

# Gideon: Stumbling Before the Finish

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[ 0 : 00 ] me, if you will, today at Judges, Judges chapter 8, verses 22 through 27. Judges chapter 8, verses 22 through 27. You know, Jackie Smith was one of the greatest high school athletes to ever play football in the state of Louisiana. He was an All-American. He went on to college, was one of the best tight ends considered in college football. He even went on to play in the NFL, and he was considered a Hall of Fame, one of the best tight ends to ever play the game. But many of you who remember the name Jackie Smith today, those of you who are old enough to remember the 1970s, you'll probably remember Jackie Smith for one play in his entire career that he will always be remembered for. It was in the 1979 Super Bowl. The Dallas Cowboys were playing the Pittsburgh Steelers, and the Cowboys were trailing late in the third quarter, 21 to 14. But the Cowboys, with their Hall of Fame quarterback, Roger Stalbeck, were driving, and they were deep into Pittsburgh territory. And it was third down, and the play was called. The ball was hiked. Roger Stalbeck goes back for the pass. Jackie Smith runs into the end zone, begins to cross. No one is even close to him. No one is within 10 yards of him.

And so Roger Stalbeck throws the ball right to him, and this is what happens. It's third down and three, Dallas at the Pittsburgh 10. Roger back to throw, has a man open in the end zone, caught, touchdown, dropped, dropped in the end zone, Jackie Smith all by himself. Oh, bless his heart, he's got to be the sickest man in America.

The Hall of Fame quarterback, I mean tight end, that one of the greatest of all time, but he will always be remembered for that one play. He ran down into the end zone, crossed over, Roger Stalbeck hit him right in his hands.

Whether it was the moment, whether it was the light, who knows, but this great tight end allowed the ball to hit him in the hands and bounce to the ground, and the Dallas Cowboys had to settle for a field goal.

And then they lost the game by four points, and so many believe that that one play cost the Dallas Cowboys the Super Bowl.

[ 2 : 40 ] And it ended up Jackie Smith retired after that game, even though the Dallas Cowboys asked him to come back. He was shamed and couldn't get beyond it, and he retired.

You know, the way an athlete plays throughout his whole career, nothing is more important sometimes than the way they end their career, because that's the way we typically remember them. And it's not only the athlete, but it's the Christian as well. What is very important and what we're going to be talking about today is finishing the race strong.

Finishing the race strong. There's nothing more critical in the Christian life than crossing that finish line and being faithful and being faithful and being faithful and running as strong and faithfully and as committed in that moment than at any other time in your life.

Maybe more so than any other time in your life, because it is so critical that we finished well. In my past church, I had a gentleman by the name of Donald Green.

[ 3 : 48 ] He was already in his early 80s. He might have been five feet tall, rounder than me, butterball. I always remember he'd pull his pants up to about right here.

But he was a ball of energy and fire. And he told me numerous times, I want to finish the race strong. I want to run the race and cross the finish line better than I ever did in my life.

And this is a man in his early 80s that was still going on mission trips to places like Romania. He was still coming out for church visitation every Monday night, whether it was raining or dark or cold. It didn't matter. He and his wife would show up. Now, I have to put this into context. We did grow there. That was our visitation ministry, which means you have four teams.

And each team, let's say Justin's on the G team, he would only show up the first Monday of the month. And then the R team would be the second, and you get the point.

[ 4 : 54 ] But Mr. Green and his wife, they came every week. It didn't matter. They were on fire for the Lord, passionate about making the name of Jesus known. And they wanted to serve faithfully until they crossed that finish line.

And it was always funny because there were a few times when Mr. Green might be out of town or he might not be feeling well or one thing or another. And he would call me, and it was almost like he was asking for permission not to come to visitation.

I was thinking, Mr. Green, you're doing more than most people half your age are doing. I've only asked for one night a month commitment, and you're already giving four and five nights out of the month.

So, you know, if you're not feeling well or you're out of town, we completely understand that. Well, this morning I want us to take a look at a figure in Scripture that we all know very well.

We know the highlights, the achievements, and the success of this figure. But do we know how he finished the race?

[ 5 : 59 ] Do we know what took place after the famous battle that Gideon defeated the Midianite army with 300 men?

He was going up against 135,000 Midianite soldiers with 300 men, and God gave him the victory. We all know that story. But do we know what takes place next and how Gideon stumbled before the finish line? Let's look together at our Scripture in Judges 8, and we're going to be reading verses 22 through 27.

The Israelites said to Gideon, Rule over us, you, your son, and your grandson, because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian. But Gideon told them, I will not rule over you, nor my son rule over you.

The Lord will rule over you. And he said, I do have one request, that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder. You know, it was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings.

[ 7 : 11 ] And they answered, We'll be glad to give them. So they spread out a garment, and each man threw a ring from his plunder onto it. The weight of the gold rings he asked for came to 1,700 shekels, not counting the ornaments, the pendants, and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian or the chains that were on their camels' necks.

Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer. Father, we come to you this morning, and we thank you, Lord, for the Word of God. We thank you that we can come to it, and we can learn life lessons, and we can grow in our relationship with you, and we can trust it, knowing that it is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

And we ask, Lord, today that you just speak to each one of us, draw us closer to you and nearer to you, and speak to our hearts that as we leave this place today, those whom we encounter will say, surely they were with the Lord.

And it's in your holy name we pray, Father. Amen. You know, following Gideon's great military victory, where he went out and he defeated a Midianite army of 135,000 soldiers, and God had narrowed his army down to only 300 men.

[ 8 : 47 ] And the Israelites came to him and said, because you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian, we want you to become our king.

You know, they wanted to be like all the other nations around them. Now, this was a big moment. This was a big moment. Why? Because up to this point, Israel had never had a king.

Israel had been set aside by the hand of God to be ruled by God and God alone, and they'd never had a king. But they're asking Gideon to become their king.

You know, we all like to be bragged on, don't we? We all like to feel important or feel special or even to be in a position of power. And so, this must have, if not for just a second, been a real temptation for Gideon, for him to accept the offer, you know, to believe that he is the one that helped them be delivered from Midian and become their king.

But overall, Gideon shows some very good wisdom here in denying their quest. Look at verse 23. But Gideon told them, I will not rule over you, nor my son rule over you.

[10:04] The Lord will rule over you. Gideon understood that Israel was God's chosen people, and they had been set aside to be ruled by God, and they were to never have a king.

Now, we know later on in history that they do adopt a king, but it becomes the downfall of them. But Gideon, at this moment in time, realizes that God was certainly to be the one to rule over them, and so he refuses their request certainly to become king.

Now, this is also a big moment here, because Gideon had led Israel to defeat an army that was 450 times larger than themselves.

Now, I want to put this in context today, because if it were in modern day weaponry, we might could think, yeah, 300 men with jet fighters flying over, dropping bombs, machine guns, tanks, all the modern day nuclear weaponry and stuff, 300 men might defeat an army of 135,000.

But that's not the context in which they were setting, was it? What were they fighting with? Swords, maybe spears.

[11:31] I don't know if they had bow and arrows at that point in time. But let's think about this. Who's the biggest and strongest man in the room? Brian Hester. Brian Hester's the biggest, strongest, most ferocious man in the room.

And he's got a spear. Now, surround him with 450 men, also with spears and swords. What are his odds of winning?

I'll even give him a gun. But he's still going up against 450 men. What are his odds of winning? Probably not very good.

He's not going to succeed. And so when you look at the odds of the battle, there's only one explanation as to who won that battle.

And after all the history of Israel, they should have known. All the things they've seen God do throughout their history, all the battles He had already won for them, they should have known.

[12:39] But look who's getting the glory. You know, they told Gideon they wanted him to rule over them because he had won the battle.

And there's not one spoken word here in Scripture that is in recognition of God. Not one word here in recognition that God is who won that battle.

Now we can look back and remember, go back to the story of Gideon. When he first raised his army, he raised an army of 32,000. And God said, your army's too big. Narrow it down.

So 22,000 soldiers left. He had an army of 10,000. He said, it's still too big. Narrow it down. Now we know why. Now we know why God told them, or told Gideon that his army was too big.

Because if he had gone into battle with an army of 32,000 men and defeated an army of 135,000, somehow maybe they thought, well, we pulled it off.

[13:41] Maybe we're better than we thought we were. But when you go into a battle of 300 men, that again the odds are 450 to 1, there's no explanation except God won that battle.

But they were given Gideon the glory and the praise. Now Gideon refused to be their king, but he does make one request. He makes a request that they take a gold earring, which the Midianite soldiers had the tradition of wearing gold earrings, and he asked for one gold earring from each of the soldiers.

And they were glad. They probably were thankful that he didn't require even more than that. They just asked for one gold earring. And so they laid out a garment, and the soldiers began to throw their one gold earring into that.

And it came out to be 43 pounds of gold that Gideon had. And I don't see anything in Scripture or anything that I've read that tells me that Gideon's request was wrong and that he was doing anything out of the will of God by requesting their earrings.

There are times in Scriptures, people like Abraham, that they were told, don't take a single thing. And they were told and instructed by God not to touch the plunder.

[15:10] But I don't see that in the story with Gideon at all. So I don't see anything that he's done here to be wrong. But look what he does with the gold.

Verse 27. Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. And all Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.

You know, Gideon, he takes this gold and he makes it into an ephod. Now, an ephod was something that was associated with the priestly garments and priestly robes.

And we don't completely understand everything there is about it, but it was a way that the priest consulted God and discerned God's will.

Look with me, if you will, and I didn't put this in the notes, so you'll have to actually open your Bibles. The first Samuel 23. First Samuel 23, and let's look at verses 9 through 12.

[16:16] This is where David was seeking the will of the Lord. It says, When David learned that Saul was plotting against him, he said to Abathar the priest, Bring the ephod.

David said, O Lord God of Israel, your servant has heard definitely that Saul plans to come to Kaliah and destroy the town on account of me. Will the citizens of Kaliah surrender me to him? Will Saul come down as your servant has heard? O Lord God of Israel, tell your servant. And the Lord said he will. Again, David asked, Will the citizens of Kaliah surrender me and my men to Saul? The Lord said they will. Flip over to 1 Samuel 30 and look at verses 7 and 8. 1 Samuel 30, verses 7 and 8.

Then David said to Abathar the priest, the son of Abimelech, Bring me the ephod. Abathar brought it to him, And David inquired of the Lord, Shall I pursue this raiding party?

[17:21] Will I overtake them? Pursue them, he answered. You will certainly overtake them and succeed in the rescue. So the ephod was a part of the priestly garment And it was a means for them to seek the Lord's will and direction.

Today we have the Holy Spirit that lives within us. And the Holy Spirit guides and directs us. We don't need things like casting of lots and putting out the fleece, Things like that.

We seek the Word of God and we seek the Holy Spirit to lead us. But in that day and time they didn't have the Word of God the way we do today. And they certainly didn't have the Holy Spirit the way we do today.

And so God had given them that means to discern the will. But Gideon takes the gold from the earrings that he had gotten And he makes this ephod.

But look what happens. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping there And it became a snare to Gideon and his family.

[18:29] You know I'm sure Gideon knew who won that battle. If you go back and you read how God worked in Gideon's life To even give him the courage to go into a battle like that.

Gideon knew. And we can assume, again scripture doesn't tell us So we're assuming and sometimes that may get us into trouble. But we can assume that Gideon was doing something Probably to bring glory and honor to God.

He made this ephod and he put it in his hometown. It was probably something to help the people recognize And remember that God won the battle. But the people took what Gideon created with his own hands And they began to worship it.

They turned it into an object of worship And this became a snare to Gideon and his family. Now there's two things that I would say About Gideon in this moment and in this story.

Two things that Gideon did wrong. First of all, when they gave him glory for winning the battle There's not a word here that tells us that Gideon corrected them.

[19:37] There's not a word that Gideon said, I didn't win that battle. And he did say, I won't rule over you. But he didn't say, I didn't win that battle.

The glory belongs to the Lord. And so, one of the first things that Gideon does wrong in this That becomes a snare to him and shames his name and his family Is he takes the glory away from God. But the other thing I believe, and this is my beliefs Is that he didn't stop the people from worshiping the ephod either. You know, they prostituted themselves by worshiping the ephod And Gideon never stopped it.

He could have destroyed it, thrown it in the river, Done whatever, burned it, melted all the gold back down, Whatever, to stop the people from doing it. But he didn't.

Do you remember John in Revelation 19? An angel appeared before him. And John was so overwhelmed that he fell before him And began to worship.

[20:43] And the angel said, no, no, no, no, no. Don't do that. Get up to your feet. I'm just a messenger of the Lord. Do not worship me. Or do you remember in Acts chapter 14 When Paul and Barnabas, they healed a crippled man.

And the people began to respond, Y'all must be gods. And they began to try to worship. And Paul and Barnabas had to fight to stop them. But they stopped them and they said, Do not worship us. We're only men. Worship only belongs to Jesus Christ. And so, what Gideon may have attempted to do, You know, to bring recognition to God, He allowed it to get out of control.

And he took the glory from the Lord for winning the battle. But he didn't stop the people from worshipping the ephod. And he left it up there in his hometown throughout his lifetime.

You know, we can't say enough about the importance of finishing well. You know, Paul frequently uses the imagery of running a race to show what the Christian life is like.

[ 21 : 56 ] And that it is important for us to run the race with all perseverance, throw off every weight, everything that would hinder us or slow us down, but to finish the race as strongly as we ever ran it.

Never stop. Never quit. Never give up. But keep running the race. The Christian life is very much that way. It doesn't matter how we got started.

You know, sometimes, maybe some of us in here today didn't get started very well in either living the life or living the Christian life.

Maybe we've stumbled a bit along the way. But God is a gracious God that loves us and forgives us, picks us up, and encourages us to get back to running the race.

So despite the failures, despite the sin that maybe we've fallen into throughout our lives, we can go to Christ and ask Him to forgive us and cleanse us and purify us with the blood of Jesus Christ that was shed on Calvary and then continue running the race and set it up just like Donald Green, the gentleman in my last church.

[ 23 : 20 ] Make it your goal. Make it your intentions to run the race strong and to continue to run the race and cross the finish line as strongly as you ever ran it throughout your lifetime.

You know, the Apostle Paul didn't get started very well in serving the Lord Jesus Christ in his life either. He started off as a Pharisee, up and becoming.

You know, he had a great future in the Pharisee party and he may have one day become the high priest. We don't know that. But he was ruled or governed by the law and a set of rules and regulations.

And he was so passionate about that that he was out killing Christians. He was putting Christians to death. He was arresting Christians and having them thrown in jail or whipped and beaten.

He was even on his way to Damascus to have Christians arrested when Jesus Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus in a bright light.

[ 24 : 31 ] And you know, from that day forward, Paul's life changed. From that day forward, Paul no longer lived for a set of laws or rules, regulations.

He set aside all of his ambitions, all of his drive, all of the things he had been living for before, and he focused upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

And from that point forward, he began to die daily unto himself and allow God's will, God's wishes, God's dreams for his life to be lived out.

And he faced whippings, stonings, beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, snakebites. He faced all of those things with joy to take the gospel message into the world to those who still needed to hear it, to take the gospel so that people could hear of the love of Jesus Christ, come to Jesus, be forgiven of their sin, and be freed from the penalty of sin.

The penalty that those individuals would spend all eternity in hell. And it was Paul's desire that burned within him to make the name of Jesus known and that people would worship him and live for him and serve him.

[ 25 : 58 ] And Paul said he died daily. He had to die daily. Every day he got up, he put himself aside. The things that were important to him previously are no longer important.

He counted it as rubbish, he said. All of the things of the past were rubbish that he could only make Jesus and the blood of Christ that was shed at Calvary to make it known.

The problem sometimes in Christians' lives are as we think that when we get saved, that's the end of the race.

And really that's just the start. That's when the starting pistol gets fired, is at the beginning of the race. And that's when our race begins, when we come to know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. And we are to fix our eyes upon Christ, throw off every hindrance that would hinder us, and run to win the race.

[ 27 : 04 ] That means dying to self. All the things, all of our hopes, all of our dreams, all of our ambitions, all the things that we were living for, we set them aside, and we allow the will of God to be birthed within us.

And now our dreams, our hopes, our desires, the things that we live for are given to us by God.

That it is our ambition to bring glory to the Lord Jesus Christ above all else. And we're willing to face whatever challenges, whatever obstacles, whatever things come our way, we will face them and pay the price to be running that race to make Jesus Christ so that when we cross the finish line, we can finish it strong.

A few years ago, I was leading a Bible study at Cafe Connections. And many of y'all know this. Many of you know this story. But we were leading a Bible study on Friday night.

And we had a rather interesting mixture of individuals coming to that Bible study. Well, one night, I live up 183, and there's some trailers along the way that I stopped and picked up a couple of guys that had been homeless.

[ 28 : 34 ] And they moved up there to move in with one of them's mother. But I stopped there. And when I got there, Jimmy, not Jimmy Dicker, by the way, he was sitting there, and he just had that blank stare on his face like, and he was sunburned really bad.

And I said, man, what are you doing? I said, you need to put your shirt on. You're getting really sunburned. And he just stared at me. And I said, are you coming to Bible study tonight? Well, the other gentleman was off working, you know, mowing somebody's yard and stuff.

So I kept asking him. And it took probably 10 to 15 minutes to finally get him to say, no, I'm not coming. So I'm like, almost like, good, you know, let's go. Jumped in my truck, took off. I stopped at McDonald's.

I had pre-ordered some hamburgers because I always fed the people. And then went over to Cafe Connections. And I hadn't been there two minutes. And he walked in the door. And I was thinking, man, how'd you get, he didn't have a car.

And this was probably five miles up 183. How did you get here? He never would answer me. He just looked at me. And I started thinking in my spirit, Lord, please don't let him pull out a gun or a knife or something to kill me.

[ 29 : 46 ] Because I'm beginning to realize something's really wrong. Well, I realized it back in the trailer. Something's really wrong with this guy. But he kept just staring at me. Well, I learned some valuable lessons that day. Number one, you don't turn your back on somebody on meth.

But I was standing there at the island. And I was putting the hamburgers and drinks and stuff out. And I'm like, hey, Jimmy, you hungry? Come on over here and get this. Well, the next thing I know, he punched me in the face.

Right there, just as hard as he could. He was 23 and a rather big dude that he could have thrashed me easily. However, God answered my prayer. He didn't have a gun or a knife.

But he hit me so hard that Michelle made me go have my jaw x-ray to make sure it wasn't broken. Because I was leaving a couple days after that to go to Peru.

But he hit me and then he ran. Fortunately for me, he hit me and ran. And he was asked later why he did it. And he said, voices told him to hit me.

[ 30 : 45 ] Now, I don't know if those are demonic voices or voices he heard because he was on meth. But, I'll have to admit, it rattled me and it scared me. And I had to really think long and hard did I even want to go back over there and risk him coming in again to, you know, this time bring a gun or a knife.

And I really struggled. I thought about just ending the Bible study. Fortunately, I was co-teaching that with Jim Gilstrap. And for those of you that know Jim, Jim's not scared of anything.

You know, he walked around in Peru, you know, never scared of the most dangerous areas where he was, which might not have been real smart. But anyway, he's not scared. And if Jim's watching this today, hi Jim.

But, so we continued and I brought myself to go back over there. And I even had the opportunity to eventually talk to Jimmy, forgive him, told him I didn't hold anything.

I didn't press charges against him. And I invited him back to the Bible study. And he did come back once. But the point of all of that is sometimes we face challenges.

[ 31 : 56 ] Sometimes we face difficulties. Sometimes we put ourselves in awkward positions. But God wants us to run the race as strong as we ever did.

And we see that in the life of Paul. Paul ran the race. And he faced all those difficulties being imprisoned, being whipped, being beaten, being stoned to where the people thought he was dead, being shipwrecked, being snakebitten, and he did it all for the glory of the Lord.

Can I ask you today, are you running the race like that? Can you say, like Paul says in 2 Timothy 4, 7, I have fought the good fight.

I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Are you running the race today with that much focus, that much determination, that much commitment that your only goal and purpose is to bring glory and honor to the Lord Jesus Christ and you're faithful and obedient to however he wills to use your life.

That you've taken all those things that you've been living for and you've set them aside. They don't matter. It's all rubbish and garbage compared to knowing Jesus Christ and making Him known.

[ 33 : 22 ] If you're not living that way, can I ask you another question? Why not? Why not? What stands in your way to making Jesus your priority of life and that you will live for Him and serve Him and trade all the things you used to live for for the things that He wants you to live for and the purposes that He has in your life.

I'm going to ask the musicians to come and lead us in a closing time. And I want you to just be very sensitive to the Holy Spirit this morning and what He is saying to you.

And I'll be down here if you'd like to come forward. Lord, I'll be more than happy to pray with you or if you have a decision to make today that maybe you don't know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and today's the day that you want to ask Him to come into your heart to be your Lord.

I'll be here to pray with you.