

Being Weak in the World of the Strong

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Date: 09 February 2020

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[0 : 00] Father, for some of us, the story we're going to read is very, very familiar. And for others of us, Father, we're going to be hearing it for the first time. We ask, Father, that your Holy Spirit would do a wonderful work, both for those who know this story very well and those of us who've never heard it, that you would bring the story deep into our heart.

Father, I ask that it's not that people will remember my words or think that I am wise. We ask, Father, that the Holy Spirit will bring your word into each of our lives, that your word will be what forms us and grips us at our heart.

And this I ask in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen. Please be seated. So some of you know I'm a runner.

Actually, as I get older, I probably shouldn't call myself a runner. It's probably fairer to say that I shuffle very rapidly along the canal as I get slower, as I get older.

And on Friday afternoon, late afternoon, I went for a run along the canal. I don't know, 3.30, 4 o'clock, something like that. And as you know, it was bad weather on Friday. And so I come to the canal and the path along the canal hasn't been plowed, which makes the, you know, whatever, this much snow.

[1 : 23] It's not very comfortable. I get to where the ice has been open for people to skate. And I look down, and as often the case, right along the edges, there's a bit of a strip where it's been plowed but not ice.

So it's like hard-packed, flat snow. So I go down there and I do the rest of my run. I'm doing the rest of my run on the ice or beside the ice. And as I'm sort of going down a little bit, I see off in the distance ahead of me about three or four men.

And they're all, like, skating more like this. You know, they're not skating like they did minor hockey as kids. And they're all, you know, they're tottering around.

And as I'm getting closer to them, one of them starts to totter over towards me and starts saying something which I can't understand at first. And then I realize he has a really deep Georgia or Mississippi or Alabama accent.

You know, one of those real southern accents. And he's saying to me, You're cheating. And I said to him, I am.

[2 : 27] And then we just, I kept running, and he sort of tottered over to the side. So I'm going to begin this story. You heard John read the beginning. I'm going to, for those of you who have never heard the story, I'm going to cheat and tell you the ending.

The ending, God does a remarkable, miraculous, providential thing. And Gideon lives. So I'm giving you the ending. I'm going to cheat. And for those of you who have never heard the story, I'm going to let you know that Gideon wins.

But for those of you who've heard the story many times, often Sunday school teachers, in an attempt to spice things up, not putting down Sunday school teachers, many pastors, they put parts and missed parts of the story that are actually really, really significant if they're going to affect our hearts.

So let's look at the story. It's Judges chapter 7. Judges chapter 7. And if we were doing, if we were, if Netflix approached us to do a movie on the story of Gideon, it would be, this would be episode 2 of three episodes.

And so last week in episode 1, we meet Gideon, amongst other things, and we discover that Gideon is this Jewish man who worships Baal, Baal, and the Asherah, so he's paganized or Canaanized.

[3 : 44] And Israel has been brought very, very, very, very low. They, every, periodically, at least once or twice a year, the Midianites, the Amalekites, and other nomadic tribes come and enter into the land of Israel.

And it's not just that, they don't just, they don't come to conquer, they don't come to occupy, they just come to steal whatever they can carry and whatever they can eat, and whatever they haven't stolen and whatever they haven't eaten, whatever's left, they destroy it so that the Israelites can't eat it.

So what this story is, they've been brought low for seven years. There's been seven years of attempted genocide. Seven years of attempted genocide of the people of Israel. And Midian has been brought very, very low.

And just before we start to read this, one of the things we talked about last week is if you go through all of the book of Judges, one of the things the book of Judges as a whole wants to show you is that it's not true that all paths lead to God.

It is not true that all paths lead to God. But it is true that the triune God uses many paths, many different paths, to bring people to himself. And so in the book of Judges, you're going to see God constantly delivering his people, but he does it in a different way every time.

[5 : 02] And so last week, we heard about Gideon and his call, and God is going to be the one who delivers them from the Midianites, but he's going to use Gideon.

And so now we actually see it happen. And here's how it begins. I hope I point this the right way. I think I did. That's, yes. Okay, so here's how it begins. Then Jerobal, that is Gideon, and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Herod.

As we'll see in a moment, Gideon's raised an army. And the camp of Midian was north of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley. Verse 2. And just before I read verse 2, verse 2 is the key to understanding the entire story of Gideon from the beginning to the end.

In other words, if we were to make this into a Netflix movie, and you saw episode 1, which is chapter 6, episode 2, which is chapter 7, and episode 3, which is chapter 8, and maybe into chapter 9 because it's connected to what happens there.

If you, verse 2 is the key text to help you to understand what's going on in the whole story. And it's the key to being able to interpret it.

[6 : 24] And here's what it says. The Lord said to Gideon, The people with you are too many for me. Too many. Your army's too big for me to give the Midianites into their hand.

Lest Israel boast over me, saying, My own hand has saved me. Now therefore, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead.

Then 22,000 of the people returned and 10,000 remained. So, this advice that the Lord gives Gideon, we have at least one veteran in the room, is completely insane advice.

Normally what you do is you say, Okay, we got 32,000 people. How can we get 30,000 more so we can really guarantee that we win this battle? And I can also well imagine that many, many commanders, maybe even this is what went through Gideon's mind, we're not told.

Gideon might have thought, Sure, I can say whoever's afraid go on home because I know my troops and two will go home because I know my troops. They're all men's men and they're all pumped for this battle.

[7 : 40] So he gives this thing and before he knows it, over two-thirds two-thirds of the army leaves and he's left with 10,000. The book doesn't go into the psychology of what was going through Gideon's mind but it must have been terrifying for him to see over two-thirds of all of his troops just leave, left to 10,000.

But remember verse 2, God says, the Lord says to Gideon, The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand lest Israel boast over me saying, My own hand to save me. So, what happens next? Well, what happens next is in verse, it's going to get worse. Those of you who've never heard the story, it gets worse. Verse 4 and 5.

And the Lord said to Gideon, the people are still too many. Take them down to the water. I will test them for you there. And the word test is different than the word test used other places in the story of Judges.

This is a word about refining. I'm going to refine them more for you there. And anyone to whom I say to you, still at the part of verse 4, anyone of whom I say to you, this one shall go with you, shall

go with you.

[8 : 56] And anyone of whom I say to you, this one shall not go with you, shall not go. So Gideon brought the people down to the water. And the Lord said to Gideon, everyone who laps the water with his tongue as a dog laps, you shall set by himself.

Likewise, everyone who kneels down to drink. Now just sort of pause. If it's a little bit, I think I've skipped a bit here. No, I didn't. I think I'm fine. If it's a little bit confusing, this is one of the few places in the Old Testament where there is some confusion in the grammar.

And if you read something like the New Living Translation, it smooths it out. But it's not important to get all the words right. And I'll explain why in a moment. Let's see what happens next.

It's verses 6 and following. And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was 300 men. But all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water.

And the Lord said to Gideon, with the 300 men who lapped, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand. Let all the others go every man to his home. So the people took provisions in their hands and their trumpets.

[10 : 07] And he sent all the rest of Israel, every man to his tent, but retained the 300 men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley. So now, once again, the Lord has done completely and utterly crazy advice.

He's given another test and he's got the people down to 300. Now here's where many pastors and many well-meaning Sunday school teachers make a big mistake. The point of the test is to get the number down to 300.

It is not the point to find out Arnold Schwarzenegger and The Rock and Jason Statham and 297 other super soldiers.

That's not the point of the test. If that was the point of the test, they could still boast. They could say, listen, we don't need 32,000 people. All we need is The Rock and maybe Stallone and maybe Schwarzenegger and we can handle all of those people.

That's not the point of the story. I mean, it could have been, I don't know, who scratched their chin this way. It could have been who didn't pick their nose. Like, the point of the test is it's not about some type of special vigilance or anything like that.

[11 : 13] Just as, and I don't want to rain on the parade of some people and they're preaching, there's no special power about Israeli horns. There's not.

It's completely irrelevant. Like, there's a whole, there's whole, like, training sessions in churches. The shofar, I think that's what it's called. You know, if you really want to have success, get a shofar and, no!

The point of it is, you ask the average soldier, would you rather go in with a rifle or a horn and they'll pick the rifle every day. Do you want to go in with a sword or a horn?

They'll pick the sword. The point is that God's going to do the delivery. That's the whole point of the story, right? God's going to do something so that nobody with even an ounce of intelligence can look and say that we had anything to do with the victory.

That's the point of the story. It's not to say there's something special about Israeli horns and shofars. Sorry, I hope I didn't offend anybody who's here or who listens to the sermon later.

[12 : 17] But, that's what's going on in the text. So now we have 300 people. Well, what's going to happen? Let's see, what happens next. Now, one of the things which is really neat is that, and this is really important for us in the story.

See, the thing about these stories is that if you read them and read them and read them and they get into you, it forms you in a way that me being able to talk doesn't form you. It forms you in a way that, it forms you at a deep level.

Stories form you in a very subtle, but at the end of the day, maybe even a more important way than using something like a creed. And one of the things which is so wonderful about the story is this, that the Lord knows when you're afraid.

Like, if there are some of us here today who are struggling with fear about something, you don't have to worry about pouring your heart out about your fear to the Lord because the Lord already knows you're afraid.

And the Lord doesn't despise you because you have fear. If you go back and you read in the Gospels time and time and time and time again, Jesus says, do not be afraid. He doesn't say, do not be afraid to shame you if you're afraid.

[13:27] He lets you know that he's with you even though you're afraid. And so here, even before Gideon can say, Lord, I am terrified, the Lord knows he's afraid.

And so the Lord goes ahead of Gideon's fear, so to speak, speaks into it. We don't know whether Gideon would have been too afraid to acknowledge it before him or not, but the Lord knows he's afraid and that's what happens next.

That same night, verse 9, the Lord said to Gideon, arise, go down against the camp, in other words, right up to the very edge of it, for I have given it into your hand. But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah, your servant, and you shall hear what they say.

And afterward, your hand shall be strengthened to go down against the camp. Then Gideon went down with Purah, his servant, to be to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp.

So the Lord knows he's afraid. And the Lord knows he's afraid even to go down and get close. So he speaks into it because the Lord knows we're afraid when we're afraid.

[14:38] And, you know, just once again, think of verse 2. he wants them to know that he is the mighty deliverer, that there's no reason that we should boast about our strength or our accomplishment.

In other words, he wants them to understand that they're weak. And it isn't that the Lord looks down and says, I'm only going to save the strong people. I'm only going to save the fearless people.

No, he saves us when we are fearful. And this next part of the story, which is very subtle, also says, I'm going to deal with you and save you even though your heart is still given to a pagan understanding of me.

It's a very small thing, but just before we get that, we have to see something that's going to help emphasize the magnitude of what the Lord is about to do. Verse 12, And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance.

So here's Gideon and Purah. He has 299 men back in the bush and he looks down and he sees that you can't even begin to count them.

[16:03] Like 32,000 wouldn't have been enough. They just seem to stretch on forever into the distance. The lights of the torches and the campfire. It just goes on and on and on like sand in the seashore.

But Gideon goes on down close to the outpost and here's where we see the Lord takes great compassion on him. You see, the Lord doesn't wait for you to have perfect theology to save you. The Lord doesn't wait for you to have like all religion and all spirituality says, okay, start to get your life together and learn how to do these rituals and learn how to do a few good things and then if you do that you can sort of start to maybe talk to me and I'll pay a little bit of attention to you and if you really do that very well then I'll save you.

And the gospel message is the complete opposite. The gospel message is, listen, I know you can't defeat Midian and I know you like to boast and I know that at the end of the day you have more of a pagan notion of God than me but I'm going to deliver you.

And the Christian life flows out of God delivering us when we were weak and helpless and not deserving of being saved and all of the Christian life flows out of God's mighty deliverance when we were unworthy.

[17:23] So here's how it works here if you look at verse 13. When Gideon came now he's right up against the edge of the outpost behold a man was telling a dream to his comrades so this is a Midianite or an Amalekite or one of the nomadic tribes from the east that's there they're armed they're on the edge of the camp keeping watch and so I'll read verse 13 again when Gideon came behold a man was telling a dream to his comrade and the man said behold I dreamed a dream and behold a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian and came to the tent and struck it so that it fell so it fell and turned it upside down so that the tent lay flat now just before I read verse 14 the interpretation this is like most dreams this is absurd like I'm not a camper but generally speaking if a barley muffin fell in the tent I wouldn't worry the tent's going to collapse and so here we have a little a bun barley bun in the dream it's like dreams it comes rolling in the whole tent gets not only knocked over but turned upside down completely absurd dream like most of our dreams right but here's the interpretation verse 14 his comrade answered this is no other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash a man of Israel

God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp now just sort of you know pause here for a second why did I say that this is actually God condescending to Gideon like if you go back and read episode 1 you'll discover that in chapter 6 you'll discover that when Gideon finally has like a huge miracle done in front of him and he believes in fact that the Lord is calling him to do this remarkable thing and he goes back and you discover that Gideon's family are the ones who look after Baal and the Asherah they're the sponsors the patron for it they're in a sense the leading Baal worshippers of their community and then you go and you read the story and how God tells them to tear it down and destroy it now here's the really big thing unlike idols the triune God is love and he loves ordinary people like you unlike idols the triune

God is love and he loves ordinary people like you you see if so Louise and I I think can have to be we'll be 39 years married in October it's a long time not long enough long time and if on our wedding day Louise and I talk to each other exchange our vows and then for the next 39 years we never talk to each other and we can I mean we talk to other people but we never talk to each other that would be just wrong weird and wrong because it's of the nature of love to talk to each other it's of the nature of love to reveal yourself to the other person and you reveal yourself not just by your actions but also by your words as you interpret your actions or try to or you deal with it in consistency with it and last week one of the things that we saw was that the charge that God brought about his people is and we don't really grasp what this means because we don't fully grasp the uniqueness of the triune

God that in the nature the very nature of the triune God is that from all eternity the Father has loved the Son and the Son has loved the Father and the Holy Spirit is both another person also communicating love but is also sometimes described as love itself and you have this marvelous picture of from all eternity this overflow of love given and received this overflow of communication given and received and it's out of this overflow of love that God creates but for idols the gods create human beings to be their slaves to feed them and in much of the world you have a distant God like in Islam you have a distant God and when you have a distant God when you have a solitary God or when you have the gods the God doesn't speak to you directly like in Islam Allah does not speak to Muhammad Allah speaks to an angel who speaks to Muhammad because the

God does not communicate to you directly because it's really at the end of the day love is not the defining characteristic of the God that is described by that religion or spirituality and so that's why it is that in most religions dreams are really important because that's how God communicates to you indirectly through dreams in Islam dreams are remarkably important and many Muslims will make no decision unless they have first had a dream that communicates to them what God's will is to them communicated indirectly as with paganism as with much of monism the dream is spectacularly significant we don't fully appreciate that because the Christian view is that God is the triune God whom from all eternity has been loving the son and the son has loved the father and the holy spirit is love and the father is good to the son and the son is good to the father and there's in a sense this communication this revelation this opening of the self and the giving of the self and the receiving of the self and God has created us out of who he is the triune God has created us out of who he is and so it is that the triune God reveals himself in words directly

[23 : 21] Gideon hasn't got this entirely and because he is canonized now he really gets it because a dream is revealed you see once again I'm just going to this this is part of why the story is so important to us you see God doesn't wait for you to have a perfect theology he doesn't wait for you to have a perfect understanding of who he is he doesn't wait until you're only strong and never weak he doesn't wait until you're only good and never bad but when you had bad within you and when you had the most crazy absurd ridiculous notions of God still he loved you and sends his son to die for you and he does everything that needs to be accomplished for you to be made right with him you do nothing so what happens next well now Gideon is really energized look at what happens in verse 15 as Gideon as soon as

Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation he worshipped just pause this is just a small thing but it's very important and there's nothing wrong when we think of the word worship we think of all of us standing and putting our arms up like this and exalting we exalt you we exalt you that's in a sense what we understand but here you have to understand that what they're saying is face time as soon as God as Gideon understands it he's flat on his face arms spread out prostrate that usually when you see the word worshipped in the Old Testament it's describing complete and utter prostration it's an acknowledgement that it's making yourself defenseless before the triune

God and that's what Gideon does he falls flat on his face his arms out he is defenseless he is worshipping he is trusting continues on and he returned to the camp of Israel and said arise for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand remember you couldn't even see them they're like the sand on the seashore and now he's heard the dream he's had God speak to him he's heard the dream God condescends to his weakness as part of his grace and his mercy and his goodness and verse 16 and Gideon divided the 300 men into three companies and put trumpets shofars into the hands of all of them and empty jars with torches inside the jars and Gideon said to them look at me and do likewise when I come to the outskirts of the camp do as I do when I blow the trumpet I and all who are with me then blow the trumpets also on every side of all things about this story is it helps us at a story level to understand how it is that God answers prayer and what it is that we're asking when we pray now I don't know what the latest statistics are but I believe it's something like 90% of Canadians or more at least pray last time I saw a statistic one third of all atheists pray the fact the matter is and this should humble us if you're here as a Christian it might very well be that your non Christian office workers pray way more than you do and you should never talk to them as if I pray I mean it might very well be wouldn't it just be terrifying if one day God just showed up and just paused everybody and you discovered your horror hurt well you did pray three weeks ago and this person who's the atheist beside he's been praying every day like human beings pray I've had people talk to me I remember having this conversation with this one person and he said you know I grew up in a completely non religious household I didn't go to a religious school I only watch secular media I've never been to a church a synagogue or a mosque and

I pray every day I pray every day now here's what works in prayer so we pray maybe you have a loved one they're here for winter lude and they're going to drive home to Toronto this evening and so we pray for them not just we maybe our atheist friends and our Muslim friends and our completely and utterly non spiritual Jack Daniels drinking never go to church make fun of Christians friends and they pray as well that the person will get home safely on their car and what they're not praying is that every time a vehicle veers in front of you that God's hand will pick the vehicle up so you can keep going they just pray that you get there safely don't really think about it most of the time way that's praying for a miracle but generally speaking a miracle is something that only [28 : 43] God can do and nature can't do it by the normal way that nature works that's what we pray for when we pray for a miracle and we do pray for miracles but generally we're praying that God will work through the normal course of events everybody still exercising their free will and God will work through the normal course of events in such a way that his purpose and you're praying that his purpose will be what you're asking is that he will take this on as his purpose and that his purpose is accomplished what we're going to see here in a sense let's read the text and then I'll explain why I mentioned all of this verses 19 so Gideon and the hundred men who were with the camp at the beginning of the middle watch so the middle watch would have been around midnight so at around midnight all those guards on the outskirts of the camp and within the camp they're all going to have a lie down and as they're going

I think as those of you who are military veterans can correct me but I think they don't leave their post and the new guys go there the people who are going to be there they go to the posts at least that's the way it's supposed to be done and when they're all there the people who are there start to go back so it's well after midnight most people have been sleeping for four hours or more and and there's a whole pile of armed men coming back to their tents so I'll begin at verse 19 again so Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch when they that is the Midianites and the Amalekites and the nomadic tribes from the east had just set the watch and then the Israelites blow their trumpets and smash the jars that were in their hands verse oh I maybe did it too quickly sorry verse 20 then then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars they held in their left hands the torches and in their right hands the trumpets to blow and they cried out a sword for the Lord and for Gideon every man stood in his place around the camp so they would you can read it I don't know if I pronounced it correctly and the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from Almanasseh did I read too far no I didn't and they pursued after Midian so just sort of pause here like on one level you can come up with a tiny bit of a naturalistic explanation about what happened in this particular story there has been at least one dream who knows how many dreams and they take these dreams as being messages from the gods and those of you who have

been any type of a large organization one of the things about large organizations is that gossip travels faster than orders that's probably true you know in civil service gossip especially bad gossip bad news travels faster than orders and if you think about it for a second on one level you could say this is a very very uneasy alliance like if there were three four of you hopefully there's not and four of you and you're completely and utterly committed to murdering people and for a while it's good for the four of you to hang out together because you like murdering people but at some point in time you'd have to wonder to yourself

I think I'd like to murder this guy beside me and they're probably thinking you know I wouldn't mind murdering this guy beside me because I like murdering so on one hand you could see how this could all work out in a naturalistic explanation there's armed men walking towards the tents there's all of a sudden the the lights and all of that and the yelling and all of a sudden the basic fears in the and people can say well there's a bit of a naturalistic explanation for it but that's what you see here is how prayer usually works which is that

God brings about the result that God wants to bring about even though there are natural processes and nobody's free will is overwhelmed but in this particular case it would be hard even to come up with a naturalistic explanation the army self destructs and flees before 300 men armed with a torch and a trumpet with shards of broken pottery so just sort of want to wrap this up as we come to an end the story is the main thing but here's the thing in terms of an extra thing to try to bring it home to us we all know that it's very easy in life we see it all the time in work some poor secretary does all the work the boss comes in and he or she just sort of takes the work that the secretary or the lowly admin person has done and they sign their name to it and it gets praised and they take all the credit we see that happen all the time we see it happen all the time of a person taking credit for what was it that old joke about

[35 : 10] George W. Bush as he somehow thought he was a self made man without realizing he was born on third base he didn't have to go all the way around the bases he subtle ways and this story is preparing us for the fact that God there is a true and greater median that we need to be delivered from and this true and greater median is we are delivered from this true and greater median by the true and greater act of deliverance which is Jesus and his death upon the cross for unworthy people such as you and me because the fact the matter is that many of us have murderous anger and rage towards people we're too well brought up and we're too Canadian to act on it but we have murderous rage and we have pride and every single one of us if we honest have had times in our lives where somebody who has hurt us and something bad happens to them maybe we find out that they get cancer and part of us is actually pleased that this terrible thing has happened to the other person and the true and greater

Midian that we all face is not just the fact that there is Midian within us but also that there is sin and death we had a beginning and we will have an end and every single one of us will one day come face to face to death and we cannot defeat it and this story is preparing us to understand who Jesus is that he comes and faces the true and greater Midian that we cannot defeat partially because we are Midian that the seeds of our eventual death are already within us as well as there is evil in every one of our lives and every single one of us has a Midian that we cannot defeat and the Lord does what we cannot accomplish for ourselves in his life and death and resurrection he does it when we are unworthy he does it for us and his hope is he doesn't want to make us little

I mean that's that's the power of the story the power of the story is that Gideon is delivered that when God does what only God can do showing that Gideon cannot do anything it doesn't leave Gideon squashed but it leaves him delivered and free and so it is that God in the person of his son accomplishes for us what we can never accomplish for ourselves and that as that story grips us that is how we become a Christian and as that story grips us that is the story by which we can start to understand and see the things around us and look at the things within us looking at the Midian within us in the confidence that God has already defeated that Midian in the person and the work of his son the story prepares us for the story of the true and greater king who defeats the true and greater

Midian to deliver ordinary people like you and me because he is love invite you to stand father we ask that you bring this story deep into our hearts and into our minds and into our imaginations into our memories we ask father that not only will this story be brought into our minds and our hearts and our imaginations but that we will understand how it prepares the way for Jesus the great act of love that he has for us the great victory that he wins for us the great acceptance and mercy and

grace which he only reason we stand and that there is nothing that we can boast of in his mighty act to redeem us we ask father that that would grip us and father you know today those of us who are struggling with fear you know today father those of us who are confused because our thinking isn't formed by your word you know those of us today father who struggle because we're so addicted to boasting about our own resources that when we look at some problem we think that you are smaller than that problem but we give you thanks and praise father that just like you could destroy the host to bring to defeat the host of

Midians that there is no problem that any of us face that you are smaller than that problem that you are bigger and you are not bigger in a way that will crush us but bigger and more loving and more good and more knowledgeable and more wise and more filled with grace and mercy than we can possibly get our minds around and we can call out to you that you would deal with that problem and help us to deal with that problem father you know those of us who need to bring that to you today and we ask that your Holy Holy Spirit would bring this wonderful story of Gideon home to us that we might live the rest of the day and the rest of the week and the rest of our lives out of that story and not the stories of the world and all God's people said Amen