

Forget Not Blinded by Success

Rob Rogers

November 17, 2019

How many of you have either read the book, or seen the movie the “The Martian”?

Matt Damon is the main character, stranded on Mars... Great movie. Terrible conclusion... if you haven't seen it, I'm about to spoil it for you. (20th Century Fox, September 2015)

Matt Damon is stranded on Mars, left by his crew who thought he was dead, has to learn how to survive... grow food, get water, and survive as long as possible, he faces all these obstacles and setbacks...

Well the crew is headed back to Earth, finds out Matt Damon is alive wants to go back and save him, but ground control is telling them, “No you can't go back, it's too risky, you don't have the right equipment to manage another landing and re-launch... you won't make it back to rescue him in time, and it would put too many people's lives at risk, not just one...”

The crew doesn't listen, they use the gravitational force of the earth to slingshot them back toward Mars to rescue their friend — which then causes the Chinese and US governments to collaborate with the crew to devise a plan to rescue Matt Damon's character before he starves to death on Mars.

So, they come up with a plan, they figure out a way for Damon to launch off Mars, right as their ship is passing by his location, so he launches up, the ship is passing by, it's this tense moment, because if they are off by just a few feet, he's going to spiral into outer space and be lost forever. It doesn't look like he's going to make it, his launch didn't have enough power... so he rips a hole in his glove, the escaping air propels him the rest of the way to the crew, and he's saved from certain death. Great movie, very realistic.

That's all good. So fun. But at the end of the movie, there is a scene where Matt Damon is instructing a class and sharing how he survived this awful scenario.

“At some point, everything's gonna go south on you... everything's going to go south and you're going to say, this is it. This is how I end. Now you can either accept that, or you can get to work. That's all it is. You just begin. You do the math. You solve one problem... and you solve the next one... and then the next. And if you solve enough problems, you get to come home.”

I loved this movie, but I hated the conclusion. Here's why... the moral of the story is if you just keep solving the next problem, then everything will work out for you in the end and you'll succeed.

While solving the next problem is definitely a *part* of the equation... it's not the *whole* equation...

- *what about all of the sacrifices, and monumental efforts made by the US and Chinese government*
- *by the crew who risked their lives over and over again to come back for you and save you*
- *You could have solved all of your problems — but if they didn't come back — you're dead.*
- *If the Chinese and US governments don't set aside their political issues and collaborate, your dead*

In other words

- *there was a total overestimation of his own ability to save himself*
- *total undervaluation of the sacrifices and contributions of others toward his rescue*

But this issue... is actually not just a Hollywood issue — it's a human issue...

Gideon

Judges 8 is an obscure passage packed with an enormous warning to those who have experienced any level of success, achievement, accolade, blessing, position, worldly status.

- **Judges 8:4-9,16**

And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing. ⁵ So he said to the men of Succoth, "Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian." ⁶ And the officials of Succoth said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?" ⁷ So Gideon said, "Well then, when the Lord has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers." ⁸ And from there he went up to Penuel, and spoke to them in the same way, and the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered. ⁹ And he said to the men of Penuel, "When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower."

¹⁶ And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson. ¹⁷ And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

Background:

Gideon has had some really up and down moments in his life...

- he's hiding in the winepress — is he a coward or a genius?
- he whittles his militia all the way down to 300 men... is he a genius or a lunatic?
- wild victory over the Midianites where they put the torches in the jars of clay, and the jars of clay shatter and they blow the trumpets and shout and then the whole Midianite army starts killing each other out of confusion and then they flee...
- So, Gideon and his mighty men, (*who didn't do an ounce of fighting, btw*), defeated the Midianites
- then... here comes this weird, obscure story of Gideon's response to the people of Succoth and Penuel *in the very next chapter*.

Out of this obscure story, we're going to talk about the...

**THE SEDUCTION OF SUCCESS
THE EXALTATION OF SELF
THE SUBVERSION OF SUCCESS**

The Seduction of Success

Modern western culture says we should live for —

- success
- status
- achievement
- wealth
- recognition
- position
- power

We internalize the messaging from a young age that if you achieve, if you perform, if you acquire those things, if you get there... then you'll...

- be a somebody
- have a sense of validation
- have proven yourself to all the naysayers
- really know that you have value

Now, out of our passage... we see a guy who has just accomplished great success... against all odds he and 300 of his men defeated an enormous enemy military power — and as the Midianites are fleeing, and Gideon and his men are in pursuit, they come across some people, and ask for food. They're tired, they're exhausted, and they're hungry.

- **Judges 8:5-6**

So he said to the men of Succoth, "Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian." ⁶ And the officials of Succoth said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?"

Gideon has a choice at this point... He could say, "I know you're afraid of the Midianites, but God has given them into our hands, and God is with us. You might doubt us, but don't doubt the God of Israel. Please help us, and when God gives us victory, you'll be rewarded."

But Gideon doesn't respond this way... look at what he says...

- **Judges 8:7**

So Gideon said, "Well then, when the Lord has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers."

- Gideon says, "Oh you don't know who I am? How dare you doubt me! I'm going to get some briers and teach you all a lesson..."

Then they go to Pennuel, and they won't help them either... so he says this...

- **Judges 8:9**

"When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower."

Question — Now, do you hear what he's saying? He doesn't say, "I know it's hard to believe, but God is with us — don't trust in my strength, but trust in His." Instead, He says, "*How dare you doubt me!? You just wait until I get back here, then I'm really going to show you... you'll respect me then!*"

So, Gideon chases down the rest of the Midianites, captures the two kings... and then the very first thing he does is deliver on his threats!

- **Judges 8:15**

...And he came to the men of Succoth and said, "Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about 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 exhausted?'" ¹⁶ And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson. ¹⁷ And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

- Gideon says, "*You wouldn't help me then... well look at me now! I'm going to teach you a lesson! Where's that tower, I'm pulling that down. You'll think twice before you disrespect me again!*"

Question — Why the outburst? Why the rage? Why the anger?

- **Here's why:** Gideon bought into the lie that his success was solely the result of his own strength, effort, and wisdom. Gideon was lured by his success to believe that he deserved honor, recognition, and glory — and when he didn't get it — he raged with bitterness and indignation!

"Don't you know who I am? I don't deserve this kind of treatment!? Not from the likes of someone like you, anyway?"

- In other words, Gideon had one victory in battle and instantly became a Diva! So, when he doesn't get the respect he thinks he deserves, he goes off.

APPLICATION — the seductive danger of success is it can fool you into thinking that you're a really big deal. It can fool you into thinking that now you're a somebody.

- *Because success, like sirens luring sailors to their doom, calls to us and lures us into spiritual amnesia.*

And what we learn from Gideon in Judges 8 and what we learn from Matt Damon of all people... is that

Any type of success can lure you into overestimating your own contribution, and undervaluing the contribution of others to the success in your own life.

The seductive nature of success —

- undermines a grateful life
- blinds us to our own inadequacy
- we can begin to believe that we are the sole reason...
- ...our greatness is the sole reason
- ...our discipline is the sole reason for our success in life.

...and it completely devalues and undermines

the power, the importance, the role of God's guiding grace in our lives

This is why failure is such an important part of the life of every Christian.

The Exaltation of Self

The Bible uses a word for the belief that we actually earned the blessings in our lives and that we deserve respect and recognition for God-given victories and successes:

PRIDE

"Pride is ruthless, sleepless, unsmiling concentration on the self."¹
~ C.S. Lewis

- self-obsession
- self-absorption
- the demand to justify your own existence through your own efforts

And for that reason, pride and ingratitude go hand in hand. Because pride demands that any ounce of success be used to justify yourself... to prove your value to yourself and to others... Pride says, "No one else contributed to my success, it's all because of me."

*"Ingratitude is a fundamental rather than a superficial sin. It is part and parcel of pride and self-centeredness, a deep denial of how dependent we are on God and one another. If we aren't thankful, it's because we don't think we owe anyone anything."²
~ Tim Keller*

Question — Where was the first instance of ingratitude in the bible?

Answer — Lucifer

- Wherever ingratitude is present in our lives, it's a reflection of the work of the devil himself.
- Wherever there is entitlement in our lives, it reveals that our enemy has been at work in our lives and we're buying into it.

¹ <https://twitter.com/davidhertweck/status>

² Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Penguin, Feb 14, 2008)

- **INTERESTING...** See, what's fascinating about Gideon, is at beginning of his story... he is continually refusing to believe God... over and over again he is doubting what God can do...
- “God I’m the weakest in my clan” It’s okay I got you. “Well prove it with this fleece, put dew on it in the morning,” God does it. “I need another sign, don’t put dew on the next morning.” God does... and he finally gives in and God is patient with him, gracious, kind, gentle, proves himself over and over again... And Gideon was absolutely filled with doubt and disbelief and God was so kind to him... But as soon as someone doubted Gideon, as soon as someone didn’t believe in Gideon, he was ready to kill them. And he DID kill them.

Whenever Gideon didn’t believe God, God was gracious... whenever someone didn’t believe him... he punished them.

APPLICATION — When we walk in ingratitude, we’re ready to go off on people for the very thing that God has forgiven us of.

- It’s the story of the man that was forgiven his enormous debt and refused to forgive his debtors of a far smaller sum in Matthew 18...
- pride and ingratitude cause us to turn God-given victories into justifications of self.
- we take the goodness that God gives, and stack all those blessings, victories, successes up in order validate our own existence apart from God Himself.
- we, like Gideon, desperately want to believe that we have what it takes to save ourselves, to take credit for the victories God gives...

What’s the solution? How do we fight against this?

The Subversion of Success

Question — If ingratitude is evidence of pride, and vice versa... What does it take to be grateful? What quality must you have, if you’re going to be a grateful person?

HUMILITY

You must be humble, if you’re going to be grateful. And you must be grateful if you’re going to be humble.

- **Proverbs 29:23**
One's pride will bring him low, but the lowly in spirit will obtain honor.
- **Luke 1:52**
...he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;
- **Matthew 23:12**
Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.
- **James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5; Proverbs 3:34**
God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

What all these verses are telling us is that God’s ways are not our ways. God flips the kingdom of this world that says, “achieve, accomplish, strive, win at all costs...” and he flips in on its head...

- Jesus says in **Matthew 23:11**
The greatest among you shall be your servant.
 - You want to be great? You want to be a somebody in God's economy?
 - **Serve at the expense of self, not for the exaltation of self.**
 - The king and creator of the universe, wrapped a towel around His feet and humbly served the creation...

Jesus subverts worldly success through servanthood.

INTERESTING: What's fascinating about the story of Gideon — is that God-given success didn't fill him with gratitude, but revealed the insecurity, the pride, within himself, and he didn't become a servant — he became a tyrant.

The last place we see Gideon turning to God, and trusting God and relying on God is *in the very beginning of his story.*

Look at Gideon's response when God first calls him...

- **Judges 7:15**
And he said to him, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house."
 - He's face-to-face with his own frailty and weakness, and is completely dependent and reliant on God... He worshiped God and honored God... and the moment success entered into his life, he worships it, he idolizes it, he becomes addicted to it...
 - He completely forgets who it was that called him, equipped him, reassured him, and won the battle for him.

Question — So, how do we guard against this? The answer is in our root passage for this series...

Application —

- **Psalm 103:15-10**
¹⁵ As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; ¹⁶ for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. ¹⁷ But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, ¹⁸ to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments. ¹⁹ The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.

When Gideon understood his frailty and weakness, he knew that victory could only be won by grace. **We need to remember God's grace in failure, but we need to remember it much more in success.**

Tauren Wells has a song... the lyrics get to the heart of it...

On the mountains, I will bow my life
To the one who set me there
In the valley, I will lift my eyes to the one who sees me there
When I'm standing on the mountain aft, didn't get there on my own
When I'm walking through the valley end, no I am not alone!

~ Songwriters: Chuck Butler/Jonathan Lindley Smith/Tauren Wells
Hills and Valleys lyrics ©Essential Music Publishing

This is exactly why David writes Psalm 103...

- **Psalm 103:2**
Bless the LORD, O my soul, and **forget not** all his benefits...

**In other words, stand tall in the low places, bow low in the high places.
Because no matter where you are in life, God's grace is at work... allow that knowledge to fill
you with humility and gratitude. Amen?**

Discussion Questions

1. Define Pride.
2. Why do pride and ingratitude go hand in hand?
3. Discuss Keller's statement that, "Ingratitude is a fundamental rather than a superficial sin."
4. What struggle in your life are you most grateful for?
5. Have you ever "challenged God" by "putting out a fleece"?
How did that challenge turn out?

NOTES