

As Is the Man

Judges 8:18-21 Then [Gideon] asked Zebah and Zalmunna, “What kind of men did you kill at Tabor?”

“Men like you,” they answered, “each one with the bearing of a prince.”

¹⁹Gideon replied, “Those were my brothers, the sons of my own mother. As surely as the LORD lives, if you had spared their lives, I would not kill you.” ²⁰Turning to Jether, his oldest son, he said, “Kill them!” But Jether did not draw his sword, because he was only a boy and was afraid.

²¹Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Come, do it yourself. ‘As is the man, so is his strength.’” So Gideon stepped forward and killed them, and took the ornaments off their camels’ necks. (NIV)

A brief overview

The Midianites terrorized their enemies. Countless invaders swarmed over the Israelite territory and ravaged their crops and destroyed their livestock. For seven years the Midianites oppressed the Israelites until they cowered in caves, impoverished and demoralized.

Through Gideon, God raised up (or rather whittled down to) an army of 300 men, who killed over 120,000 of the wicked Midianite army. Towards the end of this battle Gideon captured Zebah and Zalmunna, the two kings of Midian.

Gideon questioned these men and after confirming that they had killed his brothers, he asked his son, Jether, to put them to the sword. Jether was scared to do so and the kings of Midian responded, “Come, do it yourself. ‘As is the man, so is his strength.’”

Personal reflections

The phrase, “As is the man, so is his strength,” means something like, a man is proved a man by his strength, or that manhood is shown by one’s might. In other words, if your son is not man enough to do it, come do it yourself. In today’s less cordial language, we might just call the boy a sissy.

This saying was not only an insult to Gideon’s son, but also to Gideon. The strength of a man’s son reflects back upon the man. Calling Jether a wimp was also a veiled insult to Gideon as a father and as a man. “As is a man, so is his strength.” In a way, Gideon’s “strength” (or weakness) was his son. In other words, there was an implication that your son is a wimp, *because* you are a wimp.

I happen to really like this saying, and I think of it most often with the secondary interpretation that says, “As is the man, so is his [son/]strength.” Of course, just because I like it does not make it true. Since it is from the mouths of wicked men it is important to question the truth in it. I personally think it rings true with several Proverbs (10:1; 15:20; 17:21; 17:25; 19:13). The following verses also capture similar truths:

Psalms 127:4 Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. (NIV)

Ezekiel 16:44 "Like mother, like daughter." (NIV)

Our kids are, in a large part, a reflection of (or an extension of) our own lives. Our weaknesses and strengths are often manifested in their attitudes and actions.

When my kids are doing well I'm so proud of all of my parenting prowess. (It's a prideful thought of course. Thankfully, the kids have a way of humbling me pretty quickly!) When the kids are flailing and struggling in life, well, sometimes I feel like I'm looking into a little mirror.

Sadly, Gideon's life also bears out the "as is the man" principle in a very negative way. When I recently read the story of Gideon I was appalled at the realization that it ended with Gideon repeating the sins of his father. The whole story started with Gideon tearing down his father's alter (Judges 6:27), and it ended with Gideon engaging in idolatry himself (Judges 8:27). In some ways, as Gideon's father was, so was he. You can't blame Gideon's sin entirely on his dad, but you've got to wonder how much dad's example played out in the life of his son. As is the man, so is his strength!

The outcome of my kids' lives is, in a large way, impacted by my own life. I want to be a man who has the vision to make my boys into men (and girls into women), and I want to be a man myself—a man of God who lives honorably.

My parenting efforts must not start and stop with the kids. They must also be focused on the parent, namely me. For as is the man, so is his strength.