

Judges 8:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

Analysis

Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, Rise thou, and fall upon us: for as the man is, so is his strength—The Midianite kings' response reveals both dignity and contempt. Their proverb, "as the man is, so is his strength" (ki kha-ish gebhurato, כִּי כָאִישׁ גַּבּוּרָתוֹ), means a warrior's prowess matches his maturity—implicitly mocking Jether's youth while acknowledging Gideon's proven military capability. They preferred death by a worthy opponent rather than humiliation at a boy's hands, maintaining honor even in defeat.

The command "rise thou, and fall upon us" (qum atah ufega-banu, קָם אַתָּה וַיַּגְעַבְנָו, is direct and resigned—better quick death by Gideon than prolonged shame. Ancient warfare prized honor in death; execution by an adolescent would disgrace their memory. Their courage contrasts sharply with Gideon's vindictiveness—they face death with dignity while he nurses grievance. This irony pervades Judges: pagan kings sometimes display greater nobility than God's chosen deliverers, exposing Israel's moral deterioration.

And Gideon arose, and slew Zebah and Zalmunna—the execution is swift, using the same verb harag (הָרַג, "slew") as Gideon commanded Jether. The phrase "and took away the ornaments that were on their camels' necks" (vayyiqqach et-hasaharonim, וַיִּקְחֶה אֶת-הַשָּׁהָרִים indicates Gideon claimed the crescent-shaped ornaments (saharonim, שָׁהָרִים, probably moon-shaped amulets associated with

pagan worship) as spoils. These ornaments later contributed to Gideon's idolatrous ephod (8:24-27), completing his spiritual decline from Spirit-empowered deliverer to syncretistic leader whose actions caused Israel to "go a whoring" after false gods.

Reformed theology sees Gideon's trajectory as a sobering warning: genuine conversion and divine calling don't guarantee perseverance without ongoing dependence on God's grace. Gideon began with remarkable faith (reducing his army, trusting God's unusual battle plan) but ended in vengeance, polygamy, and idolatry. This illustrates the Reformation principle *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously righteous and sinner)—believers remain vulnerable to sin's deception until glorification. The solution isn't self-effort but continual faith in Christ's sufficient righteousness and the Spirit's sanctifying work (Philippians 1:6, 2:12-13).

Historical Context

Camel ornaments in the ancient Near East often had religious significance. Crescent-shaped ornaments (saharonim) were associated with moon worship, common among desert peoples including Midianites, Ishmaelites, and Arabians. The moon god Sin was prominent in Mesopotamian religion, and lunar symbolism permeated nomadic cultures. Isaiah 3:18 lists such ornaments among women's finery, suggesting both decorative and religious functions. Gideon's taking these ornaments as spoils, then using gold from them to create an ephod that became an idol (Judges 8:24-27), demonstrates how pagan religious symbols infiltrated Israelite worship. Archaeological discoveries include numerous crescent-shaped amulets from this period, confirming their widespread use. The warning against taking spoils devoted to destruction (herem) appears throughout Scripture (Joshua 7:1-26, Achan's sin), yet Gideon appropriated these pagan symbols with disastrous spiritual consequences.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. How can spiritual victories early in your Christian walk lead to presumption and moral decline if not accompanied by ongoing humble dependence on God's grace?
2. What seemingly innocent 'ornaments' or cultural elements do you incorporate into spiritual life that gradually draw your heart away from pure worship of God?
3. How does Gideon's story illustrate the biblical teaching that 'he that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall' (1 Corinthians 10:12)?

Interlinear Text

בָּנָי	וַיַּפְגַּע	בְּנָי	אָמַר
said	thou and fall		
H559	H6293		H0
בְּנָי	גְּדוּלָה	בְּנָי	גִּירָגָג
עַל	וְעַל	עַל	וְעַל
H3588	upon us for as the man	is so is his strength	And Gideon
	H376	H1369	H1439
			H2026
בְּנָי	וְלֹכֶד	בְּנָי	בְּשָׁבֵר
אָתָּה	וְלֹכֶד	אָתָּה	אָתָּה
H853	Then Zebah	and Zalmunna	the ornaments
	H2078	H6759	H7720
בְּנָי	גִּמְלִיקָם:		
אָשָׁר	בְּצָאָר		
H834	necks	that were on their camels	
	H6677	H1581	

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 83:11 (Parallel theme): Make their nobles like Oreb, and like Zeeb: yea, all their princes as Zebah, and as Zalmunna:

Isaiah 3:18 (Parallel theme): In that day the Lord will take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments about their feet, and their cauls, and their round tires like the moon,

Judges 8:26 (Parallel theme): 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.

From KJV Study • kjvstudy.org