

Failing Where It Really Matters

They're Your Kids . . . Be Their Dad – Part III

Judges 8

Introduction

Since this is Father's Day, I want to begin with a story that men might very well appreciate. It seems that little six-year-old Johnny was in trouble again with Mom. As soon as Dad came home from work and walked into the kitchen, his wife was commanding Johnny to do something he did not want to do. And right there in the kitchen, little six year old Johnny looked up at his mother and said, "No, I'm not gonna do that."

He then turned on his heel and left the kitchen. She looked at her husband with that look. He trudged up the stairs, knocked on his son's door, went in, looked down at little Johnny for a moment, and then said, "Son, would you teach me how you do that?"

All the men say, "Amen!"

This is Father's Day, so we can get away with this . . . if it is okay with you ladies.

Next week, we officially begin our church summer series entitled, "Learning to Walk from Those Who Fell". You do not have to look very hard to find stories of failure in the Bible. They have been given to us for warning, admonition, learning, and encouragement to walk closely with our Lord. I know the topic on which each series speaker has chosen to speak and I can tell you, we will be challenged this summer in an incredible way.

I want to address the same theme on this Father's Day by speaking on the biography of a man who failed; a father who fell in the later years of his life.

Turn in your Bible to the book of Judges and the biography of Gideon. Gideon was a man who failed

where it mattered the most – in his personal life and in his home. To everyone around him, Gideon was nothing less than a success. To God, however, he was a failure.

May I remind you that your reputation and your character may be two entirely different things. Your reputation is what people think of you; your character is who God knows you are.

Review – Gideon's Success

Now, when I mention the name of Gideon, you probably think of that incredible event recorded in Judges, chapter 7. Gideon led three hundred men into battle, defeating an army of Midianites.

Perhaps you are more familiar with his biography and know that earlier, in chapter 6 of Judges, Gideon was given a nickname after nearly single handedly destroying the altar to Baal in his hometown. It took unbelievable courage to do such a thing, and because of that, he came to be known by his nickname which meant, "Baal-fighter," or even, "Baal-conqueror".

More than likely, you are familiar with the other significant event in chapter 7, when Gideon took 32,000 men into battle against the Midianites. God told Gideon that he had too many men, so the army was whittled down to a mere three hundred men.

Imagine, going up against an army of at least 150,000 men, trained and armed to the teeth. But Gideon was following the direction of God and surrounded the army one night, armed with only trumpets and crude lanterns. They blew the trumpets, broke the lanterns, and as they began to shout, "For the Lord and for Gideon," the Midianites turned on

one another in the confusion and darkness, and killed each other.

What happened next, you would almost expect to happen to their fearless leader. Let us pick up this story at Judges, chapter 8, verse 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.”

Did you notice their praise, “*YOU* have delivered us”. The failure of Israel, at this point, is in failing to acknowledge that God did the delivering.

By the way, in chapter 8, you will not find one stitch of thanksgiving. In this entire chapter, you will never read of the people stopping and saying, “Oh God, thank you for delivering us from these oppressors and idolaters. Thank-you!”

It reminds me of Romans, chapter 1, verse 21, (I had to mention that book at least once!), when it talks about the unbeliever who,

. . . did not honor . . . God or give thanks . . .

One of chief characteristics of the unbeliever, as well as the wayward believer is a lack of gratitude toward God.

So, here they are, instead of thanking God, they thank Gideon.

At the same time, the people tempt Gideon with a very exciting proposition – “Rule over us, both you and your son, and also your son’s son”. In other words, “Start a dynasty of kings, and Gideon, you can be the first to rule over us.”

Isn’t that the way it works? Isn’t that success? This is the natural “perk” of power. Gideon was brave and fearless and faithful and obedient to God – what better person to rule as king than he?

How tempting! How flattering and alluring! In fact, I think it was so tempting that the high point of Gideon’s walk with God occurs in the very next verse. Look at verse 23.

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

That is a fantastic answer! He is completely right, because God was the King in this theocracy. The nation would be ruled by God through prophet, priest, and judge, not through a king. Gideon is basically saying, “God alone, should be the King of Israel.”

If we could close the book here – end of chapter, end of story, end of biography – it would be a wonderful ending. Gideon would have run his race well and he would have finished well.

Gideon’s Failure

From this point on, however, Gideon’s life goes downhill. In a strange twist, the very next verse in Judges, chapter 8, begins what will be a downward spiral in the life of this man.

Look at verse 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 verses 25 and 26.

They said, “We will surely give them.” . . .

(In other words, “This is the least that we can do for you, Gideon.”),

. . . 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, somewhere between \$350,000 and \$400,000.

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

That is not the case, however. In fact, the next verse gives Gideon’s motive for requesting this gold. Look at verse 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 ruin or to trap”. This ephod will ruin; it will destroy Gideon’s family.

Why? Understand that the ephod was spiritually significant to Israelite worship. It was fashioned like an apron and was worn by the high priest.

So, Gideon is making an imitation ephod. In fact, it seems that he assumes the role that God never intended him to play; that is, of high priest.

Gideon breaks three commands

Gideon will break three commands, according to Exodus, chapter 28.

Gideon was not qualified to wear the ephod

1. First, Gideon was not qualified to wear the ephod.

God had specifically said that only the descendants of Aaron could wear the ephod – only the high priest, not Gideon. He has no right to assume a priestly office.

Gideon's ephod was constructed with the wrong material

2. Secondly, the ephod was constructed with the wrong material.

According to the Pentateuch, the ephod was to be constructed of blue cloth, 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.

Beauty is related to your reputation; obedience is related to your character.

Gideon's ephod was in the wrong location

3. Thirdly, perhaps the most significant error was that the ephod was in the wrong location.

Worship was to occur in Shiloh, not Gideon's hometown of Ophrah. So Gideon actually instituted a rival form of priesthood, a rival form of worship, and a rival location for worship.

The result of this sin in Gideon's life

Now notice the result of this sin in Gideon's life, in verse 27b.

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

The words translated "played the harlot," always refer to spiritual failure or unfaithfulness in the Old Testament. What the people praised in Gideon, no doubt, as spiritual attentiveness, God considered to be spiritual adultery.

God's response

So what did God do about Gideon's sin? Look at verse 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.

Wait a minute! All of these things have happened – where is the thunder from heaven; where is the bolt of lightning; where is immediate judgment on a man who has so presumed in his attempt to institute a rival form of worship and led the nation astray?

No thunder? God must not be that bothered. Evidently Gideon thought the same thing.

If Gideon's downward spiral teaches us anything, it is this truth – if the heavens are silent when we sin, it does not mean that God did not notice.

I have had many people over the years say to me, "Stephen, you say I'm in sin, but God isn't doing anything about it. He must not think it's that bad – I don't hear any thunder!"

Two ways God tests men

Let me read the words of an author who lived two centuries ago. God has two ways of testing men:

- one, in the furnace of affliction;
- the other, in the refining pot of prosperity.

And the second is the much harder test of the two. Affliction tends to humble and soften and subdue. But in prosperity, self-esteem, self-reliance, self-satisfaction, self-will and pride are prone to spring up with a rank luxuriousness. The scriptures teach us of the inability of the human heart to drink a full cup of success without becoming intoxicated by success."

Gideon would enjoy forty years of prosperity – and his heart would become intoxicated with himself.

You might think that the greatest danger in a wayward believer's life would be God thundering out His judgment – bringing down misery, discipline – bankruptcy or disease or something similar. But it may actually be a greater judgment to the wayward one for God to not speak at all.

Results of Gideon's Sin

Let me give several things that happened as Gideon lived out his life, unaccountable to God and the scriptures.

Gideon's rival form of worship opened the door for national idolatry

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

Skip to versed 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 died, "We're already used to worshipping something other than God prescribed or allowed; we're already on our way toward idolatry, so why not go all the way?"

Why not? Baal was already in their blood.

This is like sons and daughters today who follow a father who is outwardly paying lip service to God, as Gideon did, but as soon as they are old enough and out of the home, they run after Baal! They never saw the reality of faith in their father!

There are sons within Christian families today, who are struggling with pornography. They have confided that they were introduced to it by their fathers – unwittingly. They saw their fathers watching it or they came across computer files. And their fathers do not even know it!

This is like Gideon's seventy sons – they are paying lip service to God, but they have already decided in their hearts, "As soon as that old hypocrite is dead and buried; as soon as I can move to another state; as soon as I get out on my own and far enough away, I'm going after Baal."

As soon as Gideon died, the nation turned his compromise into corruption.

Gideon's refusal to obey scripture opened the door to personal sin

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

Look back at verse 29.

Then Jerubbaal [the nickname meaning "The Baal Conqueror"] the son of Joash went and lived in his own house.

It must have been some house because verse 30 says,

Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives.

Why did Gideon have seventy sons who were direct descendants? Because he had many wives. Gideon was the famous leader, and of course, leaders should have more, so he had more. This was a typical Canaanite "perk" of power. But it was a direct violation of Deuteronomy, chapter 17, verse 17a, which Gideon knew,

He shall not multiply wives for himself . . .

"Ah, who says? It's the thing men do. It's the pagan perk of power."

Was Gideon satisfied with his seventy sons and many wives? No! Look at verse 31a.

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

Concubine is the social euphemism for mistress. Gideon has fifty to sixty wives, but is he satisfied with his life? No. He has got someone on the side in Shechem, which, by the way, is a Canaanite city. She is a Canaanite girl, so she is openly pagan and idolatrous. She bears him a son, as well.

The thunder clouds of God are beginning to gather.

I came across a parable that they say is an original Russian parable. A hunter was hunting in the woods for bear and a bear came around the corner and pinned him to the ground. And the bear said, "Just what are you looking for?"

The hunter replied, "Well, I'm looking for a bear to kill so that I can make a warm fur coat."

The bear said, "I see. Well, I'm hungry, so perhaps we can negotiate a compromise."

Thirty minutes later, the bear ambles away, and on the ground are the hunter's cap and gun. You are left to put the pieces together, which you already have. The bear got his full stomach by eating the hunter, and the hunter got his warm fur coat.

Let me talk frankly with men today – young and old alike.

Perhaps you have been running well. But, maybe just recently, you have stopped to talk to some bear. It may be in the form of flirtation at the office or on the campus. Maybe it is with a married woman, or perhaps it is with a girl who does not believe in Christ.

Perhaps the bear you are negotiating with comes in the form of business accounts or practices. You are stretching the truth; you are cutting corners. It may come in the form of padding your expenses – just a little, here and there.

It is a dangerous, hungry bear, and you are in the process of negotiating a compromise.

Some time ago, I was speaking with the president of a Bible College. He was commenting to me that they were struggling with students cheating on exams. Can you imagine a Bible student at a Bible college taking a test related to a biblical subject and cheating on it?

I have an older brother who is in the ministry. He told me about an incident that occurred while he was a student in seminary in Minnesota. One day, during a Greek exam, he observed a friend of his cheating. After class, he confronted him about it, and this student admitted that he had been cheating. In fact, he had been cheating for some time, and he confessed this to my brother. On his own volition, he went to the professor, confessed, and made amends. But something, my brother told me, still did not seem right.

They went through four years of seminary together and, on graduation day, everything came to light. It seems the guy had been living with a young lady who was an unbeliever. He had told her he was a student in law school. They lived together during his four years in seminary, or, so she thought, law school. But they had had such a fight that she had decided to kick him out. He was away at the time and, as she was packing his things, she came to his books. For the first time, she noticed that they were strange – they were not law books, they were theology books. And stamped inside most of them, at least the ones he had checked out from the library, was the name of the seminary he attended. She called the seminary and asked, “Why does my boyfriend have all of these books from your school?”

They said, “Because he’s a student here and he’s about to graduate.”

Two of the professors went out to that apartment and met with her. They unraveled all the lies and then, waited for him to return home. On the day of graduation, God decided to thunder from heaven – and this young man was caught. All his years of study went down the drain. The charade was over.

As tragic as that story is, the greater tragedy is the one who never gets caught, but instead, simply deteriorates into self-absorption, pride, and a wasted life. We call that self-destructing.

Now, notice a third thing that happened as a result of Gideon’s failure to distinctively follow after God.

Gideon’s lifestyle manifested open pride and ingratitude toward God

3. Thirdly, Gideon’s lifestyle eventually manifested open pride and ingratitude toward God.

Look again at verse 31.

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

The name “Abimelech” means, “my father is a king”.

Do you remember in verse 22, when the people said,

. . . Gideon, “Rule over us . . .”

In other words, “Gideon, become our king.”

And in verse 23,

But Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you . . . the Lord shall rule over you.”

Then, forty years later, we read that he has, because of his sensual lifestyle and his compromise and his utter disregard for the law of God, finally come to the point where he takes off the mask and announces what he has become. “I shall name my son Abimelech, because his father is a king!”

Every time someone calls his son’s name, it will announce the fact that Abimelech’s father is a king.

Everyone will lose. This will become the last period, in the book of Judges, where there is peace.

You will never read again of the nation Israel worshiping as a unified people. The future judges will be tainted with sin. A future one, that I am sure you know, Samson, will follow hard after Gideon.

The very next chapter of the book of Judges will literally drip with the blood of Gideon’s seventy sons. They will be killed by Abimelech, the son of his pagan girlfriend.

The heavens will thunder. God will speak.

C. H. Macintosh wrote, a century ago, in his commentary, *Genesis Notes*,

Many a vessel has sailed out of harbor in gallant style with all its sails spread; amid cheering and shouting, and with many a promise of a first-rate passage; but alas! Storms, waves, rocks and quicksands have changed things; and the vessel that began so well has ended in disaster.

Application – Lessons From Gideon’s Sin

What can we learn from this man who fell? Let me give several lessons.

The descent of any believer into a lifestyle of sin never occurs without warning

1. Lesson number one is, the descent of any believer into a lifestyle of sin never occurs without warning.

In other words, spiritual collapse never happens overnight and it never happens without God's word saying, "I told you so!"

Last night my family and I were in the van, heading for the concert here at church – and what a concert it was! The van was on empty and as I turned out of our subdivision, the light went on in the dashboard that reads, "low fuel". Imagine, I could have stopped, gotten the crow bar from the back, come up to the front, and proceeded to smash that little light until it went out. I could then say to my wife, "There, that fixed that!"

I could have removed the warning, but I would eventually discover the unchangeable truth that you cannot drive a car without gasoline!

Spiritual truth is the same. You never fall into a life of sin without ample warning. You can throw away the warning sign of scripture; you can ignore the beeping of the warning sounds, but you are warned.

In fact, did you know that there is no such thing as falling into sin? You walk into sin with your eyes wide open; you run toward sin; you embrace sin. You leave your telephone number, so sin knows where to reach you; you hand out your business card, so sin knows where to write to you.

You take the first step into sin! It might be a small thing – certainly no one would think badly of you. It might be:

- just one date with a non-Christian,
- just one lunch with a married man,
- just one bad check,
- just one sip or snort,
- just one magazine,
- just one phone call,
- just one bet,
- just one look,
- just one shortcut here and another there.

For Gideon, it was:

- "I think I'll have one more wife."
- "I think I'll worship in my hometown where it's convenient, rather than travel all the way to Shiloh."
- "I think I'll look for a girl among the unbelievers – they're not so bad!"

My friend, you can never say, after you are stranded spiritually or bankrupt morally, "I didn't have a chance."

Perhaps for you, this sermon is just one more way that God is flashing a warning light at you. Do you see it?! The thunder clouds are forming. Can you see them?!

The person who falls into sin has been sliding in that direction for some time, while ignoring the warning signs all around him.

Making a wise decision today does not guarantee a wise decision tomorrow

2. The second lesson that I believe we can learn from Gideon's ultimate ruin is, making a wise decision today does not guarantee a wise decision tomorrow.

Gideon said, "No, you can't follow me, God is your king!"

Forty years later, "God who? I am the king."

No matter how much you acquire in fame and fortune, in position and power, it will never be enough to satisfy. Even for the believer, we often forget that God is enough!

I've just finished reading the Book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon and Gideon are a lot alike. They had wealth, women, power, achievement, reputation . . . and were absolutely unsatisfied with life. They both began well, but ended in ruin.

I find it tragically ironic that in the book of Ecclesiastes, which I am convinced every man ought to read at least once a year, if not more, Solomon lists all his accomplishments and names them as empty folly. But never, not even once does Solomon ever mention the temple.

Do you remember Solomon's temple? His father designed it, but Solomon built it. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world. The architecture was stunning, the design brilliant; it was massive, majestic; most of it was covered with gold. And Solomon never mentions it!

The temple did not matter to Solomon and he never included it in his grand list. That is how far he had fallen.

One commentator put David's life and Solomon's life on a graph. David's life looked like a roller coaster – intimacy with God, then sin and repentance; walk with God, then sin and repentance. But Solomon's life looked like a sheer cliff – intimacy with God, then collapse.

Gideon's life ends in a moral collapse. And the truth is, it does not seem like he even sees it.

His illegitimate son, which he named out of obstinate pride, will soon rise up and kill his family, and the nation will follow after Baal.

The time to walk with God is today

3. A third lesson that shouts from the pages of Gideon's biography is, the time to walk with God is not yesterday, not even tomorrow, and certainly not some day; the time to walk with God is today.

Dr. John Walvoord served for fifty years as the president and chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary. I had the privilege of attending Dallas while he was in leadership. Marsha and I still have the letter he wrote to our newborn sons, as was his custom to babies born to the seminary family. As many of you know, he came for our church's first anniversary in 1987 and preached to one hundred

people gathered in our band room. He also dedicated our first campus in a special ceremony. He told me once that he prayed for our church every day. He was scheduled to dedicate this current campus as well, but his health declined and, within this last year, John Walvoord went home to be with his Lord.

I remember riding in the car with him on his last visit here, as I was driving him back to the airport to catch his flight home to Dallas. We were talking about ministry in general, when he made the comment, almost, it seemed, talking to himself. I can remember seeing him look out the window as he said, "You, know, I really want to finish well . . . I want to finish well."

This man was in his eighty's. He wanted to finish well.

He did. So can you. So can I.

If we learn these lessons – not by experience, but by acceptance, which is a far better teacher.

- Realize, the descent of any believer into a lifestyle of sin never occurs without warning.

So be alert to the warning! Maybe today is yet another one from your gracious, patient Lord.

- Recognize, wise decisions today do not guarantee wise decisions tomorrow.
- Remember, the time to walk with God is not yesterday, or tomorrow, but today.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/20/2004 by Stephen Davey.

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