

Pride, Fear, Revenge

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 December 2023

Preacher: Matthew Capone

[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church. And it's my joy to bring God's word to you this morning.

A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here. And we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community. And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good that they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in his word. As you may have noticed, we're in the middle of the season of Advent, and Advent comes from a Latin word that means to come or to arrive. And so this is a season when we focus on Jesus coming or arriving to earth. And we do a few things during this season. First of all, we celebrate what God has done in the past. And so we sing songs like Joy to the World. And we also look forward to what God will do in the future. We don't just look to Jesus' first coming. We also anticipate his second coming. And so we sing songs like O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. And really, that's all of the Christian life. The Christian life is celebrating what God has done in the past, looking forward to what God will do in the future, and holding both of those things so that we can follow him in obedience now in the present. As we're in that season, we're continuing in the book of Judges. And you'll remember that the book of Judges is about many things. It's about the need for constant renewal and revival among God's people. It's about the need for a true and faithful king, a king who can do what no human can do, which is to change the hearts of men.

It's about the power of spirit-filled leadership. And it's also about God's grace, his mercy to hard-hearted people, people like you and me. We're going to focus especially on two of those things this morning, our need for a faithful and true king, which is part of our focus during Advent, and also God's great mercy to hard-hearted people. We're continuing the story of Gideon. You'll remember last week, Gideon had a great victory. And this was a great victory where God had protected him, at least we had hoped, from the dangers of success by reminding him that it was God who wins the battle.

And so in verse 21, we saw Gideon and his men simply standing there as they saw God winning for them. Unfortunately, things do not end well for Gideon. He does not avoid all the temptations that present themselves. And so as we move on to chapter 8, we're going to see all the ways that we get dragged off track, all the ways that we abandon what God has for us when we focus on ourselves in our egos, in our fears. And we'll see the sorry and sad state of God's people. And so really, this is a passage that reminds us of why Advent is so good. Reminds us of why we need a true and faithful king.

Reminds us of what it is that we long for and celebrate during the Christmas season. And so with that, I'm going to invite you to turn with me in God's word. We're in Judges chapter 8.

[3 : 33] You can turn with me in your worship guide. You can turn with me in your Bible. You can turn on your phone. No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's word. And God tells us that his word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold. And it's sweeter than honey, even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb. And so that's why we read now Judges chapter 8, starting at verse 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. 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? God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb, and Zeb. What have I been able to do in comparison with you? Then their anger against him subsided when he said this.

And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing. 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 Zeba and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.

And the officials of Succoth said, Are the hands of Zeba and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army? So Gideon said, Well then, when the Lord has given Zeba and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briars. 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. And he said to the men of Penuel, When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower. Verse 10. Now Zeba and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about 15,000 men, all who were left of the army of the people of the east. For there had fallen 120,000 men who drew the sword. And Gideon went up by the way of the tent dwellers east of Naba and Jogbaha and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. And Zeba and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zeba and Zalmunna, and he threw all the army into a panic.

Then Gideon, the son of Joash, returned from the battle by the ascent of Heras. 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. And he came to the men of Succoth and said, Behold, Zeba and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, Are the hands of Zeba and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted? And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briars, and with them he taught the men of Succoth a lesson.

[6 : 42] And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city. Then he said to Zeba 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. 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. 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. Then Zeba and Zalmunna said, Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength. And Gideon arose and killed Zeba and Zalmunna, and he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's Word. Our Father in heaven, we praise you and we thank you again that you give us your Word week after week, day after day. We ask that you would use it this morning to sustain us, to encourage us, to challenge us. Most of all, we ask that you would show us your Son and our Savior, our Lord Jesus, that we would say, come, O come, Emmanuel, more and more, that our longing for him and our love for him would grow.

We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I have shared with you, I think at least once before, my controversial opinion on C.S. Lewis' series, The Chronicles of Narnia, which is that my favorite of all the books is not The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, but it is in fact the last battle. The last battle is called the last battle because it tells the story of the final battle in the land of Narnia that is fought between Assel and the true king, who's this Christ figure, and the false god, Tash. Now, one of the things that Tash does that is so tricky and so deceptive is that there is a donkey who finds a lion skin, and this donkey dresses up as if he's Aslan. So there's a true Aslan that's walking around in the world, and there's the false, the fake Aslan that's present. There's something that appears to be a lion, but it's actually a donkey.

[9 : 24] The dwarfs are duped by the false Aslan, and so they decide they are never getting tricked again. They are never going to get duped, and so they come up with this line that's repeated over and over throughout the rest of the book. Whenever they're asked to take a side or to fight for something, they simply say, the dwarves are for the dwarves. This is their way of saying, we have loyalty to no one else. We don't follow any king. We only follow ourselves. We're not interested in helping anyone else. We don't join any team except our own. As we come to Judges chapter 8, we're at a sort of a watershed moment for the book of Judges, because what we see here is the sorry state of the nation of Israel. They have reached a point where they are loyal only to themselves. We might say, Gideon is for

Gideon. The men of Ephraim are for the men of Ephraim. The men of Succoth are for the men of Succoth. They have lost their unity as a tribe. They've lost their interest in anything that's greater

than themselves. And so actually what we're going to see this morning are three things, and this is on page, I believe, eight or nine of your worship guide is the sermon title, Pride, Fear, and Revenge. What we have in this passage before us is pride, fear, and revenge. Now you'll remember last week, Gideon finally goes out to battle, and we saw that victory belonged to God and to God alone. They simply stand around and watch as the people of the east kill each other because they're so confused by being woken up in the middle of the night. At the end of chapter 7, we see the people of the east are fleeing away. They are leaving their own camp. It appears that Israel has won, and it is no longer just the 300 that Gideon is fighting with. Remember, his army was reduced from 32,000 down to 300 men.

But at the end of chapter 7, he calls out to the other tribes of Israel for reinforcements, and so we see them rushing on to the scene to help. One of the groups that rushes on to the scene to help are the princes of the men of Ephraim, and these men of Ephraim kill two princes, Oreb and Zeb.

[11:59] So the 300 expand to this larger group. There's a feeding frenzy on these people of the east as they rout them. Oreb and Zeb are killed. They're the prize of the men of Ephraim, and that's where we pick up here in chapter 8. The men of Ephraim have this great prize of war, right? They have killed these two princes, but they are very upset. And why are they very upset? Well, we find out in verse 1 of chapter 8, they're upset because they were not invited to the party. Gideon went out. He went out with the 300, he didn't include them. And so they want to know, why were we not called in? We are so great, why did you not look to us? And by the way, we're going to see in chapter 12, the men of Ephraim show up again. Their ego will appear as well. Why did you not invite us later? Because clearly we are so great. Thinking fast, Gideon uses his diplomatic skill to calm things down. He uses a bit of flattery here in verses 2 and 3. When he's talking about gleaning of grapes, basically he's saying, look, you guys are so much better than me. You're so great. You took the two princes.

Compared to what you did, I did nothing. And there's a sense in which Gideon is right. Remember, he just stood and watched. Compared to the men of Ephraim, it's true that Gideon, in a sense, did nothing. And here we have a sad commentary on the sorry state of Israel and God's people, because that is all the men of Ephraim need to hear. Gideon's flattery, it massages their ego, and so it's exactly what they need. Gideon telling them how great they are calms them down, which reveals to us what's really going on in their hearts. They are not concerned with God's glory. They're not concerned with the good of Israel. They are concerned instead with their own status, recognition, and honor. They have lost sight of the big picture. They've lost sight of God's mission. They are not grateful that they played a part, and they are not concerned for God's people. No, they want to play the part, and they're concerned with their own glory.

And so what we see here at the very beginning of chapter 8 is things go sideways when personal interests come first. Things go sideways when personal interests come first. And of course, it's true that we also are quick to look to our own honor and recognition and lose sight of the big picture.

[15:20] The temptation of the men of Ephraim is our temptation as well. The dwarves are for the dwarves. Their loyalty is only to themselves.

The men of Ephraim are for the men of Ephraim. Their only loyalty is to themselves.

Unfortunately, things only get worse here. The pursuit continues in verse 4. And it's not just the pursuit that continues. It is personal interests that continue as well.

Gideon is continuing to go after these people of the east. He wants to finish off the battle that he's begun. And yet we hear that his men are exhausted and tired. We hear this twice, in fact. Verse 4, we're just told they are exhausted yet pursuing. Verse 5, he comes to the men of Succoth and he says, they are exhausted and I am pursuing. Can you please help us out? All we're asking for is a little bit of bread.

If you could just give us what we need to continue on the mission that's before us. And the men of Succoth respond instead with this rhetorical question. Verse 6, are the hands of Ziba and Zalmunna already in your hand? And this is a reference to practices of war during that time. If you were to take another army, you might chop off some of their hands as demonstrations of the bodies that you had killed. And so what the men of Succoth are saying is, have you already won? No? Well, then we're not going to help you. We only play for winning teams.

[17:18] We only help people who have already succeeded. We're going to only make bets if they are sure. And we're told, can infer here from what's happening, that their interest, it's not one of pride. This is not the problem with the men of Ephraim. It's a problem of fear. In fact, pride and fear

are the categories given by Dale Ralph Davis. This is on page 7 of your worship guide.

What is it that they're afraid will happen? Well, if they bet on Gideon and Gideon loses, the people of the east are coming for them. And so they're simply saying, hey, we can't afford to be on the losing team. We are not confident that God's people are going to win.

There's something gross here, though, which is that they are betting against the hometown team. They are betting against their own brothers. It's the same thing we see with the men of Penuel.

They also say, hey, we can't be bothered to help out. Verse 8, Sorry, Gideon. It's too risky to play for your team.

Sorry, Gideon. It's too risky to support God's team. What if you lose? What if God doesn't come through?

[19:08] Sorry, we have to hedge our bets. Of course, we as humans are also quick to save ourselves, quick to lose perspective and refuse to risk our time, our talents and our treasure for the sake of something bigger.

Afraid of what others might think or do if we come out playing for God's team. What if God ends up on the losing team?

What would happen then? And so we play it safe rather than exercising faith. The dwarves are for the dwarves.

They only protect themselves. The men of Succoth and the men of Penuel are for the men of Succoth and the men of Penuel.

They only protect themselves. We have not just pride and fear, though. We also have revenge.

[20:25] Gideon is no better. Because Gideon is also very concerned with his own ego. We would hope, we would think that this man who's been chosen by God, who's been going through all these processes of building and growing his faith, the protection he received last week from his temptation to praise himself, we would think that this would be someone who would come out on the other end, passionate for God and his glory.

And yet Gideon's story is not one that ends well. Gideon is a man here who comes back ready for revenge.

We see first that he is ready to take revenge on his own people. He is ticked. The men of Succoth and the men of Penuel refuse to help him, and so he is now going to make good on his threat. He has the victory that they feared he wouldn't. He shows back up in verse 14 ready to teach them a lesson. So first he goes and he gets this list, this hit list of the elders, the names of the elders. And then verses 15 and 16, he punishes them with thorns and briars. He lets them know exactly how he feels about their betrayal. Now we might think, okay, punishing with thorns and briars, things could get worse.

[21:52] The problem is they do. The men of Succoth get off easy compared to the men of Penuel. We have this shocking statement in verse 17.

He broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city. Gideon kills his own brothers. And he kills them for the same failing from which God had saved him. Why did Gideon need the sign of the fleece?

Why did God draw Gideon down to the camp of the peoples of the east so he could hear about the dream of the wheat barley knocking over the tent?

Because Gideon was what? Afraid. And how does he now treat those who are afraid?

[22:59] He doesn't extend to them the mercy that God has given him. No, his only concern here is his ego that has been hurt.

How quickly Gideon has forgotten God's grace to him. How quickly Gideon has turned from God's mission to his mission.

How quickly Gideon has abandoned God's glory and God's honor. And he's taken up Gideon's glory and Gideon's honor.

He doesn't get revenge just on his own people, though. He also gets revenge on Midian. Now, we might think initially, yeah, that makes sense. God has sent him, right, to rout these people, to rescue Israel.

It would make sense that Ziba and Zalmunna would be put to death. But that's not the reason Gideon does it. Gideon doesn't kill Ziba and Zalmunna because they are God's enemies.

[24:11] Gideon kills them because they are Gideon's enemies. He's explicit about this. Verse 19, he tells them, Hey, these people you killed, they were my brothers, not in a general sense.

These were my biological brothers. These are the sons of my mother that you killed. Had you not killed them, I would spare you.

He's not killing them because they're enemies of God. He's killing them because Gideon's on a personal vendetta. Gideon, to his own people, God's people, and to God's enemies, is on a journey for revenge.

The dwarves are for the dwarves. Gideon is for Gideon. Their loyalty is to themselves.

Their concern for themselves. And so the main point of this passage is this. It is the sorry state of God's people.

[25 : 31] This is the first time in the book of Judges that we see blue on blue. It is the first time that God's people are killing not God's enemies, but each other.

Remember I told you when we began the book of Judges, we have this cycle or this spiral that we see that's spelled out in chapter 2. It tells us each generation became more corrupt than the generation of their fathers.

Each generation refused to give up their stubborn ways. Now the compound interest is arriving. Things are going downhill and they are going downhill fast.

It is not simply that God's people will not work together. It's that they are actively fighting each other. And this passage presents us with no solution.

In fact, in the next passage, things are going to get even worse. And the judges that follow Gideon continue in a downward spiral.

[26 : 47] So the question that the book then raises for us is, what is the solution to this sorry state of God's people? What is the solution to people who are filled with their own pride and fear and revenge?

How is it that Israel is going to be brought back to God? And that leaving of no solution, that is part of the point of the book of Judges.

Judges reminds us of our need for a true and faithful king.

A king who can do what no human can do, which is to change the hearts of men. Judges reminds us of our sorry state, the sorry state of this world.

It presents us with a problem that cannot be solved by any man. It pushes us to be able and willing to say, O come, O come, O come, Emmanuel.

[28 : 14] And it reminds us of God's mercy to hard-hearted people, people like you and me. After the dwarves have gone this way in the last battle, they say over and over the dwarves are for the dwarves.

At one point, one of the children asks Aslan the lion, hey, can we help the dwarves? Is there any way that we can bring them back?

And Aslan makes this sobering statement. This is on page eight of your worship guide. They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief.

Isn't that a statement about the world and its condition? We have chosen cunning instead of belief. Gideon chooses cunning instead of belief. Gideon becomes the problem rather than the solution.

And so Judges chapter eight points us to the need for a greater king, a greater king who will not choose pride or fear or revenge.

[29 : 31] A king who will come to set his people free. Advent is about the sorry state of man.

The sorry state of man that we see in Judges chapter eight and the sorry state of man that we see in our own hearts and minds and lives.

Gideon does a lot of good. And Gideon is ultimately a great disappointment. We are looking for a king who will do what Gideon could not do.

And what we're looking for is this, what we already sang this morning, our new song on page seven.

The poor and lowly he will raise, and all our bitterness and tears, our violence and our endless wars, will end at last when he draws near.

Come soon, come soon, O Christ, our Lord. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you this morning that you have not left us.

[30 : 52] You haven't abandoned us in our pride and fear and revenge. You haven't washed your hands and said, let them destroy themselves, but instead you sent your son and our Savior, our Lord Jesus, to be the true and faithful king that we need, the one that can change the hearts of men.

And we ask that you would grow our faith and our love and our trust in him, that as we look forward to the celebration of Christmas, we would be able to say more and more, O come, O come, Emmanuel.

We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I invite you to stand.