

The Lord's Art of War

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[0:00] But we're going to turn now to our Bibles and we're reading with Josh Johnston in the book of Judges. And we come this morning to Judges chapter 6 and we're reading where we left off last week beginning at verse 36 and through into chapter 7.

If you need a Bible, there are church visitors Bibles at the sides at the front here and at the back. Do pick one up. I think on those Bibles it's by page 206. And we're going to read from verse 36 of chapter 6 through to verse 25 at the end of chapter 7.

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's 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 the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Then Gideon said to God, let not your anger burn against me.

[1:18] 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. And it was dry on the fleece only. And on all the ground there was dew. Then Jeroboam, that is Gideon, and all the men who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod.

And the camp of Midian was north of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley. 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 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.

And the Lord said to Gideon, The people are still too many. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. And anyone of whom I say to you, this one shall go with you, shall go with you.

[2:35] And anyone of whom I say to you, this one shall not go with you, shall not go. So he 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, he shall set by himself.

Likewise, everyone who kneels down to drink. And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouth, was 300 men. But all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water.

The Lord said to Gideon, With the 300 men who lapped, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand. And let all the others go, every man to his home.

So the people took provision in their hands and their trumpets. And they sent all the rest of Israel, every man, to his tent, but retained the 300 men.

And the camp of Midian was below them in the valley. That same night, the Lord said to him, Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand.

[3:41] But if you're afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Pura, your servant, and you shall hear what they say. And afterward, your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.

Then he went down with Pura, Pura his servant, to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp. 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. When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his comrade.

And he 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 and turned it upside down so that the tent lay flat.

And 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.

[4:49] As soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshipped. And he returned to the camp of Israel and said, Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand.

And he divided the 300 men into three companies and put trumpets into the hands of all of them and emptied jars with torches inside the jars.

And he 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 the camp and shout for the Lord and for Gideon.

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 had just set the watch. And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands.

Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars. They held in their left hand the torches and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, A sword for the Lord and for Gideon.

[6:06] Every man stood in his place around the camp. And all the army ran. They cried out and fled. When they blew the 300 trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army.

And the army fled as far as Beth-Sheta towards Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-Mehalah by Tabath. And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from Omanasseh. And they pursued after Midian. Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim saying, Come down against the Midianites and capture the waters against them as far as Beth-Bara and also the Jordan.

So all the men of Ephraim were called out. And they captured the waters as far as Beth-Bara and also the Jordan. And they captured the two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeab.

And they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb. And Zeb they killed at the winepress of Zeab. Then they pursued Midian.

[7:13] And they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeab to Gideon across the Jordan. Amen.

May God bless to us his word. We'll do open your Bibles to Judges chapter 6 and chapter 7.

There is perhaps no better known manual for war than Sun Tzu's, the art of war. Here are some snippets from it. Though an obstinate fight may be made by a small force, in the end it must be captured by the larger force.

Or the good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat. He writes, pretend to be weak that the enemy may grow arrogant.

Simulated weakness postulates strength. Or finally, to secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands.

[8:28] He's saying, calculate your strength against your foe's strength. Never allow yourself to be drawn into a battle you can only lose. Deceive your enemy by obscuring your strength.

And know that the outcome of the battle depends upon what the commander can know, control, manipulate and secure with his own hands. Well, you'll be pleased to know that this morning we're not going to be spending time in Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

But we are going to be spending some time in Yahweh's Military Academy. And in the Lord's art of war, there's a wholly different source of confidence.

Listen to some of his principles. Psalm 33, the king is not saved by his great army. A warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

The war horse is a false hope of salvation. Or Deuteronomy, when you go out to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them, for the Lord your God is with you.

[9:35] Or the apostle Paul. God choose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

And perhaps maybe the crowning principle of the Lord's art of war. Again, Paul writing to the Corinthians, who were so fond of strength. Paul writes, The Lord said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore, says Paul, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I'm content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. The Lord's art of war for his people is to strip away every false confidence in human strength, so that in weakness, in weakness, his followers trust in and taste God's promised victory, taste his strength.

The whole thrust of this passage this morning is that it is God alone who's able to grant his people rescue and victory. But there are always two sides to that.

[11:01] Being clear about our weakness and being confident in God's strength. The two sides are our posture and God's promise.

This is a truth that is perennially important to the Lord's people. Gideon, as we began to see last week, is the hinge at the heart of the book of Judges, through whom we begin to see why all of the judges were only temporary deliverers.

Why the rest that the land enjoyed because of the various judges, why it always ceases. Why the hearts of Israel were turned again and again towards the corrupting influence of Baal.

And that grim idolatry. The need for Israel, for the Lord's people, to be led by a righteous king becomes increasingly apparent throughout the book of Judges.

And one key aspect of this righteous king is that he leads the Lord's people in knowing that the Lord and the Lord alone is their strength.

[12:08] That all of their hope and trust and expectations are only rightly expressed when they're laid upon the Lord God. And so Gideon acts as a real deliverer who, at least in the early part of his ministry, does serve to do this for the Lord's people.

And that's what we see in our passage. So firstly, 636 to chapter 7, verse 8, we see the revelation of our weakness. The revelation of our weakness. God exposes the inadequacy of our strength.

In these verses, God grants reassurance, even as he necessarily exposes our weakness.

Weakness is a major theme in Gideon's story.

We saw last week, throughout chapter 6, Gideon has not understood why Israel was experiencing covenant curses. He was confused by their apparent forsakenness.

He was quick to point out that his clan was the weakest in Manasseh. And that he was the least in his father's house. And that theme of weakness continues as Israel prepares to meet Midian.

[13:27] At Gideon's trumpet blast, an army assembled, we saw at the end of last week's passage. The tribes muster at Jezreel to confront the Midianite raiders. But notice what happens immediately after this impressive mustering.

God reassures Gideon in his weakness. Gideon has already received assurance from the Lord several times. The Lord is with you. Have not I sent you?

I will be with you. God even confirmed his word by consuming Gideon's offering upon the rock. Yet, verse 36, Gideon again asks the Lord for reassurance.

And we come to the well-known incident of Gideon's fleece. Gideon places a fleece upon the threshing floor. And first he asks that dew appear on the fleece while the surrounding ground remains dry.

And then he asks for the reverse. That the fleece remain dry while the ground is covered with dew. Both times, God grants what Gideon asks.

[14:40] Now, there are two pitfalls to avoid when reading this incident. The first one is that we take Gideon's fleece as a kind of model for discovering God's will. Gideon was not asking God to reveal what he should do.

God had already told him. Notice the repeated words, verse 36. If you will see of Israel by my hand, as you have said.

Verse 37. Then I shall know that you will see of Israel by my hand, as you have said. Gideon wasn't seeking some sort of new guidance.

He was seeking miraculous confirmation of God's already revealed word. That is very different from noticing some everyday occurrence that happens to line up with a decision that we're considering.

Something like, if the telephone rings today, I'll know I should take that job. Gideon's sign was not some sort of everyday coincidence.

[15 : 46] God confirmed his revealed word through an unmistakable miracle. And the reality is that guidance is often not our greatest problem.

It's obedience where we typically stumble. You see, we have the scriptures which Gideon didn't have. And they give us the boundaries and great purpose of our lives.

And within those, there's great liberty. God has told us that his will is our sanctification. He tells us to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances.

That's his will for our lives. And so as Augustine said, we love God and we do as we please. As long as our concern is chiefly for loving and honoring him, then there's great freedom in all manner of choices about our lives.

Who to marry, what job to take, where to live and so on. We do not need a fleece in order to know we should love, trust and obey the Lord Jesus.

[16 : 45] So we mustn't take Gideon as a sort of guide, a model for guidance. But the second pitfall is to take Gideon to task. To stand over him and condemn him for his weakness.

The text does not explicitly praise Gideon's request, but neither does it condemn it. Instead, it draws our attention to God's extraordinary patience.

Gideon is saying, Lord, I've heard what you've said. I'm willing to follow, but this is a great calling. And I'm painfully conscious that I'm not sufficient for it.

Please strengthen my wavering faith. Remember that Gideon, for all his flaws, is included in Hebrews 11. Among those who acted by faith.

And notice the striking sequence. In Judges 6.34, Gideon is clothed with the Spirit of God. Two verses later, he's seeking reassurance.

[17 : 47] The presence of God's Spirit does not instantly remove every fear. It doesn't remove all of his uncertainty or every aspect of his frail humanity. God's Spirit doesn't come with a personality transplant.

Gideon's faith is real, but it's frail. And the Lord is remarkably patient with frail faith. He is not above stooping down to reassure his people amidst their doubts and fears and weakness about what he has said.

Indeed, the Lord gives us something that happens in our church every month. He knows that we're pruned to weakness and doubt.

He knows that we may long for something that we can experience in this world that will confirm to us and help us to know that his promises are real and that they're substantial and that the life of faith is real and not futile.

And so he's given us something that we can see, something that we can touch, something that we can taste, something that visibly preaches to us, that engages our senses, that confirms to us his word, that he has been and will be faithful to all that he's promised.

[19 : 05] Listen to Ralph Davis. He is patient with our weakness. God doesn't mind humbling himself in order to bolster our fragile faith or our wavering grip on his word.

He is so eager to do just that, that he has provided a table instead of a threshing floor, and bread and wine instead of a fleece.

Gideon's weakness is met with God's reassurance. But having reassured Gideon in his weakness, God then reveals just how weak Gideon and Israel truly are.

God removes Israel's apparent strength. Chapter 7, verse 2, gives us the reason for everything that follows in verses 1 to 8 of chapter 7.

7-2, 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 saved me.

[20 : 12] That's the great danger that the Lord grant his people victory, salvation, but they attribute it to themselves.

So that having tasted his salvation, they say, Our strength has accomplished this. My wisdom has secured this. My hand has saved me. And so God determines to reduce the army until such boasting becomes impossible.

We might think that perhaps this is something of the rationale our own political leaders have for the declining state of our own armed forces. Perhaps not.

But 32,000 men have assembled. That's a respectable force, although it still peels in comparison to what chapter 8 tells us is about 135,000 Midianite fighting men.

And so at this stage, Israel has roughly one man for every four Midianites. Victory seems highly unlikely, but perhaps not totally inconceivable.

[21:18] But God says, you have too many men. And so the first reduction takes place in verse 3. Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home.

Now, this command can be rationalized in ordinary military terms. Deuteronomy 20 had instructed that fearful soldiers should be sent home, lest their fear spread and cause the hearts of others to melt.

And so 22,000 men return home. More than two-thirds of Israel's army is too frightened to fight. There's a clear revelation of Israel's weakness if ever one was needed. But perhaps this is a blessed subtraction. Perhaps Gideon is now left with a smaller but more courageous, refined, battle-ready force.

Well, if that's the case, there are now 10,000 men remaining, which is roughly one Israelite for every 13 or 14 Midianites. And then verse 4, the Lord says it's still too many.

[22:29] Still too many. At this point, the Lord's strategy departs decisively from Sun Tzu's. God isn't seeking to compensate for Israel's numerical weakness. He's intensifying it.

And so Gideon takes the men down to the water and God distinguishes them according to how they drink. Some kneel down to drink. Others scoop the water into their hands and lap it from there as a dog might drink.

Various attempts have been made by commentators and others to find some kind of tactical or moral significance to these actions, the way that people drink. Perhaps those who use their hands are more alert.

Perhaps they're less distracted and therefore better soldiers. But the text says nothing of the sort. You see, God is not selecting the best 300 men from 32,000.

He's reducing 32,000 to a number through which only He could plausibly give victory. The test is not designed to reveal Israel's hidden military excellence.

[23:41] It's designed to thin Israel out. Indeed, the word in verse 4 there, test, that could be translated refine or, as the NIV has it, thin out.

Verse 2 is the driver here. There are too many men. That's what's going on. And so at the end of this thinning out, Gideon is left with 300 men.

300 Israelites against 135,000 Midianites. That's one man for every 450 Midianites. That's the kind of army that the Lord can use without Israel making, mistaking God's strength for its own.

Verse 7, with the 300 men who lapped, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand. Well, Gideon submits to this extraordinary reduction.

He sends the others home and remains with the 300. That is an example of faith. Faith is at work. Gideon acts upon God's word, even while every visible source of confidence is being removed.

[24:50] And so the message here is unmistakable. God's people need their true condition laid bare. Israel is inclined to forget the Lord, to enjoy his gifts, while overlooking the fact that its very identity, that its safety, that its prosperity has and always will depend entirely upon the Lord.

Before the Lord's people can taste salvation, God must expose their helplessness. Before Israel can be saved from Midian, Israel must be prevented from saying, my own hand has saved me. And is that not also true for us? There's no place for boosting in the Lord's church or in his kingdom. However uncomfortable it is for us to realize it, it is vital that we come to grasp that we are weak and needing strengthened.

Listen to J.I. Packer. He writes, What is weakness? The idea from first to last is of inadequacy. We talk about physical weakness, meaning a lack of vigor and energy so that one cannot tackle heavy jobs.

We talk about intellectual weakness, meaning inability for some forms of brain work. We talk about personal weakness, that a person lacks resolution, firmness of character, the capacity to command.

[26:28] We talk about a weak position when a person lacks resources and cannot move situations forward or influence events. We talk about relational weakness when persons who should be leading and guiding feel to do so.

Weak husbands, weak fathers, weak parents, weak pastors, and so on. Every day finds us affirming the inadequacy of others at point after point.

And he goes on. The truth, however, is that in many respects, and certainly in spiritual matters, we are all weak and inadequate, and we need to face it.

Sin, which disrupts all relationships, has disabled us all across the board. We need to be aware of our limitations, to let this awareness work in us, humility and self-distrust, and a realization of our helplessness on our own.

Brothers and sisters, are you conscious this morning of all that you're not? Is your weakness painfully apparent? If that recognition brings you here desperate to receive grace and help, then such exposure of your weakness is a mercy of the Lord.

[27 : 55] It's evidence of His grace drawing you to Him that you might indeed be strengthened. The Lord who graciously exposes our weakness doesn't do so in order to leave us wallowing in our inadequacy.

Weakness on its own won't do anything for us. To discover that we're weak is simply to recognize reality. But recognizing our weakness means our eyes can be directed towards His strength and His sufficiency.

And that will do everything for us. And that's what we see secondly in verses 9 to 25, the reassurance of God's victory. The reassurance of God's victory.

God reassures us of the sufficiency of His strength. The previous section began with reassurance sought by Gideon, followed by the revelation of Israel's weakness.

This section begins with reassurance, but this time initiated by the Lord, and it's followed by the revelation of His strength. Having seen his army reduced, Gideon is told in verse 9, Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand.

[29 : 17] But then the Lord adds, If you're afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Pira, your servant, and you shall hear what they say, and afterwards your hands shall be strengthened.

God knows His servant's fear. He takes the initiative and provides the reassurance that Gideon needs. And it's not difficult to understand Gideon's fear. He's got 300 men now.

While the Midianites, in verse 12, are like a plague of locusts. Their camels are as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

If you pick up a handful of sand, you couldn't count all the little spectacles that are in it. That's a handful, not a seashore's worth. That's what their camels were like.

So Gideon creeps down to the camp with Pira. He sees this. This wonderful display of might. But he also overhears two soldiers talking.

[30 : 23] One has dreamt that a loaf of barley rolled into the camp and knocked over a tent. Sounds like an extraordinarily mundane dream, much like ones I would have.

But listen to the interpretation of it in verse 14. This is no other than the sword of Gideon. God has given into His hand Midian and all the camp.

The vast army that appears so terrifying is already trembling. It is worth noting that whilst we are weak, the reality is that the very things that stand against us are a lot less strong than they appear. Listen to Tim Keller. He says, Satan cannot force us to sin. The power of idols can be broken.

Those who mock or persecute us are often conflicted and broken beneath their confident exterior. God graciously gives Gideon the opportunity to see this. This vast army, thick as locusts, underneath their armor, have trembling hearts. They may be as numerous as the sand on the seashore, but the Lord made the seashore and every grain of sand upon it.

[31 : 50] And notice that the Midianite soldier does not make the mistake that Israel might make. He knows that victory will not become Israel's because of their brains or brawn. He says, God has given Midian into Gideon's hand.

The lips of the enemy are declaring victory for Gideon at the Lord's hand before battle's even begun. And so once again, God graciously reassures Gideon.

And at the sound of this astonishing reassurance, look at what he does, verse 15. Gideon worships. That's the battle that's taking place underneath the battle with Midian.

The conflict began last week with Gideon confronting Baal because the great battle is for the worshiping heart of Israel. And now that Gideon has been reduced, his weakness has been exposed, he's been disabused of any notion that he can be victorious on his own.

But when God reassures him of certain victory, Gideon worships. That's why the discovery of our weakness is so important. When we realize that God, we realize that God has done what we could never do, our boasting is silenced and our hearts are drawn to worship.

[33:10] And having worshiped, Gideon returns and rises his tiny army. He says, Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand. Notice the certainty.

The battle has not begun, but Gideon speaks as though victory has already been won. God's promise, God's power, his strength made victory certain. And yet, victory comes in the most extraordinary manner.

It's not simply that 300 men defeat 135,000. The manner of the victory demonstrates that it has been won by the Lord. We're told that Gideon divides his men into three groups and gives each man a trumpet, a jar, and a torch.

They surround the camp and wait until the beginning of the middle watch, just as the guards have changed and the camp is at its most unsettled. And then suddenly, 300 trumpets sound, 300 jars smash, 300 torches blaze around the camp, and they cry out, a sword for the Lord and for Gideon. And all of the sudden noise and the light and the shouting produce panic. But the writer does not let us conclude that this is a victory because of Gideon's ingenuity.

[34:33] Verse 22, amidst this panic, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army. This is victory secured not by Israel's hand, but by the Lord's.

Notice the repeated references throughout our passage to hand. Gideon sought reassurance with the fleece that God would save Israel by Gideon's hand.

God said, the people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into your hand. With the 300 men, I'll give the Midianites into your hand.

God has given Gideon into Gideon's hand, Midian and all the camp. This whole picture of the hand is throughout this passage.

And notice here at the decisive moment, every Israelite has both of their hands occupied. In one hand is a torch and in one hand is a trumpet. There's not a sword in any Israelite hand.

[35:41] Instead, the Lord turns the hands of the Midianites against one another so that Israel cannot in any way say, my own hand has saved me.

Once battle arrives, Israel does little more than stand. They stand and sound their trumpets and watch as the Lord's victory unfolds. Only after the decisive victory has been won do Israel's warriors raise their swords and pursue the defeated enemy.

They don't fight to secure the victory. They listen to the Lord, obey Gideon's command. They enter into and pursue a victory only after the Lord has secured it.

And so our passage then closes with striking echoes of where Gideon's story began. Do you see the two princes in verse 25? They're defeated Oreb at a rock and Zeab at a wine press.

We first met Gideon hiding in a wine press and waiting to receive a sign at a rock. Signs of Gideon's weakness. But now the rock and the wine press become monuments to God's victory, to His strength.

[37:08] Israel's weakness has been revealed and upon the canvas of that weakness God displays His marvelous strength. Listen to what the Lord later said to Paul.

My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness. You're weak but my grace is sufficient.

My strength is most fully and vividly displayed in the arena of human weakness. And this is how Hebrews remembers Gideon.

Hebrews 11 Time would fail me to tell of Gideon. He was among those who were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war and put foreign armies to flight.

brothers and sisters, this pattern of weakness met by divine strength matters in every part of the Christian life. When it comes to our salvation, our weakness is so profound that Paul describes us as being spiritually dead.

[38:18] We were dead in our trespasses and sins, following the course of this world, living under the power of the evil one. not just outnumbered, dead, enslaved, unable to raise ourselves to life.

Jesus describes Satan as a strong man fully armed and guarding his palace and we could not overpower him or release ourselves from his grasp.

But a stronger man has come. while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.

Mary sang of Jesus coming, he has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of a humble estate.

He has filled the hungry with good things. And Paul says to the Colossians, you who are dead in your trespasses, God made alive together with him.

[39:28] At the cross, Christ cancelled the record of debt that stood against us and he disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame and triumphed over them.

Brothers and sisters, it is the empty hands of faith that come to Jesus knowing we have nothing to give, nothing to offer, that come to him and say, I must screw up.

I'm inclined in every way to betray the Lord. But I see that I'm weak. It's those empty hands of faith which can receive the wondrous, mighty, strong salvation that has been won by Christ's unbreakable power.

Into those weak, empty hands comes the perfect strength of the Lord to rescue. But the same is true of our sanctification as well, isn't it?

Our progressive sanctification, our growth in holiness and likeness to Christ. Jesus says, apart from me, you can do nothing. No amount of moral resolve can transform us into the likeness of Jesus.

[40:38] No amount of mere endeavor can produce genuine spiritual fruit. That doesn't mean that we've got no part to play. Paul tells us to put to death the deeds of the body, but we do this by his spirit.

We work, but we work because it's God who works in us, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. There will be areas of our lives, perhaps of our corporate life together, in which we desperately long to see progress.

The posture in which we are strengthened for those battles is one of dependent prayer. Lord, my heart longs for things it shouldn't.

I cannot change it myself. I want to honor you, but I need your help. Help me with my lust. Help me with my temper.

Help me with my greed. Help me with my pride. Help me with my loose tongue. Your grace is sufficient. Your power has made perfect in weakness.

[41:51] Now, God's grace may not remove every struggle immediately, but it is sufficient to sustain us. It's able to strengthen our obedience and continue the work of making us like Christ, that he who began a good work in us will bring it to completion.

And the same is true, lastly, for our service. The psalmist says, unless the Lord build the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

Our weakness does not mean there's nothing for us to do. The builder still builds, the watchman still stays awake, Gideon still gathers an army, but unless the Lord acts, all such activity is in vain.

We can preach sermons, we can teach children, we can organize ministries, we can craft vision, we can work hard in service, but in our own strength, we cannot build Christ's church.

You and I cannot convert a human heart or create spiritual life. That's why it's so important that we are a church at prayer.

[43:06] That's the sign of a church that knows its weakness. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but it's God who gave the growth.

And yet, God delights to work through weak servants, doesn't he? Servants like Gideon, who needed reassurance after reassurance. Or like Paul, whose weakness was on full display to the Corinthians, and yet his weak words, his weak message, his weak manner, were laden with God's spirit and with power.

Friends, we need to let our weakness, our inability, our inadequacy to produce maturity in the kids that we teach, in the students that we look out for, in the group that we lead.

We need to let our weakness and inability to rouse faith in those who sit at our tables. We need to let our weakness in these things drive us to the Lord for his strength, that he might be pleased to use our meager efforts, that people might be saved and matured at his hand.

I think of someone in our congregation who serves in a welcome team, and they're so conscious of their weakness for the task, that each week they plead for the Lord's help before they come, before they serve.

[44:31] That's the posture of Christian service. And those are the prayers the Lord delights to answer, that his power might be displayed perfectly in our weakness.

Brothers and sisters, let's continue to help one another to be a church where we do not need to fear weakness or hide it. For in doing so, we will continue to be a church who know and see the power

of God in our midst.

If we together embrace our weakness, we'll experience his power more and more at work in us and among us and through us.

The Lord said to Gideon, with the 300 men I will save you. And the Lord says to us still, my grace is sufficient for you.

For my power is made perfect in weakness. For when we are weak, then we are strong. Well, let's pray.

[45:42] O Lord, I we need your help. The world we inhabit would push us all the time to puff out our chests and to walk tall in our own strength.

And we knew that our own hearts are pruned to miscalculating ourselves. O Lord, we are riddled with all manner of insecurities that can cause us to default to where we feel strong and comfortable. And so help us, Lord, to embrace our true state. Teach us in your grace that everything we need, all that we lack, is met with Christ's superabundance.

And so be pleased to display in our little church your mighty power. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.