

FAINT—BUT NOT FAINT-HEARTED NO. 2343

A SERMON
INTENDED FOR READING ON LORD'S DAY, JANUARY 14, 1894
DELIVERED BY C. H. SPURGEON
AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON
ON THURSDAY EVENING, OCTOBER 17, 1889

“Faint, yet pursuing.”
Judges 8:4

THESE three hundred men, though faint, were not faint-hearted. If they had been cowards, they would have left Gideon when he made the proclamation, “Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead.” Twenty and two thousand accepted that permission, and left their general with ten thousand. Out of that smaller company, which was yet too large, these three hundred had been selected as the men that lapped. While others unloosed their helmets, and lay prone upon the grass to take a luxurious drink, these men acted like a hasty dog who, running by the side of a stream, laps and runs, and laps and runs, and wastes no time in drinking.

They were men who had given themselves wholly up to this holy war, and who were determined to smite these foes of God and His people, and yet they were faint. They were not faint because they were dispirited, for they had just won a great victory. They had broken the pitchers, and unveiled the lamps, blown the trumpets, and had shouted, “The sword of the LORD and of Gideon,” and they had seen the vast host of Midian melt away before their eyes. They had plunged with fervor into the battle, chasing the flying foe, and laying tens of thousands dead at their feet. Every man among them was a hero, and yet they were faint.

When you see men faint, do not blame them. Peradventure, by their faintness, they have proved of what true stuff they are made. They have done as much as flesh and blood can do, and therefore they are faint. They may not have been defeated, they may have gained a glorious victory, and yet for the moment they may be faint. Faintness, by itself, is a poor thing, but if you can truly say, “Faint, yet pursuing,” faintness becomes the foil to set off perseverance, and the man is all the nobler because, when faint, he still pursues.

I am going to talk tonight, to some of God's people who may be in the condition which the text describes, “Faint, yet pursuing.” I shall dwell a little, in the first place, upon *the weakness of the flesh*, “Faint.” Secondly, I shall ask you to admire *the strength of grace*, “Faint, yet pursuing.” When we have done that, I trust that we shall have a few minutes in which to learn *the lessons of example*, for these men shall be our schoolmasters.

I. First, let us think about THE WEAKNESS OF THE FLESH.

What is man, after all, at his very best? The best of men, at the best, are but men, and human nature, even at its best, is but a poor thing, and the strongest man may very soon be too weak to do anything, and the heroic man, who could stand against the shock of arms, may lie upon the ground, weary, and unable to go a step further. Why were these brave, strong men of Gideon's band faint? I shall mention certain reasons which apply to us as well as to them.

Well, first, they grew faint because *they had lost their rest*. It was at night that they broke the pitchers, at night that they made that surprising attack upon the camp of their enemies, and they had ever since, with hot feet, been pursuing the flying crowd. There had been no time for them to have any sleep, that “tired nature's sweet restorer” which is so necessary to us all.

And there are Christian minds that have not rested, they have not had time to rest. And upon some there comes what is called insomnia, the inability to sleep. This of course, is a physical malady, and

over-busy men may be afflicted by it, but Christian men may suffer from spiritual insomnia. They may get so exercised about their work, so worried about the Lord's work, they may lay so much to heart the needs and woes of men, they may be so fretted about how little they can do, and how feebly they do it, and how small is the result that follows from all they have done, that they may get into a state of spiritual insomnia and restlessness.

Now, this is always evil. Christ would have Martha to care and to serve, but He would not have her cumbered with much serving, He would prefer that she should sit like Mary at His feet. We can do much for our Lord, some can do a great deal more than they are now doing, but it is very possible to attempt too much, and really to do next to nothing because we have put ourselves into a condition in which we cannot do anything well.

You may see a man who is strong and vigorous, achieve with one blow what another cannot accomplish with twenty feeble strokes. It is not the doing much that is the important matter, it is the doing what you do with real force and power. You lose the ability to work unless you have needful rest.

Did you never notice how the Master makes rest a privilege of the worker? "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me....and ye shall find rest unto your souls." You will never work like Christ unless you can rest like Christ. He had a great capacity for resting as well as great power for working.

When He was in that little ship which was tossed with tempest, He was asleep in the hinder part of the vessel while the storm was at its height, to go to sleep was the best thing that He could do, and at certain times, the best thing that a Christian can do is to "rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him," for in that way he will get back his lost strength and power for service. If he neglects to rest in Christ, he will become faint, and it will be a happy circumstance if, when faint, he is still pursuing.

In addition to losing their rest, *these men had endured a very heavy strain*. There is much work to be done that we might go on doing for a century if we lived so long, yet we should never be worn out by it, the ordinary jog-trot work of every day does not kill men. But there are superhuman efforts to be made on special occasions, and those extraordinary tasks put a tremendous strain upon the soul. It was a superhuman effort when the three hundred brave warriors remained with Gideon, over thirty thousand of his first great army melted away, but the three hundred stalwarts stood fast.

It may seem to you to be simple enough to stand fast when thirty thousand flee, but you will not find it so if ever you are put to the test. And then to go down, in the dead of night, under Gideon's leadership, against at least a hundred and fifty thousand Midianites, with lamps, pitchers, and trumpets as their only weapons, might seem a small thing to do, but it took courageous men to do such a daring deed as that, and to believe that by such a simple stratagem God would defeat their numerous foes.

O sirs, believe me, faith is not child's play, and though a simple faith, exercised from day to day about ordinary things, is not to be despised, yet there come special moments when you must have the faith of God's elect, and an elect faith too, and a high degree of it, and if you have that and exert it to the full, you will find that it will tell upon your whole frame.

These men had also experienced the strain of great success. Stand still and see that mighty host dividing into parties and beginning to slay one another. Behold the whole power of Midian suddenly broken. Oh, the joy that must have filled the hearts of Gideon's three hundred! Their spirits must have leaped within them with ecstasy and delight, they must have felt that they could hardly contain themselves for very joy while God was working such a glorious deliverance, and if you have ever been indulged by your heavenly Father with some great success in service for the King, you have felt afterwards, as if your moisture was turned into the drought of summer.

It takes the very soul out of a man to see God at work, and himself to be the instrument in the Lord's hands, of accomplishing some high and wondrous purpose of judgment or mercy. These three hundred men had endured a great strain upon their faith, and they had also had that which is a greater strain still, the triumph of their faith in God, and so, exhausted and worn out, they were ready to faint.

Beside that, remember dear friends, that *these men had put forth great strength*. It was not merely mental wear and tear that they had to endure, but there was much actual conflict with the enemy. At first

the Midianites killed one another, but after they took to flight, Gideon's men pursued them up hill and down dale, slaying them wherever they could, for they would not leave one of these enemies of their country who had dared to invade the land of the holy, they resolved to cut them all off. It was a hard day's work, and many deeds of daring had they done, and now, as they go by Succoth, they are faint though they are still pursuing the flying foe.

If you, dear brethren and sisters, will give yourselves wholly to God's work, although you will never get tired *of* it, you will often get tired *in* it. If a man has never tired himself with working for God, I should think he never has done any work that was worth doing. If a sister has never spent herself in trying to win souls, I should suppose that the number of souls which she will win will be very few indeed. We can never expect God's blessing on our work till every faculty of our being is aroused, and the whole of our strength is put forth in the divine service. Now, if this is the case with us, it is no wonder if sometimes we get weary and feel ready to faint.

Note also, that *these brave men had endured a long march*. They had first fought the battle in the night, and this had been followed by the pursuit of the enemy during the day. They wanted to prevent them from crossing the fords, and all along that forced march there had been fighting, and the fighting after a battle is often the most severe. Many generals have been able to win a battle, but they have not known how to use it after they have won it. The toughest part of the fight full often is after the enemy begins to flee, and these men had endured a long day of this trying work.

Now, dear friends, I believe that it is very often, not the pace, but the time that makes Christian people tired. When I have thought the matter over, I have many times said that I could die for Christ, by His grace, if I might lay my head down on a block and have it chopped off at once. I think that I could endure that, but what about being roasted alive by a slow fire? Well, that is rather a different thing. One might feel in such a case that human strength would very soon be dried up.

Ah, dear friends, to stand bravely for Christ for a week or two is a simple matter, but to keep on month after month, and year after year, is another affair! It is the length of life that tries the reality of religion. Some are able to stand against the temptations of youth and yet succumb amid the business of middle life, and alas! as many horses fall at the bottom of the hill, so we have known many men who have sinned sadly in old age.

In fact, as nearly as I can recollect, all the great falls recorded in Scripture are those of old men, or of persons far beyond the age of youth, as if to teach us that when we think that we have grown wise by experience, we shall be great fools if we trust to ourselves even then. But it is that length of endurance, that year after year of trial, that long fight of affliction, or that long continued temptation, that tries the man, and it is of little wonderful if sometimes the very heroes of the cross are faint and weary.

And once more, *these brave men had taken no refreshment*. We read that the people took victuals in their hand when they went down to the fight, but that food was all gone, for soldiers have fine appetites when they have had much to do, and they grow very faint if they cannot get refreshment.

Ah, dear children of God, if you live where you do not hear the Gospel faithfully preached, I do not wonder if you faint! Or if you have given up hearing the Word, and have been busying yourself, always teaching, it may be that you have been giving out too much and taking in too little. I like the plan adopted by many of our dear friends who come here on Sabbath mornings, they are always here in the morning, but they are never here on Sabbath evenings. Where are they? They are happily engaged in some good and gracious work, but they will not give up the hearing in the morning, for that, they say, is their week's meal, and strengthens them for service during the rest of the day. I think that they do wisely.

Young Christians especially cannot do without their food. There are not many of us who would be in vigorous health if we did not have our food regularly, and I do not think that the majority of Christians can afford to be so busy in the Master's service as not to get opportunities for meditation, contemplation, and hearing and studying the Word of God.

Perhaps some brother here may be faint tonight for that very reason, and he may receive a hint that it is necessary for him to take refreshment if he is to go on with his work. “Come ye yourselves apart, into a desert place, and rest awhile,” said Christ to His disciples, and as to the people who followed Him, when He saw them hungry and faint, He multiplied the loaves and fishes, and fed them to the full, and they were revived.

But beloved, what child of God, who engages faithfully in the work and warfare of this life, does not at times feel ready to faint? Stand in the position of one who finds himself deserted by those who seemed to be his friends, but who prove faithless, and without a protest for the truth, glide away in the general current of error. Your heart grows sick as you think of the cowards who ought to have been at your side in the battle for the standard. Your soul is ready to faint as you note the slackness of others whom you do not suspect of going astray, but who, in the day of battle, are like Meroz, and come not up to the help of the Lord against the mighty.

Battling for Christ in the midst of the crowd where you want hundreds of helpers, and can scarcely find one, trying to carry the light into some of the dark slums of London, thinking that every Christian will sympathize with you, but finding that none do so—these are the trials that make even brave hearts feel faint.

Well, brethren, I think I have said enough, and perhaps too much, upon that first point, the weakness of the flesh, so I turn with great pleasure to the next point.

II. In the second place, let us admire THE STRENGTH OF DIVINE GRACE.

These three hundred men were “faint, yet pursuing.” They could march but slowly, but they did march, they could strike but feebly, but they did strike.

Observe that although they were faint, *they were not faint in heart*. They still believed, they still had a brave stomach for the fight, they had not wavered in their resolution, they meant to still go forward, they intended to conquer the enemies of their country before them, or die in the attempt, and not one of them proposed to turn back, they were “faint, yet pursuing.” Every man of them kept on the track of the Midianites, they were still determined to go forward. They did not demand substitutes, saying, “We have done so much, now let somebody else come in and finish the work.” No, no, they were still pursuing, each man resolved that his own right arm should wield his weapon till the fray was over.

Nor did they rest on their laurels. Some of us perhaps would have done so if we had been in their places, we might have said, “We have done bravely, we have already broken the neck of Midian, we are victors, there is no need to do more.” No, but they reckoned that nothing was done while there was anything undone. They were not content while a single foeman lived. They must carry the warfare right through to the bitter end, and they meant to do it. Sternly resolved were they, that though they were faint, and even if they died, they would die with their faces to the enemy, fighting for the Lord God of Israel.

Brothers in Christ, is not that our resolve tonight? My Christian sisters, do you not feel the same? We have lifted our hand to the Lord and we will never go back, we could not give up His truth, His love His service. To whom should we go if we left our Lord? If we did not keep on pursuing, what should we do? Lie still, we cannot, there is a something in us which will not let us rest while there is work to be done for God, by which Christ can be glorified.

These men were driven forward by hope. Although they were faint, they felt that He who had brought them so far would bring them through to the end. He had done so much for them that they might have said—

***“His love in time past forbids us to think
He’ll leave us at last with hunger to sink,”***

and so they kept on, hopeful still that they should win a complete victory. They were resolved that if it were not so, yet still they would keep on. So let it be with us. If I am faint, I will still continue fighting against sin. If everybody else forsakes the cross, yet a genuine Christian cannot. If every flag were taken

away and rolled in the mire, our Master should still find us, by His grace, prepared to bear disgrace and dishonor for His sake, and to still cling to the grand old cause, “faint, yet pursuing.”

Now, beloved, you who are here tonight, may belong to various classes, and faintness may come upon you in reference to different things. Let me just mention them in the hope that the strength of grace may come to you even as it did to Gideon’s band.

Are you a student, my dear brother? Are you studying the Scriptures? Are you endeavoring to learn the deep things of God? Do you know that you have learned very little as yet? Do the great mysteries stagger you? Are you driven to feel what a fool you are? Have you come to those great deeps where such as you can never see the bottom? Ah, well, though you are faint in your study of the Scripture, still pursue it! Get close to the Word of God, search it through and through, study it, meditate on it, give yourself wholly to it, seek to know all that God has revealed, for the things which are revealed, however mysterious they are, belong to you. If you are faint in the pursuit of divine truth, yet continue to pursue it.

Perhaps you are fighting against some inbred sin. It may be that I address some who see a swarm of sins within their nature. By God’s grace you have determined to put every sin to the sword, but you have been baffled by their numbers and their strength. This very morning, when you got up, you thought that you would make this the holiest day you have ever lived, but it has been a very poor day after all. The other week, when you went to business, you said to yourself, “By God’s help, I will show all I meet today how a Christian can live.” But you tripped and stumbled very sorrowfully.

Well now, my dear brother, you are faint because of these failures. Yet I pray you, do not give up the struggle, for God will help you. In the power of His Spirit you are able to overcome these sins, and you may yet sing, “Thanks be to God, which gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Up and at them, brethren! If faint, yet still be pursuing. The Lord help you in this battle!

Possibly, you are a worker for Christ. You have begun well, I am thankful that you have begun. After continuing a little time in the Lord’s service, you do not want to give it up, but you do not seem to get on at it, and Satan has been saying to you, “You might as well give it up, for you are doing no good. Do not worry yourself with that work any longer.” There is a friend who is not Satan, but perhaps Satan is using that friend and getting that friend to say to you, “This work will be too much for you, I know it will, you are not adapted for it, why do you not take things more easily?”

Ah, but dear friend, permit *me* to say to you, “If you are faint, yet still be pursuing. There is a great blessing coming, and the devil does not want you to receive it. Defeat the devil by giving yourself more earnestly than ever to the cause of your Lord, for depend upon it, there is something going to happen, soon, that will abundantly repay you, and the arch-enemy wants to prevent you from getting the blessing.”

Is the conflict concerning prayer? Have you been pleading for a soul and you have not yet won the victory? Is it your husband? Is it your wayward boy? Is it a friend? Have you been at Jabbok, near where Gideon was at this very time? Have you wrestled with the angel, have you been expecting to prevail and have you not yet been successful, and has something said to you, “Do not pray about it any more”? Oh, beloved, if that is the case, I beg you to pluck up courage! Though faint, yet still be pursuing. Continue pleading with God, and do not let the angel go until He blesses you.

Or once more, have you been bearing witness for the truth, and in bearing witness for it have you met with losses and crosses? Have you been brought under suspicion and misrepresentation? Have you lost some of your dearest friends, and have they even become your bitter enemies? Do you get very faint, and are you tempted to say, “Why should I protest? Let things go as they will. The age is rotten through and through, what is the use of my standing out?” Oh, say not so!

Where would the Reformation have been if it had not been for two or three brave hearts? How will any truth be preserved in the world if men are craven and chicken-hearted? Nay, my brother, speak not so, but rather say tonight, “Though I may appear to achieve nothing by my protest, that is not my affair.

My business is to do my duty, results must rest with God, and by His grace, faint as I am, I will still be pursuing.”

III. Now I close by pointing out to you THE LESSONS OF EXAMPLE that we may learn from Gideon’s brave men.

The first lesson is this, *serve the Lord*. Brothers and sisters, we are saved by grace. Some of us were saved years ago, we were washed in the blood of the Lamb, and clothed in the righteousness of Christ. We rejoice in a finished work whereby we are saved. Now let us serve because we have been saved, and let us serve our Lord to the last fragment of strength. I do not think that Christ can be rightly served with half our manhood, it must be with the whole of our powers.

All my goods, all my alms, all my talents, all that I can invent, all that I can achieve I must give to Him. Is there any part of us that we dare reserve for self? Shall the broad arrow of the King never be stamped on this or that portion of our being? Ah then, a curse will come upon us! Nay, let it not be so, but let us give Him all the strength we have until we become fairly exhausted and are ready to faint, and even then let us be pursuing.

Let us also serve the Lord when every movement is painful, when even to think is wearisome. These men were faint. You know what it is for a soldier to be faint, it is no nonsense, no pretence, it is real fainting. Yet to go running on when you are ready to faint, to keep right on when you are ready to drop, this is very trying work, yet let us do it, brethren, by God’s grace.

Some people only pray when they feel like praying, but we need most to pray when we feel that we cannot pray. If we were only to preach—some of us—when we felt like preaching, we should not often preach. If some people I know would only give when they felt like giving, they would never give, perhaps for that matter they never do.

But you are not to do a thing merely when it is a pleasure to you, do it when it is a pain to you. When faint, yet be pursuing, when, instead of your legs carrying you, you have to drag your legs along the ground, yet still pursue the enemy. When you feel that, absolutely, you could not go another foot, yet still go many another yard, for there is such a thing as doing as much as you can, and yet, by divine power and grace, keeping on after that. The work that you felt you could not do will have more acceptance with God than that which you performed in your ordinary strength.

Serve the Lord when every movement is painful, and serve Him when difficulties thicken. There were only three hundred of Gideon’s men, and there were fifteen thousand of the enemy, and the people who ought to have been their friends would not even give them a loaf of bread to eat. Then is the time to serve the Lord. There is little in your service when everybody says, “Hurrah!” but there is something in the man who can follow the Lord when they cry, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

To run with the crowd, any fool can do that, but to face that crowd and go the other way, to stand right alone, like a brazen pillar that cannot be stirred though the whole earth should push against you, there is something in such action that is worthy of the grace of God, and it is true grace alone that helps a man to act thus.

Brothers and sisters, do not count the difficulties, count your God as everything and let the rest go which way they will. The more difficulties there are, the better, and the fewer friends, the better, there shall be the more glory to the grace that helps you in your loneliness to stand firm, and to be faithful to your God.

Next, *be stimulated by past success*. Success for God is good. You win a victory over the Midianites, and you feel faint. Do not faint. Why! it does not become you to faint after that victory. You who are red to the elbows with the blood of the enemy, are you going to faint? You who just now smote Oreb and Zeeb, are you going to turn cowards?

You know what confusion there is in battle when a standard-bearer faints. See, the standard begins to tremble, it falls almost down, somebody holds it up, but the standard-bearer faints, and down goes the banner, and everybody thinks that the battle is lost. Standard-bearer, standard-bearer, I beseech you, do not faint! Cry to your God, standard-bearer, for so many depend upon you! Teacher of a class, minister

of a congregation, leader of a clan, stand in the strength of JEHOVAH Himself, and having done all, stand!

Lastly, *be hopeful when you are feeblest*, just as these men were, “Faint, yet pursuing.” When there were so very, very, very few of them, and they were faint, then they expected victory, and when there are very, very few of us, and we too are weary and fainting, then perhaps, our extremity will be God’s opportunity.

Watch the hourglass. How fast the sands are flowing! The time is almost up, there are only two or three sands yet to trickle down. Just so, but when the hour is up, then God’s eternity comes in. When our time comes to an end, then God’s great leisure shall come to an end too, and He will pluck His right hand out of His bosom, and He will do a work in our day that shall make both the ears of them that hear thereof to tingle. Wherefore, beloved brethren and sisters, let us give ourselves more to Christ than ever.

As for you who do not belong to Jesus, to whom do you belong? You who are not servants of Christ, whose servants are you? Tremble, I pray you, for your master pays terrible wages, “The wages of sin is death.” Remember the rest of the verse, “but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” God grant us that glorious gift, for Jesu’s sake! Amen.

EXPOSITIONS BY C. H. SPURGEON

JUDGES 7:19-25 AND JUDGES 8:1-27

Judges Chapter 7. Verses 19-21. *So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came unto the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch; and they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands. And the three companies blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers, and held the lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands to blow withal: and they cried, The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon. And they stood every man in his place round about the camp: and all the host ran, and cried, and fled.*

This was in the dead of night, when the hosts of Midian were fast asleep. They were startled from their slumbers by the blast of three hundred trumpets, and the flaming of three hundred torches. They gathered that these were only the bugles and the lamps at the head of vast regiments of the Israelites and they hardly dared to calculate how great the whole host must be. Filled with fear, astonished at the sound of the trumpets, and the shouting of Gideon’s band all round their camp, they took to their heels, “all the host ran, and cried, and fled.”

22. *And the three hundred blew the trumpets, and the LORD set every man’s sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host:*

They were a motley company, every man afraid of his fellow. They had gathered together to share the spoil, and now, when fear demoralized them, the hordes of wild warriors began to destroy one another.

22-23. *And the host fled to Beth-shittim in Zererath, and to the border of Abel-meholah, unto Tabbath. 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.*

If some have the courage to strike the enemy, there are others who will come out of their hiding places to hunt the beaten foe. When you really want help, often you cannot get it, but when you can afford to do without assistance, you will sometimes be embarrassed by it.

24. *And Gideon sent messengers throughout all mount Ephraim, saying, Come down against the Midianites, and take before them the waters—*

“Secure the fords in the streams which flow into the Jordan from the mountainous region of Ephraim, so that the refugees cannot get away.”

24-25. *Unto Beth-barah and Jordan. Then all the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, and took the waters unto Beth-barah 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.

So that, though they had been very backward at the first, yet, when they were once aroused, these men of Ephraim did their part in ridding the land of the common foe, and among the trophies of war, the heads of two of the princes of the Midianites fell into their hands.

Judges Chapter 8. Verse 1. *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.*

We have some friends like these men of Ephraim, who do not like being left out of the battle for the Lord. They say, “Why are we not asked for our help? Why are we not allowed to take our share?” These are very good people, but we have known some of them who have made these inquiries rather late in the day. These Ephraimites knew all about the war, and they might have volunteered to help Gideon, and we would have been glad of the earlier help of some who tarried till the victory was won.

2. *And he said unto them, What have I done now in comparison of you?*

Gideon answered them very kindly and very wisely. He flattered them, he attached great importance to what they had done, and took little credit to himself for his valiant service. In this he showed his self-command and his discretion. When persons chide sharply, it is a pity to chide back again, the best way of dealing with them is with a soft answer to turn away their wrath.

2-5. *Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abi-ezer? 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.*

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

This was a very natural and a very reasonable request. Gideon did not ask the men of Succoth to come with him, nor even to give a lodging to his soldiers. The fear of Midian was upon Israel, and the people were afraid to do anything against their oppressor, but surely they might have relieved the hunger of their fellow countrymen. Instead of doing so, they answered Gideon with arrogant and cruel words.

6. *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?*

As much as to say, “What have you done, after all? There are fifteen thousand men with Zebah and Zalmunna, and there are only three hundred of you. You have not even captured the leaders yet.” They forgot that Gideon’s band had slain a hundred and twenty thousand already, they underrated and mocked him, and would not give him the help he asked for.

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

Some have said that this showed resentment and harshness, but when a man is at war, he is not in the habit of sprinkling his adversaries with rosewater. War is in itself so great an evil that there are many other evils necessarily connected with it. It seems to me that if, when Gideon was trying to deliver his own countrymen, they scoffed at him and refused him bread for his soldiers in the day of their hunger, they deserved to be punished with great severity.

8-9. *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.*

They took liberty to speak rudely because theirs was a fortified city, guarded by a strong tower, and Gideon, nothing doubting that he would come back that way, God having given him the victory, said, “When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower.”

10-11. *Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor, and their hosts with them, about fifteen thousand men, all that were left of all the hosts of the children of the east: for there fell an hundred and twenty thousand men that drew sword.*

And Gideon went up by the way of them that dwelt in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and smote the host: for the host was secure.

He went by an unusual route and took them at night again unawares, when they felt perfectly safe, and were sound asleep, “for the host was secure.” As I read these words, I think, what a pity it is ever to fancy ourselves secure while we are really in peril! Carnal security is a great danger. To be “safe in the arms of Jesus,” is a most blessed condition, but to be secure in self-confidence is a thing that has a curse upon it.

12. *And when Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued after them, and took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and discomfited all the host.*

There was the end of the tyranny of the Midianites. Gideon slew great numbers of them, and drove away such as yet remained alive.

13-17. *And Gideon the son of Joash returned from battle before the sun was up, 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.*

He probably slew the most public revilers, the leading men of Penuel, even as he had chastised the princes and elders of Succoth with thorns and briers. I have often observed that you and I have been taught a great many things, “with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers.” If we refuse to help God’s weary and tried people, it is highly probable that one of these days, we may have to learn a great deal from the thorns of the wilderness and from the briers. Do we ever learn much apart from the thorns of the wilderness? Surely, trials and troubles have been our great instructors from the first day even until now.

18-19. *Then said he unto Zebah and Zalmunna, What manner of men were they whom ye slew at Tabor? And they answered, As thou art, so were they; each one resembled the children of a king. And he said, They were my brethren, even the sons of my mother:*

In the East, there is much greater affection between those who are the sons of one mother than between those who are only sons of one father.

19. *As the LORD liveth, if ye had saved them alive, I would not slay you.*

But now it devolved upon him to be an avenger of blood according to Oriental law, and to put to death those who had slain his brothers.

20-22. *And he said unto Jether his firstborn, Up, and slay them, But the youth drew not his sword: for he feared, because he was yet a youth. Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, Rise thou, and fall upon us: for as the man is, so is his strength. And Gideon arose, and slew Zebah and Zalmunna, and took away the ornaments that were on their camels’ necks.*

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.

There was always an itching among the Israelites to have a king, an earthly monarch to rule over them, but God did not so design it. It was want of loyalty and love to God that led them to make this request.

23-27. *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. 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.

He did not set up an idol, but he made an ephod, an imitation of that wonderful vestment worn by the high priest. Perhaps he made it of solid gold, not to be worn, but to be looked at, simply to remind the people of the worship of God and not to be itself worshipped. But ah, dear friends, you see here that if we go half an inch beyond what God's Word warrants, we always get into mischief!

You hear people say, "We have such and such symbols, not to worship, but to help us in worship." Ah, yes, but the tendency of the symbol is to act as a dam to the stream of devotion, and to make it end there! God forbid that we should ever violate the rules that Christ has laid down for us! The slightest deviation from the simplicity of the Gospel may lead us away into sheer apostasy!

Whence have come all the errors of Rome but from little accretions and alterations? A little ornament here, a little symbol there, and a little variation of the truth yonder, and the gigantic system of Romanism has thus been created. Gideon probably meant well, and we may do wrong even though we mean well. May the Lord preserve us from the smallest departure from the way that He has marked out for us in his Holy Word! Amen.

HYMNS FROM "OUR OWN HYMN BOOK"—676, 677, 681

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.