

The Lord Is With You

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[0 : 0 0] Turn back to what we read in the book of Judges, chapter 6 and 7.

And we're going to pick out a text, it will be at verse 16, where the angel of the Lord, and we believe that this actually was the Lord, the angel of the covenant, and the Lord said to him, but I will be with you. That's what the Lord said to Gideon, I will be with you. Now, the book of Judges is quite a strange book in some ways, because it follows the same pattern over and over and over again. And the pattern is very simply this, that Israel forget all about God, and they start worshipping idols. God allows enemies to come in and trouble the land, and then Israel cry out to God. I'm not much of a gardener, but I must say I love looking at beautiful gardens. And it doesn't matter whether these gardens are floral, whether it's a garden with beautiful flowers, or the likes of a garden with vegetables, beautiful vegetable patches.

Particularly, there are some people when we say they've got green fingers. Now, obviously, that doesn't mean that when they look at their fingers, they've turned green. It means that whatever they plant, they seem to be very good in the garden, and they're good at watering, and good at weeding, and they seem to know just the right things to feed the plants with.

And the things grow for them. And it's a great thing when you have a garden, and you see things grow, particularly things that you're going to be able to eat. And I may have told you this before, but when we were in Muir of Ford, we had quite a big garden out the back. And I'm not a good gardener, but I enjoyed trying. And we planted lots of stuff. And I was so proud when I saw the carrots growing, and all these things. And I was so happy until one morning when I went out, and there wasn't a carrot left. Rabbits had got in, and they just went, things had gone. And I think it must be one of the most disappointing things when you put a lot of effort and a lot of work, and you see things just taken away. In fact, there was even a roe deer was able to get in one time. And caterpillars and deer and rabbits will make a fearful mess of your garden. And all the hard work, all the effort, all the sweat, and for a long time, and then you come out, and it's all gone. But that's just our gardens. And it's, in a sense, although it's very disappointing, it's not the end of the road. But it was for Israel.

Because this is the very thing that was happening in Israel every year. And it wasn't just their gardens, it was their crops. And it wasn't just their crops, but even their sheep and their cows. Because what would happen is that every year, the Israelites, they would plant their grain, and they would plant their wheat. And they would be expecting, and they would say, well, this winter, hopefully, we'll have a good, or this autumn, we'll have a good harvest. And we've got to remember that in these days, you couldn't just nip down to the shop to get the bread, and nip down to get what you want.

[3 : 48] You grew what you were going to eat. And if you had a bad summer and a bad harvest time, you were in trouble. But what was happening then was that every year, the Midianites and the Amalekites, but particularly the Midianites, who were a people who were always on the move, they were called like nomadic. They were a nomadic tribe of people. They were always on the move. And there was an incredible number. I think there was something of about 135,000 of them sometimes came up. And they would come into Israel, and they would strip it bare. And they would take away all the wheat and all the grain and all the cattle, and Israel would have nothing. It was serious, because they had no food.

And this happened year after year after year. And God was allowing that to happen. And the Israelites were finding this very hard to understand, because they were God's people.

And they were saying to themselves, why is God allowing this to happen? But there was a very simple reason why God was allowing this to happen, and it was this.

The Israelites had stopped worshiping God. They began to forget all about God, and they started to worship idols. Now, God, of all the things that is what God detests. He hates above all, is when people will worship somebody else or something else instead of him. God made us with a soul, and this soul is to worship him. He made us to worship him. And when God sees us worshiping, something else or someone else, then God is displeased with us. Now, here are Israel, and they won't listen to him. Now, you might be saying to yourself, well, surely, if God spoke to them, they would listen. But they didn't. God was speaking to them. He was speaking to them in the Word. They didn't have a full Bible like we have. They didn't have all the books of the Bible that we have. But they had the first. They had the books of the law, Genesis through to Deuteronomy. All these books were written and recorded. And then you have Joshua would be recorded. So they had these books of the Bible. And God's Word was there, but they wouldn't listen. Now, if you want to say something to somebody, and it's very important, and they won't listen, what do you do? Well, you can shout. You can, I was going to say, throw something at them, but that wouldn't be very good. You've got to get their attention one way around. Supposing then there's somebody sitting watching the telly, and this is their favorite program. They're glued to the telly, and you have something really, really, really, really important to say to them. And you can't get their attention.

Do you know what you could do? You could switch off the electricity, and all of a sudden, bang, what they're watching is gone. You got their attention. You're able to speak. Well, in a sense, that's what God was doing. Because Israel had forgotten all about Him. They wouldn't listen to Him.

[7 : 22] When He was speaking to them, even through the prophets, through the Word, they wouldn't listen. So God says, I'm going to get their attention. And the only way He could get their attention was by taking away everything they had. So that all their food and all their hard work was gone.

And it was gone one year, two years, three years, four years, five years. And they were struggling incredibly. But then, at the very end, they cried out to God. It reached the point, and it reached the place where they said, we're going to have to cry out to God.

Now, the thing is, God wanted the best for them. And you know, God wants the best for us. Sometimes we don't realize that. I've told you this before, and I know that Ivor has told you this one before. But it's in Pilgrim's Progress, that book that John Bunyan wrote. And in it, one of the pictures that he described was of a man who spent every day with a wee rake.

And he spent his day raking about in the mud and in the dust and amongst the leaves. Every day, he'd be out with his rake looking, hoping to find some money or to find a wee bit of gold. If only he could find something in the dirt or in the dust or in the earth, then everything would be all right.

And every day, he'd be scratching about with his wee rake, and he couldn't find anything. And you say to yourself, poor man, that's sad. But you know what was far, far, what made it an awful lot sadder, was that above this man, there was a beautiful person standing with his hand stretched out, holding the most beautiful crown that anybody had ever seen in the world. And the man was standing with this crown, with the crown stretching it out over the man. And all that man had to do was to look up and lift up his hand and get that crown. But you know, he never, ever, ever looked up. Every day, instead of looking up, he would come and down on his hands and he's scratching away in the dirt, in the mud, in the dust, trying to find a gold, a piece of gold or a coin or something.

[10 : 00] And all the time, being offered to him a beautiful, beautiful crown. And you say to yourself, oh man, that is so sad. That is exactly how it is so often with people. God is holding out the crown of eternal life. He's holding out the riches that have been won in Jesus. And so many people never look up. And all the time they're looking around here, there, and then they're trying to find what will make them happy in life. And sometimes they'll find something that will make them happy for a wee while, but it then fades away. And the Lord is saying, I'll give you something that will satisfy you forever. And all the other things in life, yes, they're there and you can enjoy them, but you'll enjoy them far more when you have me. And so that's what the really, in a sense, this is where we find ourselves in the book of Judges. Now, again, as we say, it's very, very sad because this was happening in Israel so often. And in fact, the Lord, on one occasion, as he's writing to his people through Isaiah, the prophet said, I have nourished and brought up children and they have rebelled against me.

Now, for parents, that is an incredibly sad thing. If you bring up children and you give them and you pour your love and your time and your energy, and then they just turn away and they forget all about you and they rebel against everything that you've done for them and they break your hearts.

Well, that's what Israel were doing to God. That is what he was saying. And so that's why, that's why God was doing this because love cares. Love won't let go. God could have turned around and said, well, that's it. I'm just going to leave them to themselves. But he couldn't because he loved them.

And love cares. And sometimes love has to hurt in order to bring back. And that's what the Lord was doing to his people, bringing them back so that they would speak to him, that they would cry out to him. The Lord loves to hear. Every parent loves to hear the cry of their children. When a baby is born, when there's a little baby there, you love to hear the cry. That cry is saying, I need, I need.

And the Lord loves to hear the cry of his children. And it's the hardest thing when the Lord looks down at his people and they've forgotten all about him. They're not interested. They don't want to speak to him. And I hope, I hope all of you will be in the way of speaking to the Lord. Because do you know this? An awful lot of people won't speak to the Lord until it's the very last thing they can do.

[13 : 05] It's like the two men who fell over the side of a boat. And one of them said to the other, we better start praying. And the other man said, oh no, don't pray yet. I'm seeing a boat coming to us.

And you say to yourself, that's awful. But you know, that's what people are like. If we can sort it out ourselves, if there's any chance of us doing for ourselves, we'll do it.

It's only when there is nothing else we can do, when we've used up all our resources, and if then we've got nothing, we might then turn to the Lord.

And you know, sadly, sometimes that's how it has to reach. That's how the level it has to reach. Well, that's what had happened here in Israel. And so the Lord came and he decided, or the Lord, when Israel, I shouldn't say decided, when Israel began to cry to him and said, Lord, help.

The Lord came. That's what the Lord does. If we cry to him, he will hear us and he will come to us. And so the Lord came to this man, Gideon. Now, Gideon was very taken aback because the message came to him saying, the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon and said to him, the Lord is with you, oh mighty man of valor, mighty man of strength and might and power.

[14 : 36] But you know, Gideon had to pinch himself. I think Gideon had to look over his shoulder. Why? Because Gideon, by his own account, was a nobody. He was Mr. Nobody in the whole land of Israel.

If you'd gone into Israel, walked into Israel and said, right, I'm going to look for Gideon. And you'd start to ask people, any idea where I can find Gideon? They'd say, Gideon? Never heard of him.

Now, Israel was divided into all kinds of different clans or tribes. And each land had its own section. And Gideon belonged to the tribe or the clan of Manasseh. So you say to yourself, okay, I found out that this Gideon belongs to the tribe of Manasseh. So I'll go to that area of the land.

So that's what you would do. And you'd go to the clan of Manasseh and say, right, where's Gideon? I said, I don't know. But supposing you were told, well, you go to this particular, this wee district in here, because that's where Gideon's father's house is. And you went there and would say, where's Gideon? I would say, I don't know. That's what Gideon said of himself. He said, in the whole of Israel, I am the least. My father's house is the smallest. It's the least in the whole of Manasseh. And out of my father's house, I am the least.

So when you think about it, here is Gideon, and there's no doubt about it, he's Mr. Nobody. And yet, the amazing thing is that this is the kind of person that God will use, a Mr. Nobody. I wonder why. Well, I think we learned something about this if we went down to chapter 7, because we'll come to this in a moment. This is what the Lord is saying. The Lord said to Gideon, the people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into your hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, my own hand has saved me. You see, we're really, really, really good at taking taking praise to ourselves. We're really good at thinking that we, in some way, have been able to do what we did. And God is showing us over and over again, actually, I'm the one who helped you to do that. And in picking Gideon, he was picking the ultimate Mr. Nobody. And that's how Gideon was saying straight away, I'm sure there would be some people in Israel if the angel of the Lord had come and they would have said, oh, that's great. Yes, I'm ready. I'm your man. But Gideon is saying, oh, no, you've got the wrong person. Gideon, I'm a nobody. Nobody's going to listen to me. They won't even listen to me in my father's house. You've got the wrong person. And the Lord said, no, he said,

[17 : 50] I don't have the wrong person. I will be with you. And I am going to give Midian into your hand. That's a wonderful thing. And so Gideon, we find, if we were, we'll miss out a lot. But Gideon comes and he's really uncertain about what's to happen. So he asks God for a sign. And that's what we find in chapter 6, verse 36. And Gideon asks God for a sign. Now, even to this day, sometimes when people are wanting to know God's mind and God's will, they still talk about putting out a fleece.

Sometimes you hear people saying, I put out a fleece. What do they mean? Well, it comes back to what Gideon did here. And Gideon was so afraid and he was so uncertain.

Even after everything God had said and God had showed him, he said to the Lord, well, if you will save Israel by my hand, do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to put out a fleece, a fleece of the sheep's wool. And if in the morning, if there is dew on the fleece alone and the ground all around it is dry, then that's a miracle. If I come out in the morning and the dew has fallen and all around is soaking with dew, the grass is soaking, but there's the fleece. No, sorry, the ground all around is bone dry and the fleece alone is soaking. Then I will know.

And in the morning, Gideon came out and the ground, he felt the ground as he's going along. It's bone dry. Grass is as dry as a bone, reaches a fleece and it's soaking wet. In fact, it's so wet, it tells us that when he squeezed the fleece, he wrung out enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water.

What a wonderful sign. But then Gideon said, oh, well, can I try it once again? This time, the opposite way around. I am going to ask that the fleece will be bone dry and the ground will be soaking. And again, that's exactly what happened. Now we have to ask ourselves, is that the way we find what God is saying to us? Well, no. The Lord Gideon was, as we say, a Mr. Nobody. And what he was being asked to do was so huge. And Gideon showed great faith. And no wonder his name appears in Hebrews chapter 11 amongst all these people of faith. He was a great man of faith. Even although he was weak and frail and he had his mistakes and the sin and so on, he still exercised great faith. But anyway, the point is, is that the way we find God's way? Well, no.

[20 : 50] It's here in the Bible. If you are wanting to build something or make something or put something together, what do you need? You need instructions. And that's what the Bible is. You know, somebody told me this week a great thing about this Bible. B-I-B-L-E. Basic instructions before leaving earth. Wow, that's good. Before we leave this world, what has God done? God has given us a book to show us the way to go through life. But not just to go through life, to prepare us for dying, to prepare us for going to live with himself. The disciples once asked Jesus, we're confused. We don't know the way. And Jesus said to them, you know, he said something, I am the way. I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life. And we find all about Jesus in his word. And if we follow his word, and we seek the Lord and pray to the Lord, the Lord will guide us. Make no question about it. And if we are following him, he will open doors, and he will close doors, and he will lead us by his word. Not just according to how we feel, our feelings can be all wrong, not just because something is popular, because other people can sometimes be wrong, but according to the word. Anyway, here's Gideon, and he's been given this task. Now, this is really quite an amazing story. Gideon calls Israel together, and he says, right, we're going to have a war, because we've got to defeat Midian. God has called me to lead you in battle against Midian. And of course, a lot of the tribes sent up their people, and thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of people arrived. And Gideon was looking at the Israelites, and he thought, poor, we're outnumbered against the Midianites. The Israelites, we're not nearly enough. God said to Gideon, you have far too many. Gideon thought, too many? I was just saying to myself, we don't have nearly enough. And the Lord said to Gideon, tell all the soldiers who are afraid that they can go home. And to Gideon's horror, they all went home apart from 10,000. There were only 10,000 soldiers left. And Gideon would say, I haven't a chance. Well, this is what you would be thinking. I don't have a chance. But then the Lord said to Gideon, do you know, you've still got too many. Too many? Yes, said the Lord, still too many. Take all the men down to the river and ask them to drink from the river. Now, the men didn't know that they were going to have a test, but they were going to be tested. Tell the men to drink. And all the men who bend down and drink the water like a dog would, with their faces in the water, lapping it up like that, tell them to go home. And those who will take the water up like in their hands, like a cup, and drink it like that, you keep them. So Gideon's watching. And he couldn't believe his eyes when out of the 10,000, only 300 took the water in their hands and drank it like that. And he had to say to the 9,700 others, you can go home. So Gideon is left with 300 men against an army of over 100,000. And you say to yourself, impossible. And that's exactly

what God is showing, that he is the God of the impossible. There's a question in the Old Testament, is anything too hard for the Lord? It's answered in the New Testament, with God all things are possible.

The apostle Paul learned that when he was able to say, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Anyway, at night, the Lord was giving instructions to Gideon. And what he did was, they got a jar, not the kind of jar that we would get like you'd have your jam or honey in, but a jar, a clay jar, a dark jar, with not a glass jar, but like a clay jar. And a torch, not the kind of torches we have with battery, but what would be with fire on it. And the Israelites at night, the 300 of them with Gideon were to take a sword, and they were to take these jars, which were covering the torches, and they were set right round the Midian camp. A hundred there, and a hundred there, and a hundred there. And at the signal from Gideon in the middle of the night, they were to shout as loud as they could. They were to smash the jars on the rocks, and they were to wave the torches in the air. And they were to shout, the sword for the Lord and for Gideon. And that's exactly what happened. At the given signal, and the Midianites are all asleep.

They smashed their jars on the rocks, waved the torches in the air, shouted as loud as they could. And what happened? The Midianites woke. And everybody looked out of their tent, and all they could see was fire all around them. They could hear the yelling and the shouting, and there was a smash of the jars. And all the Midianites grabbed their sword. It was dark. And they started hitting their swords into whoever was beside them. And they started killing each other. And the Israelites were round about.

And eventually, there was so much killing that the Israelites then, and of course, other Israelites came in and began to chase them. And God delivered Israel through Gideon. And God is teaching us a very important lesson there, that he is able to do great things through the youngest. I don't know who the youngest in here is today. But God is able to do great things through you. There's a verse in Zechariah that's worth learning. Do you know what it says? It's not—maybe you know this verse. If you don't, could you try and remember this verse? Very simple. It's not by might. It's not by power.

[28 : 12] It's by my Spirit. That's what God says. Not by might. Not by power. But by my Spirit.

God is saying that to you. He's saying it to all of us today. And that's something we've got to learn. And we've got to learn to trust the Lord. Because, you know, sometimes it's quite hard to do that.

We've got to learn to trust the Lord. To believe in Him. To believe His Word. To follow Him. And what God was able to do through Gideon, in different ways, He's able to do in us and through us as well. Let's pray. Oh, Lord, our God, we pray to bless us. And we give thanks for this Word.

Lord, we pray that we might be wise as we listen to it. That we may lay hold upon what it is saying. Help us, Lord, that we have instruction for life. Instruction for death. Instruction for everything here in the Word. Help us to believe. We pray to bless all of us here today, but particularly the young people. Lord, we give thanks for them. And we pray to watch over them and keep them.

And help them to trust the Lord. Bless us then, we pray, and take away from us all our sin. And we ask to watch over us and take us all home safely. In Jesus' name we ask all. Amen.

[29 : 42] Our final singing is Psalm 23 from...