

## GOD'S GRACE AND DECREASING SPIRITUALITY

(Judges 8:1-35)

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**A CONTRAST IN GIDEON.** This section could not have two more different outcomes. In the first battle we see a trusting Gideon; as a result, Yahweh gives him the victory over the Midianite horde. In the second battle we see a revenge-driven Gideon, who wins a battle through his own cunning without Yahweh's involvement.

That Yahweh gives him the victory in the first battle is made explicit by the statement in 7:11 that "the LORD caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords." This is why the writer of the book of Hebrews can ascribe faith to Gideon because Gideon thoroughly trusted Yahweh for victory in this battle (Heb. 11:32). This is the victory over the Midianites that Yahweh has wanted to give to Gideon from the beginning; in the next battle, however, Yahweh is absent.

Like all the stories of the cyclical judges, this narrative acknowledges that if anything positive happens in the lives of God's people, it is by his grace and not because they deserve it. Evidence of any positive disposition toward Yahweh on the part of the Israelites as a whole or even Gideon in particular is meager. But on account of his great compassion, being moved by the cry of his people over their distress caused by the enemy, Yahweh intervenes to rescue Israel. That this is completely Yahweh's doing is more than clear from the double reduction in preparation for the battle and his work in confusing the enemy to accomplish the victory.

**DECREASING SPIRITUALITY.** One of the greatest obstacles to God's work among his people and in the world is their faithlessness. Gideon is one of these faithless persons. He refuses at first to follow the call of God. Only after he has presumptuously subjected Yahweh to a series of tests and after he has witnessed Yahweh's gracious answers—ironically, ultimately in the mouth of a Midianite—does he finally accept the call to deliver his people.

At the end of the first battle, Gideon demonstrates wisdom in his dealing with the Ephraimites. A gentle answer turns away wrath (Prov. 15:1), and Gideon applies this principle in his answer to the Ephraimites. Even though they are wrong in their attitude in sharply criticizing him, he wisely pays them a compliment rather than incite them to battle with a true but stinging reply to put them in their place. This is in direct contrast to how Jephthah will handle a similar situation in his day—fight it out!

However, Gideon "crosses the line" when he crosses over the Jordan. If the narrative about Gideon had ended in 8:3, Gideon, despite his character flaws as exposed in 6:11-8:3, would appear as a heroic judge, on the par with some of the previous major judges. But the narrative continues, and the degeneration of Gideon is documented. Motivated by revenge, Gideon's excesses are spelled out in the extreme reprisals on his own countrymen. While the cities did not give support, the punishment is unduly severe and sets a precedence for the later excesses of Jephthah. Also, the foil of Jether harks back to the more timid earlier Gideon, but now he is a mighty warrior who does not need God to help him.

