**Foolish mistakes we make when we are spiritually high: Why do we do this? (JD10)**

So what do Len Bias, Richard Nixon & Ted Haggard—a star basketball player, the President of the US & pastor of a mega church—have in common? Each fell from the pinnacle of their success! Bias, the next NBA superstar out of the University of Maryland died of cocaine overdose a few days after being the second overall pick in the 1986 NBA draft. Mr. Nixon resigned from the Presidency, the one he had won by a landslide, because he was about to be impeached for covering up the Watergate scandal. Haggard was forced to resign from his 14,000-member church in 2006, the one he planted years earlier, following the disclosure that he had been involved with a male prostitute for three years. What happened? These men made the kind of mistakes that they were careful to avoid on their way to the top; but once having reached it, their guards were down, leading to the collapse of everything they had worked for. Today’s study continues to examine the life of Gideon but the focus will be on a situation that developed immediately after his greatest victory. How did he handle his success of being one of Israel’s illustrious judges? Did he manage to avoid the mistakes that doomed Bias, Nixon, and Haggard, or did he become yet another reminder that success in any field can be hazardous to your health, be it physical, social, or spiritual?

**Q:** Can you think of anyone else who fell from the summit of their success? (Tiger Wood, Enron).

**A. Text:** Read Judges 8:22-27. Before proceeding, certain terms need to be clarified.

1. 1,700 shackles is about 43 pounds (1 shackle=2/5 lbs) or 688 ounces. Since an ounce of gold was valued at $1,700 on March 1, this amount would be valued at about $1.2 million today.

2. An ephod was an article of clothing worn primarily by the Israelite high priest. In the case of

Gideon, it could have been an image or some solid object that became an idol (EBD p. 342).

**Q1.** Here, Israel begged Gideon to rule over them. Why were they so enamored by him? (7:19-21)

**R:** Gideon had crushed the mighty Midianite army with only 300 men, thereby liberating Israel from the power of Midian that had been very oppressive.

**Q2:** To appreciate why the Israelites thought so highly of Gideon, note the oppressive political situation from which they were delivered by this judge. How bad was it (6:1-6)?

**R:** The Midianites ruined their crops (6:4) & killed their livestock. Judg. 6:6, therefore, sums it up by saying that their lives were “so impoverished.” So it was from this misery that Gideon had

delivered the Israelites. He was their hero, “a rock star,” and they wanted him as their king!

3. Upon examining his response to this flattering request, obviously Gideon made the right move,

saying, “I will not rule over you . . . [but] the LORD will rule over you instead.” He should

have stopped right there; unfortunately he quickly saw an opportunity to reward himself.

**Q1:** What request did Gideon, “the rock star,” make to his adoring fans? What did he do with it?

**R:** He asked for gold earrings that they had taken from the Midianites (whose ancestral forefather

was Ishmael) and then used the gold make an ephod.

**Q2:** In view of the amount of gold used to make this object, how do you think it appeared?

**R:** Splendid! An object worth $1.2 mil. in gold would’ve surely drawn a lot of attention & it did.

**B. Gideon’s fatal mistake: What was he thinking?**

1. While we aren’t sure why Gideon made a glistening object and then placed it in his town, the outcome was horrible: “All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there” (8:27b).

**Q1:** Theologically and spiritually, what was so bad about what happened here?

**R:** Their action broke the Second Commandment (*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything. . . . You shall not bow down to them or worship them—*Ex. 20:4).This was a very serious matter.

**Q2:** Gideon was greatly admired by the Israelites after his great victory, but was his reputation

tarnished as a result of this incident? Did he suffer any other losses? Read 9:33-34, Prov. 22:1.

**R:** I see 3 losses. First, Gideon, in effect, ended up trading his good name for fool’s gold. In other

words, he did exactly the opposite of what Prov. 22:1 teaches *(A good name is more desirable than*

*great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold)*. Second, people’s opinion of Gideon had so

changed for the worse that they “failed to show kindness” to his family after he had died (8:35).

Third, worshiping Gideon’s ephod made it much easier for the Israelites to later switch over to worshiping the Canaanite deity Baal-Berith (“lord of covenant”). In summary, Gideon

ended up losing his good name, people’s support, and the most important gain from his battle

against the Midianites: freedom and heart to worship the true God of Israel.

2. Had Gideon anticipated that his golden ephod would turn into an object of idolatry, he wouldn’t

have done it. So what was he thinking? Whatever it was, he was blinded from recognizing

several signposts indicating that a wrong turn would lead to idolatry.

**Q:** Which signpost did he miss that easily led the Israelites to idolatry?

**R:** I think Gideon was aware that he had become a rock star among the Israelites, however, he

failed to consider what the bewitched fans (i.e., groupie) often do: worshiping their star &

doing anything to be near him to ingratiate themselves. Gideon’s mistake was failing to

recognize that the people were eager to be influenced by him and to please him. While Gideon recognized the power he had over his people to get what he wanted from them, he failed to

consider the ramifications of his actions on his people; it was a poor leadership move.

3. So why didn’t he see this? That is to say, why did he ask for gold earrings right after

saying all the right things? (“God will lead you.”) I think the person who can clear up this

matter is Gehazi who was Prophet Elisha’s servant. He said the following after realizing that

his master would not demand anything from General Naaman after healing him of leprosy:

*My master was too easy on Naaman . . . by not accepting from him what he brought. As surely as the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something from him.*

**Q**: In view of this,what motivated Gideon to ask for gold earrings from his adoring fans?

**R:** First, both Gehazi and Gideon knew that the Israelites and Naaman, respectively, were in

position to say no. In Gideon’s case, asking for the earrings wasn’t necessarily a sin; however,

constantly exploiting such relationship (in which the other person cannot say “No” because he

owes you a favor or he is your underling) for personal benefits will lead to excess & abuse.

Second, like Gehazi, Gideon felt justified in seeking a reward since he did work extremely hard

to bring “happiness” to his fellow citizens. That attitude of entitlement, which, when unfettered (“I deserve it”), often functions as a doorway to vanity, is where Gideon ended up!

4. He then made a golden ephod, placing it in his hometown. Why did he do that? What was his

expectation? Consider what King Saul (1 Sam 15:12) and Absalom (2 Sam. 18:18) did

following their great accomplishment? It may be that Gideon was motivated by the same thing.

**Q1:** What did Saul and Absalom do? Is Gideon’s action similar to theirs?

**R:** As for Saul, following the victory over the Amalekites he set up a monument in his own honor

at Carmel. Absalom, at one point in his life, “had taken a pillar and erected it as a monument

for himself, for he thought, “I have no son to carry on the memory of my name.” As for

Gideon, no one who designs and then produces a golden object worth $1.2 million does that for

his own private enjoyment. Like a hip-hop rapper with a golden chain wrapped around his

neck who gets a kick out of an awed reaction by the onlookers, Gideon wasn’t surprised

neither by the drove of people who came to see his ephod nor by their awestruck reaction.

**Q2** What does this say about these three men? What led them to erect their own monument?

**R:** One thing is for certain: they wanted to make sure that they are not easily forgotten by the

people. They wanted people to remember them for their successes.

**Q3:** What do we call this? How did this mentality cause Gideon from seeing the signpost?

**R:** In sports, it’s called “show boating”; in real life, it is called vanity or vainglory. And because

of this, Gideon failed to see how the construction of the ephod would lead to a grassroots

movement to worship and adore him and his ephod. By the time Gideon recognized the

formation of a very disturbing movement, he couldn’t do much to stop it!

5. Gideon’s mistake is something humans are quite prone to commit, especially among those who

are involved in some type of Christian ministry. We know God is the one who did it but we’re

tempted to get some glory out it; that is, recognition from people that we are pretty clever, re- sourceful & talented! Then we do something so unwise like Gideon! Thus, Paul warns, “So, if you think you’re standing firm (i.e., doing pretty well) be careful that you don’t fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

**Q:** Would you mind sharing your story?

**The writer’s example:** After moving into a new house, I asked my wife where my degrees were. Upon being asked why, I answered her, “Well, I would like to hang them up on the

wall.” She didn’t think it was a good idea but since I insisted, she said, “Look under letter ‘U’

in the filing cabinet.” I then asked, ‘U’ for university? “No,” she said, “‘U’ for ‘useless.’”

Don’t take this story to mean we shouldn’t hang our degrees on the wall. When I go to the

doctor’s office, I appreciate that his degree from a good school is hung where I can peruse it. It

just means that to the extent that we want to show off to other people, such attitude needs to be

detected & not fed. If not, then before long, lies are told to make us look even more impressive.

**C. What’s the fundamental reason behind making a mistake of this nature (wanting to show off,**

**building a monument in our own honor) precisely because things are going well for us?**

1. Read 2 King 6:5-6: *As one of [the prophets] was cutting down a tree, the iron axhead fell into the water. “Oh, my lord,” he cried out, “it was borrowed!” 6The man of God asked, “Where did it fall?” When he showed him the place, Elisha cut a stick and threw it there, and made the iron float.”*

**Q:** What does this mean?

**R:** He was able to cut down trees to build a gathering place for prophets because someone had lent him an ax. When it was lost, he lost his ability to work (i.e., the “ability” was borrowed).

2. No matter how talented & intelligent we think we are, these abilities (i.e., the axhead) are

borrowed from God. But when we showoff to impress people or try too hard to be recognized by them, we are, in effect, saying that we own the axhead (i.e., talent, intelligence, gift).

**Q:** What do we call that attitude?

**R:** Pride. Proverb 16:18 says, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”

**Application:** What are some good ways to declare to people that “my” axhead is borrowed from God and that apart from Christ I cannot do anything (Jn. 15:5).

**R:** There is nothing like sharing our weaknesses! Get used to sharing your vulnerable side, especially those of us who are quite impressed by our own accomplishments & abilities.

**The writer’s example:** After hearing my sermon given at UC in January to promote the

Apologetics course, a young lady said,” You are intelligent.” Well, she was quite taken a back

when I told her, “Not really since I had flunked out of college.”

3. Ultimately Paul reminds us that a prudent expression of our weaknesses is how we can

experience more of Christ’s presence in our lives. He wrote in 2 Cor. 12:9: “Therefore I will

boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”

4. Reminder: Don’t love success too much but learn to be faithful; don’t be afraid to share your vulnerabilities prudently. When experiencing successes, be cautious so that you don’t fall!