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Briars, Thorns, and Toppled Towers

729-A

Series: God's Living Legends (Part 1)

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Perhaps one of the great tests of character is the test of success. This is true of nations. This is true of churches. This is true of organizations. This is true of people. The true temperature at which character becomes breakable is often not at the low end of the thermometer of success. For failure, you see, develops humility, sensitivity and dependence. Failure tends to strengthen character. But not so with success. Success leads to pride, insensitivity and independence. Have not more men found themselves to be prone to character failure at the pinnacle of success than in the valley of defeat? I think so. That is why God's warning to Israel in Deuteronomy 8 beginning with verse 10 is so ominous. He said,

When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the LORD thy God for the good land which he hath given thee.

Beware that thou forget not the LORD thy God, in not keeping his commandments, and his judgments, and his statutes, which I command thee this day:

Lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses, and dwelt therein;

And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied;

Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage;

Who led thee through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought thee forth water out of the rock of flint;

Who fed thee in the wilderness with manna, which thy fathers knew not, that he might humble thee, and that he might prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end;

And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth.

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But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day.
(Deuteronomy 8:10-18)

God is outlining here the high risk of living with success. “You may tend to forget who you were,” God says, “and you may tend to forget who I am and what you would be like if it were not for Me.” When that happens, our success becomes short-lived. In the last lesson, we looked at the kind of circumstances, the kind of man, the kind of odds, and the kind of plan that God uses to bring about success. Our Living Legend under consideration was a man named Gideon. As the drama of Gideon’s life unfolded, we saw that God’s kind of circumstances were hopeless. His children were fugitives, trapped in the vise of their own rebellion. They lived in caves and behind walled cities to exist under the pressures of their oppressors, a nation that was bent on destroying them. Their enemies were stealing their food, stealing their animals, and destroying their possessions. The enemy was like an army of locusts, the Scripture records, so numerous that they could not be counted. To say the least, the conditions were hopeless.

Then we saw that God’s kind of man was helpless. God approached Gideon, a nobody, much as He did Moses years before, and got the same kind of response. He had chosen a man who had a poor concept of God. He had chosen a man who didn’t understand the sovereignty of God or the power of God or the love of God. He had chosen a man with a poor concept of himself, for Gideon responded, “I am the least of the family of nobodies. You don’t want me.” But God said, as He had with Moses, “You are what I am looking for. I will be with you. You can’t fail.” So Gideon, to the world a faithless, faceless nobody, was God’s kind of man.

Next, we saw God’s kind of patience, as again and again Gideon tried the patience of God, seeking for signs from God to prove what He had already told him in His word.

Then we saw unveiled God’s kind of odds, odds that were and are to the world impossible. With a band of 32,000 warriors, Gideon prepared to meet the enemy. But God’s kind of odds are designed for God’s kind of glory. God sent home the fearful, and 22,000 warriors abandoned camp. It was too many, God warned, for the glory to be His, so He whittled it down to 300 Hebrews.

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These were 300 of God's men against 135,000 of the enemy. Now we have God's kind of odds.

Of course, we concluded in the last lesson, this was God's kind of plan. It was not with military might or the ways of the world's warriors that our God would defeat the enemy. He would defeat them with the likes of trumpets, empty pitchers, lamps and a shout. "The Sword of the Lord and of Gideon," they cried. Having announced their presence and announced their purpose, God defeated the enemy.

In this lesson, we continue and conclude our study of the Living Legend of Gideon. He has tasted victory. You may think now that all he had to do was tie together some loose ends and live happily ever after, or so we would like to believe. But as we mentioned earlier, success carries with it certain pitfalls and certain problems. These are healthy problems to be sure, but problems nonetheless. So as we scan the single chapter in Scripture that ties together the rest of Gideon's life, we will be looking at the tests that accompany the sweet smell of success. The title of this lesson is: "Briars, Thorns and Toppled Towers". It is about three tests of success. We will cover Judges 8.

I- THE TEST OF JEALOUSY (Judges 8:1-3)

As our story concluded last week, God's gang of weird warriors had circled the enemy camp, blown their trumpets, broken their pitchers, held high their torches, and shouted, "The Sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" As the enemy panicked at the word that they were facing the God of Israel, we read in Judges 7:

And the men of Israel gathered themselves together out of Naphtali, and out of Asher, and out of all Manasseh, and pursued after the Midianites.

And Gideon sent messengers throughout all mount Ephraim, saying, Come down against the Midianites, and take before them the waters unto Bethbarah and Jordan. Then all the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, and took the waters unto Bethbarah and Jordan.

And they took two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb; and they slew Oreb upon the rock Oreb, and Zeeb they slew at the winepress of Zeeb, and pursued Midian, and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side Jordan.

(Judges 7:23-25)

So the men of Ephraim get in on the victory side of the

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conflict. With the enemy in reverse gear, Gideon calls the tribe of Ephraim to come down from the mountain and cut the Midianites off at the pass. This they did, and they won two trophies for their limited participation in God's brief but glorious battle. They went home with the heads of Oreb and Zeeb, two of the Midianite monarchs. It was not bad for an afternoon's work, you might say. How overjoyed they must have been at the victory of their brother believers and Gideon's army. Right? Wrong. The ugly urge of human nature called jealousy raises its head and Gideon meets up with the first test of success. We read in Judges 8,

And the men of Ephraim said unto him, Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites? And they did chide with him sharply.

And he said unto them, What have I done now in comparison of you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?

God hath delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb: and what was I able to do in comparison of you? Then their anger was abated toward him, when he had said that. (Judges 8:1-3)

Gideon's first problem is not with the enemy; it is with his own. God had allowed men from only three tribes to be called to this particular conflict and then He sent more than 90% of those men home. They had suited up for battle, said their good-byes to Momma and the kids and, trembling in their boots, reported for battle, only to be shipped state-side for new assignments before a shot was ever fired or, in this case, a pitcher popped. Even most of those who were left got their orders to go back home, and these guys weren't even afraid. They, too, saw only the rigors of the KP crunch or guard duty. They never saw the enemy face to face.

Ephraim's energetic commandos, meanwhile, get a chance to get in on somebody else's battle. They got to bask in their victory, even share in their rewards. But color them green, for the envious Ephraimites never thought to congratulate Gideon on his classic encounter or even thank him for their last minute chance to participate. They were hot under the armor for not being selected in the first place to rout the rebels. They had not even been called on their hotline and been informed of the offensive that Gideon and God had planned. So instead of joy, there was jealousy. Instead of rejoicing that their brothers had

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routed their mutual enemy, they flew into a rage that they didn't get the chance instead. Their concern was not that the enemy had been slain, but that they didn't get in on the action.

You may say, "How sad. If that had been our flock, we would have sent a singing telegram to all 300 of them. We would have been overjoyed at their victory." Oh, really? I bet some of you can't even give the names of your fellow warriors, the churches who name the name of Christ and fight the fight of faith within three miles of your home church. How many can name their pastors? How many know anything about their ministries? How many of you pray regularly for them and their leaders as they do battle with the enemy? You do recall they are fighting the same enemy we are. We are on the same team. We are supposed to be as excited over their spiritual victories as ours, over their increase as ours. We are supposed to weep when they weep. We are supposed to rejoice when they rejoice.

The Ephraimites had a problem. It was called jealousy. Gideon's Gang was having all the baptisms. They were on television. They had a new building program. "Besides," they moaned, "we can't work with the men of Manasseh, they view the gifts differently. We can't get involved with Naphtali's church, they don't baptize the way we do. Zebulun's church uses a different kind of music. We couldn't really do battle alongside of them."

You may think that is absurd and those are not reasons to break off fellowship or turn the venom of our spiritual struggle on each other instead of the enemy. You may think we need every ounce of our energy united in the battle against Satan. I hope that is what you think. What does it matter who gets the trophies? All that matters is that God be glorified. God is glorified when His body works in harmony. Jesus sealed His Father's goal as He revealed His Father's heart when He said,

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; (John 17:20)

That's us. Here is what He prays. Here is what He wants,

That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: (John 17:21,22)

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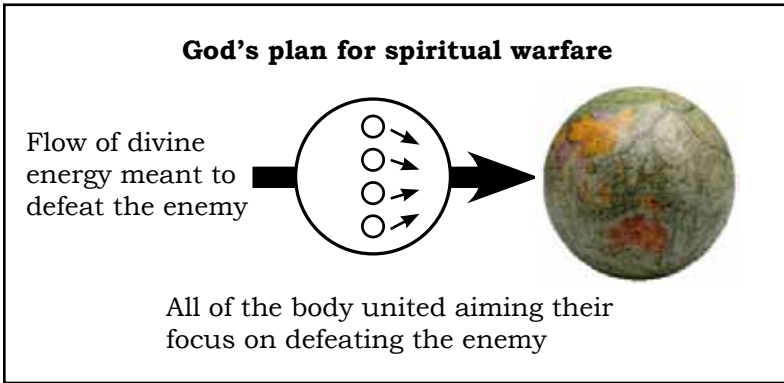
Jesus said that the goal of the Father was for us to be as united in purpose as He was with the Father. We may not necessarily be agreed in some of the less important details, but God is using our differences to attract different people. We need not be clones, nor need we compromise our convictions on issues to achieve some kind of organizational unity. So that is not it. But we are to be united in purpose. What is our purpose? To defeat the enemy. To win the lost. To grow in grace. To live the life of faith. That is why we are here. All who agree on that purpose ought to be united in spirit, even if not in practice. Jesus said, "Father, make them one the way we are." Can you imagine the Father arguing with the Son over who was going to get the glory? Can you imagine the Son struggling with the Spirit over who was getting the most converts? You say, "Never!" Why? Because in purpose, they are one. Each has a different function in the Godhead, as each fellowship has a slightly different function in the body, but when it comes to purpose, they are one. So ought we to be.

Jesus said that we ought to be united in spirit for two reasons. The first was so that the world would know that Jesus was the Son of God. They know that by how we live in harmony. Ouch! The second was that the world might know that God loves them the way He loves Jesus. They know that by how we live in harmony. Double Ouch!! It is no wonder that the world is so confused. They see the church divided into bits and pieces called denominations, fighting each other for converts. The world sees churches within the denominations fighting each other for members. They see no love. They see no common purpose. They see no unity of spirit. Because of what the world sees, they can't understand this gospel of love we preach. Jesus said,

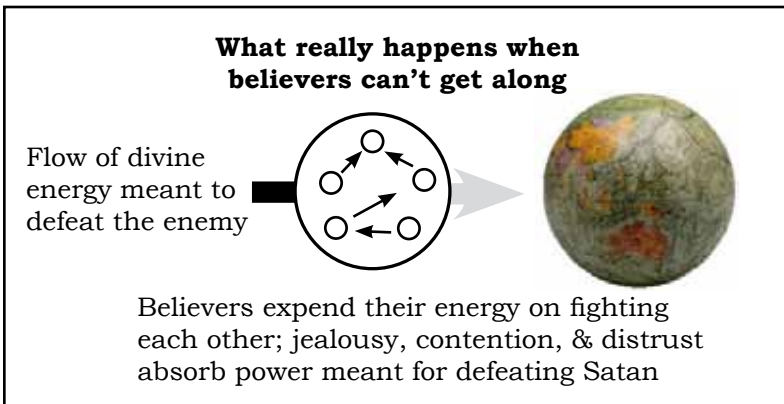
By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13:35)

We need to have love not just for those in our own church or our own denomination, but for all those who name the name of Christ. The love you have for them tells the world that we are His disciples. So Satan has a job to do. If the world is to come to believe that the Father loves the Son and that the Father loves us and that we are His disciples, they will see it by observing the quality of the love and the consistency of the love we have for each other. All Satan has to do is to create schisms in the body. He will so have diluted our direction and our power to do battle with him that he will all but have us in his hip pocket. This

diagram shows what I mean.



Look at the flow of divine energy that God gives us to defeat the enemy. It is aimed at Satan to destroy him and win the world.



The second diagram shows that when believers turn their attention away from that common objective, we use up our energies on each other until there is very little power left to fight the enemy. We take the divine energy given to us to defeat the enemy, and we waste it within the body through jealousy, contention, competition and distrust. We are so busy fighting ourselves that we forget who the enemy is. Paul saw the problem emerging 2,000 years ago so he wrote:

God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus

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Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you.

Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.

Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? (I Corinthians 1:9-13)

The Corinthians were already hung up on denominational dividing lines. They were arguing over who baptized who and how and who was following who and why. Paul said, "That is funny. I thought we were following Jesus. I thought you were all baptized in the name of Jesus. How can you slice up Jesus into small pieces and give Him different names and then cling to those names for identification? There is one name to exalt," Paul cried, "the name of Jesus!" That is the only name before which one day every knee will bow. All will one day bow before Him, and their eyes meeting His, will speak His name: Jesus. All the titles and all the labels and all the distinctives will melt in His presence. Members of competing Christian school boards will even be side by side. Members of competing Christian counseling centers will kneel together. Members of every conceivable denomination who have been washed in the blood of Christ will join the same choir, sing the same chorus and praise the same name.

What a pity we can't begin by singing in harmony down here. Paul set out the whole basis for unity in Romans 12. Read it over and over this week and see if it might not change your perspective a little bit. In chapter 12 Paul writes about our common need:

The common need is total surrender.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service of worship.

(Romans 12:1 ASV with NASV)

The common solution is transformation.

And be not conformed to this world [the common problem]; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind [and receive the mind of Christ]... (Roman 12:2)

The common roadblock — spiritual pride.

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For I say, through the grace given to me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. (Roman 12:3)

The common misunderstanding — how the body functions.

For we are many members in one body, but not all members do the same thing. (Roman 12:4 paraphrase)

The common responsibility — unity.

So we being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. (Roman 12:5)

Every one members one of another, not just all the Christians in Rome, but the Christians in Rome were members with the Christians in Corinth. The Corinthians were a part of the Ephesians. The Ephesians were part of the Philippians. They were all part of the whole body of Christ. Paul adds in I Corinthians 12,

For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body,
(I Corinthians 12:13a)

There should be no schisms in the body. The members should have the same care, one for another. If one part suffers, everybody suffers. If one part be honored, all rejoice. Now we haven't left our subject because the Ephraimites were angry because Gideon's Gang got to zap the enemy with trumpets and pitchers and they didn't. They had to use more conventional means and only had the heads of two princes to show for their trophy case. They forgot where the REAL trophies were to be handed out. And so do we. Gideon used a bit of psychology to console his envious compadres. He said, "Shucks, guys, we have done nothing compared to you. We are not even in the same league. The mere gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim are better than the whole crop of the children of Abiezer. We did nothing compared to you." Verse three tells us that then their anger was abated. When they were told what a great bunch they were, and what a great job they were doing, they quit competing and they were satisfied.

When was the last time you found one of your Christian friends that goes to another church or is part of another group and found out what they were doing in the Lord's name? Did you rejoice with them in it and praise God with them that He was using them and their group? Are you too busy publicizing

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your church, your ministries, your differences? We must not compromise our convictions or destroy our distinctives. God has placed those there to give us a unique ministry. But that is no license to condemn or criticize or compete with other parts of the same body. We will leave this subject with these practical suggestions:

1- Agree to begin praying by name for the pastors of the other churches in your area who preach the Word, even if they have doctrinal differences from you. Pray for them regularly. Pray for the pastor of that church you used to belong to, even if you wouldn't feel comfortable there today.

2- Look for ways to be an encouragement to other parts of the body of Christ. Find out what they are doing. Let them know you appreciate them. Search for common concerns in Christ. We need to publicize and share in prayer in what other fellowships are doing. We are all doing the same thing, lifting up the name of Christ.

3- Put away all jealousy in your life over their programs, their buildings, their personalities. Rejoice in what they are doing. Rejoice in what we are doing, but never, ever compare the two.

4- Bury your prejudices against groups before God. Sometimes we tend to major on others' weaknesses, when we ought to be majoring on their strengths.

5- Why not see what we can learn from other parts of the body of Christ. Some worship so effectively. Some evangelize so powerfully. Some fellowship so sweetly. Some minister so unselfishly. We don't need to become them, but we can learn from them in certain areas of our ministries.

So the first test Gideon faced was the test of jealousy, war within the ranks, believers fighting with each other. Gideon humbled himself, buried his pride and overlooked the pettiness of his brethren and found a way to build them up. He passed the test with flying colors and so can we.

II- THE TEST OF HOSPITALITY (Judges 8:4-17)

Test number two is the test of hospitality — what to do when God's people faint.

And Gideon came to Jordan, and passed over, he, and the three hundred men that were with him, faint, yet pursuing them.

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And he said unto the men of Succoth, Give, I pray you, loaves of bread unto the people that follow me; for they be faint, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian.

And the princes of Succoth said, Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in thine hand, that we should give bread unto thine army?

And Gideon said, Therefore when the LORD hath delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into mine hand, then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers.

And he went up thence to Penuel, and spake unto them likewise: and the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered him.

And he spake also unto the men of Penuel, saying, When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower.

(Judges 8:4-9)

Thorns, briars, and toppled towers; that was Gideon's promise to the men of Succoth and Penuel. Both groups had been approached for help because God's warriors, the men on the front lines, were weary. God takes it very personally when his soldiers of the Spirit need help and others just pass them by. When you minister to them, you minister to Him. It was not just financially, the issue here is hospitality. All they wanted was a sandwich and a Coke. They needed help; no one took them seriously, and God was offended. The Bible singles out four major groups for our attention. Here are four groups to never turn your back on when hospitality and ministry are concerned.

1- Hebrews 13:2 tells us to "let brotherly love continue and be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." The Holy Spirit is saying that the stranger with the need on your front porch may be an angel in overalls who has come to test your hospitality. Group number one are strangers.

2- Luke 14:12-14 tells us that man ought never to turn his back on a second group of people. Paraphrased it goes like this: "When you want to entertain, don't invite your friends, your relatives or your rich associates in order to set up a reciprocal social calendar so that they will invite you back. Rather, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. They can't pay you back, so Jesus will have that privilege when He comes again". The poor and needy constitute the second group.

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3- Romans 12:10 tell us that the third group is those that we don't see eye to eye with. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink, for in so doing, you will heap coals of fire upon his head. Matthew 5:44 tells us to love our enemies and find something good to do for them. In other words, one way you minister to Christ is by ministering to your enemies.

4- The final group is those who labor in God's vineyard. This was Gideon's Gang. God has placed in His hall of fame for all eternity some men and women whose primary contribution to the work of God was hospitality. Look up Lydia in Acts 16:15, Jason in Acts 17:7, Publius in Acts 28:8, Gaius in 3 John 5 & 6, Zaccheus in Luke 19:6, and the Samaritans in John 4:40. What a joy, God says to open your home. 1 Peter 4:9 says not to do it grudgingly, just because you have to. In other words, if there is an announcement that we need a place for a speaker, or a musician, or group of young people to stay, we ought only to have to announce it once and then just filter through the hundreds of offers in order to find where the two needs best meet.

Now if you get an invitation to dinner this week, it may be that you are a stranger, or just strange. It may be because you are poor. It may be because you are an enemy. It may be because you preach the Word. Don't ask which one, just accept; you may be an angel unawares for someone desiring to do the will of God. The key is that God takes hospitality personally. You can see what happens with the gentlemen from Succoth and Penuel. Gideon first finishes off the enemy in verses 10-13. Then we read,

And caught a young man of the men of Succoth, and inquired of him: and he described unto him the princes of Succoth, and the elders thereof, even threescore and seventeen men.

And he came unto the men of Succoth, and said, Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, with whom ye did upbraid me, saying, Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in thine hand, that we should give bread unto thy men that are weary?

And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth.

And he beat down the tower of Penuel, and slew the men of the city. (Judges 8:14-17)

After Gideon defeated the enemy, he went back and dealt

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with the elders of Succoth. With briars and thorns, he beat them and taught them a lesson they will never forget. When God's people were fainting, they were not available. Gideon went on to Penuel where down went their tower, their edifice of greatness that served as a monument to their industrious, self-serving people. So with briars and thorns and toppled towers, God's man made sure that the world understood that when God's people faint, God's heart is affected. When men refuse to help them, when they do it not to the least of these, they do it not to God. That is why giving to missions is not an option. It is not an add-on thing to the budget of the local church. It comes before us. Men and women on the front lines are fainting. Our task is to meet their needs before ours. In so doing, we minister to Christ as well. If we turn our backs on the stranger, the poor, the enemy or those who minister the Word, the abrasive scars of thorns and briars and self-centeredness will mar our testimony. The towers of self-glory that make us more comfortable will topple like toys before a lost and unbelieving world.

III- THE TEST OF IDOLATRY (Judges 8:22-27)

Gideon's third test of success was the test of idolatry. Here his grade point average plummeted. He was on the honor roll before this incident, the last one recorded in his life. In verses 18-21 he slew the two kings and finished by becoming a national hero.

Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian.

And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you.

And Gideon said unto them, I would desire a request of you, that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey. (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.)

And they answered, We will willingly give them. And they spread a garment, and did cast therein every man the earrings of his prey.

And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was a thousand and seven hundred shekels of gold; beside ornaments, and collars, and purple raiment that was on the kings of Midian, and beside the chains that were about their camels' necks.

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And Gideon made an ephod thereof, and put it in his city, even in Ophrah: and all Israel went thither a whoring after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house.
(Judges 8:22-27)

So Gideon's last test was to see if he could handle the success God had given him and not give in to idolatry. The first phase was when the people wanted to exalt Gideon as though he had won the battle. What a perfect response he had when he said, "I will not rule over you, neither will my son or my son's sons. The Lord will rule over you." Beautiful. To God be the glory. So far, he was on target. But in verse 24, he asks for the spoils of the battle so that he could make an ephod. The gold he collected was the equivalent of over \$25,000. With it, he made an ephod which was a sacred vestment originally worn by the high priests. It was a lavish, gold-adorned piece of clothing with an onyx stone on each shoulder engraved with six names of the tribes of Israel. Attached to the ephod with chains of pure gold was a breastplate containing twelve precious stones. Samuel wore one when he was ministering before the Lord. David wore one while he danced before the Lord after he brought the ark back to Jerusalem. But on two occasions in Scripture, the ephod, which was not wrong in itself, became the object of idolatry and thus brought grief to God.

You see, what may be okay for one person may not be acceptable for another. What may be God's will for one church may be a source of grief for another. What may be acceptable for one family may be a stumbling block to another. The ephod was not in itself evil, but verse 27 says that it became a snare to Gideon and to his whole family. Soon all of Israel made it an object of worship. The ephod became a symbol of their success over the enemy. Having failed to set Gideon up on a throne of worship, they began to worship the symbol of their past victories, instead of God Himself. The glory accrued to Gideon. The glory accrued to the victory. The glory accrued to the warriors. It was glory that belonged only to God. That is the third pitfall of success in spiritual things, to come to glorify the victories rather than the victor. To begin ever so subtly to glory in the methods, or the men, or the means with which a sovereign God chooses to defeat the enemy is a strong temptation.

I have seen thriving Christian organizations decline to mediocrity as the methods God chose to use became their

message. I have seen great churches die because they became so enamored by their success that they began to idolize their greatness. You can even idolize your nothingness. You can even glory in being an “unchurch”, a church God chose to bless without buildings or promotions or programs. We can set our giving up as an idol. Something that good can become a snare. We have nothing in which to glory, except Jesus Christ, our Lord. How He has chosen to bless us is a miracle. But we must not make an ephod of it and strut around town in it. That is true of every church and every Christian work that God has chosen to visibly bless. We have no right to make idols of our success. Our “success”, if it can be so labeled, ought to drive us to our knees in utter humility and awe. The spoils of the battle can be melted down and given quietly to those in need. We need no ephods around here.

So Gideon illustrates for us the three great tests of success in the Kingdom. We as a church and we as a people and we as individuals involved in different ministries need to quietly learn from Gideon. Test number one is the ability to rejoice in the success of other Christians. It is a test of jealousy. I propose to you that continued success depends on a broadening sense of appreciation for the rest of the body of Christ. If you limit your concept of the body, you limit your concept of God.

Test number two is the test of availability; to minister to the needs of the downtrodden, the needy, the afflicted, to give to Christ by giving to the stranger, the poor, your enemies and to those who minister the Word. If “success” as we call it, diminishes our outreach, and we turn our focus inward, our “success” will be short-lived indeed.

Test number three is the subtle test of idolatry, coming to worship the system or the success or the story instead of falling to our knees only to adore the King Himself. You and I are the canvas on which the Master paints. The beauty of the portrait is His to create. The glory of the portrait is His to receive and His alone.

The Ephraimites failed test number one. They couldn’t rejoice in Gideon’s victory. The men of Succoth and Penuel failed test number two. They couldn’t become vulnerable to real needs. Gideon and his family failed test number three. They couldn’t simply rejoice in God. They had to exalt the victory. All three

Briars, Thorns, and Toppled Towers

tests were spiritual tests because this is a spiritual conflict. Contention, hospitality and idolatry are the visible signs. A spirit of envy, a spirit of greed, and a spirit of pride are at the root of it all. Success merely surfaces who we really are. You see, in reality, success is not measured by what we are doing or how well we are doing in the eyes of one another. Success is measured by what God is doing in our lives and in our ministries. Is the enemy being systematically defeated? Is the glory going only to God? Those are the two questions to answer.

Real success is the natural outworking of the Holy Spirit being allowed to be God in our lives. That kind of victorious life will drive us to appreciate the victories of other Christians. Such is the mark of real success. That kind of victorious life will draw us to be more sensitive to saints in need. Such is the mark of real success. That kind of victorious life will discourage us from taking the spoils of the conflict and making ephods that call attention to the victories or even to the conflicts. We will only fall to our knees and call attention to God. We won't need to advertise where we are or publicize what we are, or write a book on what we have done. Ours will be but a task of quietly trusting God to give us laborers for the harvest. It is a harvest in which He has allowed us to participate, but only by grace. If that be our mindset, and His be our mind, we need not fear briars and thorns and toppled towers. We can, instead, as Paul said, go from one degree of glory to another, for all the glory belongs to Him.

BRIARS, THORNS & TOPPLED TOWERS

Briars, thorns and toppled towers;
Symbols at their best,
Of those who tasted God's success
And couldn't pass the test.

The test of trusting God to work
Through others in the fold,
And learning to be just as pleased
When their success was told.

The test of meeting other's needs
Of being one who cares,
Of treating those whose lives touch ours
As angels unawares.

Briars, Thorns, and Toppled Towers

And, oh, the test of tests is still
Whom do we glorify?
Do we an ephod make for men
To see as they pass by?

And subtly let the people think
There's glory due to us?
As we hold up our victories
As though, in them we trust?

Briars, thorns, and toppled towers
Are symbols, don't you see?
For in them, there's a message
Of what success may be.

A roadblock at which we can fall
And pay life's greatest price,
Or stepping stones to altars
And greater joy in Christ.

Success is his, beloved,
And He alone can give it.
It's letting Him live out His life
As only He can live it.

Briars, thorns, and toppled towers;
They need not be our story,
For our success is Jesus Christ
And His is all the glory!

Briars, Thorns, and Toppled Towers

For Focus and Application

1- Read Deuteronomy 8:10-18. Paraphrase it. (Put it in your own words) List the things listed there that are marks of success. Now list the pitfalls mentioned that accompany that success. Try to paraphrase it as it would sound using today's vocabulary.

2- Memorize verse 14. What are the two sins listed in that verse? Why does one so often lead to the other? What can we do about it?

3- Three basic sins defeated three groups of people who had been measured by God for success. Look at each of them and apply those tests to your own life, your own church, and your own ministry.

A - The test of jealousy:

How faithful are you at praying for other believers, other Christian leaders, and other ministries, especially those who seem to meet with more outward success than yours?

If your friends are to judge Christianity by the love you demonstrate to other parts of the body of Christ, what conclusion would they come to?

Do you take the time to inquire about the needs and blessings in the churches your friends attend, even if you wouldn't feel comfortable there?

B- The test of hospitality:

How open is your home and your church to strangers? To those who may dress differently, talk differently, even worship differently than you? How difficult is it for you to find other believers willing to open their homes and their hearts to total strangers? If this is a test of integrity in the body of Christ, why aren't we more concerned?

How sensitive are you and your church towards the real needs of the blind, the crippled, the poor, the needy? Is it a natural ministry that flows out of love, or a ministry that struggles out of duty?

How committed are you to serving and loving those who are not your admirers? Those who seem to be roadblocks at every turn? Why do you think Jesus was so set on our ministering to them?

C- The test of idolatry:

Briars, Thorns, and Toppled Towers

Once God has blessed you or your ministry or your church, how sensitive are you to the dangers of self-exaltation? Do you tell people about your church or your Savior? About your preacher or God's Word? About a ministry or about the source of that ministry, Christ Himself? Once success becomes real, what ploys does Satan use to steer us off course? Ask God to purify your heart and humble you this week as you return all the glory back to Him.

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