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Fake It Till You Make It

*Brave is trusting God despite
your feelings*

Elizabeth Swaney had a dream of becoming a winter Olympian. After attempting bobsled, skeleton, and aerial skiing without success, she decided to make her mark in the sport of half-pipe skiing. This involves skiing while performing tricks such as flips, spins, and grabs. Sadly, for Elizabeth Swaney, she couldn't do any of these.

There was little chance she would be selected to compete in half-pipe skiing for the country where she was born. The United States has 325 million people, most of who were better at half-pipe skiing than she was. So, Swaney decided to compete for the nation of Hungary, her grandparents' country of birth. Hungary has just under

10 million people, giving her a better chance of Olympic selection.

The question remained—how was Elizabeth Swaney going to qualify for Olympic half-pipe skiing when she couldn't even do the sport?

There were two criteria for Olympic selection:

- The world's top 24 skiers will be selected but only a maximum of four from any one nation.
- Athletes must place in the top 30 in a recognized halfpipe competition.

These looked like difficult criteria to meet given Swaney's lack of ability. However, she was undeterred and decided to enter a half pipe competition. Swaney travelled to New Zealand, entered a competition, and came in 26th place. How did she pull off such a feat when she couldn't even perform the simplest of tricks? Swaney started at one end, skied to the other, performed no tricks and came in last place. But importantly, there were only 26 athletes in the competition. This fulfilled one of the two criteria, she had finished in the top 30 in a recognized halfpipe competition.

But how would Swaney get her ranking up to be one of the twenty-four athletes at the Olympic Games? When Swaney finished 26th in New Zealand she earned herself some ranking points—not many, but it was a start. Swaney figured that, if she needed more points, she simply needed to enter more competitions. So Swaney went to Canada and came 21st, to South Korea and came 26th, France 24th,

and Spain 21st. In China she finished 13th—how did she manage that? There were only 15 competitors and two of them crashed out. Swaney also competed all around America, accruing points and improving her ranking. As the Olympics drew near, Swaney found herself ranked 34th in the world. Consider Elizabeth Swaney's monumental achievement—she was ranked 34th in the world for a sport she didn't even do!

Swaney's world ranking was close but just shy of Olympic selection. Then, some technicalities began to run in her favour. America had six skiers in the top 24 but was only allowed to send their best four. Swaney avoided that by competing for Hungary. Some of the world's top 24 were injured—half-pipe skiing is a dangerous sport, especially for those who perform tricks. As a result, the Olympic Committee kept going further and further down the list. Eventually, they found themselves inviting Hungary's Elizabeth Swaney to the Olympic Games. Elizabeth, take a bow!

What a remarkable achievement! Elizabeth Swaney went to the 2018 winter games in a sport she couldn't do for a country she didn't live in. On the day of her event, she started at one end, skied to the other, performed no tricks, and finished in last place. There were 2,922 athletes at the 2018 winter games and Swaney was surely the most unlikely of them all.

If you thought Elizabeth Swaney making the Olympics was unlikely, we're about to encounter one of the most unlikely leaders in the Bible. His name is Gideon, and we meet this brave warrior hiding in a hole.

To set the scene:

Gideon belongs to the nation of Israel, which at this time is being severely persecuted by the nation of Midian. The Midianites attack Israel's farms, destroying their crops and reducing Israel to starvation. This happens at a time when Israel isn't following the Lord. The Angel of the Lord appears to Gideon who is threshing wheat in a winepress. You don't need to be an expert to know that winepresses are for pressing grapes to make wine, not for threshing wheat, but Gideon has chosen this unconventional location to hide from the Midianites.

The Angel of the Lord speaks to Gideon and says, "Mighty hero, the Lord is with you!"

Has there been a mistake? Did the Angel go to the wrong hole? Israel's hopes of freedom rest on the shoulders of a hero in hiding.

Gideon replies, "If the Lord is with us why has all this happened to us?"

Gideon doesn't get it; he doesn't even realise that Israel is suffering because of their disobedience.¹¹

Gideon offers excuses: "How can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my entire family!"

But the fact that Gideon is weak is exactly the reason God uses him. God wants to show Israel that it is God who will rescue them from the Midianites, not a strong warrior.

¹¹ Judges 6:1 The Israelites did evil in the Lord's sight. So, the Lord handed them over to the Midianites for seven years.

The Lord offers Gideon further encouragement: "I will be with you. And you will destroy the Midianites as if you were fighting against one man."

Gideon asks if he can bring God a voluntary offering. This is a great move, as a voluntary offering is a way to worship God. Gideon may be weak, but he offers God what he has. God accepts Gideon's offering; the Angel of the Lord touches the gift with the tip of his staff and fire consumes it and the Angel disappears! A miraculous event—this should give Gideon the encouragement he needs to be brave...

Next, God tells Gideon to pull down his father's altar to Baal, which is an idol that Israel worships instead of God. Gideon plucks up the courage to pull the idol down, but at night when no one's watching. It's braver than hiding in a hole—but not by much.

Now Gideon asks God to prove to him that He plans to use him. If Gideon wants a sign all he needs to do is open his eyes! The Angel of the Lord has appeared to him and personally told him he would rescue Israel. Plus, Gideon's offering was consumed by fire. But God is remarkably patient with Gideon's questioning. When Gideon puts out a woollen fleece and asks God to make the fleece wet and the ground dry, God grants his request.

Gideon then says to God:

Please don't be angry with me, let me make one more request. Let me use the fleece for one more test. This time let the fleece remain dry while the ground around it is

wet with dew.¹²

God is gracious, He knows how scared Gideon is. The next morning the fleece is dry, and the ground is wet. Finally, Gideon is convinced God is calling him to lead. He's not feeling it, but he gets on with it.

With a leader as weak as Gideon, you would think God would provide him with a strong army to give him confidence. Instead, God tells Gideon he has too many troops! The Midianite army has over 100,000 soldiers, Gideon has just 32,000. God is teaching the nation of Israel an important lesson. If God's people follow Him, He is more than able to protect them and win their battles. He can use the weakest leader with the smallest army to defeat the most powerful armies in the world. God tells Gideon's army that if anyone is scared, they can leave. 22,000 of Israel's soldiers breathe a sigh of relief and return home, leaving Gideon with just 10,000 troops. They are outnumbered by more than 10 to 1! But God decides it is necessary to reduce the army further, right down to just 300 men! Let's check out their weapons...

Gideon's troops are handed a ram's horn, which was a musical instrument. This army looks more like a brass band than it does a military force. Each man also has a clay pot with a torch inside (not a torch with batteries but more like a stick with a flame). These are not the sort of weapons you'd expect. Just after midnight Gideon's men blow their ram's horns and break their clay jars. One minute the Midianites are sleeping, the next minute there's sound and light everywhere. The Midianites panic

¹² Judges 6:39

and begin fighting one another and Israel wins an incredible victory in the most unlikely of circumstances.

If Elizabeth Swaney is the most improbable Olympian, then Gideon is the unlikeliest of leaders. Gideon's story reminds us, if God can use a man hiding in a hole to free His nation, then anyone can be brave in the making, even you!

Bible Story: Judges 6-7

Press Pause: *Am I underestimating what God can do through me?*

Verse to remember:

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. (1 Corinthians 1:27 ESV)