

Failure . . . In the Final Lap

Beyond the Fleece – Part V

Judges 8:22-35

Introduction

It hurts to expose today, as we continue our study of the book of Judges, a man who got tripped up in the last lap. We have been studying the biography of an ordinary believer whose story revealed moral and ethical faith. Now God gives us the story of this man's moral, ethical, and spiritual failure.

What caused this man to fail in later years? I do not know all of the reasons, but I know that God has given us his story for our instruction and our warning. And hopefully, by His grace, at the end of our study today, we will be able to avoid the searing words of the apostle Paul as he wrote to the Galatian church, "You were running so well. What stopped you from obeying the truth?"

I invite your attention to Judges chapter 8, the last chapter in the biography of this ordinary believer.

The High Point of Gideon's Career

Gideon, as you may remember from our last discussion, led the Israelite people in an amazing victory over the Midianites. In fact, God's power was so wonderfully displayed that 120,000 of them killed each other. Gideon then chased the remaining 15,000 and drove them off the face of the earth, as God's tool of judgment on that idolatrous nation.

The next thing that happens is almost to be expected, because Gideon has been the fearless leader. The people come with an interesting proposition. Look at Judges 8:22.

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son's son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian."

Now, before we take a look at Gideon's answer, let us stop to observe the nation Israel. They are not smelling like roses at this moment.

Notice, in this verse, the words,

... ***you have delivered us*** ...

Israel has failed to acknowledge that it was God who did the delivering. In fact, in Judges chapter 8, there is not one stitch of thanksgiving to be found. In the entire chapter, we never read of the people stopping and saying, "God, thank you for delivering us from these oppressors that brought about famine-like living."

It reminds me of Romans 1:21, which talks about the unbeliever as it says,

... ***even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks*** ...

One of the chief characteristics of the unbeliever is that they do not show gratitude toward God for what God has done.

The Israelite nation, instead of thanking God, thanks Gideon.

At the same time, the Israelites tempt him with a very exciting proposition, saying, "Gideon, we want you to be our king. In fact, we want your son to be our king, and his son."

What are they asking? The Israelite nation is asking Gideon to be the first in a dynastic rule. He will be the first king and his family will be the first dynasty in Israel. This is very flattering.

The answer Gideon gives to this proposition is the high point of his career. From that point on, things go downhill in the life of Gideon. Look at Judges 8:23.

Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you.”

This is a fantastic answer! He is exactly right because God was the King in this theocracy. The nation would be ruled by God through prophet and through judge, not man. So Gideon responds by saying, “This would be wrong. God alone, should be the King of Israel.”

The Spiral Downward of Gideon’s Career

If we could close the book at this point – end of chapter; end of story; end of biography – it would be wonderful. However, the next verse reveals what will be the start of a spiral downward in the life of this once great man, Gideon. Look at Judges 8:24.

Yet Gideon said to them, “I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil.” (For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.)

Continue to Judges 8:25-26. The Israelites basically answer, “This is the least we can do for you.”

They said, “We will surely give them.” So they spread out a garment, and every one of them threw an earring there from his spoil. The weight of the gold earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the neck bands that were on their camels’ necks.

Most scholars believe that this loot is valued, in today’s market, between \$350,000 and \$400,000.

Now when I read these verses, the first thought that came to my mind was probably the same thought that came to yours, “Uh-oh, Gideon, like so many others, has gotten greedy.”

This is not the case, however. In fact, the next verse gives us his motive for requesting the gold. Look at Judges 8:27.

Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household.

The word “snare” means, “to allure; to entrap into ruin”. This ephod will ruin; will destroy Gideon’s family.

Now I have a couple of questions:

- First, why was making this ephod alluring to Gideon?
- Secondly, why would it destroy his family? What is so bad about it?

Understand, if we could back up for just a moment, that the ephod was very significant to Israelite worship. It was fashioned something like an apron and was the outer garment of the high priest. The ephod also had a pouch in it, in which the Urim and the Thummim were kept.

We are never told what the Urim and the Thummim were, but they were the vehicles by which God spoke to the high priest and, through him, to the people. It was the means of getting God’s attention, as it were, and hearing from God.

So Gideon is making an imitation ephod. And this, according to the scriptures, will destroy his life. In fact, it seems that he assumes the role that God never intended for him to play; that is, high priest. He has a counterfeit ephod and thus, a counterfeit priesthood, and also, if you noticed in verse 27, a counterfeit location for worship. We will look at that in a moment.

This brings up an interesting question. Why would Gideon want to play priest and move their worship to Ophrah?

Putting the clues together, the priesthood, during Gideon’s reign as judge, was corrupt, immoral, and at the least, ineffective. In fact, nowhere in the entire book of Judges do we read of a high priest fulfilling his function. We never read in this entire book, of a high priest leading the people in worship. This absence shouts, “Where are they? Something is wrong!”

Furthermore, the tabernacle was located in Shiloh, which was where the place of worship was supposed

to be at this point. Guess who controlled Shiloh? Gideon's favorite friends, the Ephraimites.

Do you remember the tribe of Ephraim from our last study? They jumped all over Gideon's back because he did not invite them to fight the Midianites with him. In fact, in chapter 12, they got onto another tribe for the same reason and told them, "We're so upset, we're going to burn your house down."

These petty Ephraimites controlled the center of worship. And the priests, within that system, were ineffective. So perhaps, Gideon reasoned in his own mind, "Wait a second, I'm the person that God has spoken to. I'm the leader. I'm the one whom God is using to lead these people. I'll take it one more step and I'll assume the role of high priest."

It made sense, but it will not work.

The Commands that Gideon had broken

Gideon breaks three commands in acting as a high priest. Let us look at these.

1. Number one, Gideon was not qualified to wear the ephod.

In Exodus 28, God specifically says that only the descendants of Aaron could wear the ephod; only the high priest, not Gideon. He has no right to assume priestly duties.

2. Number two, the ephod was constructed with the wrong material.

According to Exodus 28, the ephod was to be constructed of blue material, not gold. Perhaps the people, and Gideon himself, were impressed by constructing an ephod out of this precious and rare metal. But they, and we, should learn that God is not impressed by beauty; He is impressed by obedience.

3. Number three, most significantly, the ephod was in the wrong location.

Gideon then, instituted a rival form of priesthood, a rival form of worship, and a rival location. Perhaps his motives were sincere, but they were sincerely wrong.

Look at the result again, in Judges 8:27.

. . . and all Israel played the harlot with it there . . .

The words "play the harlot" always refer to spiritual failure; to unfaithfulness. So God refers to Gideon's solution as spiritual adultery.

Gideon has no business making this ephod. The people have no business going to Ophrah to worship. They are committing spiritual unfaithfulness. This is what God has to say about Gideon's actions.

Perhaps Gideon thought God had made an exception for him. Leaders sometimes think that. They live by different rules. When will we ever learn that spiritual leaders *do not* have spiritual privileges?

What does God do? Look at Judges 8:28.

So Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not lift up their heads anymore. And the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon.

That is fascinating to me. All these things have happened, so where is the thunder from heaven; the bolt of lightning; the immediate judgment on a man who has gone haywire with his attempt to institute a rival form of worship? Since it has not occurred, God must approve – at least that is what Gideon evidently thought.

God, however, does not make exceptions for Gideon, and He does not make them for you and me, even though He has used our lives in the past. Just because the heavens are silent when we sin, does not mean that God is condoning the sin or that He is not noticing.

A bolt of lightning at this time, would have been good and may have jolted Gideon back, like some kid caught. Sometimes being caught is a good thing.

I can remember, as a sixteen-year-old, getting my driver's license. Do you remember that time in your life? Some need to think way back! I thought, "Sixteen years old – freedom! Driver's license, a set of keys, and I'm on my own!"

My father, when I was sixteen, had a huge Buick Le Sabre that was about fifteen years old. At that time, cars were really big. It did not have air conditioning; we would roll all four windows down.

The summer after I got my license, my cousins and their family arrived from Minnesota. My favorite cousin, Mark, and I decided to go for a ride. I asked my dad for the keys and he gave them to me with that look that dads give sixteen year olds about to take a ride. I said, "Dad, no problem, we're just going to putt around the block a little bit."

Mark and I got in the car and I was driving, Mark, sitting on the passenger side, looked at me and smiled and I looked at him and smiled, and I eased out

of the driveway. All of the family was out there. I probably went five miles an hour down the road in front of our house, turned, and soon came to an area which emptied onto Military Highway, the main street in Norfolk, Virginia. There, the stoplight was red.

I looked at Mark and he looked at me, and this will surprise you that I would ever do anything like this, but when that light turned green, I pushed the accelerator to the floor and took off. We were having a riot!

However, about that time, as we were up to about sixty-five miles per hour, I looked in my rearview mirror and saw billows of smoke coming out from underneath the car. I am not a mechanic, but I knew that billows of smoke should not be coming out from underneath the car! So I pulled off of Military Highway, and my cousin and I knew I was in trouble.

We called my father and soon, he and my uncle, his brother, came to pick us up. Mark and I quietly slipped into the back seat. Of course, I said, "I have no idea why this happened. I can't understand it. But anyhow, something is wrong."

My father looked at my uncle, who was a little more of a mechanic than him, and said, "How does something like this happen?"

My uncle floored the accelerator and we shot forward. My cousin and I slid down in our back seats. I could have killed my uncle for doing that!

A typical kid might try to sneak around their parents. Adults might try to sneak around God. Sometimes we do not get caught, so it does not seem as if God is going to move.

The consequences that Gideon would experience

Gideon was caught, but because the thunder did not erupt from heaven, he kept going. There are a number of consequences of this downward spiral in his life. Let us look at these.

1. First, Gideon's rival form of worship opened the door for national idolatry.

Look at Judges 8:33.

Then it came about, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god.

It is as if the Israelites were waiting for this old judge to die, and as soon as he dies, they think, "Well,

we're already used to worshiping something else, in some other location, in some other way."

This is the first step toward idolatry. And they were ready – Baal was already in their blood.

2. Secondly, Gideon's refusal to obey scripture opened the door to personal sin.

Three sins are revealed in Gideon's life.

- The first sin, which we have already mentioned, is that Gideon's lifestyle directly ignored the authority of scripture.

Gideon had two authorities in his life – the same authorities we have. One is the authority of the Bible, of which God is the author. If we place ourselves under this authority, we are going to end well.

However, if we refuse to submit to the authority of God's word, we are in need of something to call the shots in our lives. What is the authority now? We become the authority. Our feelings, our reasoning, our logic, our desires become the authority. So Gideon begins to follow the way of his flesh.

- The second sin is that Gideon's lifestyle degenerates into the pursuit of sensuality.

Look at Judges 8:29-30. Gideon's nickname, by the way, is Jerubbaal, which means "The Baal Conqueror".

Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house. Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives.

He must have had some house with all these wives and sons!

Gideon was a famous leader and, of course, leaders should have more, so he had more. This was a typical Canaanite perk of power. However it was a direct violation of Deuteronomy 17:17, which Gideon knew,

[You] shall not multiply wives . . .

Was Gideon fulfilled in this sensual lifestyle? No. Look at Judges 8:31a.

His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son . . .

Concubine is the social euphemism for a mistress. He has perhaps, fifty to sixty wives. Is he satisfied in his lifestyle? No. He has a concubine on the side in Shechem, which, by the way, is a Canaanite city. She

is a Canaanite girl. She bears him a son, as well. Gideon's compromise is already destroying him.

I came across a parable that is said to be a Russian parable. A hunter was hunting in the woods for bear and a bear came around the corner and pinned him to the ground.

The bear said, "Just what are you looking for?"

The hunter replied, "I'm looking for a warm fur coat."

The bear said, "That makes sense. Perhaps we can negotiate. I'm looking for a full stomach. Perhaps we can come to a compromise."

Thirty minutes later, the bear ambles away. On the ground is the hunter's cap and gun. We are to put the clues together, which I am certain you already have. The bear got his full stomach by eating the hunter. And the hunter got his warm fur coat.

Perhaps you have been running well, but recently stopped to talk to some bear. Your bear may be in the form of flirtation at the office. It may be in the form of fudging business accounts. It may be in the form of padding your expenses. It may be in the form of some subtle manipulation or some egotistical pursuit. It may be in the form of a test that you must cheat to pass. It is a bear and you are in the process of compromising.

I was recently in the office of a president of a Bible college. We were talking and he happened to mention that there was rash of cheating that had just broken out among the student body. Can you imagine a Christian student at a Bible college taking a test related to a biblical subject and cheating on it? That would be kind of like breaking into a Christian book store and stealing a Bible you have always wanted to have for your own. It does not make a lot of sense, does it? Neither does Gideon's lifestyle.

My brother told me a story, a couple of years ago, about a fellow that he went to seminary with. This fellow was an excellent student, but my brother observed him, in a Greek class, cheating on an exam. After the class, he talked to him and confronted him about it. He admitted that he had been cheating and, in fact, confessed that he had been cheating for some time. He, of his own volition, went to the professor, confessed, and made things right.

However, my brother told me that something still did not seem right. He and this fellow went through four years of seminary together, and on graduation day, God thundered from heaven.

It seemed that this guy had been living with a girl, an unbeliever, and had told her that he was in law school. They evidently had quite a fight because she decided to kick him out. As she was packing his things, she came to some of his books and noticed that they were strange – they were not law books, they were theology books. And stamped inside most of them, at least the books from the library, was the name of the seminary he attended. She called the seminary and asked, "Why does so-and-so have all of these books from your school?"

They looked at their records and said, "Because he's a student here and he's about to graduate."

My brother told me that two of the professors went to the girl's apartment and met with her. They then waited for him to return home, unsuspecting. He was finally caught.

Tragically, God sometimes uses a disaster to stop us. I wish that something had happened to stop Gideon, but God allows him to self-destruct in his pursuit.

- The third sin is that Gideon's lifestyle develops into the practice and pride of a king.

Notice Judges 8:31 again. This is a very short phrase, but it packs a punch.

His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech.

The words "named him," could be rendered "appointed him". This is different than a little baby who is born and the father picks out a name that he would like to see his son have.

It was typical in that day, for the father to appoint a nickname for his grown son. In fact, you may remember that Gideon was nicknamed Jerubbaal by his father. This meant, "my son is 'The Baal Fighter'".

Gideon gives his grown son the nickname Abimelech, which means, "my father is a king".

Do you remember in Judges 8:23, the people asked Gideon to rule over them? Gideon answered, in Judges 8:24,

I will not rule over you, . . . the Lord shall rule over you.

Forty years later, we read that because of his sensual lifestyle; his compromise, he is feeling and acting like a king, and even has a king's harem. Now Gideon has a son and has given him a nickname that

every time someone calls him by his name, it references the fact that Abimelech's father is a king.

Everyone will lose. This will become the last period in the book of Judges, in which there is peace. The cycle stops at this point. We never read again of the nation Israel worshiping as a unit. The future judges will be painted with sin themselves. A future judge who will follow soon after Gideon, that I am certain you are familiar with, is Samson. It seems that Gideon has lowered the standard for good. The next chapter of the book of Judges will literally drip with the blood of his seventy sons who will be killed by Abimelech. The heavens did thunder. God did collect.

Application – A Summary of Gideon's Biography

Let me briefly summarize this biography of the life of Gideon in two ways.

1. First, faithlessness in the past, may become faithfulness in the present.

No matter how insignificant you may consider yourself, if you submit to the authority of God, God can use you. He used this timid farmer from Ophrah and made him a judge, made him a warrior, made him "The Baal Fighter".

There is no telling what God can do with you and me, if we submit to Him. Gideon's faithlessness in the past, became faithfulness in the present.

2. Secondly, however, faithfulness in the present, may become failure in the future.

This is the way Gideon's story ended. He *was* a great leader.

I have a book in my library that is nearly one hundred fifty years old and is composed of writings by many different men. Listen to these words as I quote one commentator who lived nearly two centuries ago.

God has two ways of trying men. One in the furnace of affliction. The other in the refining pot of prosperity. This is the much harder trial of the two. Affliction tends to humble and soften and subdue. But in prosperity, self-esteem, self-reliance, self-satisfaction, self-will, pride and security are prone to spring up with a rank luxurious. The scriptures teach us the danger of prosperity and the inability of the human heart to drink a full cup of success without becoming intoxicated by success.

This is the story of Gideon. As we see him intoxicated by his own prosperity, his own success, his own prominence, his own status, we see him staggering and stumbling over the finish line.

May we echo the words of the apostle Paul, who said,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness . . . (II Timothy 4:7-8a)

What is Paul talking about? Earning heaven? No. He is talking about a unique reward given to those who finish the race; who end well; who submit to the authority of God, even in the last lap.

If God should choose today, to write the last few words of your life and close the book on the biography of your life, would you have ended well? If His hand were to put down the divine pen that was recording the deeds, the acts, the thoughts, the passion, the purpose of your life, would it end well?

I am not talking about perfect people, I am talking about progressing people who have a passion to follow God. May we learn from this man, never to step out of the race, but to keep running; to keep following; to keep submitting, so that we may end well.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/22/1992 by Stephen Davey.

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