

When Leaders Let Us Down
 Judges 8
 Bellevue Baptist Church
 September 20, 2026

If you would, please open your Bible to Judges chapter 8.

Singer-songwriter Ben Rector wrote a song called Heroes, and it starts with a very sad prayer:

Heroes
By Ben Rector

I miss my old heroes
I had to give them all away
I miss my old heroes
God, I wish they could've stayed.

Most of us know exactly what he means. I've lived fifty years now, and I too have had to trade some heroes out. Many of us know that feeling, and it can happen in the church.

Rector goes on:

I miss my Bible study leader
Had all the answers for livin' in the big bad world
Don't know if he still talks to Jesus
But his wife's remarried now...

What is Rector doing? He's remembering a man he once knew, who could quote all the Bible verses to the students, but never once mentioned the struggles he was having at home.

Finishing well is rare, and some will disappoint us. Proverbs 20:6 says:

**Many a person proclaims his own loyalty,
 but who can find a trustworthy person? Proverbs 20:6**

In *other words*—who can you really trust in this world, to set an example to the end? Where is the person who starts and finishes well? Sadly, we can't say this about the judge we encounter today, a well-known name Gideon.

If you grew up in church, you've probably heard about his best days. You've heard about the time he shrank his army from 32,000 soldiers to 300, and still came out with the win. Gideon is famous for his heroic act, but on the tail end of his highlight reel, his humanity comes through. As soon as they win the battle, the people have a proposal for him. 8:22...

²² Then the Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you as well as your sons and your grandsons, for you delivered us from the power of Midian." Judges 8:22

That is quite a proposal, isn't it? It's reminiscent of America's founding president, George Washington. After leading the Continental Army in the American Revolution, some felt ready to call him king, but he refused to entertain the idea of a monarchy, moving back to his farm in Mt. Vernon.

Gideon faces a similar situation. He has won the war and the people want a royal family. V. 32:

²³ But Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you." Judges 8:23

This was indeed what the Lord wanted. God had already warned Israel many times—a king would never be all he is cracked up to be—men and power rarely mix well. God wanted his people to let him rule over them. And Gideon is wise to reject their request, but then he says something next that makes us turn our heads funny:

²⁴ Then he said to them, "Let me make a request of you: Everyone give me an earring from his plunder." Now the enemy had gold earrings because they were Ishmaelites.

²⁵ They said, "We agree to give them." So they spread out a cloak, and everyone threw an earring from his plunder on it. Judges 8:24–25

You heard that right. After conquering those gold-toting people, the people of Israel looked like the kids at the end of *Goonies*. All the pirate's treasure was theirs. Gideon says, "While I won't take the title as king, I will gladly take a token from each person's treasure."

Someone spreads out a big sheet, they all toss an earring, and when that sheet is folded up and picked up, it weighs 43 pounds. Today, that's about \$2.7 Million dollars. But Gideon isn't looking to build his bank, instead he wants to build a monument. V. 27...

²⁷ Gideon made an ephod from all this and put it in Ophrah, his hometown. Then all Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his household. Judges 8:27

What is an ephod, you ask? Elsewhere in the Bible, this is a special garment associated with Israel's priests. The high priest wore an ornate ephod as he ministered before the Lord. This vest had stones fixed upon it, which represented the tribes of Israel.

But Gideon has collected forty-three pounds of gold, so whatever this is that he makes, it is more than a piece of clothing. It's some kind of memorial, remembering what God had done in helping them win that war.

And notice: the text never says that Gideon set out to build an idol. I don't believe that was his intention. Just two chapters earlier, in Judges 6, Gideon honored God by tearing down an idol. Now, in Judges 8, he creates an object that becomes one.

This is how idolatry usually works. Very few people wake up in the morning and say, “Today, I think I’ll become an idolater.” Nobody decides, “I’m going to make this person more important than God,” or “I’m going to care more about this thing than I do the mission God gave us.”

Idolatry is usually much more subtle than that.

Idolatry happens when something good slowly becomes something supreme. A person. A tradition. A building. A ministry. I know that when the Lord laid it on the heart of Dr. Rogers to consider the relocation from where Bellevue once was, to where it sits today—there was some resistance. There were those that wanted the church to stay put, even if it hindered the growth and reach of the church, even if it meant reaching far less people. But God helped this church agree that the mission is more important than a location, that the church exists to expand and reach more people for Christ.

Idolatry is when we take something that has been a gift and we make it more important than the mission of God.

Perhaps the best example in the Old Testament comes from 2 Kings 18. Centuries earlier, God had instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent. It was an instrument of God’s mercy, and when the people were bitten by venomous snakes, they could look upon it. And God would spare their lives.

But something happened over the generations. The people held on to the bronze serpent, and eventually this object that once reminded them of God’s power became an object of worship itself. By the time of King Hezekiah, the Israelites were actually burning incense to that thing. So Hezekiah smashed it to pieces.

That’s the danger with buildings and programs and traditions and even great people from the past. Don’t ever forget that these things are gifts from the Giver. Remember them with fondness and give glory to God, but don’t let the cement of yesterday form around your feet.

Now, let’s keep going in the text, and see what else happens to old Gideon. V. 30...

³⁰ Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, since he had many wives. ³¹ His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. Judges 8:30–31

Throughout the Old Testament, we encounter men like Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon, and now Gideon who practiced polygamy. The Bible reports it but never endorses it. From the very beginning, God’s design in the garden was clear—that marriage was made to be one man plus one woman for life. And whenever people depart from God’s design in any category, heartache is the result.

As the husband of one wife and the father of four children, I know how much intentionality it takes to lead one family well. To love your wife, shepherd your children, provide for them, listen to them, and be emotionally present. It requires tremendous focus. I cannot imagine trying to

faithfully lead a household with multiple wives and dozens of children. The Bible says that Gideon had seventy sons. And that's just the sons! In the ancient world, genealogies and family records typically emphasized male descendants because sons carried the family line and inheritance, so Gideon surely had many daughters as well. We don't know the total number of his children, but the point is clear: Gideon had built an enormous household.

And you have to wonder: how could one father possibly be present in the lives of that many children? How could he know their hearts, understand their struggles, correct them, encourage them, and teach them to walk with God? The answer is: he couldn't and like so many saints in the Old Testament including David himself, the dysfunction of the family eventually comes back to bite you.

I want you to notice one fascinating detail the narrator drops into the story. Verse 31: *"His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech."*

Gideon names one of his sons Abimelech. And that name means:

Abimelech: "My father is king."

Did you catch that?

Earlier in the chapter, Gideon had said, *"I will not rule over you...the Lord will rule over you."* But then the man who publicly rejected the crown gave his own son a name that whispered royalty: My father is king.

The Bible never tells us Gideon placed a crown on his head. It doesn't have to. The narrator simply lays down the evidence and lets us connect the dots. Gideon refused the title of king, but increasingly, he seems to have enjoyed the lifestyle of one.

Then chapter 9 opens, and it is a long and brutal story that I'll summarize for you. Abimelech decides he wants power for himself. He goes to Shechem, gathers support, and murders his brothers to eliminate any rivals to his rule. The son whose name meant *"My father is king"* decides that he wants to be king. And perhaps that is one of the saddest parts of Gideon's story: the ambition Gideon entertained became the ambition his son acted upon. What was subtle in the father became savage in the son.

Gideon failed to lead his family well. There appears to have been a false humility growing in him. He started as a reluctant servant, deeply aware of his weakness and dependent upon the strength of God. But success changed him. Slowly, his dependence on God waned, his appetite for status grew, and eventually the consequences spilled into the next generation.

And that is why the book of Judges leaves us with this constant ache of disappointment. Every time Israel thinks they've found a man made of gold, eventually they discover he's made of clay.

Every judge disappoints.
 Every judge dies.
 Every judge leaves Israel longing for someone greater.

And that is exactly where the story wants us. Because eventually, another King will come. A King who will not be corrupted by power. A King who will not use people to build his kingdom, but will give his life to bring people into it. A King who will not disappoint.

Judges leaves us longing for Jesus. The Old Testament is a few thousand years of longing. The New Testament begins with the Son of Man arriving. Finally, one who is worthy of the power, and the glory, and the honor.

So before I raise a few questions from various types of people in the room, let me summarize the main takeaways from Judges 8-9:

Takeaways From The Text

- **The higher you rise, the humbler you should become.**

Would your spouse say, "I liked him better before the promotion." Would your children say, "She used to be more present, before she was someone important." Would your closest friends quietly admit, "He was easier to be around before everyone started applauding him." Could it be that you've drunk the same poison so many people in Scripture drank? The very thing you prayed for has begun changing your heart.

Kent Hughes: the goddess of success...

Question 2:

- **Hold every gift from God with an open hand.**

Remember, an idol is not always something evil. Often it's something wonderful. A child. A career. A ministry. A reputation. A relationship. Anything we love more than God has quietly climbed onto the throne of our hearts.

The solution isn't necessarily to lose the gift. The solution is to love the Giver more than the gift. How can you seek first the kingdom of God again? How can you reorder your affections so that Christ occupies first place?

- **Build your faith on Christ, not Christian celebrities.**

Throughout history, people have had a tendency to put extraordinary people on pedestals. Even Peter experienced this. When Cornelius fell at his feet in worship, Peter immediately lifted him up and said in Acts 10:26: "Stand up. I myself am also a man!"

Peter understood something we sometimes forget. No pastor deserves your worship. No author deserves your worship. No ministry leader deserves your worship. No church deserves your worship. Only Jesus.

If your favorite Christian disowned Christ tomorrow, would your faith collapse like a house of cards? People will fail you, but Jesus won't. Keep your eyes on Him, and all will be OK.

Now, with my time remaining, let me raise some thought-provoking questions that help us apply this story of Gideon's failures.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

How do I know whether I'm serving God or quietly building my own kingdom?

That's a solid question because the shift rarely happens overnight. Very few people wake up one morning and decide, "Today I'm going to make it about ME." It happens slowly. One compromise here. A little applause there. A growing sense of importance. And before long, we've stopped asking, "Lord, what would You have me do?" and started asking, "How can I protect what I've built?"

Jesus knew this temptation would confront His disciples. That's why He spent so much of His ministry teaching them about leadership. What did they argue about? Who was the greatest. Who would sit at His right hand. Who would occupy the seats of honor. Again and again, Jesus had to turn the conversation upside down. "The greatest among you will be your servant." "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." In other words, leadership in Christ's kingdom is measured not by how many people serve you, but by how many people you willingly serve.

Peter is a fascinating example. Jesus gave Peter extraordinary responsibility. He called him the rock upon which He would build His church. Imagine hearing those words. Peter probably envisioned honor, influence, and significance. What he received instead was responsibility, hardship, persecution, imprisonment, and ultimately martyrdom.

Peter thought the calling would lead to comfort. Instead, it led him to a cross.

That's the part of Christian leadership we don't always talk about. The higher God calls you, the heavier the responsibility often becomes. The greater the influence, the greater the accountability. The louder the applause, the more diligently you must guard your heart. The question isn't, "How many people are following me?" The question is, "Am I still following Jesus?"

The Apostle Paul understood this tension. Listen to how he described ministry:

We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed. 2 Corinthians 4:8-9

Notice Paul's focus. He talks like a man who is having a hard time, but learning to lean on God through it all. When God entrusted him with greater influence, he did not expect a bigger spotlight. He expected a heavier cross.

A Good-hearted Skeptic Asks:

If Gideon drifted so badly, why is he listed among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11?

If you're new to the Bible, you may not know that the book of Hebrews contains what many people call the "Hall of Faith." Think of it as the Mount Rushmore of biblical history. It's a chapter filled with men and women whom God used in remarkable ways. And sure enough, Gideon's name is there. But how can that be? After all, he led Israel to an incredible victory, but by the end of his life he had drifted. He accumulated wealth. He created the ephod. His household became a snare to Israel. It seems like his name should have fallen off the dean's list.

But here's the surprising answer. The Bible never hides the failures of its heroes. In fact, that's one of the strongest evidences that it tells the truth. Think about some of the people God chose to use:

- Abraham lied about Sarah being his wife because he was afraid. That's called being a coward.
- Jacob deceived his own father and cheated his brother. That's called being a liar.
- Moses lost his temper and struck the rock in disobedience. That's called being a rebel.
- Paul spent part of his life persecuting Christians before becoming one himself. That's called being a terrorist.

None of these people are listed in the hall of faith because they were perfect. God used cowards, liars, rebels, and hate-mongers. So why are they revered in the Hall of Faith? Because they were instruments used by God. If perfection were the requirement for heaven, none of us would get in.

The only person who has ever lived a sinless life is Jesus Christ. So why is Gideon there? Because Hebrews remembers the defining moment of his life, rather than focusing on his failures. Gideon believed God enough to face a huge army with three hundred men. That act of faith didn't erase his later failures, but neither did his later failures erase God's gracious work through him. And I find that deeply encouraging.

Because it reminds me that God's grace is greater than my worst chapter of life, than my worst moments in life. If your faith is in Christ, your story is not ultimately defined by your greatest failure. It is defined by God's grace.

Our minds tend to hang on to those moments when we did something or thought something that was 100% anti-Christian. We blew our top. Or said something utterly evil. We cheated. Or we stole. Or we hated. We all have some moments in our past when we did evil.

But the reason we can find comfort is that Hebrews 11 lists lots of people who had their embarrassing moments, yet the Lord still used them. All those people in Hebrews 11 are in heaven today—not because of their good works, but because of God’s grace.

A Student Asks:

What should I do when someone I respect lets me down?

I love to ask a question every week aimed specifically at our students. Why? Here’s one reason:

Only 46% of Americans ages 18–24 identify as Christian, compared with 80% of Americans 74 and older.

Think about that gap.

For decades, churches have spent enormous amounts of energy asking, *“What do our longtime members want?”* And of course we should love and shepherd every generation well. But increasingly, we also have to ask, *“What will it take to reach our kids?”* The older generations are far more likely to already identify as Christians. The generation coming behind them is not.

So we cannot afford to build a church merely around the preferences of those who are already here. We have to think deeply, pray desperately, and work creatively about how to reach the generation that is coming next.

So let me answer this question pertaining to students. What should I do when someone I respect lets me down, like Ben Rector sang about in his song, *Heroes*?

Eventually, it happens to all of us. When I was in my 20s my favorite preacher confessed to an affair with his secretary. I was devastated. What was I to do with all the cassette tapes of his that I held with such high regard? Should I pretend I never learned anything from him? I don’t think so. Here’s why. Truth doesn’t become false because the person who spoke it failed to live it.

If I stand in this pulpit on Sunday and faithfully explain God’s Word, but you were to see me on a Tuesday acting in a way that dishonors Christ, my hypocrisy wouldn’t make the Bible any less true. It would simply remind you that God has always chosen to communicate His perfect truth through imperfect people. That’s the story of the entire Bible.

So what should you do when someone you respect falls? First, grieve. Whenever a Christian leader falls, the name of Christ is dishonored, families are wounded, churches suffer, and people are hurt. That should never become normal to us.

Second, forgive. If there is genuine repentance, we extend the same grace that Christ has extended to us.

Third, be careful. Galatians 6:1 says: “Watch yourself, so that you also won’t be tempted.” One of the worst responses to another person’s failure is pride. “I’d never do something like that.” Be

careful. The proper response is humility. "Lord, apart from Your grace, I'm capable of more than I realize."

When someone you respect lets you down, don't stop trusting Jesus. Instead, let their failure remind you why Jesus is the only One worthy of your complete confidence.