

Past Success Doesn't Ensure the Future

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Judges

Gideon is a prime example of the paradoxical character of Israel's leaders in the time of judges, and the ambivalent lessons they offer for the workplace today. Gideon's name literally means "hacker." This has a positive meaning when he hacks up his father's idols in Judges 6, but the fact that he does this at night, out of fear, points to the ongoing contradictions in his character.

The remainder of Gideon's story is equally two-sided. The high point of this tale is, of course, Gideon's astonishing triumph over the Midianites in Judges 7. Less well known are his subsequent failures of leadership in Judges 8. The inhabitants of Succoth and Penuel refused to help his men after the battle, and his brutal destruction of those cities might strike some as disproportionate to the offense. Gideon was again living up to his name, but in this case he hacked down anyone who dared to cross him. Despite his protestations that he did not want to be king, he became a despot in all but name. Even more troubling is Gideon's subsequent fall into idolatry. The ephod he makes becomes a "snare" for his people, and "all Israel prostituted themselves to it there" (Judges 8:27). How the mighty are fallen!

A lesson for us today may be to find gratitude for the gifts of great people without idolizing them. Like Gideon, a general today may lead us to victory

in war, yet prove a tyrant in peace. A genius may bring us sublime insight in music or film, yet lead us astray in parenting or politics. A business leader may rescue a business in crisis, only to destroy it in times of ease.

We may even find the same discontinuities within ourselves. Perhaps we rise in the ranks at work while sinking into discord at home, or vice versa. Maybe we prove capable as individual performers but fail as managers. Most likely of all, perhaps, we accomplish much good when, unsure of ourselves, we depend on God, but wreak havoc when success leads us to self-reliance. Like the judges, we are people of contradiction and frailty. Our only hope, or else despair, is the forgiveness and transformation made possible for us in Christ.

Gideon's failures are intensified in the judges who follow him. Gideon's son Abimelech unites the people around him, but only by killing his seventy brothers standing in his way. Jephthah starts as a brigand, goes on to deliver the people from the Ammonites, but destroys his own family and future with a dreadful vow that leads to the death of his daughter. The most famous of the judges, Samson, wreaks havoc amongst the Philistines, but infamously succumbs to the seductions of the pagan Delilah to his own ruin.

What are we to make of all this for our work in today's world? First of all, the stories of the judges affirm the truth that God works through broken people. This is surely true, for a number of the judges—Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah—are praised in the New Testament, along with

Rahab (see Hebrews 11:31-34). The book of Judges does not hesitate to point out that the Spirit of God empowered them to bring about mighty acts of deliverance in the face of overwhelming odds. Furthermore they were more than instruments in God's hand. They responded positively towards God's call to deliver the nation, and through them God delivered his people again and again.

Yet the overall tenor of Judges does not encourage us to make these men into role models. The burden of the book is that the nation is a mess, awash in compromise, and its leaders are a disappointment in their disobedience of God's covenant. A more appropriate lesson to draw might be that success— even God-given success — is not necessarily a pronouncement of God's favor. When our efforts in the workplace are blessed, especially in the face of adverse circumstances, it is tempting to reason, “Well, God obviously has his hand in this, so he must be rewarding me for being a good person.” But the history of the judges shows that God works when he wishes, and how he wishes, and through whom he wishes. He acts according to his plans, not according to our merit or lack thereof. We cannot take credit as if we deserved the blessings of success. Likewise, we cannot stand in judgment ourselves over those whom we deem less deserving of God's favor, whether they be our coworkers or our leaders.