

Gideon Part 3: All's Not Well That Doesn't End Well

Scripture Readings: JUDGES 8:1-35; I Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • August 7, 2016 (BSCC & ZCRC Pasig)

Congregation of Christ: The title of our study this morning is the reverse of a well-known proverb or cliché, “all's well that ends well.” It means that everything has turned out well, even though some things went wrong and the outcome was uncertain, along the way.

Did you know that this proverb was popularized in Shakespeare’s play of the same name? It is the story of a beautiful woman in a court in Paris who pursues her love, Bertram. Although Bertram doesn’t reciprocate her love, he agrees to marry her. But he vowed never to consummate his marriage to Helena, unless she does two impossible things: get the ring from his finger, and give him a child of his own. So Helena planned a deceitful scheme to do these two things through another beautiful woman. She does this by a “bed trick,” where Bertram is deceived into believing that he slept with the other woman, when in fact, it was Helena herself he was in bed with. At the end of the play, Helena reveals what has really happened to the dismay of Bertram. So in the end, Helena says, “all’s well that ends well.”

Today, we will study the rest of the story of Gideon the Judge after the first victory of Israel over the Midianites. For the rest of his life, he did many things that were not according to the LORD's commandments, and they did not end well for Gideon and for the Israelites.

So our theme today is the reverse of the title of Shakespeare’s play, “**Gideon Part 3: All's Not Well That Doesn't End Well.**” We have three headings: first, **From God's Battle to Gideon's Battle**; second, **From Timidity to Vengeance**; and third, **From Worshiping God to Worshiping Idols.**

From God's Battle to Gideon's Battle

Our text begins with the tribe of Ephraim complaining why Gideon did not give them advanced notice of the battle against the Midianites. They were jealous that only Gideon's tribe got the glory in the victory. But Gideon pacified them with his flattery saying that they have accomplished more than he did because they have slain three of the kings of Midian.

With that fire taken care of, Gideon moved on to take care of the business of destroying the rest of the Midianite army. The enemy had retreated, crossing the Jordan river into the east, so Gideon pursued them with his 300 men. Exhausted and hungry, they came to the cities of Succoth and Penuel, and asked the people for food. He was pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, two other kings of Midian. But the two cities were not hospitable, telling Gideon that they would help only if Gideon had already cut off the hands of the Midianite kings.

We must note a few things that changed in Gideon. First, in the previous battle, he trusted the LORD. Although he did not at first understand why God pruned his “army” from 32,000 to 300, he was later assured by God that God will give the huge Midianite army into his hands. He acted on this assurance, and it was the LORD who caused the Midianites to be so confused and terrified that they killed one another.

This is why the writer of Hebrews commends him for his faith, together with Barak, Samson and Jephthah, judges who were not really models of good virtues. The writer says of these judges, *“through faith ... were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight”* (Heb 11:32-34). They were victorious because they believed the LORD.

Note secondly that the LORD was almost totally absent from the narrative after the first battle. The only time that Gideon mentioned the LORD was when he pronounced his coming vengeance against the men of Succoth in verse 7, *“when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand,”* he will punish these inhospitable men. But throughout the rest of the second battle story, God was not mentioned, even after Gideon destroyed the Midianite army and captured their two kings.

Even then, God was gracious to Gideon and Israel. Only because of God's grace and mercy that he delivers us from our sinful actions and decisions. He is patient and kind toward us who do not deserve anything from him. The LORD responded to Israel's cry for help, even if they were not a cry of repentance. So with us: sometimes, even when we do not confess and repent of our sins, he still responds and works things out for our good.

Note thirdly that at times, our brothers and sisters in the church will disappoint us, just as the tribe of Ephraim and the people of Succoth and Penuel disappointed—even infuriated—Gideon. Don't let the people in the church disappoint you because they, like us, are sinners too. We all think, say and do things to each other that are un-Christian-like. We make our brethren stumble, sometimes even without our knowledge or unintentionally. In that case, be prepared to forgive or to be forgiven, just as the men of Ephraim forgave Gideon. And just as Gideon used kind words—even flattery—to pacify them, let us be mindful of Proverbs 15:1, *“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”* Gideon had a soft answer.

So Paul also reminds us about our relationship with other people in the church:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Eph 4:31-32).

and

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others (Phl 2:3-4).

But kindness and tenderheartedness was not the case with the men of Succoth and Penuel, who insulted Gideon. Their “hard word” stirred up Gideon's hateful vengeance. And Gideon in turn was not forgiving and humble, but vindictive.

From Timidity to Vengeance

If the story of Gideon ended in Judges 8:3 after the men of Ephraim were pacified by Gideon's flattering words, we can summarize the story as, “all's well that ends well.” Even if Gideon showed unbelief and doubt when the LORD first commanded him to deliver Israel, he eventually showed faith in obeying God's command. He believed the LORD's promise that he already had given the Midianites into his hand. Up to this point, “all's well that ends well.”

Gideon was so lacking in faith and confidence in the LORD, that he argued against his appointment. Even after the LORD's promise of victory, and that he himself will do battle for Israel, Gideon asked for two signs involving the fleece and the dew. After this, he was still fearful, for he had only 300 men. So the LORD gave him a third sign: he guided Gideon to the place in the camp where he was able to eavesdrop on the conversation of two Midianite men about their defeat at the hands of Gideon. This finally gave Gideon the assurance he needed.

Like Gideon, the men of Succoth and Penuel wanted assurance that Gideon will be successful. Gideon was furious, saying to the men of Succoth, *"I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers,"* after he has defeated the Midianites. And he also told the men of Penuel, *"When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower."* And these are exactly what he did, and more. He actually killed the men of the city of Penuel!

After Gideon captured the two Midianite kings, he commanded his firstborn son to kill them. But the son was afraid to do it because he was too young. Like father, like son: Gideon was also fearful when the LORD first commissioned him to fight against the Midianites. The two kings even mocked his manliness, so Gideon did the execution himself.

Was he justified in killing the two Midianite kings? Yes and no. He has reason to kill them because they were the enemy kings. Their armies would be easier to defeat if their leaders were dead. But our text never says that the LORD commanded Gideon to kill the two kings because they killed Gideon's own family members. No personal vendetta in God's law.

What Gideon did to the men of Succoth and Penuel was even more reprehensible. They were his own countrymen, and did nothing to deserve such punishment from Gideon. But what about those prayers in the Psalms invoking God's curse, wrath, or calamity on God's enemies? Is it right for a Christian to pray this kind of prayer, such as: *"let them perish in disgrace"* (Psa 83:17); *"Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow; let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg"* (Psa 109:9-10). However, doesn't Christ contradict these curses when he commands us, *"love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"*? (Mat 5:44).

Scriptures say we are to do both, but for different reasons. Firstly, Christians are to pray for God's justice to be done. Vengeance is the Lord's (Deu 32:35; Psa 94:1; Rom 12:19), not ours. God will surely punish His enemies, if not in this age, in the age to come (Psa 11:5-6; Rom 1:18; 9:22). We are to pray that God will restrain rulers and men who hinder the preaching of the gospel and persecute our brethren (Acts 26:29; 1 Tim 2:1-2). But we may also pray for God's righteous vengeance against His enemies, the enemies of His church. Christian martyrs in heaven are actually praying this right now (Rev 6:9-10).

Secondly, we are not to pray for God's wrath against our personal enemies, including our political enemies. But we are to pray for God's salvation for them. The apostle Paul exhorts us, *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"* (Rom 12:14, 21). And he put his words into practice when he taught the Philippian jailer the gospel of Christ (Acts 16:16-34).

Gideon did not show compassion to his own people, even after the LORD treated him with patience and kindness toward his unbelief. He reminds us of the unforgiving servant, who after being forgiven of his insurmountable debt, wouldn't forgive his fellow servant's tiny debt.

And the worst of Gideon's life was yet to come. The rest of his life surely did not end well.

From Worshiping God to Worshiping Idols

After Gideon delivered Israel from the Midianites, the people showed their gratitude to him by asking him to establish the first Israelite dynasty of kings. But Gideon refused, saying, “*the LORD will rule over you.*” But he then requested the men of Israel to give him their golden earrings that they plundered from the Midianites. So the men gave about 40 pounds of gold that Gideon made into an ephod.

Now what is an ephod? It is a sleeveless tunic worn by the high priest over his regular priestly attire. It is made out of fine linen of many royal colors such as gold, blue, purple and scarlet. It has a breastplate in which twelve precious stones are set. In the breastplate's pocket are two stones, the Urim and the Thummim, which are used to discern the LORD's will.

Why would Gideon make an ephod which God has commanded to be made only for high priests? The tabernacle is not in his hometown of Orphah, but far away in Shiloh or in Bethel. The LORD did not authorize any other high priest in any other tabernacle, even one made by a judge. In making an ephod, Gideon wrongly coveted what the LORD gave exclusively to his ordained high priests.

Christians often also covet more than what God has given to them in his Word. When we need spiritual guidance, we seek other things such as signs, or even dreams and visions. Some even say, “The Lord said to me” this or that thing that is not written in God's Word. This is why televangelists who say they talk to God daily outside of the Bible are very popular. And many Christians love songs that say, “And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me things I want to know.” In addition to spiritual guidance outside the Word of God, Christians also often covet other spiritual gifts that God has not given to them. Sometimes we are not satisfied with the role that he has given to us in the church. We become jealous of our brethren who serve in roles that we desire to do.

In the end, Gideon's ephod became a prologue to Israel's idolatry after Gideon died. All Israel committed spiritual adultery when it became a “snare” to them, including Gideon and his family. They “whored” after idol gods, believing that they would be blessed by these idols. This reminds us of the golden calf that Aaron made for Israel to worship. But this time, it was God's judge and deliverer who made it for them. Churches today have their own ephod idols in the form of altar calls to call believers to revival and renewal, when Christ has provided one ordinary thing to renew our souls: the Lord's Supper, a covenant renewal meal with Christ.

The epilogue to Gideon's life is even sadder. Gideon, in stark disobedience of God's law, had many wives, some of whom were surely pagan Canaanites. Gideon judged Israel for 40 years, and during this period, “*the land had rest,*” meaning, no other oppressor conquered them. As we shall later see, this was the last “rest” that Israel would enjoy. There will be more judges who would follow after Gideon, but none of them would give Israel rest from invaders.

And as soon as he died, Israel went back to worshiping not only the ephod idol, but worse, the Baal idol gods. Again, they did not remember the grace of the LORD, and Gideon had a lot to do with this downward spiral with his unlawful ephod.

Dear Friends: There is one last sad note in the ending of Gideon's life. Because he had many wives and 70—70!—sons, not including daughters, he must have had a wealth of material resources. Out of these 70 sons, one named Abimelech was mentioned—for a reason.

Do you know what “Abimelech” means? It means “my father is king.” Though Gideon politely refused to be king, he was actually hankering to be king. His actions betrayed his kingly ambition. In his severe punishment of the men of Succoth and killing of the men of Penuel, he was pretending to be king. When he ordered the men of Israel to give him their spoils of gold, he was in effect asking for a tribute, as a king would. After he died, his wicked son Abimelech, not the LORD, actually declared himself king, as we would see in Chapter 9.

Pride overcame Gideon. He wanted all the glory to himself. When he commanded his 300 men to attack, he told them to shout, “*A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!*” When he was confronted by the men of Ephraim, he said, “*What have I been able to do in comparison with you?*” as if he and his 300 fought against the enemy.

Unlike Gideon and most of the other judges, all throughout his life on earth, our Lord Jesus Christ did not covet the glory really due him. He wanted his disciples and all the Jews to glorify God his Father. After the last Passover meal he shared with his disciples, he said to them, “*Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him*” (John 13:31). In John 17, when he prayed in the garden before he died on the cross, he asked his Father, “*I glorified you on earth.*” How did he glorify God? He had “*accomplished the work*” that his Father gave him to do. He has revealed his Father's name to the people whom he had given him out of the world. In answering our prayers, Jesus is glorifying his Father (John 14:13).

Christ also calls you to glorify his Father. When you bear much fruit of good works, God is glorified (John 15:8). When you serve God by serving the church and your brothers and sisters in Christ, God is glorified, because it is God who supplies you with strength and spiritual gifts (1 Pet 4:11). So Paul commands you, “*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*” (Col 3:17). “*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*” (1 Cor 10:31). Our lives must be full of giving glory and gratitude to God, “*giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Eph 5:20).

Praise God for his mercy in sending his Son in order that, even when most things are not well for us here and now, all things will “end well” for us. All things “end well” because he gives rest to our weary souls, not for 40 years or for the rest of this earthly life, but for eternity.