

THE THIRD ENEMY - JUDGES 8:1-4

STUDIES IN THE JUDGES #8

Imagine how bothersome grocery shopping would be if you had to carry everything you were going to buy in your arms, or in a hand-held wicker basket that you brought with you? Well, that is how people shopped before June 4, 1937. Grocery stores were like a circus, with shoppers trying to juggle a gallon of milk, four cans of soup, 2 loaves of bread, a dozen eggs and a 16 pound turkey. Usually, it was the dozen eggs that were the first to be lost and crash to the floor.

Well, Sylvan Goldman of Oklahoma City knew that there had to be a better way. As the owner of 2 supermarket chains, Standard Food and Humpty Dumpty, Goldman was pained to see his customers struggling around the store, trying to balance everything that they needed to buy in their arms. But, truth be told, he was even more pained because he knew that their limited capacity to carry groceries was hurting his own profits as well.

One night, as Goldman was sitting in his home office brooding over sluggish sales, the inspiration came to him. He was looking across his desk when he noticed a folding chair leaning against the wall. Suddenly, he began to picture that chair with wheels on it. Soon he was sketching with his pencil. He had raised the seat, enabling him to put another seat below it. This would enable shoppers to carry 2 baskets, one on each level. When the carts were not in use, they could be folded up neatly in the front of the store. The shopping cart had been born.

The next day, Sylvan took his rough draft to the home of a carpenter friend. Within a few weeks, his friend had built a few dozen carts. The grocer could hardly contain his excitement as he ran an ad in the Oklahoma City Times - " It's new . . . it's sensational . . . a revelation in food buying." He just knew that this ad would attract thousands of new customers. But when he went down to his market the next day, not only weren't there crowds of people, but there wasn't a single customer using his newly invented shopping cart. Not one. The discouraged grocer walked up to a lady who was laden down with canned goods and asked her why she wasn't using his new shopping cart? Goldman never forgot her answer. "I've pushed my last baby buggy forever, I hope." He found men even less receptive to his shopping carts. Most simply replied with a macho tone, "Don't you think my arms are strong enough to carry these groceries?" For an entire week, Goldman came day after day - and nobody used his shopping carts.

Well, you can imagine how devastated Sylvan Goldman was at first as all he received was criticism for this ingenious invention that he had made. But after a while, convinced that his invention would revolutionize grocery shopping, he decided he would try again. He took out another ad in the Times which said, "Shoppers came . . .saw. . . and said, 'Wow'." Later in an interview, he would admit that this ad was one of the biggest lies that he had ever told. But Goldman had his plan all laid out. He had already hired a dozen actors and actresses. And he had instructed them carefully to push the carts through the aisles with big smiles on their faces. When they purchased a cart

full of groceries, they were to go out, change clothes, and come back in for more. Throughout the entire day, for 2 and then 3 days, these actors and actresses played out their parts. Eventually people began to get the idea.

Today, next to the automobile, the shopping cart is the most widely used contraption on 4 wheels. Over 1.25 million shopping carts are manufactured every year. There are between 20 and 25 million shopping carts rolling around in our country. And Sylvan Goldman's original cart? Well, it is regarded as such an important article in our culture that it is enshrined in the permanent collection at the Department of Cultural History at the Smithsonian Institution. But we still might be carrying around our groceries in our arms, if one man hadn't persevered with his idea in spite of the criticism that he received.

Many of the conveniences that we enjoy today have been gained in spite of severe criticism. In fact, most of the advances that are made in civilization come at the price of criticism. Gideon found that to be the case in his deliverance of Israel from the hand of the Midianites as he faced his third major enemy.

Now it has been a while since we studied the book of Judges. During the month of December we enjoyed some wonderful Christmas programs. But now we are ready to get back into our studies in the book of Judges again. Let's just take a moment to remind ourselves why this section of the Bible is so important for us to study today before we continue to look at Gideon.

The period of the Judges is a critical portion of the O.T. that is so often overlooked today. For it was during the period of the Judges that the people

adopted a relativistic view of truth. The major characteristic of the age is summed up in the last verse of Judges where it says, "In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." Jud. 21:25. In other words, the nation of Israel came to the place during this period of 300 or so years between the conquest of Joshua and the Kingdom Period of Saul and David, when there was a complete breakdown in the authority structure. There was no general recognition of authority. Law and Order fell apart. All structure of society disintegrated. And the result was relativistic thinking. Everyone did as he saw fit. Everyone was a law unto himself. Everyone did what was in his own best interest. Everyone determined truth for himself or herself. So the general way of approaching truth during the time when the Judges ruled is very similar to the generally accepted concept of truth that is recognized today. Today, of course, a relativistic approach towards truth has evolved as the natural consequence of the acceptance of the theory of evolution. But the end result is similar. A modern day thinker would have felt very comfortable philosophically living during the period of the judges.

Now we have already seen that God raised up 6 major Judges to deliver his people. For there was a cycle that the nation fell into time and time again during this period of the Judges.

1. First, the people would stray away from following after the law of God. The prevailing new age philosophy of the day would convince people that there is no one certain path for truth - everyone has their own truth. Everyone should do what they think is right in their own eyes. And so people would.

They would follow after false gods, or would indulge in all kinds of immorality, or would pursue all kinds of hedonistic pleasures.

2. And the result of their disobedience was the weakening of their social structure. Family units were torn apart, personal character was corrupted, law and order disintegrated. And what would happen every time was that some other force would take advantage of their weakened social structure. Another nation would come in and conquer them. And then the oppression would become more and more severe and restricting.

3. Finally, when things got so bad that it appeared that society was going to bust apart at its seams, the Israelites would cry out to God for deliverance. They would confess their sins. They would ask for God's help. They would promise to reform their ways and do what is right. And every time, God listened to their pleas for help. Every time, God answered their prayers.

4. Now the manner in which God answered their prayers in these days was in the form of a Judge. The Hebrew word, Shaphat, literally meant one who made a decision between 2 or more possible alternatives. The judge was one who rendered a verdict or made a decision. In a day when everyone was making their own decisions and judgments, when things got so bad that this kind of anarchy was just intolerable, God would raise up a person who would then bring order and structure to society. His or her word would be the law for the time of his or her life. But there was an added dimension to the ministry of the Judge that goes beyond the normal meaning of the word. For in each case, there was also the necessity of some military deliverance as well. For it was

the oppression of the enemy that always brought the Israelites to the place of crying out for help. So before there could be structure restored to society, there was the necessity of a military deliverance. So God gave to these Judges the ability to muster an army and lead the Israelites in throwing off the yoke of their enemy. It was after the enemy nation had been subdued that the judge would then settle in to reform society and there would be a period of peace and tranquility in Israel once again. There are 12 individuals who are called Shaphat in the book of Judges. If you include Eli and Samuel who are also called Judges in 1 Samuel, the total number of judges in the Bible is 14. Of the Shaphat in the book of Judges, 6 are normally referred to as major judges and 6 are called minor judges. The minor judges only have a verse or two devoted to them without many details given about their life or deliverance. The bulk of the content of the book of Judges is devoted to the 6 major Judges. We have already looked at Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah, and have begun to look at the contribution of Gideon as well.

*We have already seen Gideon face his first enemy - himself. When God called Gideon to be a judge, he did not feel adequate for the job. So God had to reassure Gideon that His power was sufficient for the job at hand. And then Gideon had another personal problem to be overcome - his sin. Gideon had an altar to Baal in his backyard. That had to be removed for the power of God to flow through his life. As Gideon gained victory over this first enemy - himself - the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in mighty power.

*Gideon was then ready to face his second enemy - the Midianites. I hope you

remember the marvelous, miraculous deliverance that God orchestrated over these oppressing raiders. Cutting Gideon's army from 32,000 to just 300, God brought about one of the great military miracles of all time as the Midianite enemy was defeated without sword or spear at 450 to 1 odds. What a glorious deliverance God gave to the Israelites that night.

*But now Gideon had to face a third enemy. And this one must have been totally unexpected. Whereas Gideon expected a battle from the Midianites, this enemy must have really blindsided him. In fact, we cannot believe it ourselves as we read this account. For you would think that the Israelites would have been so overjoyed and relieved by the miracle that God had wrought on their behalf, that they would have been bubbling over with gratitude and appreciation.

*After all, they had suffered under the oppressing hand of the Midianites for 7 years. For 7 years they had been unable to harvest their crops due to these cruel raiders. They had tried everything that they could, but they were unable to cast this yoke of oppression from around their necks.

*In the agony of their misery, they had cried out to God for deliverance. “Please, Lord, help us get rid of this menace that is collapsing our economy and taking the food out of the mouths of our children.”

*And God had heard and answered their prayer. He had raised up the 4th major judge - Gideon. And God had in a miraculous manner delivered them from the hands of their enemy. For the first time in 8 years, the Israelites were able to see some light at the end of the tunnel. For the first time in almost a

decade, there was hope. You would think that the Israelites would have been so relieved that they would have been ecstatic in their joy, wouldn't you? Well, listen to the response of the major tribe of Israel as recorded in Judges 8:1 - just after the Midianites victory in the valley of Jezreel.

READ JUDGES 8:1

JDG 8:1 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.

*Now you talk about something that could have completely disheartened Gideon. I mean, he must have been physically exhausted. He had been up at least 24 hours - very likely longer. He had just been through the emotional trauma of a major battle with the enemy. And now he was trying to lead his troops to catch the Midianite leaders who were trying to escape. And here come some of the Ephraimites with this petty criticism. "Why have you treated us like this?" How would you have answered this question? I know how I would have been tempted to answer this question. "You begged God for deliverance and He has just lead me to execute it for you. I would say that this is pretty generous treatment. Not if you will just get out of my way, I will be able to catch the Midianite leaders and we won't have to worry about their oppression any longer." I mean, you talk about petty criticism. To stop the general in the middle of battle and complain that you were overlooked when the army was put together - I wonder how Douglas McArthur would have handled this criticism?

But I guess the more important question for us to consider this evening was how Gideon dealt with this criticism? For in the heat of battle and emotion, Gideon masterfully handled this situation. And he becomes a tremendous example to us as to a godly response to criticism. Notice with me 2 ways in which Gideon handled this criticism.

1. He recognized the true source of the criticism and dealt with it gently.

READ 8:2,3

JDG 8:2 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?" At this, their resentment against him subsided.

Gideon knew the characteristics of the Ephraimites. The tribe of Ephraim was a proud tribe. They had a great heritage and a privileged position in the nation of Israel. Joshua had been an Ephraimite. The tabernacle of God was located at this time in their city of Shiloh. Their tribe was the dominant tribe of the north equally only by Judah, the dominant tribe of the south. Later, when the northern 10 tribes would break off from the southern 2, the 2 sections would often just be called in the Bible, Ephraim and Judah. The criticism leveled by these Ephraimites was a manifestation of their own pride.

Now it is very important to see this. For most times when we are criticized, the temptation that we face is to take the criticism personally. I must have done something wrong; I must not be a worthy person. And when criticism is taken personally, our response almost always is defensive - sticking

up for ourselves, defending our perceived rights.

Now there are times when criticism is leveled in a very personal manner. Sometimes this criticism is deserved, and a wise person will consider it and improve himself because of it. More often, personal criticism is undeserved, and a wise person who knows the whole situation will just consider the source and allow the criticism to go in one ear and out the other.

But the vast majority of criticism that is offered has very little to do with the object of criticism in its source, but rather reflects a personal weakness in the one who is criticizing. And it is critical for us to see this if we are to deal with criticism effectively. It took me a long time to learn this lesson in the ministry, and I still have not learned it completely, but I must say that it is one of the most important lessons that I have ever learned that has helped my ministry. The vast majority of criticism that is given simply reflects a problem in the person who is criticizing. To Gideon's credit, he recognized this fact immediately.

Gideon could have exploded on these Ephraimites. “What do you expect out of me? I just defeated 135,000 Midianites in battle with just 300 men? What more can I do to please you Ephraimites?” But Gideon recognized the fact immediately that the real problem was not with his military strategy - the real problem was in the heart of the Ephraimites. They were proud. In their pride, they felt offended that they had been overlooked. Many of them probably were among the 22,000 that had left when the invitation for all those who were afraid to go home had been given - and now they were feeling guilty

for that decision. Some of the others were undoubtedly among the 9,700 who were ordered to leave when they failed the drinking test, and now they were jealous because they were going to miss out in the glory. But the problem was in the hearts of the Ephraimites. The problem was not with Gideon. And Gideon recognized that immediately. So Gideon spoke kindly to these who criticized, and he assured them of their value to the nation. You have made a great contribution. In reality, you have done more than we have. We just stood and watched God work. But you have provided our nation with the most productive produce, and you were the ones who cornered those key leaders, Oreb and Zeeb, and killed them. You Ephraimites have made a great contribution to the cause, and we appreciate you.

Now we can't underestimate the wisdom that Gideon displays here, because another response could have been disastrous to the deliverance that God was giving the Israelites. To illustrate this, I want to jump ahead to the next judge for just a moment. Now, I don't normally like to do this - to jump ahead in our studies. But in this case, we have such a similar situation with a different response leading to a disastrous conclusion - so it is critical that we compare the 2.

TURN TO AND READ JUDGES 12:1-6

JDG 12:1 The men of Ephraim called out their forces, crossed over to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, "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."

JDG 12:2 Jephthah answered, "I and my people were engaged in a great struggle with the Ammonites, and although I called, you didn't save me out of their hands. ³ When I saw that you wouldn't help, I took my life in my hands

and crossed over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave me the victory over them. Now why have you come up today to fight me?"

JDG 12:4 Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites struck them down because the Ephraimites had said, "You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh." ⁵ The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead asked him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he replied, "No," ⁶ they said, "All right, say 'Shibboleth.'" If he said, "Sibboleth," because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.

Here we have a parallel situation from the 5th major judge, Jephthah. Jephthah had just lead the Israelites to victory over the Ammonites. This is the next major deliverance after Gideon. And the Ephraimites are at it again, aren't they? They come out and criticize Jephthah for not including them. Did you notice how different Jephthah's response was from Gideons? Did you notice how personally Jephthah took this criticism? 10 times in 2 verses Jephthah uses the pronouns I, my or me. And did you notice the different results? Gideon's recognition of the underlying pride of the Ephraimites and his insightful response resulted in the complete defeat of the enemy and peace within the Israelite camp. Jephthah's taking the undeserved criticism personally resulted in the deaths of 42,000 Israelites. Now granted, the Ephraimites were the ones who asked for this and initiated the conflict. And this example gives a strong warning to each of us about the dangers of having a critical spirit. Because the critical spirit of the Ephraimites finally caught up with them, and destroyed a good portion of their tribe's strength. So a critical

spirit in our own lives will hurt us more than anyone else. There is nothing that eats a person up more from the inside and causes him to be more miserable than a critical spirit. But taken in comparison to Jephthah's response, Gideon shows us a better way to handle undeserved criticism.

2. But we must quickly now move on to a second step in Gideon's handling this criticism. He didn't let the criticism deter him from the pursuit of his goal. READ 8:4

JDG 8:4 Gideon and his three hundred men, exhausted yet keeping up the pursuit, came to the Jordan and crossed it.

Now we don't have the time this evening to finish reading this chapter. I would invite you to do this on your own - you will find it most profitable. But let me just summarize it briefly for you.

*The majority of the Midianites had been killed in battle in the night, put to death by the swords of their own companions according to Judges 7:22.

*The rest of the Midianites along with some of the key leaders had fled east and were trying to get back to the land of Midian.

*Gideon realized that now was the time to catch them, before they could regroup and return for battle.

*So Gideon is pursuing them as fast as he can with his 300 men.

*The Ephraimites approach him with their criticism. Gideon takes some time to deal with the Ephraimites, because he knows that if he doesn't deal with this now, he might have a bigger problem on his hands later. So, in wisdom, Gideon appeases the Ephraimites so they are satisfied.

*But Gideon does not let this criticism deter him from the accomplishment of his intended purpose. After his conversation with the Ephraimites, Gideon is right back on the trail in pursuit of the Midianite leaders, and he eventually catches Zebah and Zalmunna and the 15,000 Midianites who were left and defeats them.

*The point is this. Gideon knew the will of God. He knew what needed to be done. And he was not deterred by criticism. He kept going until he had accomplished what God wanted for him to do.

As you know, there is a society called Gideons, International which has taken the name of this 4th major judge in its title. The expressed purpose of the society called Gideon's International is to distribute as many bibles as possible throughout the world. It is a very clear and well-defined purpose. And we would think that this goal would be applauded by all. What could be better than spreading the Word of God. But no, the Gideons are often criticized. One time when I was in a motel, I picked up the Gideon Bible and found a piece of paper that someone had glued in its cover. Let me read part of it for you. It is entitled "Gideon Exposed". It says, "The Gideon Society placed this Bible for your edification. But just who was Gideon? One would assume that he was a person of exemplary character and great worth to have a worldwide society named after him. But here are some of Gideon's accomplishments:

*Gideon slaughtered thousands in battle by plotting with the Lord to use treachery.

*Gideon murdered thousands more for worshiping false gods.

*Gideon tortured and killed still more for daring to taunt him.

*Gideon plundered the bodies of his victims to fashion a jeweled priestly vestment.

*Gideon fathered an offspring who killed 69 of his stepbrothers.

...The tale of Gideon is just one of many horror stories in the bible, a book that glorifies behavior you abhor. Millions of people have been hoodwinked by what their clergy and leaders have told them of the Bible."

Now some Gideon businessman who loves the lost and desires for people to know the saving gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ gave of his own money to purchase a bible to be placed in that motel room. He gave of his own time to go to the motel manager and ask for permission to place the Bible and personally placed each of those bibles in the top dresser drawers of the motel rooms. And then here came along this servant of the enemy who pasted this flyer in the bible trying to distort the truth and take parts of the story out of context. No mention of the Midianite oppression. No mention of the 7 years of stealing the harvests until the Israelites economy is collapsed and they are in danger of famine. How do you deal with this kind of criticism when you are trying to do what is right and good?

Well, I ripped the slanderous piece of paper out of the Bible and put it right back into that dresser drawer. You see, that criticism was really directed against the Lord, and the flyer really demonstrated a bitter and angry heart enslaved by sin. We needn't take the criticism personally, and we certainly shouldn't let the criticism deter us in the accomplishment of our God-given

mission.

Gideon is an example for us in facing criticism. He was not disillusioned by the criticism that he received, but recognized the true source of it. And he did not allow criticism to hinder him from God's work