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Judges 8:13-35 "No Time for Coasting" **

Proposition: The final segment of Gideon's life warns us about the danger of coasting. By examining what happened to Gideon in Judges 8:13-35, we discover three cautions.

I. Be careful how you handle unresolved problems (13-21).

A. Gideon confronted those who had mocked God's Word (13-17).

1. When attacked personally, he took it.

2. When God's reputation was at stake, he took action.

B. Gideon confronted those who had attacked God's people (18-21).

1. We must deal with sin.

2. We must deal with it God's way.

II. Be careful how you handle success (22-27).

A. The people applauded Gideon (22).

B. Gideon responded (23-24).

1. What he said first was fine (23).

2. What he said next got him into trouble (24).

C. The results were disastrous (25-27).

1. Good intentions aren't enough.

2. Sincerity is no substitute for obedience.

III. Be careful how you handle "ordinary" life (28-35).

A. In the big challenges, Gideon did well (28).

B. In day to day living, Gideon struggled (29-35).

1. He had family flaws.

2. He had personal flaws.

Implications: What can we learn from Gideon?

1. The battle isn't over until it's over.

2. Beware of the "little" sins.

3. Resolve to live for God in the mundane, too.

4. Thank God for grace.

I used to like to ride my bicycle when I was a child. I can still see the shiny green color, the banana seat, and the high handle bars. It was your basic "one speed" bike, but it was a lot of fun.

Hills were a challenge. When you approached an incline, you'd have to leave your seat, lean forward, and pump your legs like crazy. Sometimes if a hill was steep enough, you were almost standing still by the time you reached the top.

Yet the greatest part about climbing a hill was—you guessed it—getting to coast down the hill on the other side! After giving it all you had to reach the summit, you were ready for a much needed rest. It sure felt good to sit down on the banana seat, lean back, and feel the wind blowing gently in your face as you coasted effortlessly down the hill.

When you're on a bike, it's fun to coast. But know this. What's fun for a child on a bike leads to disaster for a Christian in life. When it comes to living for God, there's no time for coasting.

In fact, one of the most vulnerable moments for the Christian occurs when there's no major battle on the horizon. When we're under attack, we know we need the Lord, and that without Him we'd fail miserably. So we devour His Word, make church a priority, and devote ourselves to prayer.

But when He sends the victory, it's as if we've reached the top of the hill. We celebrate for a moment, tell Him thanks, and then so often sit down on our "banana seat," and start coasting down the hill. When that happens we are in great danger, and don't even realize it.

Have you ever coasted in life? Perhaps you're coasting right now. Maybe you're thinking, "Hold on. I think you're making a big deal out of nothing. I may not be as on fire for the Lord as I once was, but I'm okay. What's wrong with coasting, anyway?"

That's a fair question. To address it I'd like to take you to the end of Gideon's life. Judges 8 records three scenes from Gideon's life that warn us of the danger of coasting.

To be honest, I wish I didn't have to preach this message. I wish the story of Gideon had ended at Judges 8:12. But it didn't. Gideon's life didn't end after he won the big victory over the Midianites. Some things happened afterwards, and God wants us to know about them, in part, so we'll beware of the danger of coasting.

Have you ever noticed how many people start well but don't finish well? Yesterday's victories are no guarantee of tomorrow's. In fact, it's sad yet true. You can tarnish years of faithful service by dropping your guard even for a moment. And it can happen so subtly.

It's unfortunate that we must conclude our six-week series on the life of Gideon in this fashion, but we must. The final chapter is there. And as with all of God's Word, it's there for our benefit.

The final segment of Gideon's life warns us about the danger of coasting. By examining what happened to Gideon in Judges 8:13-35, we discover three cautions.

I. Caution #1: Be careful how you handle unresolved problems (13-21).

Do you have any unresolved problems in your life? Our story begins with two unresolved problems on the table for Gideon. Before we look at how Gideon handled them, allow me to set the stage for the story.

The book of Judges reveals what happens when God's people violate God's covenant. In short and simple terms, things get *messy*.

After living in the Promised Land but a few generations, the Israelites forgot God and pursued other gods. So God judged them. He raised up the Midianites to make life miserable for His wayward children, and thus get their attention.

After seven years of oppression, God's people cried out to the Lord for help. And God sent help in the form of an unlikely hero, Gideon.

You'll recall that when God first told Gideon He was going to use him to deliver His people, Gideon wasn't too keen on the idea. He was full of doubts and fears. But God patiently prepared Gideon.

Then he prepared Gideon's army. He whittled down the troops from 32,000 to 300 and said, "Now you've got just the right number of men! You're going to defeat the Midianites in such a way that everyone will know that I did it through you!"

Which is exactly what happened. God used Gideon and his surprise attack to result in the ultimate destruction of more than 120,000 Midianite soldiers! It was a great day for God's people.

But the battle wasn't over. The next day Gideon faced some more challenges, as recorded in the first part of

Judges 8, namely, the challenge of the critics and the challenge of the skeptics.

First, the critics attacked Gideon. Namely, the Ephraimites who didn't like the way Gideon did things, blasted him. But he didn't become defensive. He just took it, and defused their anger with a soft answer.

But not so the challenge of the skeptics. He didn't just "take it," but promised to deal with it. Gideon faced the skeptics at the towns of Succoth and Peniel (8:6-9).

Here's what happened. The day after Gideon routed the 120,000 Midianites he was in hot pursuit of the fleeing survivors. Having been up all night, he and his band of men were hungry and exhausted when they arrived at Succoth, an Israeli town in the tribe of Gad.

But the people of Succoth refused to help them. They didn't want to get involved. In fact, they mocked Gideon and in essence said, "We don't believe you can finish the battle, and we're not going to give you bread."

It was a blatant attack on the promise of God, for God had promised Gideon complete victory over the Midianites. But the town of Succoth didn't believe Gideon, and worse, didn't believe God even though they were God's own people (and Gideon's people, too!). And the same thing happened in the next town of Peniel.

Whereas Gideon took the personal attack of the critic, he confronted the attack of the skeptic. He didn't ignore it or let it slide, but promised to deal with it severely. He told the leaders of Succoth and Peniel, "I'm going to finish the job God gave me to do by destroying the final Midianites, and then I'm coming back to deal *with you*."

Why was Gideon so hot? What was at stake was God's reputation. When God's own people refuse to do what God's Word says, it's cause for alarm!

According to verses 10-12, Gideon attacked the Midianites and captured two kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, just as he said he would. And then he headed back to take care of the first piece of unfinished business.

A. Gideon confronted those who had mocked God's Word (13-17). "Gideon son of Joash then returned from the battle by the Pass of Heres." Though the KJV translates the final phrase, "returned from battle *before the sun was up*," the Hebrew indicates Gideon returned by a different route—which would explain why he reached Succoth ahead of Peniel. Possibly, Gideon took the alternate course in order to surprise the city.

Before he arrived he took steps to get some information, as verse 14 explains, "He caught a young man of Succoth and questioned him, and the young man wrote down for him the names of the seventy-seven officials of Succoth, the elders of the town."

Gideon was on a mission, but he wasn't out of control. He got his facts straight, which is a good idea any time you're trying to resolve problems. Armed with his list, he entered the city.

Verse 15, "Then Gideon came and said to the men of Succoth, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me by saying, `Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your exhausted men?'"

Notice how Gideon quoted the skeptics' very words and reminded them of their mockery. And he displayed the two Midianite kings for them to see. Why? Because he wasn't taking action based on hearsay, but on fact. The men of Succoth had mocked God, and here was the evidence to prove it.

So Gideon took action (16), "He took the elders of the town and taught the men of Succoth a lesson by punishing them with desert thorns and briars." The punishment was drastic, but in Gideon's eyes, it was necessary.

Keep this in mind. Gideon was Israel's divinely appointed judge. As such he had the right to punish this city. He wasn't seeking personal revenge, but justice. Indeed...

1. *When attacked personally, he took it.* But...

2. *When God's reputation was at stake, he took action.* Drastic action. In fact, the punishment was even more severe at Peniel, as verse 17 states, "He also pulled down the tower of Peniel and killed the men of the town."

Wait a minute. When Gideon forewarned the men of Peniel in verse 9, what did he say he was going to do? Tear down their tower. He did that, but he did something else, something he didn't predict. He killed the men of the town.

Why? Did he kill them because they offered resistance? Did they bring this punishment upon themselves? Perhaps. Maybe things just got out of hand.

The point of the story isn't to emulate Gideon's methodology. Gideon was not a perfect man—which of us is? The fact is, he was an *ordinary* man, a lot like us. He had flaws (some glaring ones as we'll see in a moment). He made mistakes (and he was accountable for them). Yet God used him.

Some people think, "I can't serve God. I've got too many problem in my life." Listen, if you wait until your problems are gone, you'll never serve God.

The fact that God used Gideon is a testimony of how great God is. He doesn't use *likely* people, but *unlikely* people.

Read the Christian biographies and you'll see. Did you know that before his conversion Augustine lived with a mistress for years and even had a child out of wedlock? Martin Luther had a temper, and was known for his off-colored vocabulary at times. Jean Calvin authorized the execution of an Anabaptist leader.

John Wesley had a horrible marriage. His wife, Molly, was insanely jealous, and he responded by ignoring her. They basically had very little to do with each other for twenty years, and left him in 1771. When she died ten years later, John was not even informed until after four days.

Were these men wrong for their faults? Yes. But did God use them? Yes. How? Each of these men learned of their desperate need for God's unmerited help. That's *grace*.

By the way, just because God uses a person doesn't mean He endorses every thing that person does. Even Paul would says, "Follow me as I follow Christ (1 Cor 11:1)." Do we need leaders? Yes. Should we follow leaders? Yes—as long as they do what? As long as they *follow Christ*.

Here's caution #1 again. Be careful how you handle unresolved problems. In the first case, Gideon confronted those who had mocked God's Word. Here's the second.

B. Gideon confronted those who had attacked God's people (18-21). Verse 18, "*Then* he asked Zebah and Zalmunna." We're not told where and when this conversation took place. My hunch is that it occurred back at Ophrah, Gideon's hometown, and that there's a break in time between verses 17 & 18.

Up until now Gideon's main concern has been to deliver Israel from Midianite control. With that task

accomplished, he turns to a secondary concern, a piece of unfinished business we've not heard of before this.

Apparently, Zebah and Zalmunna did more than just oppress the Israelites. Apparently, they killed some Israelites in cold-blooded aggression. And the people they killed were near and dear to Gideon.

So Gideon brought them home and interrogated them (18), "What kind of men did you kill at Tabor?" We don't know when this killing occurred, likely during a previous raid.

Verse 18, ""Men like you," they answered, "each one with the bearing of a prince.""

19 Gideon replied, "Those were my brothers, the sons of my own mother. As surely as the LORD lives, if you had spared their lives, I would not kill you.""

It's a serious thing to shed human blood, and Gideon's going to enact justice. The surprising twist pertains to how he chose to do it. Gideon's actions force us to consider a couple of implications.

1. *We must deal with sin.* It's wrong to ignore sinful problems. But...

2. *We must deal with it God's way.* Not *our* way, but God's. Is that what Gideon did? Quite honestly, it's hard to tell why he did what he did next.

Verse 20, "Turning to Jether, his oldest son, he said, "Kill them!" But Jether did not draw his sword, because he was only a boy and was afraid."

Why did Gideon involve his son? A couple of possible reasons. One, maybe he wanted to give his son a chance to prove his manhood. Two, maybe his intent was simply to humiliate the criminals. Arthur Cundall explains, "It was no shame to die by the hand of a warrior like Gideon, but a youth unskilled in warfare would hack and bungle the execution, and even these brave men flinched at such a prospect."

For a mighty king to die at the hands of a boy would be a disgrace, so the kings spoke up in verse 21, "Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Come, do it yourself. `As is the man, so is his strength.'" So Gideon stepped forward and killed them, and took the ornaments off their camels' necks."

I'm struck by how these two pagan kings taunted Gideon. Even facing death, they're hard-hearted. There's not a trace of repentance, not a glimpse of, "We were wrong for what we did. Have mercy on us."

You die like you live. If you've learned to trust God in life, you'll trust Him when you face death. But if you've trusted in yourself throughout your life, why would it be any different at the end? Trials don't make us; they *reveal* what's in us.

Beware of coasting. How can we tell if we're coasting? Take an honest look at your life. Are there any unresolved problems? What's your response?

Some people refuse to deal with their unresolved problems. That's obviously wrong. On the other hand, there are others who deal with their problems, but they do so *their own way*, not God's. They take matters into their hands. To do so is to begin to coast.

II. Caution #2: Be careful how you handle success (22-27).

Many people who've handled adversity well blow it when they experience success. How'd Gideon handle it? Let's take a look.

A. The people applauded Gideon (22). "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.""

Crowds are fickle. Just days earlier (back in 6:30), Gideon's own people were calling for his head. Now they're wanting to put a crown on it. They want him to be their king. And who wouldn't want a king who needs only an army of 300 men to defend national security?

B. Gideon responded (23-24). His response was twofold.

1. *What he said first was fine* (23). "But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you.""

Good answer, Gideon! Gideon knew Israel didn't need a king, for she already had one. It was the Lord. Israel was a theocracy. Gideon knew that God deserves and desires to rule His people.

That's true for us, too, by the way. A Christian is a person who submits his life to the Lord and says, "I'm going to stop trying to rule my life. I'm going to follow the Lord instead."

So what Gideon said *first* was fine. Unfortunately...

2. *What he said next got him into trouble* (24). "And he said, "I do have one request." Uh, oh again! Here's the request. "That each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder." (It was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings.)"

Just one tiny, little, insignificant request—no big deal, right? After all, the man who risks his neck for his country deserves a little reward, doesn't he? What harm could there be in this? Sadly...

C. The results were disastrous (25-27). The following is a sad footnote on the biography of Gideon. Here's what happened.

Verses 25-26: "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. 26 The weight of the gold rings he asked for came to seventeen hundred shekels [that's between 43 and 62 pounds depending on which shekel weight is used], 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."

Why did Gideon request the gold anyway? Verse 27 explains, "Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town."

What's an ephod? We're not sure what it is here. The priest wore a holy garment called an ephod. It was woven with gold thread and contained numerous jewels. The priests wore the ephod when they wanted to communicate with God—the Urim and Thummin were associated with the priest's ephod.

In later times, the term ephod referred to a free-standing object used for religious purposes. It was a pagan object associated with idol worship.

Is that what Gideon intended? I doubt it. He was a man of God. Maybe his intent was to make a kind of memorial that would help God's people remember what God did. It backfired as verse 27 concludes, "All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family."

Whatever Gideon's intent had been, the outcome was devastating. The ephod caused the Israelites to forget God.

Forms do that even today. Some people do that with the Cross. They worship the wood object instead of the One who died on it.

There are a couple of lessons we can learn from Gideon's mishap.

1. *Good intentions aren't enough.* Gideon had no right to make an ephod, no matter what his intent. He wasn't a priest. He lacked biblical grounds for his actions. "But I meant well," doesn't cancel out the destructive power of our actions.

2. *Sincerity is no substitute for obedience.* It's never right to disobey God, no matter how sincere you are. Never. And the moment we start making decisions without biblical grounds is the moment we begin to coast. Which brings us to the third caution.

III. Caution #3: Be careful how you handle "ordinary" life (28-35).

So much of life is *ordinary*. Have you noticed? It's mundane. Yes, the battles with the Midianites do come from time to time, but most of our battles seem so insignificant. Simply put, most of the Christian life is lived in the trenches of the unspectacular.

But know this. God is very interested in how we handle "ordinary" life. It matters to Him the kind of conversations we have when we eat supper with our families. He's concerned about how we respond when the boss doesn't give us the pay raise we think we deserve. He wants us to honor Him when we're in the lunchroom at school, and in the locker room after school.

Quite honestly, some of us do fairly well in the "big" battles of life, but lousy in the "ordinary" challenges of daily living. When crisis comes, we call on God, dig into His Word, and get serious about church—and so we should.

But when there's no crisis, *we coast*. We fail to live in constant dependence upon God. We naively think we're okay and can handle things on our own strength.

Beloved, know this. We are in a battle *every day* whether we see the smoke or not. Every day we make choices that affect God's reputation.

It's great to seek God when we lose a job, or face surgery, or experience a broken relationship. We should seek God in such times.

But what about the rest of the time? Should we seek God when deciding how to spend our paycheck, or where to take a vacation, or how to discipline our children, or what to do about a broken relationship with a brother in Christ? Is God interested in the "ordinary" parts of our lives, or is it okay to do whatever we want in those areas?

Several years ago a man came to see me, his life a wreck. It was my privilege to share with him the hope-giving truth of God's Word. I showed Him from the Bible how that Jesus died on the Cross to pay the penalty of sin for every person that would believe on Him. I explained that Jesus conquered death and offers abundant and eternal life to all who will trust in Him.

I watched as that man began to experience the amazing grace of God in his life. God put his family (which had been in shambles) back together. God restored his health (which he had harmed by indulging in sinful habits). God preserved his job (which he had nearly lost).

But then something happened—or *didn't happen* is more accurate. The man stopped seeking God and started coasting. Oh, he came to church for awhile. But it wasn't long before I didn't see his smiling face

anymore.

I'd visit him and say, "God's been so good to you. Why don't you come to church anymore?" And he'd merely shrug his shoulders and say, "I don't know. I just don't know." He'd coasted right into passivity.

There are two indicators that reveal a lot about us. The first is what we do when we're facing a huge foe. Our response at that point indicates who we're trusting in—whether it's God or someone or something else.

But the second indicator is just as critical. It's what we do right *after* God gives victory, when life returns to "normal." What you do when you're facing a battle indicates who you're *trusting* in. What you do after God gives victory reveals who you're *living for*. The world is full of people who are willing to use God, but refuse to live for God.

Please realize this. What you do right after God gives victory reveals a lot about you. Consider Gideon again...

A. In the big challenges, Gideon did well (28). Verse 28 sums up the hallmark event of Gideon's life, "Thus Midian was subdued before the Israelites and did not raise its head again. During Gideon's lifetime, the land enjoyed peace forty years."

Yes, Gideon was a hero. In fact his name appears in God's Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11:32. In the big challenges of life, he did well. But...

B. In day to day living, Gideon struggled (29-35). Verses 29-35 tell us what happened after Gideon's big day ended, and he settled into the routine of "normal" life. He struggled with a couple of flaws.

1. *He had family flaws.* Notice verses 29-30, "Jerub-Baal son of Joash went back home to live. 30 He had seventy sons of his own, for he had many wives."

There's a red flag. Gideon had *many wives*—that's a violation of God's command. And *seventy sons*—how could you keep their names straight, let alone give the needed personal attention to seventy sons? And the fact that one of the sons ended up killing the rest (in chapter 9) may indicate he didn't.

2. *He had personal flaws.* Verse 31, "His concubine, who lived in Shechem, also bore him a son, whom he named Abimelech."

For some reason, even "many wives" weren't enough for Gideon. Sadly, he had a woman on the side, a concubine who lived in Shechem (that's some thirty miles south of his home in Ophrah!).

What's Gideon doing with a concubine? Who knows? But sexual sin has led to the downfall of far too many men of God.

Be on guard men! Don't coast. It was the son Gideon fathered by this concubine, Abimelech, that eventually murdered his other children. You reap what you sow.

Are you ignoring any family flaws or personal flaws? The time to deal with them is *now*. Don't minimize them. Deal with them before it's too late.

And so Gideon's life ended. Verse 32, "Gideon son of Joash died at a good old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash in Ophrah of the Abiezrites."

Gideon was quite a man—he left behind an amazing legacy. But he was still a man. Yes, he trusted God and defeated the Midianites. But later he coasted and it cost him.

Listen to the epilogue in verses 33-35: "No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god and 34 did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side. 35 They also failed to show kindness to the family of Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) for all the good things he had done for them."

Implications: What can we learn from Gideon?

I'll mention four simple, yet critical lessons.

1. *The battle isn't over until it's over.* "Be sober, be vigilant. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (1 Pet 5:8)."
2. *Beware of the "little" sins.* Do you have any known sin in your life?
3. *Resolve to live for God in the mundane, too.* It's good to trust God with your problems. It's just as important to seek Him when the sailing is smooth. Are you? And one final lesson.
4. *Thank God for grace.* How could God use a man like Gideon? The same way He can use us. It's all by His grace. So thank Him today for grace.