than any individual sees

Two errors in Christian service

- **Passivity:** God gives victory, so no need to prepare, communicate, or act
    - Gideon's men did all those things
- **Self-reliance:** plan well enough and technique will produce fruit

- “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” (1 Cor 3:6)
- Work faithfully, pray earnestly, leave the increase to God

Ephraim’s complaint (7:24-8:3)

- Other Israelites called into the pursuit; Ephraim captures Oreb and Zeeb, princes of Midian
- “Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites?”
- Gideon: “What have I done now in comparison of you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?”
- “then their anger was abated toward him”
- The danger after visible victory: rivalry among those who should rejoice together
- Gideon recognizes a real contribution — not false flattery

Wisdom here

- Not every grievance requires a counterattack
- A gentle, truthful answer can turn away wrath
- One wise response isn’t proof of permanent maturity — faithfulness must continue
- Doesn’t mean every disagreement is solved by praise, or leaders avoid hard truth
- An answer can be both humble and truthful
    - When someone feels overlooked, is there a contribution we can sincerely recognize?
- Envy grows where people compete for a story of importance
- Gratitude and truthful honor protect unity
- The church belongs to Christ; no ministry role grants a claim to personal glory

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Exposition: Success, vengeance, and kingship (19-29 minutes)

“Faint, yet pursuing” (8:4-21)

- The real cost of the campaign
- Gideon asks Succoth for bread; princes refuse — Zebah and Zalmunna not yet captured
- Penuel also refuses
- Not simple neutrality
    - They calculate Midian may still win

    - They withhold aid while waiting to see which power prevails
- Gideon captures the kings; punishes the leaders of Succoth and Penuel

Description in its setting

- Not an invitation to copy civil and military actions
- Israel in Judges was not the church
- The church isn't authorized to enforce God's kingdom by violence
- No warrant for personal vengeance or coercive religion
- We read description in its setting; submit conduct to Christ's commands

Gideon's finest words (8:22-23)

- Israel: "Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian."
- Gideon: "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you."
- Exactly right — God was Israel's King
- Gideon rightly declared, "[BLANK: the LORD shall rule] over you"
- Israel didn't need a substitute dynasty; it needed to remember its true King
- Sound theology on the lips ≠ lasting faithfulness in life

The story turns (8:24-27)

- Gideon asks each man for an earring of his prey
- 1,700 shekels of gold, "beside ornaments, and collars, and purple raiment that was on the kings of Midian, and beside the chains that were about their camels' necks"
- "And Gideon made an ephod thereof, and put it in his city, even in Ophrah: and all Israel went thither a whoring after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house."
- May have seemed an ordinary memorial; amount and royal ornaments show it was substantial
- Not neutral remembrance

Do not minimize this

- An ephod had priestly associations; this was Gideon's unauthorized religious innovation
- Good words about God's rule didn't excuse a religious object that diverted Israel
- A ministry can speak correctly in public yet introduce practices that compete with obedient worship
- Gideon's [BLANK: ephod] became a spiritual snare — not a harmless souvenir

A sobering sequence

- Rejects the crown verbally
- Receives a royal-scale collection
- Later lives with many wives and a large household
- The text doesn't say each detail proves a secret desire to be king — don't state more than it says
- It invites us to notice the tension between confession and pattern
- Sin doesn't always arrive by open denial
    - It grows through privileges, symbols, habits, and allowances that reshape the heart

"Whoring" is spiritually serious

- Covenant unfaithfulness — treating another object as able to receive the LORD's devotion
- Whatever Gideon intended (memorial, priestly object, public symbol), the text emphasizes the outcome: a snare
- Good intentions can't make unauthorized worship safe
- Warning to those who serve visibly
    - May reject one obvious temptation
    - May speak accurately of God's kingship
    - May still create a practice directing attention to himself, an object, or an experience rather than God's appointed Word

Quiet, household, and aftermath (8:28-35)

- Forty years of quiet
- Many wives, seventy sons
- Abimelech born by a concubine in Shechem — prepares for next lesson's tragedy
- Doesn't prove he ruled as king in title; fits uneasily beside rejecting dynastic rule
- Marks of excess and divided loyalty
- After Gideon's death: "the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baal-berith their god."
    - Baal-berith = "the god of the covenant"
    - Especially bitter: they replace the LORD of the covenant with a false god using covenant language
    - Religious vocabulary alone can't preserve true worship
- They remembered not the LORD; showed no kindness to Jerubbaal's house
- A generation can experience blessing and still fail to preserve faithful worship

> **Teacher note — motives:** Let Gideon's decline stand without claiming to know his every private motive.
>
> - The text explicitly says the ephod became a snare — sufficient for application
> - Be especially cautious after success: a useful tool, honored leader, tradition, or memory can quietly become an object of spiritual confidence

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Application: Continue in faithful obedience (29-36 minutes)

1. **Reject boasting**
   - God saves so His people won't say, "Mine own hand hath saved me"
   - Work diligently, use gifts responsibly, but never confuse means with the Giver
   - [BLANK: boasting] steals glory that belongs to God
2. **Worship before and after the battle**
   - Gideon worshiped when he heard the dream
   - Worship when God supplies encouragement and when He gives visible results
   - Thanksgiving protects the heart from entitlement
3. **Pursue peace where possible**
   - Gideon's reply wasn't manipulation; he recognized genuine service
   - In church disagreements: can a humble word honor another's contribution and preserve unity without surrendering truth?
4. **Stay watchful after success**
   - The most famous battle was behind him when the ephod became a snare
   - Temptation doesn't disappear after fruit, provision, a resolved conflict, or years with God
   - We need continuing repentance, Scripture, prayer, accountability, gathered worship
   - [BLANK: vigilance] is needed after seasons of visible victory — not distrust of God, but obedience to Him
5. **Reject unauthorized substitutes for worship**
   - No objects, personalities, traditions, or experiences as a visible focus of confidence apart from Christ and His Word
   - Anything attracting devotion away from God can become an idol — even if it began as a reminder of blessing
   - Continuing obedience is **to** the Lord who saved us, never **for** acceptance

- Grace doesn’t make vigilance unnecessary; it supplies the standing and strength for faithful service

6. **Plan for faithfulness after an answer to prayer**
   - We plan for the crisis but not the season after
   - When a conflict resolves, ministry grows, or a burden lifts, we relax dependence
   - What practices will keep success from becoming a snare?
     - Regular gathered worship
     - Honest relationships
     - Scripture meditation
     - Confession of sin
     - Willingness to receive correction
   - Not signs of doubting grace — ordinary means God uses to keep us near
   - More than emergency measures
     - Scripture only in panic, prayer only when exhausted, correction only after failure → the heart left exposed
     - Build ordinary habits while the season is quiet
     - Ask trusted believers questions that make concealment difficult
     - Give thanks for fruit without rehearsing your own importance
     - Keep returning to the gospel, where every accomplishment sits beneath Christ’s mercy
7. **Distinguish gratitude for a servant from devotion to a servant**
   - Israel owed Gideon appreciation; churches should thank faithful leaders
   - Only Christ may receive the trust and allegiance belonging to God
   - An ephod-like danger is near when:
     - Admiration makes correction impossible
     - A personality becomes the reason people remain faithful
     - An institution is treated as beyond biblical examination

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Christ and the gospel (36-41 minutes)

Temporary and flawed; Christ is greater

- Gideon could rout Midian but couldn’t keep Israel from idolatry or his house from a snare
- Jesus Christ:
  - Perfectly obeyed the Father

- Defeated sin and death through His cross and resurrection
- Continues as risen King and High Priest

The believer's battle and victory

- Not against flesh and blood; victory isn't self-salvation
- "But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15:57)
- Through faith, sinners are forgiven and brought under the true King's reign
- In gratitude: "be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Cor 15:58)

The King who won't decline

- Israel's war isn't a church mandate for physical conquest
- The text points to the need for a King who won't decline into compromise
- The faithful King and Deliverer is [BLANK: Jesus Christ]

Contrast with Gideon

- Jesus never needed victory adjusted to protect Him from pride
- Humbled Himself, obeyed perfectly, gives all glory to the Father
- Makes no snare for His people after saving them
- The true High Priest, not a competing religious object
- Intercedes and keeps them by His power

The King Israel needed

- Human judges and kings bring temporary help; can't bear ultimate trust
- Christ's reign is righteous, gracious, everlasting
- He doesn't exploit His people or turn devotion toward a created thing
- Submitting to Him isn't exchanging one human master for another
  - It's coming under the saving rule of the One who gave Himself for sinners

Gratitude and realism

- Thank God for every servant; don't ask any to carry what only Christ can carry
- Parents fail, pastors fail, churches disappoint, our strongest seasons reveal limits
- The gospel doesn't collapse when an instrument is flawed — its foundation is the flawless Savior
- Learn from Gideon's faith without excusing his sin
- Learn from his decline without treating grace as defeated

Perseverance is active dependence

- Commanded to be watchful, not left to preserve ourselves by anxious effort
- Abide in Christ, receive His Word, pray for help, confess sin quickly, encourage one another
- We continue not to keep the King from rejecting us
  - Because He redeemed us, rules us in love, and will complete His work

Humility in weakness and success

- Don't despair when resources appear small — God's work doesn't depend on our strength
- Don't boast when fruit appears — every good gift is from Him
- When we fail, don't hide behind a past victory
  - Return in repentance to the King whose grace is sufficient and whose obedience never failed

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Discussion and closing (41-45 minutes)

Discussion questions

1. Why did the LORD reduce Gideon's army? What does the passage, not speculation, say?
2. What does Gideon's worship after hearing the dream teach us about receiving encouragement?
3. How does Gideon's answer to Ephraim model wise conflict response?
4. Why is the ephod a warning especially after a season of success?
5. What practices help a believer continue faithfully after visible victory?

> **Closing prayer:** "Lord God, forgive our pride and our desire to claim credit for what Thou alone dost. Thank Thee that deliverance belongs to Thee. Keep us humble in success, faithful in weakness, and watchful against every idol. Fix our confidence on Thy Son, the true King and perfect Deliverer. Make us steadfast and obedient until we see Him. In Jesus' name, Amen."