

Man's Weakness For God's Glory

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[0 : 00] Well, let's begin by recalling kind of the approach that we're taking as we go through each section of this Gideon cycle. We have endeavored to keep one eye on Israel and the larger work of grace that God was doing through the nation, through his covenant people.

And then we're also endeavoring to keep the other eye on Gideon and the uniquely personal work of grace that God was accomplishing in his servant.

And there's a reason that we're taking this approach. One is because the text lends itself to that, as I'll mention here in just a moment. But as we're thinking about the big picture of what God is doing in the nation of Israel, it helps us keep from missing the forest for the trees, so to speak.

Sometimes we can get so focused in on the details that we forget the larger context of what's happening. And then we inadvertently end up misinterpreting or misapplying in some way the word that God has given us.

So we want to keep an eye on the big picture here. Here's what God is doing in Israel so that we can make good study choices and examinations here. But then we also want to keep a close eye on what God is doing through this one man, Gideon.

[1 : 22] And we want to glean a harvest of encouragement from that. And that's exactly what we can do. Of the entire Gideon cycle that we've studied so far, this dual focus of looking at Israel and at Gideon kind of separately or parallel to one another, it's most apparent in this section of verses that I just read.

Verses 33 to 35 are really about Israel. It's about this big enemy that is now encamped in Jezreel. It's about God kind of assembling together a group of Israelite soldiers that is going to be led by Gideon.

But the focus of it is really on the big picture. Here's Midian. Here's Israel. Now what's God going to do? And then when we get to verse 36 through 40, it really zeroes in on this moment with Gideon and his fleece and this test that he has for God.

So the text lends itself to that. And the parallels for us in application and as we look at this through the lens of New Testament gospel people, the parallels are really quite obvious.

There are things for us to understand about God's larger work in and through the church. And there are also things that we need to understand about God's very personal and intimate work of grace in each believer, in each person that belongs to him.

[2 : 48] And so we want to kind of trace those as we go. Now the overarching theme of these verses is also evident. Here's what it is. I don't think this is on the screen. But if you like to take notes, this is what you should write down at the very beginning.

God is glorified in using weak vessels to accomplish his work. God is glorified in using weak vessels to accomplish his work.

If you're right, now I'm going to say it one more time for you. God is glorified in using weak vessels to accomplish his work.

Have I said it enough for you to remember now? Let's all say it together. God is glorified. Ready? God is glorified in using weak vessels to accomplish his work.

If you don't get anything else from the sermon this morning, that's what I want you to walk away thinking. I want you to go to bed tonight thinking God is glorified in using weak vessels to accomplish his work.

[4 : 01] Now I've mentioned before, this is one of the major themes of the entire book of Judges. Indeed, it's a major theme in the entire storyline of the Bible. But it is uniquely underscored here in the story of Gideon.

Because over and over and over and over, Gideon proves himself to be filled with fear, in constant need of reassurance from God, completely incapable of doing the task that God has actually asked him to do, at least doing it on his own.

And yet, God is still pleased and glorified in showing really tremendous patience with Gideon at each and every moment of Gideon's weakness.

And it's not just Gideon's weakness. It's the weakness of the entire nation at this point as we study. And of course, God is still pleased to show incredible patience with his people as they do his work in the world.

That's me and you. God is glorified in our weakness. I want you to think about this from one New Testament verse. In 2 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul says this, We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

[5 : 25] Now that's on the screen. I want you to think about this verse for just a second. We have this treasure. What's the treasure? The treasure is the gospel. That's what Paul is directly referring to in that particular passage.

This wonderful, amazing, marvelous gospel of grace through Jesus Christ is a treasure. It's the work that God is doing. And he says that we have this treasure, this work of the gospel, this application of the gospel.

We have it in jars of clay. That's a euphemism in the ancient world for weakness and man's weakness. It's very plain of just a clay pot.

It's all we are. We're not even pretty clay pots like the mugs that we gave out last week for anniversary Sunday were clay pots essentially weren't they? And they have these really nice glazes and paints on them and things like that.

We're just plain vessels. There's nothing particularly unique about us, right? And yet Paul says we have this treasure contained in what seems like such weakness.

[6 : 26] And then he says the reason for this is to show that the power of the gospel actually belongs to God and not to us. In other words, the power is the treasure itself, not the container that is holding it.

Now that's amazing, isn't it? To think that not only with Gideon's life, but now with us and the work that God is doing in the world through his people, we're just jars of clay and we have this just magnificent treasure of the gospel.

And God is not only pleased to use us, he's actually glorified more to use people like you and me to do his work. In other words, man's weakness reveals God's glory.

Man's weakness reveals God's glory. And the message this morning is simple, but it is vital as well. And what I want us to do is just, I want to acknowledge two things as we're really just looking at the two paragraphs here.

But I want us to examine God's work in and through weak people. And then I want to conclude at the very end with why this shouldn't matter to us, okay? So we're just going to kind of do an examination of what's happening.

[7 : 38] And then we're going to ask ourselves, why does this actually matter, okay? Here's the first thing that I want you to see in the first paragraph. God works through corporate weakness. God works through corporate weakness.

I don't mean corporate like the business that you work for. I mean corporate as in collective weakness, okay? We're looking at the nation as a whole now or the church as a whole. Look at verse 33.

Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east came together. They crossed the Jordan and encamped in the valley of Jezreel. But the Spirit of the Lord clothed the Gideon.

And he sounded the trumpet and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh. And they too were called out to follow him. And he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali.

And they went up to meet them. So it's the same old story with this coalition of tribes led by Midian. The Midianites, the Amalekites, other semi-nomadic tribes from east of Canaan encamped in the valley of Jezreel, which was the most agriculturally rich and fertile land in the entire region.

[8 : 49] That's why they're going to that particular place. And they are prepared to rob Israel once again of its harvest. This is year eight now.

And it was a devastating invasion every year for seven years straight. So devastating was this that earlier in the chapter, if you set your eyes on verse five, you'll see this very clearly. The author pictures this invasion like an invasion of locusts that are kind of swooping into the land. And they're there really briefly. And then all of a sudden they move out of the land. And they leave absolute devastation behind. That's the picture that we have earlier. So in chapter six, we're told that it's not even possible to count just how many people and livestock, I think it mentions camels in particular, just how many people and livestock were involved in this annual invasion.

But it was large enough that the threat forced the people of Israel to actually vacate their homes. And for a season, until these tribes left, they had to live in caves in the mountains.

[9 : 56] This was just, this was probably among the worst of the judgments that God had sent to Israel during this book of Judges. This is just devastating every year.

And this is now year eight, and they've encamped again. Well, then we get to chapter seven. We're not going to get there today. We'll get there in a few weeks. But we get to chapter seven, we find that there's a specific number now of people in this invasion, in invasion number eight.

And the number is 132,000 men. At least 132,000 soldiers that are involved in the battles against Gideon and his army.

Now, I want you to put that in perspective for just a moment. In Huntersville and Cornelius and Davidson combined, you have an entire population of about 100,000 people.

So, take another 32,000 people. I'm not sure what Mooresville is. It's probably a little bigger than that. But take another 32,000 people. Attach it to the entire population of Huntersville and Cornelius and Davidson. And that's just the army.

[10 : 58] That's probably not the support staff that comes along. Or if they brought wives and children with them as these nomadic tribes, I don't know if that's what they did. But at least 132,000 soldiers are encamped in the Valley of Jezreel.

Can you imagine what that looked like? Israel's not a big place. This is not a huge valley. They could have been up on the hill where the Abiezrites lived in Ophrah, looking over and just seeing this vast amount of people that have now gathered.

This was an enormous army for its time. Now, things were going to be much different for the Midianites this time. But it wasn't going to be because the Israelites suddenly summoned the courage and strength to fight back.

That's not why it's going to be different. A key statement is in verse 34. Just set your eyes on it. But the spirit of the Lord of Yahweh clothed Gideon.

This is God's work. God is doing this. God is strengthening these people in this moment for this work. Now, we often think of the work of the Holy Spirit as if he began at the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2.

[12 : 08] But the person of the Holy Spirit, co-equal, co-eternal with God the Father and God the Son, is active throughout all of the scriptures. In fact, as early as Genesis chapter 1 and verse 2, we find a direct statement of the Spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters.

He's God. The Holy Spirit is not an it. It's a he. And he is part of the Trinitarian God. He has always been and he has always been active in the scriptures.

Now, there's certainly a uniqueness to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that we find in the New Testament gospel. But there's also this work that we see over and over in the Old Testament where the Spirit of God empowers individuals for a specific task.

And that's what we find happening here. In verse 34, the Spirit empowered Gideon for the task at this point of simply gathering the army.

That's all this is about at this point. The Spirit has clothed Gideon in order that he might assemble an army to fight against the Midianites. So God is determined then to deliver his people.

[13 : 28] And he empowers Gideon to lead a weak and insufficient army to accomplish this task. Now I want you to see the people that God gathered through his empowering of Gideon.

The earliest part of this narrative, if you go back a few verses, perhaps to verse 15, it opens with Gideon saying this, that he is the least in his father's house and his family was the least in all of the tribe of Manasseh.

And we already know through our study of the Old Testament that Manasseh is not a particularly strong and stable tribe itself. You want you to think about this.

Even Gideon himself has said this. How are you going to use me, God? I'm the least in my family. My family is the least in my tribe. And our tribe is not really that great. And now look what we find here.

Here we find God is using a group of Israelites led by Manasseh. Not only are they led by Manasseh, but the least family in Manasseh, the Abiezrites, they're at the front lines.

[14:37] And not only are the Abiezrites at the front lines, but the least, the weakest of the Abiezrites is the commander of the whole army, Gideon. This is weakness.

This is insufficiency. This is inability. So through Gideon, this is amazing. So through Gideon, God assembled 32,000 men who were considered among the weakest in the nation.

And if you set your eyes on verse 2 of chapter 7, what you find is that God assembles these 32,000 men just to send them back home again.

I don't want to get too far ahead of myself, but just look at the verse. Chapter 7 and verse 2. The Lord said 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 land has saved me.

And if you skip down to the end of verse 3, then 22,000 of the people returned and 10,000 remained. Now get this picture. There's 132,000 soldiers in the valley from Midian.

[15:52] God supernaturally uses Gideon to collect 32,000 of the weakest in Israel. And then as soon as Gideon gathers them together, God says, That's too many.

Let's send 22,000 home. And there's 10,000 left. And then God's going to say again, That's too many. And he's going to whittle Gideon's army down to 300 people against 132,000.

It's weakness. What do we find here? God works through corporate weakness for his own glory.

Isn't that what he says in verse 2 of chapter 7? Hey, we've got to send some of these guys home, Gideon, because if even the numbers at that point are so lopsided, but even God says, I know the pride of Israel.

And I know if 32,000 men, if I use them to defeat this army, Israel's going to say, Look what we did. And they're going to forget me again. And they're going to rebel against me again. Or they're going to give credit to Baal or whatever it is.

[16:56] And he whittles it down. Well, God works through corporate weakness for his own glory. All glory belongs to him. If I can just take this a step further, even as we're thinking about the weak, we come to a passage like this, it's not for us to praise Gideon.

That's not what we should be doing when we come to this text. Because this wasn't Gideon's doing. Now, I don't mean that we shouldn't honor and recognize examples of faithfulness.

The Scriptures itself does that over and again. It actually does it with Gideon. You get to Hebrews chapter 11. And Gideon is specifically named for his example of faith in leading this army and doing this work at this particular moment.

So I don't want you to misunderstand me. I'm not saying that we shouldn't honor and be appreciative and show that appreciation to people to whom honor is due, as Paul says. But we need to be careful not to make a hero of Gideon.

Because Gideon's not a hero. None of the judges in this book, none of them are heroes. Indeed, there's one hero in the Bible.

[18:09] And his name is Jesus. He's the only one. Everyone else that God uses is a weak vessel that God works through for his own glory.

We praise God for how he used Gideon. So as we sit around the Thanksgiving table this week, that's what we want to do, right? We want to praise God for the way that he's blessed our family. We want to praise God through a boss that has been kind to us and maybe given you a boldness this year. We want to praise God for the way that he has used our church to reach people with the gospel. We want to praise God for the way that he's used this person in my church to develop me and to help me grow closer to Jesus.

We don't want to make heroes out of people. We want to look to Christ and we want to say, all the sufficiency belongs to him. All glory be to God. Or as we sang a moment ago, all praise to him.

We don't want to make a hero out of people. It's too common in Christian churches today. It's too common to take weak vessels and set them up on pedestals and expect something of them or treat them in a way that we should only treat God.

[19:23] To expect something from spiritual leaders in our lives that really we should only expect of God. To give praise to a spiritual leader in our life that we should only give to God.

God works through weakness. Now let's think about this in terms of just some New Testament application quickly. Let's be honest. As we're thinking about God's corporate enterprise here for reaching the nations, the church is a weak enterprise, isn't it?

There's nothing particularly impressive about the church. And when you find those churches that are particularly impressive, it might not be everything that you think that it is.

It's not impressive. There's not a lot of strength and ability here. Yet, it's still the church that Jesus declared in Matthew 16 that the gates of hell could not prevail against.

Now, the church of Christ is not unstoppable for God's purposes because Christians are just strong and courageous and powerful.

[20 : 35] And we need to stop thinking that progress will be made for the cause of Christ simply by enlisting better gifted and more capable people to do the work.

Because it's not true. The church is unstoppable because it's God's instrument of grace in the world. And God will empower his people with his spirit until the day Christ returns.

God works through weakness. You say, well, there's not much to our church here. Well, that's okay. There doesn't need to be. It's not our work anyways. God's doing his work.

And he uses weakness to do it. Think of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards.

Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

[21 : 40] God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are. So that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

And because of him, you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. What is that passage all about? Well, it's about God being glorified and using weak vessels to accomplish his work in the world. God uses man's weakness for his glory when it comes to reaching the nations with the gospel.

It's because of him and his grace alone that you're even in Christ Jesus today. And it's only through his power that we've been brought together as a church to glorify him in this particular community.

This is his work. This is what he's doing. But how wonderful is it to think that he has enlisted us, meager jars of clay, to carry out the treasure of his gospel to other people.

[22 : 53] Here's the bottom line. The hope of the world is the church. The strength of the church is the Spirit's power at work through Christ's gospel.

And glory to God for that. Because if this whole thing, if this whole enterprise rested on us, then there's a problem that doesn't rest on us. This is God's work.

And we get to be a part of it. Glory be to him. Let's praise him for it. God works through corporate weakness. Secondly, God works through individual weakness. God works through individual weakness.

Verse 36, Then Gideon said to God, If you will save Israel by my hand, as you've said, behold, I'm laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone and it's dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you've said.

And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Gideon said to God, Let not your anger burn against me.

[24 : 00] Let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew. And God did so that night.

It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew. Verses 25 to 32, the enemy was Baal. Verses 33 to 35, the enemy was Midian.

But in these verses, 36 to 40, the enemy is Gideon's own doubt. Personal doubt. So once all 32,000 Israelite soldiers had gathered, can we really blame Gideon for this?

There's 135,000 down in the valley. He's got 32 rough-looking characters up on the top of the hill.

And he needs to go to the Lord, and he just needs some reassurance here again, doesn't he?

His need, constant need for reassurance, it resurfaces here. And he devises this test that he hoped would validate God's word.

[25 : 05] If the fleece was wet the next morning, and the ground was dry, then he would know that God would be faithful to his word. But then after God performed the sign, Gideon was still unsure.

You ever been there before? God just really makes things abundantly clear to you, and then you come back to him just one more thing. He said, God, you just got to do a little bit more for me here. Help me out. So he lays out the fleece again, except this time he asked for a bigger miracle, actually.

He asked that the ground would be wet, but that the fleece would be completely dry. Well, the wool and fleece is going to be prone to soaking up water. That's why it's probably a stronger miracle at this particular point.

The second thing as he lays it out, and God, of course, does it. And this would have been a reassurance for such a weak servant. Now, can anybody else relate to what Gideon was doing here?

Of course we can. Of course we can. This is one of the more famous portions of Scripture for most Christians, but the question that we often need to ask when we come to this particular text is, was this actually right for Gideon to do?

[26 : 16] Is this an example from Gideon that's mostly positive that we need to mimic in our own lives? Is this a negative thing that Gideon does that we actually need to avoid doing ourselves?

Or can we be basically indifferent to it? You just kind of do what feels best in the moment. And I want to take a moment and I want to show you that this is actually quite negative, even sinful, for us to follow Gideon's pattern here.

But I also want you to see how you can be comforted in this text, okay? So that's my goal here in these closing moments. Here's the thing. God calls us to trust Him, not test Him.

He doesn't say test me. He says believe me. He desires that we trust His perfect Word rather than constantly coming to Him, asking for some kind of sign in the sky or asking for Him to orchestrate certain things in our lives just in a way so that finally we can be reassured of what we already know is His will for us to do.

Do you realize this was actually a part of Satan's temptations of Jesus? I've got this passage on the screen for you as well in Matthew chapter 4. Then the devil took Him to the holy city, that's Jerusalem, and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to Him, If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, He will command His angels concerning you, and on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.

[27 : 55] And Jesus said to him, again it is written to you, this is a quote from Deuteronomy, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test. Now do you see the subtlety in this temptation?

Satan presents Jesus with what God said. He quotes the Scripture. He quotes the Scripture and then He says, Do this thing to force God to prove that you're the Messiah, that what He said is actually true.

There's a subtlety in this temptation, isn't there? Satan says, Don't just believe His word. Put Him to the test. Now this temptation is as old as of the Garden of Eden, isn't it?

What is it that He says to Eve? Did God say? Really? That's what He said? Why don't we put that to the test, Eve? Why don't we put that to the test, Adam?

Isn't that what's happening here with Gideon? Testing God always comes from a heart of doubt regarding what God has already said.

[29 : 07] It's very plain in the text. Gideon was testing God. He even says to God twice, As you have said, If you will just do this for me, God, it will show me that you are actually faithfully to your word.

I know what you told me to do. I know what you've said you would do on my behalf. But will you just prove it to me? But this kind of testing, it always, always comes from a heart of doubt.

He requested a sign because he had difficulty trusting God's promise. That's why we can't look to this and say, Okay, this is a good thing. We need to lay out our fleece.

No, you need to put your fleece back in a closet. You don't need to lay that out. You just need to trust what God has said. You need to read your Bible and say, This is God's word. This is God's word. He has told me what His will is directly in the scriptures.

And I'm going to believe it. And I'm going to believe His promises. That's why we can't look to this and say, This is a good thing for us to do. It's not. But there's something else that I want you to notice here. It comes in verse 39.

[30 : 11] Notice what Gideon says. Let not your anger burn against me, Gideon says. Gideon was not ignorant of his doubt.

He wasn't trying to pretend to God that things are cool. We're just dotting all of our I's. And crossing all of our T's. He recognizes his doubt here. And he doesn't expect God to be okay with it.

Do you see that? God, don't. Please don't let your anger burn against me now. He knows this is not right. This is not good. His doubt, ironically, is wrapped in humility.

Which indicates that it's not exactly unbelief that we find here. Del Ralph Davis says this plainly.

Gideon is hesitant, he says, not unbelieving.

It's not the absence of faith, but the caution of faith that we see here. Now think about this for just a moment. There is a kind of doubt that's driven by pride.

[31 : 20] This is what we find earlier in the passage. Look at verse 13. What is it that Gideon says to God? How does he respond? The angel of the Lord comes and he tells Gideon what God's gonna do.

And verse 13, That's a different thing than what's happening here.

That was doubt that was driven by pride. Unbelief. The word of God was delivered to Gideon and he says, no, there's no way. God is the problem here, is what he says.

Essentially. It's pride. It's arrogance. Unbelief. But that's not what he's doing here at the end of chapter six. This is an expression of fear, not unbelief.

Gideon is seeking reassurance and validation from God. He's not challenging God. Now all of us fight against doubt. We're all tempted to test God's promises along the way of our Christian lives.

[32 : 32] But the difference between prideful unbelief that we see earlier in the chapter and fearful doubt that we see here is the difference between an unbeliever and a believer.

That's the difference. That's the difference. One who does not belong to Christ, one who is not a genuine believer, challenges God.

That can't be true. No, God is not faithful. How could God ever do this? Look, he hasn't done anything good for me up to this point. They push against, they rebel, there's unbelief.

A believer, though, still has the struggle of doubt. But the doubt looks different. It's not wrapped in the same kind of pride. It's actually wrapped in humility that even acknowledges, Lord, I know you're good. And Lord, I know you're faithful.

And I know that you are powerful. And they can do all of these things. So please have mercy on me, even as I come to you in this moment with this test. That's what's happening with Gideon here.

[33 : 29] Now that doesn't excuse what he did. But it does help us better understand the difference between the doubt that we experience as believers versus the unbelief that we exemplify in our pride before coming to Christ.

Now what we should all be comforted by in this text is the astounding kindness and patience of God. Here's how Barry Webb described it.

We should be careful of being too hard on Gideon. Not just because of our own failings, but because of the way God himself responds to Gideon's request.

He doesn't lecture him on the weakness of his faith, but gives him the sign he asked for. And when even that is not enough for Gideon, he gives him another one.

In other words, what is really amazing, Barry Webb says, is God's grace to his struggling servant. Isn't that amazing?

[34 : 34] Over and over, Gideon keeps saying, oh Lord, please prove yourself. And over and over, God does it. He does it. He doesn't have to do it. But he does. Why?

Because God is kind. He's patient. He's loving. He's long-suffering. Is there anything more incredible than the grace of God in this way?

And over and over, he continues to show you mercy despite your many failures. And over and over, despite your doubt, and despite your fears, and despite your sin, he loves you.

And he cares for you. And he helps you. And he's patient with you. That is true. It's incredible grace. But we don't need to presume upon that grace.

You know what I mean? You should not read of God's grace to Gideon and then feel comfortable by testing God yourself. That's not what you should take away from that.

[35 : 43] However, you shouldn't feel comfortable, but you should be comforted to see that when you do fail, God is patient. And he's full of steadfast love and mercy.

And he will often assist us even when we don't deserve that assistance. Isn't that amazing? That he answers Gideon. Not once, but twice.

