



## FALLING AT THE FINISH

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Judges 8:22-35  
Tenth Message  
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The American sprinter and hurdler, Gail Devers, was one of the major stories of the recent Olympic Games. She won the 100 meter dash, and was favored to win the gold medal in the 100 meter hurdles, a feat that had not been accomplished since Fanny Blankers-Koen won both these events in the 1948 Olympics. From the start of the hurdles race, Devers forged ahead of the field. With one hurdle to go, she had an insurmountable lead. Then disaster struck. Her foot caught the last hurdle and she toppled forward, staggered and fell. Several runners flashed by her. She lunged at the finish line, but she had to settle for fifth place. The prize was in sight, but just as she neared the finish, she fell.

In our study on the life of Gideon from the book of Judges, we have been talking about acquiring a personal faith in God. The journey is fraught with obstacles, but there is one supreme danger: no matter how far we travel on this road, no matter how far in front of the pack we are, no matter what we have achieved, there is always the danger of falling at the finish. We are in danger of being tripped up when we are running well.

As we come to the last chapter in the life of Gideon, we find that his saga ends on a sobering note. The book of Judges tells the stories of people very much like ourselves — people with God-given potential for greatness and an unflinching capacity for catastrophe. We have seen the greatness of God demonstrated in Gideon's life, a hero who began in weakness and obscurity. We witnessed his struggle as he learned to believe in God without depending on fleeces and road signs. At last we saw his triumphant faith as he led the nation of Israel in a rout of the Midianites — a battle against insurmountable odds, fought with very questionable weapons. But, unfortunately, the story does not end there. Today we will look at the catastrophic conclusion of this story for, like Gail Devers, Gideon falls at the finish.

Our study now brings us to chapter 8 in the book of Judges. Following the rout of Midian in the valley of Jezreel, and the death of Oreb and Zeeb, Gideon and his 300 men pursue the enemy across the Jordan. (There is a descriptive phrase in verse 4 of chapter 8 that says that Gideon was "weary yet pursuing.") Gideon sought to enlist the aid of two cities, Succoth and Peniel. He needed food for his weary troops, but he received nothing. Undaunted, he pursued until he had wiped out the rest of the enemy and captured two more leaders, Zebah and Zalmunna. On his way home he executed judgment on the two cities that did not help him and his men, and finally he killed Zebah and Zalmunna.

Gideon's resounding victory moved the people of Israel to want to crown him king. Let's pick up the story in verses 22-23 of chapter 8:

**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." (NASB)**

Certainly the idea of installing Gideon as king would be attractive to the Israelites. They would have a leader with proven abilities to defend them against other enemies. While there was provision in the law for a king to rule over them, it is clear that this request of the Israelites was outside of the will of God. Deuteronomy warns that the king must be one whom the Lord chooses, and God had given no such directions. Secondly, the people do not recognize God's provision in the victory. They praise Gideon for delivering them from the Midianites, giving him credit he didn't deserve. One of the prevailing tendencies of our sinful hearts is to exalt men to the place that belongs only to God. If someone came along today who could solve our economic woes, he or she could become a candidate for President overnight and would win in a landslide.

Certainly the idea of being made king over Israel would be attractive to Gideon. Men love power and prestige. But Gideon declines the tempting offer, saying that the Lord must rule over Israel. As was the case with his victory over the Midianites, this stands as a high point of Gideon's faith.

But failure is in close attendance. 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.) And 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. And 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 the camels' necks. And 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. And 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 Abiez-

**rites.** (8:24-32)

Here we learn that Gideon was having problems in four areas. The first mistake he made was with worship. He took the spoils of victory and made an "ephod," which is either a garment or a free-standing image. Historically, the ephod was a garment resembling a fancy apron which was worn by the high priest. It may be that Gideon, who had refused to be king, was setting himself up as a priest, and was shifting the worship of Yahweh from Shiloh to Ophrah. But God had not told him to do this.

What was the result of this action by Gideon? Verse 27: "and all Israel played the harlot with it." Harlotry implies that this ephod caused the nation of Israel to fall into idolatry. Also, his decision to make an ephod from the spoils became a "snare" to Gideon and his household. A snare is something that draws one away from his real purpose and then destroys him. Not only did the ephod become a snare to Israel, it also affected Gideon and his household. Gideon failed to obey the warning of Deut. 7:25: "The graven images of their gods you are to burn with fire; you shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them, nor take it for yourselves, lest you be snared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God."

Gideon's second problem area was that he enjoyed luxury, in defiance of Deut. 17:17, which says a king shall not "greatly increase silver and gold for himself." Gideon began life as "the least in Manasseh," but at the end he lived in extravagance. We could say that his desire for wealth was masked in spiritual clothing.

His third problem was with women: "He had many wives" (verse 30), and he also had a concubine in Shechem. But Deut. 17:17 says, "neither shall [a king] multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away." Gideon had not only adopted the Canaanite standard of polygamy, but with his taking of a concubine, he also took on their moral standards.

Fourth, Gideon had a problem with pride. He named the son whom he had with his concubine, Abimelech, meaning, "my father is king." The implication is that even though Gideon declined the offer for him and his sons to be kings over Israel, he secretly coveted this title and position. Even though he did not carry the mantle of king, he saw himself in that light. It is easy to say one thing and to do or think something else. But this pride was to cost the nation a civil war, for later, Abimelech would kill all but one of the 70 sons of Gideon.

Worship, women, pride, wealth. Gideon hit them all. When I was young, I told my mother that I would never drink or smoke, and that I would get a scholarship to college. When I got my scholarship, I thought to myself, "one out of three isn't bad!" But Gideon was 0 for 4. We find the sorry results of his failings in verses 33-35:

**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. Thus the sons of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon), in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel.**

The result of all of this was the falling away of Israel.

Even though the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon, and even though Midian did not lift up their heads anymore, the fruit of Gideon's choices was devastating for the nation. As soon as he died, Israel once again fell into idolatry. They began to worship a new god, Baal-berith. They did not remember the Lord their God, the one who had delivered them. Furthermore, "they did not show kindness to the household of Gideon in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel" (v. 35). Sometimes the consequences of sinful choices don't show up for awhile, but eventually they become evident.

I will make four observations and conclusions from this closing account of the life of Gideon. Here is my first observation: *The journey of faith never ceases to be dangerous; opportunities to be misguided abound.*

When my family and I were returning from our sabbatical this summer, we changed planes in Dallas/Ft. Worth. We arrived at our gate with a few minutes to spare. Sara, my fifteen-year-old daughter, and I waited with the luggage while the rest of the family checked out the airport. When the plane began to board, my wife and our two other children were nowhere in sight. After a bit my daughter went ahead to board the plane while I waited. At last the other three members of the family arrived and we proceeded to board. There was a long line, and when I looked up ahead, I didn't see my daughter. Then I noticed that the gate we were waiting at serviced two different flights, one to San Francisco and the other to Albuquerque. When I didn't see my daughter in line, I sent my wife on ahead to see if she was on the plane. So she pushed her way through the line with great difficulty. A few minutes later, she pushed her way back for her boarding pass so she could get on the plane. Later she returned and said there was no Sara. I told her that she should check the other plane, and she went to do so. When she got to the cabin of the plane, she told the stewardess what might have happened. The stewardess picked up the intercom and said: "If there is a Sara Hanneman on this plane, please get off. You are on the wrong plane." By this time, my two other children and I had arrived at our seats. After a little bit, my wife arrived with my daughter, who was trying to look as small and as inconspicuous as possible, walking behind her. We asked her what happened, and she said no one had checked her ticket, but she was confused when she saw that someone was sitting in her seat! We could hardly stop laughing, but Sara didn't think it was funny. She said she wished she had gone to Albuquerque.

Unless we remain alert, it is easy to head off in the wrong direction. No one is checking tickets to see where we are going, and we can go wherever we desire.

Gideon had won a wonderful victory. With his 300 men he had destroyed Midian and his 135,000 men. He had killed the leaders, Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah and Zalmunna. He had declined the people's offer to rule over them as king. But then he retired to his own house. He thought the battle was over, and he stopped taking into account the danger he still faced. He needed someone to say, "If Gideon is on board, you are headed in the wrong direction."

We are on a journey of faith. We grow closer to God and more dependent on him. While he gives us great victories, there is still danger ahead and we must stay on guard. There is no free space, no retirement on the journey of faith. We can retire from our careers. Our children will

grow up and move out of the house, but we cannot retire when it comes to faith. We must not be deluded into thinking that we can coast to the finish. We must not be tricked into thinking that we have arrived at a place in our lives where we are safe from sin and temptation. We have an enemy, the devil, and he “prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). And our enemy is very tricky. He does not fight fair. God gives us the land and defeats enemies that outnumber us and enslave us, but the land must be held and maintained. We may defeat the enemy on one front, but he is sure to attack somewhere else.

The story of Gideon reveals one of Satan’s most insidious tactics. Often our biggest defeats come on the heels of our greatest victories, after we have been empowered by God to do his will. We are most vulnerable when we are least fearful. This is the time when we are likely to feel secure, confident, and prideful. God gave us such a great victory that we thought we were invincible. But, Paul warns in 1 Cor 10:12, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” The proverb says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (Prov 16:18).

Here is my second observation: *The danger on our journey is often very subtle, and it begins with a slight deviation.* Gideon was on top of the heap. God had given him victory, and the people wanted to make him king. But Gideon did not fall for the obvious. His failure began with the less obvious and grew from that point on until he named his son Abimelech, “my father is king,” and thus arrived at the place where he would have been if he had fallen for the obvious. He had many wives until he fell prey to a concubine. Gideon masked his desire for wealth with spiritual clothing. He did not fall off a cliff; he wandered from the path little by little, walking ever closer to the edge.

Most of us are smart enough to avoid the obvious. We know truth, and we are involved in the community. We don’t just fall off the cliff. The things that get us in trouble are usually subtle and disguised. We don’t rush headlong into sin, rather we compromise with evil and play with temptation. Sometimes, like a child playing with a snake, we are unaware of the danger. But before long we find ourselves ensnared, just like Gideon. Our sense of worship slowly erodes. We keep to ourselves, in our own house, so that others will not be aware of our sin. We don’t keep a concubine in our own town, but we go down to Shechem, where we think no one will know our sin. But we must never compromise with evil. If we do, defeat will certainly follow.

And the areas we must constantly examine are the very ones that Gideon fell prey to. We must guard our worship of God. This does not mean we can never 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 electronic church. Our place of worship changes to our own house in Oprah rather than the community of faith in Shiloh. Our worship becomes convenient rather than meaningful.

And we must be on guard against a love of wealth. Like Gideon, we can try to disguise our desire for riches with a religious dressing. It is a great temptation to live in the lap of luxury, without fear of financial strain. We even excuse this, saying that we are going to amass wealth to use for

the glory of God. I am reminded of the words of Agur, from the book of Proverbs:

“Give me neither poverty nor riches;  
Feed me with the food that is my portion,  
Lest I be full and deny Thee and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’  
Or lest I be in want and steal,  
And profane the name of my God” (Prov 30:8-9).

We must be on guard against misplaced affection. How many spiritual leaders, how many Gideons have been destroyed by uncontrolled lust! There is a close tie between spirituality and sexuality. If worship is not in order, that will become evident sexually. Again, this will happen little by little. It begins in the mind, and this is the place where it must be fought.

And then there is pride. God gives us wonderful victories, but it is easy to take the credit for ourselves, to let people exalt us, to accept the praise so that we feel good about ourselves. In Regent College this summer I enjoyed two classes taught by brilliant and spiritual men. What was evident about these men was that even though they were deeply intellectual, they were deeply humble as well. We must bring ourselves low and keep ourselves low. If we are to receive any exaltation, let God do it in his own time. It is better we receive it at the end than too soon.

Here is my third observation: *Endurance is an essential ingredient to our faith.* Endurance is the quality that Gideon displayed when he was “weary yet pursuing.” Our journey is not a sprint, it is a marathon. We are in it for the long haul. Faith outlasts all the opposition — the oppressors and the temptation both. Faith maintains the sense of opposition to sin. That doesn’t mean we never sin. It doesn’t mean we are perfect. It means we maintain our purpose. We don’t give up or give in. We continue to confess our sin. It means we stick with God. Faith with endurance means we keep going, we stay the course. This is the kind of faith that lasts.

Along these lines, the prophet Jeremiah once asked this demanding question:

“If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out,  
Then how can you compete with horses?  
If you fall down in a land of peace,  
How will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?” (Jer. 12:5)

This is the kind of faith that Jesus demonstrated when he was tempted three times in the wilderness. Paul expresses this thought in Philippians 3:14, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Heb. 12:1-2 puts it this way: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, *let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*”

Eugene Peterson, in his book, *Run With The Horses*, has a good word for us here:

The mark of a certain kind of genius is the ability and energy to keep returning to the same task relentlessly, imaginatively, curiously, for a lifetime. Never give up and go on to something else. Augustine wrote fifteen

commentaries on the book of Genesis. He began at the beginning and was never satisfied that he had got to the beginning. He never felt that he had got to the depths of the first book of the Bible, down to the very origins of life, the first principles of God's ways with us. He kept returning to those first questions. Beethoven composed sixteen string quartets because he was never satisfied with what he had done. The quartet form intrigued and challenged him. Perfection eluded him — he kept coming back to it over and over in an attempt at mastery. We think he did pretty well with them, but he didn't think so. So he persisted, bringing fresh, creative energy to each day's attempt. The same thing over and over, and yet it is never the same thing, for each venture is resplendent with dazzling creativity.

Our faith in God, our opposition to sin, needs to be anchored in endurance — doing the same thing over and over again, but with freshness and creativity.

Here is my last observation: *The final goal on our journey of faith is to finish well.* Now that I have lost both of my parents, I have been thinking a lot about them lately. I have spent time looking at old photographs of them, contemplating some seventy years of history. Both my mother and father grew up in poor surroundings. Neither of them went to college. They never enjoyed much glory or glamor or riches. They were everyday people, everyday moms and dads, working faithfully year after year. They were not perfect (they had their share of weaknesses), but there was a quality in their character that I came to admire more and more. They lived every day and they finished well. They maintained loyalty and faithfulness. They remained devoted to God. They kept growing in faith. In fact, they were more involved spiritually in their later years than at any time in their lives. They invested a lifetime in people, and they were rich with friends. And they didn't do these things just to be seen, or just on Sunday; they did it every day. They finished well.

So we are on a journey of faith. As we have seen, the road is difficult and tiring. When at last the end comes into sight, we might be tempted to let down. We don't feel like studying for the last test of the quarter. We don't work as hard on the last assignment as the first. We don't invest as much care in the last child. We change to a pass/fail system. We do just enough to get by. Statistics show that most automobile accidents occur within 25 miles of home. The time to be most cautious is when our journey is nearing the end. When we read the story of Gideon, we want very much to hear of his steadfastness and faithfulness all the way to the end. We want to read that he restored worship in Shiloh, that he tore down all the altars of Baal in Israel, that he named his son, "the Lord is king," not "my father is king." But, Gideon "retired to his own house." He didn't finish well.

The attitude we must maintain is reflected by Paul in 1 Cor. 9:24-27, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. *Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not*

*fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize"* (NIV).

Our goal should be to strive to finish well, like the apostle Paul says in 2 Tim. 4:7-8, "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, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (NASB).

Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame. At the end, he said, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). He finished well.

Pyambuu Tuul was not in the spotlight during the Summer Olympics, but his achievement was probably more noteworthy than any of those who were honored on the medal stand. As the only member of the Mongolian track and field team, he was the first ever Mongolian entered in the marathon. Before the race, he said, "I do not want to lag too far behind all the fantastic runners." Tuul was a construction worker when he lost his sight during an explosion, in his home town of Ulan Bator, in 1978. After two unsuccessful operations he gave up hope of ever seeing again. Then the New York Achilles Track Club, which promotes athletics for the disabled, invited him to participate in the 1990 New York Marathon. Led by a guide, Tuul walked much of the way and finished the course in just over five hours. The club also arranged for a cornea transplant for him, and surgery was performed in New York in January 1991. For the first time, he saw the faces of his six- and eight-year-old daughters. Tuul was the last runner to finish the Olympic marathon, in four hours and 44 seconds, but 25 of the 112 marathoners had already dropped out of the race. He didn't finish to the roar of the crowd. He finished away from the stadium, in obscurity and quiet, while the crowd cheered at the closing ceremonies. But he finished, he stayed the course, he endured.

In our journey of faith it matters not when we finish, but how we finish.

While we must take into account the failings of Gideon's later years, lest we become discouraged, we can also note that he is remembered as a man of faith despite his failings. I say this not to soften the message of the text, but to remind us and encourage us that his faith was not nullified. The final word on Gideon, which we find in Hebrews 11, the Hall of Fame of faith, says of him, "And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight" (Heb 11:32-34).

Gideon learned a personal faith in God. He was called out of weakness to learn of God's greatness. We do not want to diminish this great story, but let us be sobered by his later years, that we might pray for endurance to stay the course and finish well in our own journey of faith.

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