

God's Gift of Salvation

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[0 : 00] Friends, I'll pray while you remain standing. Our Father in God, may the words that I speak now be your words and may you graft them into our hearts and work in us so as to bring forth in us the fruit of good works.

And we pray this for the honour and praise of your name and the glory of your Son, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Please sit down. Well, it lurks in the strangest places, in the dark places, in familiar places, on the edge of cliffs.

And you know the feeling, your heart drops through the floor, perhaps sometimes your stomach with it and panic wells up, numbness surrounds. It is fear, fear of failure, perhaps fear of heights, fear of death, of rejection, of disease, of creeping things, of the future, fear of what others think of you, fear of what someone might, that someone might actually tell you the truth, fear of space, fear of not finding a job, fear of losing a friend, fear.

Friends, all of us have fear and some of us have been crippled by it. Some of us live with it as part of life for us. And fear, I think, was what Gideon felt.

Or at least that's what it looks like when you read the story that we've just read. And we saw hints of it last week. And there's more coming this week. And God is going to deal with it in Gideon. And perhaps as he does, there might be something for us to take home as well.

[1 : 37] So please, let's get started and turn with me to Judges chapter 6 in your Bibles. Now, before we get underway with the passage, let me just remind you of where we were last week.

Israel had been rescued out of Egypt. They've entered into the Promised Land. Under Joshua, settlement of the land has begun. And the inhabitants of the land, though, remain in the land. Israel hadn't done all that God had told them to do. And that means that their fertility cults, their political, their moral practices remain in the land with Israel. But worst of all, their gods remain influential in God's land.

This period of time can be characterized by a number of things. But chief among them is this, that every person does what is right in their own eyes. That's the catch cry of this generation.

But fortunately, God has not left them alone. He acts in his land to raise up deliverers, which are called Judges. And in these particular days that we are looking at, in this generation, he has raised up a certain Gideon.

[2 : 42] And we met Gideon last week. You might remember him. He starts off by questioning the messenger of God who comes to him. And then he seeks from that messenger a sign. And then he receives a command from God's messenger to go and tear down his father's altar to Baal and the Asherah pole that stands beside it.

And with some apparent fear, that is what Gideon does. He sneaks out in the middle of the night with some servants and he acts according to his name. You see, his name means hacker.

And so he hacks down those idolatrous objects. And the aftermath of that incident nets him a new name. Not only will he be Gideon, the hacker, he will be Jerubbaal, let Baal contend with him.

In other words, let Baal go and do war against him if he needs to. And that brings us to Judges chapter 6, verse 33, which returns us back to the situation that gave rise for the Lord's reason for raising up Gideon.

In chapter 10, verse 6, sorry, in verse 10 of chapter 6, we were told about the menace of the hordes of Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern people who sort of came rushing into Israel at a particular time of year.

[3 : 59] They were invading like a swarm of locusts. Well, they're here again. Verse 33. But this time they're more aggressive. They join forces.

They cross the Jordan. They camp out in some of the most arable land west of the Jordan. Jezreel, the city that they come to, is a site critical and strategically important for trade, commerce, for defense of the land.

And Jezreel is also where Barak, the previous judge, had fought Sisera in chapters 4 and 5. But now look at verse 34. We are told that.

Then the spirit of the Lord came on Gideon. Actually, the English Standard Version captures the Hebrew a little bit better when it says, the spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon.

The term is very different from what's used elsewhere in Judges. It means that God's spirit took possession of him. It's as though he wore the spirit. Now, for us as Christians, being possessed by the spirit of God has very positive associations with speaking God's word, living in God's ways.

[5 : 04] However, being possessed by the spirit in the book of Judges meant to be overcome by God for the purpose of rescuing his people. And that's what happens to the spirit clothed Gideon here.

He blows a trumpet, you see, and he sends out messengers to the Israelites in the areas around Jezreel, to Manasseh, Asherah, Zebulun, Naphtali. And it's a call to arms, a call to war.

And they flood in. Now, so far, everything has been at pace. But suddenly, as happens often in this narrative, things slow down a little bit in verses 36 to 40.

Look at them with me. They're probably some of the most famous verses for Christians in the whole of the book of Judges. The eyes shift, you see, from the hordes of foreign aggressors, and they move away from gathering troops of Israel, and they settle on just Gideon and God.

Look at verse 36. Gideon's words appear to be an expression of fear or timidity. He says to God, If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have promised, look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor.

[6 : 17] And if there is only dew on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, just as you said. And verse 38 tells us what happens.

And it is just as Gideon had requested. Now, my guess is, you see, that Gideon recognizes that the first request was somewhat inconclusive. After all, you'd expect, wouldn't you, that a woolen fleece would gather water.

In fact, there are stories of just exactly how much water you can put in a fleece and how much it will gather. That is, he wonders, I think, whether he thinks to him, he wonders whether perhaps he hadn't asked something unusual or spectacular, and he really ought to ask God of something, something that will really press him a bit.

We know from, as I said, other accounts that fleece can collect lots of water. So Gideon apparently says, all right, let's, to himself, let's ask God for something that's a bit tougher.

And so he does. And he uses, let me say, the same words that Abraham did when he argued with God over Sodom in Genesis 18. He says, don't be angry. And look at his request, verse 39.

[7 : 28] Then Gideon said to God, don't be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with a fleece. But this time, let the fleece be dry and let the ground be covered with dew.

In other words, let there be a heavy dew and the fleece will be just dry as a bone. And God graciously concedes. Look at verse 40. Our writer says, that night God did so.

Only the feast was dry and all the ground was covered with dew. Now, because this incident is so well known by Christians, so often used by them, I need to make just a few comments about it.

So, first, despite what many Christians have said, this incident is not about guidance. Gideon is not seeking guidance from God at this particular point.

It's not about saying to God, guide me now. It's not about Gideon seeking God's will. In verse 39, Gideon himself tells us what this is about. Look at it. He uses the word test.

[8 : 32] It's about testing God. It's not a word that has good connotations, let me tell you. It is what Israel did in the wilderness. They tested God and God condemns them for it.

Gideon knows, you see, that what he is doing is something that could well arouse God's anger and cause God to punish him. So, for a start, it's not something that we ought to think Gideon is modelling for us.

It's a risky business. That's why, like I said, he urges God, don't be angry. And you see what's happening. Despite the presence of God's spirit, I think Gideon is fearful and timid and he tests God.

And yet God, in his mercy, stoops down and allows it and meets Gideon in his frailty and his tentativeness. However, the manner in which Gideon goes about things is not something commendable.

It is not something that we are meant to copy and say, right, I'll put my fleece out. Laying out fleeces for God is not something Christians should be doing.

[9 : 36] And yet, if I might say it, going to God in our frailty, as Gideon does, and being honest with him, is something Christians should do if they're feeling it. By the way, I wonder if I might make another comment about all of this.

Did you notice what is happening with the fleece? I explained it a bit earlier on. First, Gideon asked for something ordinary, a fleece to soak up dew. Then he asked for something extraordinary, for a fleece to be dry while the ground is soaked with dew.

And God is behind both things. God is behind the ordinary, you see. But should he choose to, he can also be behind the extraordinary. And friends, just a passing thing, really, out of this passage. Let's acknowledge this. You see, God can act in his world to accomplish his purposes through natural means or even through supernatural means. He can intervene and do the spectacular, but he's not bound to do that.

Let me just apply it to illness. God can heal, you see, and alleviate people's illness with ordinary means such as science and medicine.

[10 : 42] He can use that and it's quite a good and right thing for him to be doing. It's the ordinary, if you like. Or he can spectacularly intervene and cause a person to be healed miraculously and spontaneously.

Again, he's entirely capable of doing that should he wish to. Or, if I might say this, he might even let nature run its course or his own purpose run its course and allow a person not to be healed at all. He is God. He's in control. He can do whichever he likes. All are within his ability. He can use whatever means he chooses in his world to accomplish his purposes.

My third little comment about this little passage has to do with noticing what's happening here. You see, if you look carefully, you'll notice that there's some distance developing here between Gideon and God.

Did you see it? Have a look closely at the passage. And a sign of this is God's personal name, Yahweh or the Lord, has slipped out of the vocabulary of this passage.

[11 : 43] Instead, he is simply God. But there are other signs as well. You see, even if God allows it here, testing God does not have positive connotations. It moves the relationship out of the realms of trust and confidence.

And it moves it into the realm of doubt and manipulation. It is the opposite of faith and trust. And the story of Gideon develops this week and in the weeks to come.

We will see that distance between God and Gideon at Gideon's behest grow larger and larger, wider and wider. It'll become a gaping chasm.

We'll see that in the coming weeks. But let's leave it now and return to chapter seven. In verse one, Israel is ready for war. It's a very significant moment. And in the last verses of the previous chapter, Gideon had intervened himself to stop progress toward the battle.

Now it's God's turn. Now God's going to intervene. Look at him in verse two. The Lord said to Gideon, you have too many men. This is a marvelous story, which you've already seen a graphic representation of in the kids talk.

[12 : 50] You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into your hands or Israel will boast against me. Notice what's prohibiting God. Not that he can't do it, but that Israel will boast in it if he does do it with so many people.

So they will boast my own strength has saved me. So announced to the army, anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead. So 22,000 men left.

10,000 remain. Now God knows human propensity for pride and he knows it's ever reaching. And he also knows Israel's disposition to be independent and to exalt in who they are and what's good for their own in their own human eyes.

And so his first action is to diminish the force by approximately two thirds. By the way, look at verse three. He talks about allowing men to leave who are trembling with fear.

I wonder myself whether Gideon might qualify, but he doesn't go. Anyway, the reduction in numbers is not quite enough for God. So the Lord said to Gideon, there are still too many men.

[13:58] Take them down to the water and I'll thin them out for you there. If I say this one shall go with you, he shall go. But if I say this one shall not go with you, he shall not go. Now in verse five, the Lord chooses some bizarre ritual.

That's a way of reducing the number of men. Now commentators, let me, one commentator called this a teaser because there's no real answer. That is, they try and work out which men are better and more equipped for battle by how they drink their water.

Right? So is it the lappers or is it the kneelers? Or is it just a way of God uses to cull people down as low as he can? I suspect it's that. We don't know.

What we do know is that by these means, the Lord has reduced the numbers of Israelites to almost ridiculous levels. I mean, when you saw Jillian tear up the little corner of the piece of paper there, gave you some idea for it.

We are left with this locust swarm of Midianites and Malachites and Easterners being opposed by a pitiful 300 with trumpets and torches and so on.

[15:07] So there's the first intervention by God. Then God intervenes again. He stoops down this time to help Gideon in his fear and his frailty. This time, you see, he doesn't wait for Gideon to express it.

He takes the initiative. Look at verses nine and ten. During that night, the Lord said to Gideon, get up, go down against the camp because I am going to give it into your hands.

But if you are afraid to attack, and I think God assumes with a fair amount of evidence that Gideon is going to be afraid. He's going to need some convincing. And so he intervenes in the dream life and the conversation of a couple of men in the Midianite camp.

And Gideon and his lad go over and they have a listen in. And Gideon is convinced and he bows down and he worships. By the way, it's the last time that he will be seen to worship in the whole of the book of Judges.

There's a deep irony here. Did you notice it? And I think if I might say this, it matches the conduct of many Christians. You'll see why in a moment. Can you see it? Did you hear it?

[16:16] Here is Gideon. He has received a word from the Lord that victory is certain. But then he has tested God.

And then God has perceived that he might still be afraid. But the thing that tips his confidence over the edge is what? Is it God's word?

Not really. Is it God's spectacular intervention in turning back nature in the fleece? Not really. What tips his confidence over the edge is hearing about some Midianite soldier's dream.

It's not really great, is it? But we'll move at pace now. Let's move on. Verses 16 to 18. Gideon issues a rallying cry in verse 15. He follows on with a strategy that he'd seen in the Lord's actions. So instead of placing weapons of might in the hands of his soldiers, he places trumpets, empty jars and torches. Oh, not little flashlights as Gillian had. But, you know, I think big torches inside of jars.

[17:21] So you couldn't see them outside. But I need to tell you, he doesn't. He does also want to share the limelight with the Lord, with Yahweh, doesn't he? You can see it in verse 18. Can you see it there? When the trumpets are sounded, what is Israel to shout?

For the Lord. And for Gideon. Anyway, all of this is followed through with verses 19 to 25. There are, let me tell you, some brilliant tactics that Gideon seems to have worked out himself.

The victory, however, is God given. And it's clear in verse 22. You see, just as in Egypt, without a sword in their hand, God had delivered Israel's enemies into their hands.

Can you see it there? The Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords. So they actually do battle against each other, the Midianites, the Amalekites and company.

And then in verse 23, the reserves are called up from Naphtali, Asher and all Manasseh. And it's they who capture and kill two Midianite rulers, Oreb and Zeb. Good names, aren't they?

[18:24] I don't think, I've never heard of children called Oreb and Zeb, I might say. But anyway. Then there's the aftermath in Judges 8, 1 to 3. Gideon sort of engages in some conflict management amongst Israel.

You can see one can't help wondering whether he has learned something from the Lord in terms of skills of diplomacy. That is, he's seen how God works with him and I wonder whether he uses it with the people.

Anyway, the end results in verse 3. Can you see it there? The Ephraimite resentment against him subsides. So friends, there's the story.

Now we all know it. We've all read it. Now what can we learn from it? Well, I don't know about you, but when I listen to it, I hear multiple voices as I go through this story. Multiple voices.

Hebrew people loved it. I think they like ambiguity. From one perspective, let's keep in mind the closing sections of the story. You see, Gideon turns out to be a man competent in military matters, adroit in diplomacy, not without insight, resources and resourcefulness.

[19 : 36] He even turns out to be someone who's willing to trust God and rely on him wholly in order to achieve his purposes. He engages in Yahweh war and sees victory as a gift from the Lord.

From another perspective, however, and here's the ambiguity. Let's hear other voices that are implicit within this story. See, Gideon's not a man without faults and frailty, is he?

He's a reluctant conscript. He distrusts his own competence. He is fearful. None of those things, let me say, are bad things in themselves.

In fact, as we've seen, they can be very positive things. Think about thinking of yourself as weak can send you running to God. It can make you dependent, which is exactly what God wants of his people.

It can make you cling to God's word and trust in God's power, which again is exactly what God wants. But feeling weak and frail can also have other effects and dangers associated with it for us.

[20 : 39] It can, of course, cause you to falter in unbelief, can't it? It can cause you to drift into superstition as it does with Gideon.

It can even cause you to test God as Gideon does. Now, in Gideon's case, at least in relation to testing, God does allow this. But it doesn't set a good precedence.

It's not a good place for God's person to be. So there are some of the issues. But let's apply this to our situation as God's Christian people in a contemporary world.

Friends, I think that the world is increasingly a fearful place for us as believers in God and in Jesus Christ. In a world full of the delights and dangers of science and technology, I think this world is often fearful.

It remains a place of fear. In fact, perhaps science and technology have given us a false confidence that makes us even more fearful. And in such a world, there is a danger that we too seek assurances, isn't there?

[21 : 45] That is, there's a risk that we seek more active intervention by God. Signs of his presence and activity in a world that seems so powerful and able. But I want to tell you today that God has already given us incontrovertible signs of his greatness.

In a spectacular display of power, he has taken on the powers of evil, not in 300 men with trumpets and jars and torches.

No, in a spectacular display of power where a man hangs on a cross, waging war against sin, death and the devil and wins.

Through what looks like defeat and weakness. And through Jesus, God has given us this one true sign of power in a demonstration of weakness.

For you see, God's power is perfected in weakness. So friends, can you see this? The cross demonstrates for us more than the story of Gideon demonstrates to us.

[22 : 53] That God's power is only, is the only dependable port in the storm that this world throws against us. So friends, do not be afraid of fear.

Don't be scared of frailty. For God can use these things. He has and he will. Have a be aware of something else that frailty and fear does bring us often close to the edge.

And on the edge, you can act wisely or foolishly. On the one hand, in frailty and fear, you can shrink back. And begin to falter in unbelief.

You see, unbelief or lack of trust in God can so easily feed itself and lead us to further unbelief. At first, the person beginning to unbelief may find themselves doing things that are just on the edge of appropriateness.

And then things escalate. And unbelief can shift before long. And you've probably seen it in friends. Into total unbelief. Into no faith at all.

[23 : 58] And the advice of the writer of the Hebrews is that we should not waver, therefore, in unbelief. And he says it this way. He says, don't shrink back. Don't throw away the confidence you had at first and in Christ.

Rather, focus on looking forward in hope. In having faith. In mimicking our Lord Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame. And is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. You see, friends, hear what I'm saying. You see, don't be like Gideon, who gradually as life goes on, slips further and further and further away from the true and living God.

Don't falter. Rise to faith. And do you remember where faith comes from? Faith comes from hearing. And hearing by the word of God.

Hear God's word. Particularly his word about his son. But hear his word in every area of life. Believe that word. Trust in the powerful God.

[25 : 07] And trust in his powerful word. Friends, do not fear fear. The indispensable requirement for a person of God is not fearlessness. Thankfully.

No. It is being full of faith. And full of obedience to God's word. So hear God's word about Jesus. Hear God's word about life before him. And flee fear. By trust. Flee substitutes. Rise to faith in God. Do not grow weary or faint hearted in it. Do not grow weary or faint hearted in it. Trust in God. Trust in his son. Trust in his word.

And do not slip back. Let us pray. Father God, please make us people full of faith.

[26 : 10] And full of obedience. Help us to hear your word about Jesus. And your word about life before you. Help us to flee to you.

To flee fear through faith in you. And in your son. Help us to rise to faith. And to not grow weary or faint hearted in it. Help us to look to Jesus.

The author and pioneer. Of our faith. We pray this in his name. Amen.