

Gideon's Ambivalent Leadership (Judges 6:12 – 8:35)

Gideon is a prime example of the paradoxical character of Israel's judges and the ambivalent lessons they offer for leadership in the workplace and elsewhere. Gideon's name literally means "hacker", [1] and it seems to point in a positive direction when he hacks up his father's idols in Judges 6:25-7. (The fact that he does this at night, out of fear, is a disturbing detail.) [2] Despite the fact that God has promised to be with him, however, Gideon is forever seeking signs, most notably in the incident of the fleece in Judges 6:36-40. God does condescend to assure Gideon in this instance, but it is hardly an example for others to follow as many modern Christians argue in relation to guidance and specifically vocational guidance. It is instead a sign of the wavering commitment that will come to ultimately collapse into idolatry at the end of the story. [3] See *Decision Making by the Book* [4] and *Decision Making and the Will of God* [5] for in-depth analysis of Gideon's discernment methods.

The high point of the tale is, of course, Gideon's astonishing triumph over the Midianites (Judges 7). Less well known are his subsequent failures of leadership (Judges 8). The inhabitants of Succoth and Penuel refuse to help his men after the battle, and his brutal destruction of those cities might strike some as disproportionate to the offense. Gideon is again living up to his name, but now he is hacking down anyone who crosses him. [6] Despite his protestations that he does not want to be king, he becomes a despot in all but name (Judg. 8:22-26). Even more troubling is his subsequent fall into idolatry. The ephod he makes becomes a "snare" for his people, and "all Israel prostituted themselves to it there" (Judg. 8:27). How the mighty are fallen!

A lesson for us today may be finding gratitude for the gifts of great people without idolizing them. Like Gideon, a general today may lead us to victory in war, yet prove a tyrant in peace. A genius may bring us sublime insight in music or film, yet lead us astray in parenting or politics. A business leader may rescue a business in crisis, only to destroy it in times of ease. We may even find the same discontinuities within ourselves. Perhaps we rise in the ranks at work while sinking into discord at home, or vice versa. Maybe we prove capable as individual performers but fail as managers. Most likely of all, perhaps, we accomplish much good when, unsure of ourselves, we depend on God, but wreak havoc when success leads us to self-reliance. [7] Like the judges, we are people of contradiction and frailty. Our only hope, or else despair, is the forgiveness and transformation made possible for us in Christ.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Robert G. Boling, "Gideon (Person)," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1013.
- [2] D.I. Block and J. Clinton McCann, *Judges in Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 61.
- [3] See, e.g., McCann's comment on the fleece incident (p.66): "In short, Gideon is beginning to look at least a little ridiculous. Instead of growing more faithful, he seems to be growing more faithless and more fearful."
- [4] Haddon W Robinson, *Decision-Making by the Book* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1991).
- [5] Garry Friesen and J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making & the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980).
- [6] Cf. D.I. Block, Vol. 6: *Judges, Ruth*. The New American Commentary. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 287: "Gideon, the fearful young man, has become a brutal aggressor."
- [7] Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, "Less-Confident People are More Successful," *Harvard Business Review*, July 6, 2012, accessed at <http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/07/less-confident-people-are-more-su/> on May 23, 2014.