



Central Peninsula Church

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Judges 7:15–8:23

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When Big is Bad

Every year a publication called *The Parachutist*, which is the official magazine of the US Parachute Association, has published an article called their “fatality summary.” In the article a writer looks at the factors contributing to parachute deaths the previous year. Parachutists are classified first as students, then after 20 jumps they receive their A license. After 100 jumps they get their C license. After 200 jumps they get their D license. In a recent fatality summary, Paul Sitter points to an alarming statistic: 59% of all parachuting fatalities were suffered by elite jumpers with a D license. The article shows a graph with a dramatic upward spike for fatalities among those with 200 to 1,000 jumps. The lesson is clear: experience, if it is accompanied by overconfidence, can be a liability. Just because you know what you’re doing, doesn’t make you invulnerable. We’re more likely to fall after hundreds of successes than we were as novices.

The same truth applies in our spiritual lives. It’s one of those seeming paradoxes of life with God: when we think we’ve got things in hand; when we’re sure of ourselves and our abilities and our strength, then we’re most vulnerable. As David Roper says, “God fears our strength, and so should we. Strong people bluster about and get in God’s way. There’s little he can do with them. It’s only the weak who can be made truly great.”

That principle appears repeatedly in the Bible, but the story of Gideon may be the best example of all. Last week we saw how the people of Israel were overwhelmed by the Midianites who were described as **“numerous as locusts...without number...as numerous as the sand on the seashore”** (7:12). We saw how God called a young man named Gideon to be Israel’s deliverer, a man who was “the least of the least,” a fearful and doubting man who needed extra assurance each step of the way. We saw how Gideon called together an army of 32,000 Israelites, but God said, “There are too many of you...” and reduced them to just 300 men. Through all this we learned that you cannot be too small for God to use you, but you can be too big.

Unfortunately, Gideon exemplifies both sides of that formula. He spent the first half of his life small enough for God to use him in a powerful way. But he spent the second half of his life too big for God to use. You might wonder, what happened? How does a man or woman start so well with God and finish so poorly?

I. When we’re too big, we resort to the weapons on the flesh.

We last saw Gideon and his little band of 300 ready to take on the Midianites, who are camped just a few miles north of them in the Jezreel Valley. In the middle of verse 15, Gideon says to his troops, “Arise, for the Lord has given the camp of Midian into your hands.” He then divides his men into three groups. And then he does something rather strange. Instead of swords, he puts trumpets and empty pitchers in their hands. Inside the pitchers are torches or candles. He tells them in v. 17, “When my group comes up to the camp of Midian, do what we do. When we blow our horns, you blow yours.” Look at v. 19.

“So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the pitchers that were in their hands.”

At about 10:30 at night, Gideon surrounds the enemy’s camp. It was just after new guards had been posted and the old guards were returning to their tents. The Israelites’ main weapon was noise; and between the trumpet blasts and the smashing of jars, they created a sense of panic among the awakened Midianites. Once the jars were broken, 300 torches lit up the night. To add to the nightmare, a ringing battle cry pierced the air. The Midianites were convinced that a powerful army was about to massacre them. In all the confusion they began fighting among themselves. Finally, to avoid the slaughter, they fled south toward the Jordan River. In v. 23 Gideon calls the southern tribes of Israel in for help as the Midianites run in their direction. He also asks the people of Ephraim to keep them from crossing the Jordan. They cut off the waters, and killed the two Midianite generals, Oreb and Zeeb.

So far so good, right? Gideon leads Israel in a great victory. It was clearly the Lord’s doing! Gideon is still small enough to depend on God. That’s obvious because he was relying on *the weapons of faith*. The weapons he used—trumpets, torches and pitchers—seem anything but intimidating. But, these exemplify his faith in God.

About seven years ago in Ethiopia there was a giant tree that stood on the banks of the Awash River. The tree had stood for generations. For years, the people who lived in the surrounding area had suffered through famines, and in their suffering they looked to the tree for

help. They believed a spirit gave it divine powers. They kissed the tree when they passed by it. As they passed by it, they would tell outsiders in hushed tones that this tree saved them. In 1989 World Vision started a development project there. The World Vision workers could see that this tree had enslaved the people through superstition and fear. They believed it was an idolatrous barrier to what God wanted to do in that community. One morning, as the staff prayed together, one of Jesus' promises struck them, "If you have faith, you can say to this tree, 'Be taken and removed' and it will obey you." And so in faith they began to pray that God would bring down that tree. Soon the whole community knew they were praying for the demise of the tree. Six months later the tree began to dry up, its leaves disappeared, and it collapsed like a stricken giant into the river. The people of that community were astonished: "Your God has done this! He dried up this tree?" In the days that followed, about 100 members of that community received Christ as Savior. They saw God's power displayed through faith and prayer. That's how we're called to fight. Not with the weapons of this world, but with the weapons of faith and prayer. That's why Gideon was so effective.

But starting in chapter 8, Gideon encounters two problems with fellow-Israelites. First, the men of Ephraim file a serious complaint with him. **"Then the men of Ephraim said to him, 'What is this thing you have done to us, not calling us when you went to fight against Midian?' And they contended with him vigorously"** (v. 1). They had a proud heritage of warfare and were insulted that Gideon didn't call on them earlier. I see a lot of pride and selfishness here, don't you? Why can't they just rejoice in the victory? It was God's victory anyway. If I were Gideon I'd be a little annoyed. But he responds wisely.

"But he said to them, 'What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? God has given the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb into your hands; and what was I able to do in comparison with you?' Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that" (vv. 2-3).

He assures them that they actually did more than the others. God allowed these Ephraimites the honor of killing the Midianite leaders, isn't that enough? So their anger subsided. Gideon shows a lot of wisdom here as a leader. He doesn't overreact. He doesn't get ticked off. Proverbs says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath."

The second problem with fellow-Israelites arises as Gideon and his men continue to chase down the Midianites.

"Then Gideon and the 300 men who were with him came to the Jordan and crossed over,

weary yet pursuing. He said to the men of Succoth, 'Please give loaves of bread to the people who are following me, for they are weary, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian'" (vv. 4-5).

Being weary from war, Gideon asks the men of Succoth for nourishment as they pursue the Midianite kings. But they refused. Look at v. 6. **"The leaders of Succoth said, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your army?'"** They obviously didn't think Gideon stood a chance. This time he isn't so gentle. Look at v. 7. **"Gideon said, 'All right, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will thrash your bodies with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers.'"** Gideon took this as a personal affront. Basically, they say "Who are you?" So he says, "You're going to pay for this." In vv. 8-9 the same thing happens at Penuel, and Gideon warns that he would return and demolish the well-known tower that stood there. Later, after he captured the two kings, he took them back to Succoth and Penuel. He wanted to prove to them how wrong they were about him. Look at v. 15-17.

"He came to the men of Succoth and said, 'Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, concerning whom you taunted me, saying, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are weary?'" He took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and he disciplined the men of Succoth with them. He tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city."

Now these are fellow-Israelites he's killing. You begin to get the feeling that Gideon is beginning to operate on his own agenda. He's no longer trusting the Lord to fight his battles. More and more it's all about him.

Then in v. 18 Gideon is ready to deal with his two captives. Look at what happens in vv. 18-21.

"Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, 'What kind of men were they whom you killed at Tabor?' And they said, 'They were like you, each one resembling the son of a king.' He said, 'They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if only you had let them live, I would not kill you.' So he said to Jether his firstborn, 'Rise, kill them.' But the youth did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a youth. Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, 'Rise up yourself, and fall on us; for as the man, so is his strength.' So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments which were on their camels' necks."

Now something new comes out in the story. Gideon is out for revenge—they'd killed his brothers. So he asks his young son to kill them. Why would he do that? Because to be killed by a boy was considered a disgrace. It was also more messy! That's why they want Gideon to do it. It would be quicker, cleaner and more honorable. But Gideon wants to humiliate them.

Gideon reminds me of what's happened with the mistreatment of prisoners in Iraq. We wonder, how could our own servicemen do that? But that's what fallen people do. In 1971, Dr. Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University conducted an experiment in the basement of Stanford's psychology building. He created a simulated prison, and he randomly assigned 24 Stanford students to be either the guards or the prisoners. Within a few days, the students playing the guards became sadistic. They placed bags over the prisoners heads. They forced them to strip and humiliated them with sexual pranks. Students from one of America's most prestigious schools descended into barbarism with alarming speed. Zimbardo concluded that prisons breed violence because the balance of power is so unequal and power corrupts. We know this corruption is the result of our fallen human nature. Given the right circumstances, the potential for what happened in Iraq is in all of us.

The Gideon in chapter 8 is different than one in chs. 6 and 7. Did you catch how they described Gideon—he resembles the son of a king! What happened to the guy we met in ch. 6? He was the least of the least, but now he's a stud. In ch. 7 he was small enough to depend on God and use the weapons of faith. But in chapter 8 he's too big and he resorts to the weapons of the flesh. He's now exacting violent revenge. The one who was the least of the least is now acting like a big shot.

II. When we're too big, we fail to finish well.

It gets even worse. Look at vv. 22-23.

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

Certainly the idea of installing Gideon as king would be attractive to the Israelites. They'd have a proven leader to defend against their enemies. But the people seem to forget that it was God who gave them the victory. They praise Gideon for delivering them from the Midianites, not God. One of the tendencies of our sinful hearts is to exalt men to the place that belongs only to God. This must have been a tempting offer for Gideon. We love power and prestige. But he declines, saying that the Lord must rule over Israel. Sounds good. But look what happens next.

“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.) 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. 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. 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. 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. His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. And Gideon the son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.” (vv. 24-32).

All of us like Gideon are on a journey of faith. Like Gideon, we have a first half and a second half. Obviously, the point is to finish the race, and to finish well. To continue to serve Christ our whole life through, growing to be more and more like him. Paul wrote in 2 Tim 4:7-8, **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith...”** But Gideon teaches us that just because you start well doesn't mean you will finish well. One of the things that can happen to us, especially in the second half, is that we get too big for God to use us.

This can happen especially after we've experienced some success. We've met some of our financial goals. We've fought the battles to keep our marriage together. We've raised our kids. We've accomplished some things we set out to do in our careers. We've seen the Lord use us in some significant ways. We begin to ride on past victories. We take the attitude that we deserve a break. We've seen already in the book of Judges how God tests us. It's a mistake to think that the only way God can test us is through adversity. God also tests us through prosperity. Success might be a more difficult test than failure.

Success can cause us to let our guard down. We don't remain vigilant in our battle with sin. We have to realize that danger always abounds. The nature of the danger may change, but it's always there. The danger in the second half of life is probably more subtle. Gideon didn't fall for the obvious. He said no to being king, but he decided to take a few earrings (“Just one from each of you”). First he had one wife, then he got a few more, and finally he kept a little concubine down in Shechem. In the end, he got to the point where he called his son, Abimelech. Do you what that means? It means, “My father is king.” Sooner or later your heart reveals itself. But Gideon didn't fall off a cliff; he wandered from the path little by little, walking closer and closer to the edge. Most of us are smart enough to avoid the obvious. We don't just fall off the cliff. The things that get us in trouble are disguised. We don't rush headlong into sin, rather we compromise with evil and play with temptation. But before long we find ourselves ensnared.

Gideon was tripped up in four different areas, and they're the same things that will trip us up. The first area was worship. He took the spoils of victory and made an "ephod," which is either a garment or an idol of some kind. Historically, the ephod was a like a fancy apron which was worn by the high priest. It may be that Gideon was setting himself up as a priest, but this was wrong, and the result was that "all Israel played the harlot with it" and it became a became a "snare" to Gideon and his family. We have to guard our worship of God. This doesn't mean we can't miss church on Sunday. It means that we can never stop worshiping God in our lives, privately and corporately. The ephod today may well be the TV set. "I don't need to go to church. I can just watch Schuler or Stanley." We fool ourselves into thinking sitting in front of a TV set can replace being in church. Before long it's not the TV set but the golf course. "I really worship better out here!" It happens especially to people in the second half of life. The kids are raised, the condo is up at Tahoe, you've heard a million sermons.

Gideon's second problem area was wealth. It probably started when he took the crescent ornaments from the Midianites. Then he collected the earrings, which by the way would have amounted to around 50 pounds of gold! Even though his wealth was masked in spiritual clothing, it was still a snare. We have to guard against a love of wealth. Like Gideon, we can try to disguise our desire for riches with a religious dressing. "Well, this really all belongs to the Lord." Or, "I'm just trying to be a good steward." But it's a great temptation to accumulate things. And often times in the second half we can finally live without financial strain, but the freedom that brings becomes a "snare" to us.

His third problem area was with women: "He had many wives," and he also had a concubine in Shechem. Gideon had not only adopted the Canaanite standard of polygamy, but with his taking of a concubine, he also took on their moral standards. We have to guard our passions. How many spiritual leaders, how many Gideons have been destroyed by uncontrolled lust! How many men, like King David, in the second half of life have fallen prey to this sin. Again, this will happen little by little. It begins in the mind, which is the place where the battle must be fought.

Fourth, Gideon had a problem with pride. When he named his son, Abimelech, it was a dead give away. Even though he turned down the offer for him and his sons to be kings over Israel, he secretly saw himself in that position. It is easy to say one thing

and to do or think something else. God gives us success, but it is easy to take the credit for ourselves, to let people exalt us, to lavish the praise. You know, this is a real temptation for me here at CPC. I don't have the title of Senior Pastor here; no one does. There's a reason for that. But because I've been here longer than anyone else and because I'm up in the pulpit more, I can sure act like a Senior Pastor. I can sure lavish the reverential treatment of a Senior Pastor of a large church. I may not have a parking space with my name on it, but everyone knows where I'm supposed to park.

We must guard ourselves in these four areas. We're on a journey of faith. The goal is to finish well. As we've seen, the road is difficult and tiring. When at last the end comes into sight, we might be tempted to let down. Most car accidents take place within just a few miles from home. For you and I, the time to be most cautious is when our journey is nearing the end. The key is to guard your heart; stay small, humble and dependent on God.

CONCLUSION

The story of Gideon doesn't end on all that bad of a note. Verse 32 says he was died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash. In the Hebrew way of thinking, that's a good death. And don't forget that in the NT book of Hebrews Gideon is remembered as a man of faith despite his failings (Heb 11:32-34).

This past week my wife and I buried her 96-year-old grandmother. She was quite a woman. One of eight children, she was born into a coal miner's family in Wales in 1908. She was tough and strong. At her burial, her son said, "She wasn't always right, but she was never in doubt." One of the things she was never in doubt about was her faith in Jesus Christ. She wasn't perfect, but she finished well.

For years, George Beverly Shea has sung at Billy Graham Crusades. He's an old man now, but he still sings the same old song. May our lives testify to the truth he sang:

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold;
I'd rather be His than have riches untold;
I'd rather have Jesus than have houses or land.
I'd rather be led by his nailed-pierced hand...
I'd rather have Jesus than men's applause
I'd rather be faithful to His dear cause;
I'd rather have Jesus than worldwide fame.
I'd rather be true to his Holy name,
Than to be the king of a vast domain
Or be held in sin's dread sway.
I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today.

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