

## Judges 8:1-12 "Dealing with Challenges in Life" \*\*

Proposition: If we're going to do something significant for God in life, we must learn to deal with three challenges, as did Gideon in Judges 8:1-12.

I. There's the challenge of the critics (1-3).

A. The Ephraimites attacked Gideon (1).

1. They ignored what he did.
2. They focused on what he failed to do.

B. Gideon responded to the criticism (2-3).

1. He took the focus off himself.
2. He put the focus on God.

II. There's the challenge of the skeptics (4-9).

A. For Gideon, it happened at Succoth (4-7).

1. He asked for help (5).
2. He received mockery (6).
3. He responded with a warning (7).

B. For Gideon, it happened again at Peniel (8-9).

1. Gideon took God at His Word.
2. Gideon wanted others to do the same.

III. There's the challenge of the enemy (10-12).

A. Gideon located the enemy (10).

B. Gideon defeated the enemy (11).

1. He did what others said he couldn't do.
2. Actually, the Lord did it through him.

Lessons: In order to be used of God...

1. Expect challenges. Don't be surprised by them.
2. See challenges as opportunities, not obstacles.
3. Be assured that nothing takes God by surprise.

Do you like challenges? Life is full of them, isn't it? The fact is, the *Christian* life is full of them. It's not easy to be a Christian.

Please don't misunderstand me. I didn't say it's not easy to *become* a Christian. Becoming a Christian is so "easy" a child can do it. Jesus Christ did the hard part. He came into this sin-cursed world, lived a perfect life, then died as a sacrifice for sinners, and three days later conquered death in triumph. Today Jesus Christ offers eternal life to all who will admit their sinfulness, repent, and receive Him as their own personal Savior and Lord.

That's why I say it's easy to *become* a Christian. If you want to become a Christian, you can do so right now. You don't need to wait for organ music or a lightning bolt. "If you will confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom 10:9)."

If you are not a Christian, I urge you to call on Christ right now, and place your faith in Him for salvation. He can do what you cannot do for yourself. He can save you!

In that sense, it's easy to *become* a Christian. But know this. It's not easy to *be* a Christian. Living the Christian life is warfare (according to Ephesians 6:10ff.). It's a battle. It involves struggle.

Isaac Watts understood this. He wrote: "Am I a soldier of the cross, a follower of the Lamb? And shall I fear to own His cause or blush to speak His name?"

"Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas?"

"Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood? Is this vile world a friend to grace, to help me on to God?"

"Sure I must fight if I would reign. Increase my courage, Lord! I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, supported by Thy Word."

Yes, living the Christian life involves dealing with challenges. That's especially true if you're serious about living a life that truly brings glory to God. There will be opposition. There will be roadblocks and hindrances. There will be challenges.

There were for Gideon. And surprisingly, some of the greatest challenges he encountered hit him right after God gave victory, as we'll see today in Judges 8.

Allow me to bring us up to date. A couple of weeks ago we began a biographical sketch of the life of Gideon. God raised up Gideon to deliver His people from the oppression of the Midianites.

When God told Gideon concerning His intent, Gideon replied (6:15), "But Lord, how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." When God called Gideon, he was full of insecurity and doubt.

The Lord simply told him (6:16), "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

We've learned some important lessons so far from Gideon. Here's one—no matter how bad things are there's *hope*. And here's another—little things can be mighty when placed in the hands of the Almighty.

You'll recall that Gideon called the Israelites to join his army and 32,000 responded—not nearly the size of the Midianite coalition army which numbered in excess of 135,000 (as deduced from 8:10), but still quite a showing.

Then God surprised Gideon. "You've got too many troops, Gideon. We're going to send some of them home." The *some* turned out to be 31,700! God whittled Gideon's army down to 300, and said, "Now you're ready! Go, attack the enemy!"

You've got to admire Gideon. He obeyed God even when it didn't make sense. He took God at His Word, and stepped out in faith.

In our last time together, we saw Gideon conduct a surprise attack of the enemy. In the pitch-black darkness of nighttime, Gideon and his men surrounded the Midianites, and in unison, blew trumpets, smashed clay pitchers, and shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!"

The Lord used Gideon's actions to terrorize the Midianites and cause them to start killing each other. Those that survived ran for their lives.

At that point, Gideon wanted to give the rest of God's people a taste of victory, so he called on Israelites from Naphtali, Asher, Manasseh, and Ephraim to join him in pursuit of the fleeing army.

It was quite an accomplishment! What happened next? There was celebration, right? The people applauded

Gideon, right? They said, "Way to go, Gideon! Thanks for saving us from the Midianite oppression. Thanks for uniting our people."

Is that what happened? Not exactly. In fact, rather than celebration came more challenges, *three challenges* to be specific. We're going to look at them and learn a vital truth this morning. If we're going to do something significant for God in life, we must learn to deal with three challenges, as did Gideon in Judges 8:1-12. Here's the first...

### I. There's the challenge of the critics (1-3).

In Gideon's case, here's what happened...

A. The Ephraimites attacked Gideon (1). "Now the Ephraimites asked Gideon, "Why have you treated us like this? Why didn't you call us when you went to fight Midian?" And they criticized him sharply."

That's interesting. The Israelites have been in bondage for seven years. They've been terrorized by the Midianites. But Gideon, in obedience to God, risked his neck to rescue them—and succeeded! He got rid of the enemy and restored a sense of dignity to God's people.

And while the battle smoke was still in the air, some of his countrymen—men from the tribe of Ephraim—approached him with a sharp criticism. "Gideon, you may have won the battle, but some of us don't like the way you did it!"

A leader must learn to deal with criticism—sometimes justified, often not.

What was it that ticked off the Ephraimites? They posed Gideon with two caustic questions in verse 1. The first, "Why have you treated us like this?" And the second, "Why didn't you call on us when you went to fight Midian?"

Now there's a fine "thank you" for risking your neck! For the past seven years, all of Israel has suffered at the hands of the Midianites, including the Ephraimites. What had the Ephraimites done about the problem? Nothing, except cry to the Lord for help (6:6).

And when God answered their prayer by sending a deliverer, were they grateful? Not at all. Instead they blasted Gideon. Notice two things in their criticism.

1. *They ignored what he did.* And instead...

2. *They focused on what he failed to do.* "You treated us poorly. You didn't you call on us when you went to fight Midian. Why?" they asked.

Answer this. Was their criticism *true*? Actually, it was. When Gideon put out his call for a volunteer army, Judges 6:34-35 says he invited the Abiezrites (that's his own clan), as well as men from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. He didn't call the Ephraimites, that's true.

Now answer this. Was their criticism *valid*? Had Gideon treated them poorly? No, of course not. Aside from the fact that he risked his life for the good of the Ephraimites, realize this. Later, Gideon did invite the Ephraimites to join his army (7:24). When? When it was appropriate.

After the surprise attack, the Midianites fled to the south right past Ephraimite territory. So Gideon involved them in the mop-up work. Why didn't he invite them for the initial battle?

I don't know for sure what Gideon was thinking, but a look at a map gives me a clue. According to 6:33 the

enemy's army camped in the Valley of Jezreel. So guess which tribes Gideon called on to fight the enemy? The ones closest to the battle sight in the Valley of Jezreel. That's the men from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali.

Why didn't he call the Ephraimites? Because this battle wasn't on their turf—they lived thirty miles south. When the battle moved to their turf, he called on them.

By the way, we're specifically told that Gideon was filled with the Spirit of the LORD when he made his decision to summon his troops (6:34). Isn't that interesting? God called Gideon to lead. And God's Spirit led Gideon in the recruitment of his army. So that means the gripe of the Ephraimites is really with whom? With God.

I get the sense that the Ephraimites simply wanted to throw their weight around and "call the shots" when it wasn't their business to call the shots. Interestingly, this wasn't the last time this trait of pettiness surfaced. In Judges 12:1 the men of Ephraim confronted another judge, Jephthah, with this charge, "Why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you? We're going to burn down your house over your head."

In that case, Jephthah said he did what he did because the Ephraimites *wouldn't help* (3). Perhaps it was the same for Gideon. He didn't ask for their help because he knew they wouldn't help anyway.

I read a story, as told by Kent Hughes, about a wise old farmer who was working outside when a family moving to a nearby town stopped and asked him if that town was "friendly." "The farmer said he could not really say. But the people pressed him for an answer, so he asked them what the town was like that they came from. They answered that it was terrible—the people were rude and small-minded. The old farmer replied, "That is just how you will find this town."

Beloved, guard your heart against having a critical spirit. Someone has said, "He who throws dirt always loses ground." Don't be a critic.

On the other hand, if you're going to do something for the Lord you must learn how to respond to criticism. Gideon can help us. Watch how...

B. Gideon responded to the criticism (2-3). "But he answered them, "What have I accomplished compared to you? Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer? 3 God gave Oreb and Zeeb, the Midianite leaders, into your hands. What was I able to do compared to you?"

I'm impressed by Gideon's response. He models Proverbs 15:1 for us, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Gideon diffused a volatile situation, and here's how he did it.

He asked his critics some questions. What have I accomplished compared to you? Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full harvest of Abiezer [that's Gideon's clan]? In other words, "All I did was sneak up on the Midianites at night. I didn't even capture any of their leaders like you did. What have I done compared to you?"

Why did Gideon say that? Is he serious or just being tactful? Why is he downplaying his accomplishments?

I'm not sure. The point of the story isn't to emulate Gideon. He had his faults, some glaring ones as we'll see next time. But here we see a commendable trait. Gideon diffused the criticism in two ways.

1. *He took the focus off himself.* "What have I done compared to you?" And then...

2. *He put the focus on God.* Verse 3, "God gave Oreb and Zeeb into your hands." God did it. God used you

(the implication being, just like *He* used me).

Notice how Gideon puts the spotlight where it belongs, not on himself, but on *God*. He could have defended himself—he was God's chosen man! He could have attacked his critics—they were being petty.

But he didn't. Gideon didn't need man's recognition to do God's work. His was a higher goal. What motivated him was seeing God's name honored and God's people restored. It didn't matter to him how it happened as long as it did.

Do you have that kind of passion for God and his honor? If you don't, you'll cave in when you face the challenge of the critics.

D. L. Moody once responded to someone who criticized him for his evangelistic methods, "Frankly, sir, I prefer the way I do it to the way you don't do it."

Notice how verse 3 concludes, "At this, their resentment against him subsided." Their "anger was abated," as the KJV puts it. Yes, hearts can change.

Dear friend, it's a fact. If you want to do something significant for the Lord, you can expect to encounter criticism. And not just from the world, either, but from within the ranks of God's own people.

That's the first challenge, the challenge of the critics. There's a second challenge we'll face, as did Gideon in verses 4-9.

## II. There's the challenge of the skeptics (4-9).

What's a skeptic? He's the first cousin to the critic. Rather than define what a skeptic is, I want to show you one. Actually, *two*. Gideon faced skeptics on two occasions.

A. For Gideon, it happened at Succoth (4-7). Here's how. Verse 4, "Gideon and his three hundred men, exhausted yet keeping up the pursuit, came to the Jordan and crossed it."

Remember, Gideon and his men have been up all night. The original battle took place at the hill of Moreh, not far from Jezreel. The surviving Midianites fled for home to the southeast, with Gideon following. It was more than a thirty mile trek.

Not surprisingly, Gideon and his men were exhausted, yet they kept going until they reached and crossed the Jordan River. By the way, notice that although this was *God's* battle, God's people exerted effort. They were not passive, and indeed, got tired!

That's when Gideon faced the first skeptics, at Succoth. Gideon's interaction with the skeptics went as follows.

1. *He asked for help (5)*. "He said to the men of Succoth, "Give my troops some bread; they are worn out, and I am still pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.""

That's a fair request, especially when you realize who the men of Succoth are. Succoth was a city in the Trans-Jordan tribe of Gad. That means the inhabitants of Succoth were Israelites. These are God's people. These are Gideon's people, too.

So Gideon asks them for food, specifically for "bread" [the Hebrew refers to round, flat loaves of bread]. And he explains why. "I'm pursuing the Midianite kings, Zeba and Zalmunna."

Don't miss that. Zeba and Zalmunna were the enemies of Succoth, too. Gideon's not asking for a "free lunch." He's asking his own people for assistance in defeating a common enemy. It would be in Succoth's best interests to help Gideon, for the Midianites actually lived closer to Succoth than to Gideon's home town of Ophrah.

And notice that Gideon isn't even asking them to risk their necks. He and his 300 men will do the fighting, but he's affording them the privilege of having a part in this victory by sharing needed supplies.

Reasonable enough, isn't it? Gideon asked for help. What did he receive?

2. *He received mockery (6)*. "But the officials of Succoth said, "Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your troops?"

The officials' words are oozing with mockery. In essence they're saying, "What's that, Gideon? You and your band of 300 men are going to capture Zeba and Zalmunna and their army [which at the time still numbered 15,000 according to verse 10]. And you want us to help you, right? Wrong! You can't do that! You're just blowing smoke! And don't give us this far-fetched story about how you beat the rest of the army last night. That was a fluke. We don't believe you can do it again, Gideon, and we're not helping you!"

It's a sad state of affairs when God's people won't help each other, especially when they have the ability to do so. Proverbs 3:27 commands, "Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act."

Gideon has just met the challenge of the skeptic. You'll note he responds to the skeptic quite differently than he responded to the critic.

3. *He responded with a warning (7)*. "Then Gideon replied, "Just for that, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will tear your flesh with desert thorns and briars."

Wow! That's not very nice. Gideon sure is upset! Why? The issue for Gideon isn't, "I deserve better treatment than this!" No, the issue is, "God deserves better!"

Don't miss Gideon's words, "When the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand." Gideon knew God was going to give this victory. It was as good as done. How'd he know? He was claiming the promise God had given him. God had told him in 6:16, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

How many of the Midianites? God said, *all* of them. Gideon was on the Lord's mission, and the job wasn't done yet.

When the Ephraimites attacked him personally, Gideon took it. But what the men of Succoth did was different. What incensed Gideon at Succoth was that some of God's own people were skeptical of God's Word.

Know this. If a pagan is skeptical, that's bad enough. But when God's own people are skeptical of God and His promises—and are unwilling to take action based on them—that's unthinkable!

The key to living the Christian life is to *take God at His Word*. You must take God at His Word to *become* a Christian. And you must do the same to *live* as a Christian. It's indispensable.

Let me ask you a question. Does it bother you when people who claim to be God's people refuse to trust God and take Him at His Word? So many people—including church members—make decisions, not based on God's Word, but on something else. They're more influenced by what their friends think, or what the

crowd is doing, or what seems expedient, than by what God says.

Does it grieve you when that happens? It did Gideon. While trying to do the will of God he ran into skeptics who made decisions based on fear rather than faith. It happened twice, the first time at Succoth. Then...

B. For Gideon, it happened again at Peniel (8-9). "From there [Succoth] he went up to Peniel and made the same request of them." You have to admire Gideon. He's physically exhausted, and now he's stinging from the mockery of God's own people. But he keeps going.

He traveled five miles east of Succoth to the town of Peniel—the place where Jacob wrestled with God (Gen 32)—and made the same request for help.

Verse 8 explains the outcome, "But they answered as the men of Succoth had. 9 So he said to the men of Peniel, "When I return in triumph, I will tear down this tower.""

The same request, the same response, and a similar warning, "When I return—not *if* I return, but *when*—I'll be back to teach you not to mock God's Word."

Which he did in firm, if not downright *harsh* fashion, as we'll see next time.

I don't think the point of the story is to commend Gideon's proposed mode of retaliation. The book of Judges is full of bizarre events that illustrate that life gets "messy" when God's people break God's covenant. A continual theme in Judges is that God uses unlikely people—like Gideon—to accomplish His purposes.

Again, two of the things that impress me most about Gideon are these.

1. *Gideon took God at His Word.* And two...

2. *Gideon wanted others to do the same.* Is that true of you?

Two challenges down, one to go. If you're serious about doing something significant for God in your life, be ready for the challenges of the critic and the skeptic. Finally...

### III. There's the challenge of the enemy (10-12).

For Gideon, here's how it happened. First...

A. Gideon located the enemy (10). "Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with a force of about fifteen thousand men, all that were left of the armies of the eastern peoples; a hundred and twenty thousand swordsmen had fallen."

For the first time we're told how many Midianites had died in battle since the preceding night—120,000 soldiers. That's a lot of soldiers.

God had already given Gideon a huge victory. But a huge obstacle remained. The Midianites still had 15,000 men, a far cry from the 135,000 they started with, but still far more than Gideon's force of 300 men.

Apparently, based on a comment in verse 4, the rest of the Israelite army did not pursue the Midianites as far as Gideon and his 300 men did. But Gideon intended to finish the job.

The Midianites thought they were safe when they reached Karkor, a city east of the Dead Sea and far to the southeast of Peniel. Apparently, the Midianites felt secure in their new location, assuming Gideon and his men wouldn't chase them this far away from their home (some fifty miles).

They assumed wrong. Having located the enemy, Gideon then...

B. Gideon defeated the enemy (11). Verse 11 explains how, "Gideon went up by the route of the nomads east of Nobah and Jogbehah and fell upon the unsuspecting army."

It was another surprise attack. Gideon took a caravan route through the territory of Gad, and snuck up on the unguarded Midianite camp. Verse 12 tells what happened, "Zebah and Zalmunna, the two kings of Midian, fled, but he pursued them and captured them, routing their entire army."

Mission accomplished! Though weary and outnumbered, Gideon and his band of 300 men eliminated the enemy. Simply put...

1. *He did what others said he couldn't do.* The skeptics mocked, but Gideon moved ahead, with dogged determination to finish his God-given job. And he did it!

Well, not really. Gideon would be the first to say that...

2. *Actually, the Lord did it through him.* It's amazing what the Lord can do through just *one* person who's totally yielded to Him. It may not be easy.

In Gideon's case, there were *personal* challenges to overcome, like the unbelief we saw in chapter 6, and the fear in chapter 7. Then there were *interpersonal* challenges, like the critics and skeptics in chapter 8. And then there was the enemy itself.

But Gideon faced all these challenges, and God gave the victory. There's a message here for us, isn't there? I'd like to sum it up with three lessons.

Lessons: In order to be used of God...

1. *Expect challenges. Don't be surprised by them.* Is this vile world a friend to grace to help me on to God? It never has been. Are there no foes for me to face? Indeed, there are if we are serious about being used of God.

That's true for you as an individual, for your family, and for your church. Listen, just because we face challenges doesn't mean something's wrong. And it certainly doesn't mean God isn't pleased with us. So expect challenges. Don't be surprised by them.

2. *See challenges as opportunities, not obstacles.* Challenges are opportunities for us to *grow* and *show*. To grow—God used challenges to test and refine our resolve and character. And to show—God loves to use our challenges to put His sufficiency on display.

So don't look at challenges as obstacles, but as opportunities. And finally...

3. *Be assured that nothing takes God by surprise.* Not the critic, nor the skeptic, nor even the enemy. Nothing can thwart God's plan. Nothing.

Will you resolve today to follow God no matter what the cost? If so, I encourage you to pray the following words take from the familiar hymn written by John Bode:

"O Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end; Be Thou forever near me, My Master and my Friend. I shall not fear the battle if Thou art by my side, nor wander from the pathway if Thou wilt be my guide.

"O let me feel Thee near me, the world is ever near. I see the sights that dazzle, the tempting sounds I hear.



My foes are ever near me, around me and within, but Jesus, draw Thou nearer, and shield my soul from sin.

"O Jesus, Thou hast promised to all who follow Thee, that where Thou art in glory there shall Thy servant be. And Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end; O give me grace to follow, my Master and my Friend."