

# Gideon's Story: 1. God shows His commitment to His people

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Amen. Well, now we come to our reading from the Bible. Will you turn with me, please, to the book of Judges, chapter 6. Judges, chapter 6, and you'll find this on page 205 in our big hardback Bibles. The book of Judges, chapter 6, and this chapter begins the story of Gideon, one of the great judges of this book. Judges, chapter 6, and I'll read the first 35 verses. The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel.

And because of Midian, the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east would come up against them. They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, they would come like locusts in number. Both they and their camels could not be counted, so that they laid waste the land as they came in. And Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the people of Israel cried out for help to the Lord.

When the people of Israel cried out to the Lord on account of the Midianites, the Lord sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage, and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you, and gave you their land. And I said to you, I am the Lord your God. You shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell, but you have not obeyed my voice.

Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor. And Gideon said to him, Please, sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian. And the Lord, the angel, turned to him and said, Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian. Do not I send you. And he said to him, Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house. And the Lord said to him, But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man. And he said to him, If now I have found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speaks with me. Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you. And he said, I will stay till you return. So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour, the meat he put in a basket and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the terebinth and presented them. And the angel of God said to him, Take the meat and the unleavened cakes and put them on this rock and pour the broth over them. And he did so. Then the angel of the Lord reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes.

And fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes, and the angel of the Lord vanished from his sight. Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the Lord. And Gideon said, Alas, O Lord God, for now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face. But the Lord said to him, Peace be to you. Do not fear. You shall not die. Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and called it, The Lord is Peace. To this day, it still stands at Ofra, which belongs to the Abiezrites.

[ 5 : 04 ] That night, the Lord said to him, Take your father's bull, the second bull, seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it, and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in due order. Then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down. So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the Lord had told him.

But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night. When the men of the town rose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the Asherah beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar that had been built. And they said to one another, Who has done this thing? And after they had searched and inquired, they said, Gideon, the son of Joash, has done this thing. Then the men of the town said to Joash, Bring out your son that he may die, for he has broken down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it. But Joash said to all who stood against him, Will you contend for Baal, or will you save him? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down. Therefore, on that day, Gideon was called Jerob Baal, that is to say, let Baal contend against him, because he broke down his altar.

Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east came together, and they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the valley of Jezreel. But the spirit of the Lord clothed 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. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord bless it to us this evening. Well, let's turn to Judges chapter 6.

I know it's a couple of months at least since we were last together in the book of Judges, but we're due to be back in this book for, I think, six out of the next seven Sunday evenings. So I want to take a moment, first of all, to reorientate us to this singular Bible book.

[ 7 : 45 ] The book of Judges describes the history of Israel from the death of Joshua, which happened in about 1350 BC, to the time of Samuel, roughly 300 years later. And much of this book is a sorry tale, because it describes a period of decline. The people of Israel are becoming addicted to Baalism and idolatry. And while the name of the Lord is not entirely forgotten in Israel, the Israelites, by and large, are not serving him, or loving him, or obeying him. And the final few chapters of the book, the last four or five chapters, are a desperate tale of moral and national breakdown, expressed in the sharp little refrain, repeated several times in those final chapters, that in Israel, there was no king in those days. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

In other words, any sense of shared moral principle, based upon allegiance to the God of Moses, had vanished like snow before sun. However, the book of Judges is by no means all depressing, because in the midst of this national breakdown, the Lord God is very much at work. He has not abandoned his people. He regularly, as chapter six, verse one reminds us, gives his people into the hand of an oppressor, as a chastisement and a corrective. But he rescues them again and again from the consequences of their folly. And he proves himself to be absolutely faithful to the promises of his covenant with Israel. Now, the church today, the new covenant people of the Lord, we have a great deal to learn about the character of God from this Old Testament history, about his readiness both to judge and to bring rescue. So our passage for today is chapter six, or at least most of it. The story of

Gideon is covered in chapter six, seven, and eight. And the theme that I want us to notice in chapter six tonight is the theme of God showing his commitment to his people. Christian people quickly learn that commitment is required of us towards our God. But in the long run, it is much more important for us to know how unwaveringly the Lord God is committed to his people. Well, I want to take the passage in two sections. First, we'll have a short section, verses one to six, which shows us a nation in crisis and despair. And then we'll have a longer second section from verse seven onwards, which shows us the grace of God at work amongst his wayward people. First, then, verses one to six, a nation in crisis and despair. Now, at one level, you can explain Israel's despair purely in terms of tribal and national conflict. Just think, think that the map of the Holy Land for a moment with the Sea of Galilee up in the north, then you have the River Jordan running 60 or 70 miles due south down into the Dead Sea. And on the west side, on the left-hand side is the land of Canaan, the land of Israel. But on the eastern side of the River Jordan, as verse three tells us here, lived the

Midianites, the Amalekites, and the people of the east. And as verse three also tells us, every summer, just as the crops were ripening and the harvest was approaching, hordes of these tribesmen would cross the River Jordan into the land of Canaan, and they would take everything. Verse four tells us they went as far as Gaza, which is right down on the Mediterranean coast in the south. They stripped the land. Verse four says they left no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or donkey, nothing.

Years ago, I was living in Manchester, in a rather rough part of the city, and I had a very small front garden, very small, with a low wall, about two foot high. And for some reason, it might have been my father-in-law, had given me a single plant of sweet corn, corn on the cob. And I planted this little tiny corn plant in my flowerbed in the garden. And this little plant grew beautifully through the summer months, and a lovely corn cob appeared, succulent and golden. And on the very day that I was planning to eat it, to cut it and have it, I came down to my breakfast, I looked out into the front garden, and I saw that somebody had nicked it.

[12:26] Now for me, as you can imagine, that was a minor deprivation. I didn't starve. The co-op shop was just around the corner, and I had money to buy my groceries. But the people of Israel, they had virtually everything stolen, and there was no co-op around the corner.

As verse 4 puts it, no sustenance in Israel. And as verse 5 puts it, the Midianites laid waste the land as they came in. And look back to verse 2.

And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian, the people of Israel made for themselves dens in the mountains, and caves, and strongholds. So when the Midianites came flooding in, they would leave their houses, they'd run up into the hills, where they'd made holes and caves for themselves, like rabbits.

And there they would cower and hide, until the Midianites had swept past. You can see from verse 11, that Gideon had managed to salvage a little bit of wheat.

But he was having to thresh it, under the cover of the wine press, in the cistern, which would normally be used for treading out the grapes. Because he didn't want the Midianites to see him and come and rob him.

[ 13 : 34 ] It was the only way that he could secure a little bit of grain to make the family's bread. And look at the understated way in which the nation's plight is summed up in verse 6.

Israel was brought very low because of Midian. Gnawing hunger, fear, destitution, and hopelessness. Do you know how we sometimes catch that sense of despair in the voices of people that we hear on the radio?

We hear of a city, perhaps in the Middle East, being knocked to pieces by shells. And a BBC reporter manages to get into the city and interview a poor man or woman who has been driven from home, perhaps having lost family members in the shelling.

And you can hear just for a few seconds the voice of utter despair. That's what verse 6 surely is expressing. Israel was brought very low because of Midian.

Now, I said earlier that at one level you can explain these horrors in terms of national or tribal conflict. But the author of Judges is making it clear that something very much more important lies behind this suffering.

[ 14 : 45 ] And that is the deliberate will of God. It's verse 1 that shows us what is really going on. The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them, the Lord gave them, into the hand of Midian seven years.

In other words, he chastised them. But it was chastisement with a purpose. Not simply unrelieved and unending punishment, but chastisement designed by God to jolt his people, to make them see how deeply they had rebelled against him, and to make them see that they must turn back to him.

God will sometimes do this with us. If you or I as individuals, or if we as a congregation, were to abandon him and start worshipping false gods, he will sometimes bring suffering to us for exactly this purpose, to jolt us into realizing that we have abandoned him, and to box our ears and to make us listen to him again.

It's because he loves us and is committed to us and knows what is good for us that he will sometimes do this. It's because he loved Israel in Gideon's time that he gave the Israelites into the power of Midian for seven long years.

Just think of that, seven years. Wouldn't you have thought that one summer of having your land stripped bare would be quite enough to send you crying to the Lord? Well, it clearly wasn't enough. It was only after seven years that in the words of verse six, the people of Israel finally cried out for help to the Lord, their God.

[ 16 : 19 ] And even then, there's no reason to believe that it was a cry of real repentance. It seems to have been no more than a desperate cry for help. It was not, we love you, Lord, we're coming back to you.

It was more like, help us, Lord, out of this dreadful mess. Spare us this suffering so that we can go back to our idols again. The subsequent chapters show that their hearts really were still bowing down to their idols.

Now, verse seven shows us the beginning of the Lord's gracious response, and we'll come to that in just a moment. But I want to linger first on the question of how idolatry can gain a stranglehold on people who by rights belong to the Lord.

Let's look together at the middle of verse 13, where Gideon is speaking to the angel. And he says, And where are all the Lord's wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?

Now, how did Gideon know these great facts of Israelite history? How did he know about the Exodus and the wonderful deeds of the Lord? Well, presumably because his parents had taught him the basics of Israel's faith.

[ 17 : 31 ] And yet, look on to verse 25, and you see that Gideon's father, Joash, had built an altar of Baal at his home with an Asherah pole beside it.

So what seems to be happening is that there's a kind of family memory of the true faith. There's still a bit of talk around about the Lord God of Israel, but the hearts of the Israelites have been captured by the idols of the Canaanite people.

Now, doesn't this kind of thing ring bells? You can have a modern British family where there is still residual talk about Christianity and the church. The family, perhaps, will fondly remember great-uncle Archie, who was a minister in Perthshire 60 years ago.

And they'll still, perhaps, go to church once or twice or three times a year. And yet, their hearts are truly wedded to the idols of the age, the idols of secular society.

There's a tiny memory of something Christian in the family's past, but the present reality is idolatry. Now, of course, today, Baal and Asherah are not worshipped as such, but the most popular modern shrines are the shrines of sex, beauty, and fashion, therapies, and health, power and money, and sensual self-indulgence of many kinds, food and drink and music and luxury and so on.

[ 18 : 59 ] But the more shocking thing is that professing Christians, including ministers and preachers, can be mouthing the old forms of Christian piety and yet inwardly can be bowing down like Gideon's father before the shrines of idolatry.

Now, friends, I cannot see into your hearts. I haven't got x-ray eyes and it's a good thing that I haven't. And you can't see into my heart and that's also a good thing. But a passage like this forces us to examine our hearts and to ask if we sometimes bow down to these modern idols.

The nature of idolatry is that it's very alluring and easily addictive. It promises great rewards and satisfactions, but in the end, its promises prove empty.

The Bible castigates idols and laughs at them. One of the Psalms puts it like this in writing about these little statues or these little idols. They have mouths but do not speak.

Eyes but do not see. They have ears but they do not hear. Noses but do not smell. They have hands but do not feel. Feet but do not walk.

[ 20 : 10 ] And they do not make a sound in their throat. In other words, there's nothing there. And then the Psalm chillingly adds, those who make them become like them and so do all who trust in them.

So if we worship the idols of the age, in the end, we become as pathetic and impotent as they are. Mere shells of human beings with no substance inside.

And God won't have it. That's why in Judges 6, he gives his people over to the power of Midian for seven years until they cry out to him for help.

So it's purposeful chastisement to jolt them into realizing that idolatry is the road to death. Now it's at this point when the nation is in despair that the Lord intervenes with his characteristic grace and kindness.

We noticed two or three months ago that the book of Judges has a very recognizable cycle of events that keeps on repeating itself. First, the Israelites do evil in the sight of the Lord, which means they turn to the idols.

[ 21 : 23 ] Second, the Lord gives them into the hand of an oppressor thirdly, they cry out to him for help. Fourth, he sends a rescuer in the form of a judge. And then fifth, once the rescuer has rescued them, they enjoy a period of peace.

But then they go back to their idols again, and the whole depressing process has to be repeated. Now here in chapter 6, we see exactly that cycle. Just follow it with me.

Verse 1, they do evil. Then verse 1 again, the Lord gives them over to the power of Midian. Then in verse 6, they cry out for help. Then in verse 11, the Lord raises up a rescuer or judge who proves to be Gideon in this case.

Gideon then rescues them by the power and grace of God. And finally, not until chapter 8, verse 28, we read that the land had rest for 40 years.

But you may have noticed that a new element is introduced into this particular cycle. It comes in chapter 6 at verses 7 to 10. Normally, we'd expect the cry of despair in verse 6 to be immediately followed by the raising up of the judge in verse 11.

[ 22 : 38 ] But in this particular case, the Lord does something in addition. And that is that he preaches a sermon to them. Look at verse 7. When the people of Israel cried out to the Lord on account of the Midianites, the Lord sent a prophet to the people of Israel and he said to them, Well, this brings us to our second main section where we see the grace of God at work.

I've got three sub-points under this heading. And here's the first. From verses 7 to 10, we see a radical diagnosis of the problem. This sermon is as sharp as it is short.

Let me read it. Verse 8. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage. And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you and drove them out before you and gave you their land.

And I said to you, I am the Lord your God. You shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell, but you have not obeyed my voice. Now friends, this is a sharp critique.

It's a thundering rebuke. If you'd been in that crowd listening to that prophet delivering his sermon, wouldn't you have wilted before the blast? I'm sure I would. Certainly if you had any sensitivity to truth and reality, you would have done.

[ 24 : 02 ] But it's a rebuke that is full of grace. God's rebukes are like that. They're gracious. The people had to hear the message. In those few words, the Lord reminds Israel of everything he has done for them.

How he'd saved them from their cruel bondage in Egypt. The Exodus was the defining event in their national history. And in it, God showed himself in his true glorious colors as their rescuer.

He demonstrated his commitment to them at the Exodus. And he sealed his relationship with them yet further at Mount Sinai when he gave them his covenant law, including the command echoed here in verse 10 not to fear or follow the gods of the Canaanites because the Lord and no other was their God.

But, end of verse 10, and here in just half a dozen words you have all the sorrow and frustration and anger of the loving parent addressing the wayward child.

But he says, you have not obeyed my voice. You foolish children do not know what's good for you. That's the implication. But it was a grace-filled sermon. The best medicine is often bitter.

[ 25 : 17 ] The Israelites needed to be faced with their chronic and willful disobedience. And this sermon surely is a word to us as well as it reminds us that disobedience to the Lord when we fall into it is the way to disaster.

So the short sermon ends with its radical diagnosis. And what does the gracious hand of God do next? Well, this is where the story, the story of Gideon really begins.

So we see, secondly, God's strengthening reassurance as he chooses Gideon to be the judge and the savior. Verse 11, the angel of the Lord came and sat down under the terebinth at Ophrah.

Now, if you're a tree expert, you'll know, of course, that the Latin name for this tree is *Pistacea terebinthus palestina*, that it's a spreading shady tree less than 25 foot high and that it's common in the hillier parts of Palestine.

But if, like me, you're not a tree expert, you won't know that and you'll probably forget it rather quickly, but the interesting point is that the angel came and sat down beneath this shady terebinth, presumably because he was feeling the heat as we are at the moment and he needed the shade.

[ 26 : 30 ] In other words, he seemed to be an ordinary human being with an ordinary human being's needs. Gideon didn't initially realize that he had come from heaven.

He seemed to be just an ordinary man. But in verse 14 and verse 16, the writer simply describes him as the Lord. And in verse 21 and verse 22, when Gideon realizes that his visitor has come from heaven, he cries out in fear because he thinks he's going to die having had this face-to-face revelation.

Now, we won't get bogged down in tricky theology, but it's just worth bearing in mind that many thoughtful Bible teachers have wondered if this might be a pre-incarnation appearance of the Lord Jesus, a foretaste of the one who was to come some 1,200 years later.

Now, back to verse 12. The Lord is with you, says the angel, O mighty man of valor, which makes Gideon's jaw drop open. Do you say the Lord is with us?

Well, how can he be? Why is our country in this state? Surely this suggests that the Lord is about a million miles away from us. Where is the Lord of the Exodus? He simply can't be with us.

[ 27 : 46 ] He's forsaken us and he's given us into the hand of these wretched Midianites. How can the Lord possibly be with us? But the angel of the Lord doesn't bat an eyelid.

He plows right on with his message. Verse 14, Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian. Do not I send you.

But Gideon replies with a, Haven't you noticed you're talking to a seven stone weakling kind of speech? He says to the angel, How can I possibly save Israel?

I'm the least suitable person to lead the Israelite army into battle. I'm utterly unqualified. My clan, the Abiezrites, are the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh and I'm thought only fit to black the boots and wash the dishes and thresh the wheat.

I'm a nobody. Now look at verse 16. But, says the Lord, I will be with you. God plus one is always a majority.

[ 28 : 50 ] Now this conversation is only recorded very briefly. We only have a few words from the angel and a few words in return from Gideon. But it's a classic Bible moment where we see divine strength rubbing noses with human weakness.

The man says, The Lord has forsaken us. God says, The Lord is with you. The man says, I am the weakest human being around here.

The Lord says, But I will be with you. Now these things are written for our encouragement 3,000 years later. We might possibly say on a bad day when it's raining something like this.

But the Western world has become so secularized. See, I'm wringing my hands, aren't I? The United Kingdom has sold itself to idolatry. The churches are so weak. Christian leaders, some of them are compromised and all of them are sniggered at in society.

The church is regarded as a museum piece, just a piece of heritage like Stevenson's rocket. God has obviously forsaken us. Or if he's still with us, he's become so weak and tired and elderly that he can't possibly stop the rot.

- [ 30 : 03 ] We do sometimes feel a bit like that. As individual Christians, we can sometimes feel so tired that we wonder if we will ever again testify to the goodness and truth of the Lord.
- As churches, we can sometimes feel becalmed. I'm not suggesting we do at the moment. I don't think we do. But sometimes a church can feel as if the wind has dropped out of its sails.
- So let's be deeply encouraged by this placing together of human weakness and divine strength. I can't, says Gideon, but the Lord replies, I will be with you and therefore you can.
- Now, at verse 17, it seems that Gideon may be just starting to suspect who his visitor is. Show me a sign, he says, that it is you who is speaking with me.
- He doesn't quite say who he thinks you might be, but the visitor sits back down under the tree again and Gideon hastens. That's why I read it rather quickly when I got to that point.
- [ 31 : 11 ] How long does it take to slaughter a young goat? Five minutes? I'm not used to slaughtering goats. Five minutes.
- How long does it take to butcher it? Half an hour, perhaps? Somebody's shaking your head at me. Yes. How long does it take to turn flour into a tray of cakes? Half an hour if you've got a good oven, I guess.
- This whole operation must have taken at least an hour and a half, perhaps two hours. But the angel sits there patiently because he wants Gideon to know who he is.
- Well, eventually, the food comes. The angel reaches out his staff and touches it with the tip. Fire instantly consumes it and the angel vanishes. And then, verse 22, and this is why the angel graciously stayed.
- Then Gideon perceives who he is. And is that a comforting revelation? Not at all. It's terrifying. Alas, he says, I'm going to die. But then, deeply comforting, peace be to you, says the Lord.
- [ 32 : 19 ] Do not fear. You shall not die. The Lord is very gracious and very reassuring to this weak and anxious man.
- Look at the repeated reassurances here. Verse 12, the Lord is with you. Verse 14, you may feel weak but you are strong because I'm sending you on your commission.
- Verse 16, I will be with you and you will be victorious. Verse 18, yes, I will stay because I want to reassure you. Verse 23, peace between me and you.
- Don't be afraid. That's what God was like then and that is what God is like now. Well, we've seen God's grace at work, first of all, in this radical diagnosis of verses 7 to 10, second, in the strengthening reassurance of verses 11 to 24 and then third and last, in the testing challenge of verses 25 to 32.
- Now, you'll see from the beginning of verse 25, that the Lord doesn't keep Gideon waiting because that very night he returns and speaks to Gideon and he commands Gideon to roll up his sleeves and set to work.
- [ 33 : 40 ] Now, this command is going to test Gideon. All his natural inclinations will tell him to run away. This command from heaven is going to challenge his relationship to his own father, Joash, his relationship to his family and the family's servants, and to the people of the town.
- And it would not have escaped Gideon that he might be risking his very life if he obeyed the Lord's command. Take your father's bull, the second bull, seven years old.
- Bulls, I'm sure you know, reach maturity at two to three years old. A seven years old bull is a massive creature and can be dangerous. No wonder Gideon had to take ten servants with him, as verse 27 tells us.



But it's not that. It's the next part of the command that is the really hard thing. Pull down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.

In other words, do something that is fundamentally defiant to everything that your family and the town have come to trust in and live for. Sabotage your father's gods.

[ 34 : 53 ] It's rather like telling the racing stables owner's son to burn down the stables in the night or telling the merchant banker's son to give all the bank's passwords to the fraudsters.

Pull down the altar, cut the bull's throat and offer it as a burnt offering on the very wood of the Asherah pole that you've chopped into pieces. So, verse 27.

Strengthened by the reassuring words he had heard earlier that day, Gideon gave orders to ten of his servants to help him. And he did as the Lord commanded.

Now, Gideon has sometimes been criticized for doing this under cover of darkness and out of fear. But I think we should cut him a little slack at this point. The fact is, he did it.

What was required of him was not heroics, but obedience. And he obeyed the Lord. The fact that he was afraid of his family and of the men of the town makes his obedience all the more impressive.

[ 35 : 54 ] This was not easy obedience. It was costly and it was difficult. Now, we'll get to verse 28 in just a moment, but let's pause first so as to recognize that we have here a classic example of how the true God relates to people who truly belong to him.

There are two elements in it. First, the Lord is massively reassuring. I will be with you, so don't be afraid.

Secondly, the believer is massively challenged. Lord, if I do what you're asking me to do, it may cost me my life. Well, yes.

That's it. That's always it. It's always like that. Didn't Jesus say, if anyone wants to be a follower of mine, he must be willing to lay down his life. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.

Gideon certainly risked his life. Look on to verse 30. When Gideon's deeds are discovered the following morning and his identity is found out, presumably leaked out by one of his ten servants.

[ 37 : 10 ] The men of the town say to Gideon's father, Joash, bring out your son. He must die because he's broken down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah pole. It was certainly a life and death matter for Gideon and he knew it, but he decided to risk his life and obey the Lord rather than protect his life and disobey the Lord.

Our natural instinct will always be to protect ourselves and to avoid the challenge of risking everything by obeying the Lord. But this example of Gideon is here in our Bible to show us that the one who does risk and obey discovers that the Lord's words of promise prove wonderfully true.

I will be with you. Are we willing to be like Gideon if necessary again and again and again during the course of our life?

The moment of greatest danger comes in verse 30. Bring him out for he must die. But it's at that very moment that the Lord begins to demonstrate that his promises are trustworthy because at that very moment Joash, the father, rather unexpectedly steps up in defense of Gideon.

Perhaps the younger man's defiance reminds Joash that the God of Israel is the true God. So Joash says in verse 31, if Baal is a God, let him defend himself.

[ 38 : 39 ] He's calling Baal's bluff. And of course, Baal, in the end, has nothing to say. Well, friends, we must leave it there until next week.

But this passage shows us that in days of decline, the Lord God is as deeply committed to his people as he is in days of revival. We have the radical diagnosis, you have not obeyed my voice.

We then have this strengthening reassurance to Gideon, I will be with you, so don't be afraid. And then the testing challenge, trust me and pull down the apparatus of idolatry.

The fact that Gideon rose to the challenge will surely encourage us to rise to similar challenges today. and the fact that the Lord proved to be true to his word will remind us that as he was then, so he is now.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we thank you for this heart-searching challenge that was given to your servant, Gideon.

[ 39 : 53 ] We thank you for your lovely and reassuring promises of your presence and protection and we thank you so much that he was willing to rise to the challenge and we realize that at least in part this is an example for us to follow.

So please give us fresh courage and particularly when we're challenged, even at risk of everything, we pray that you will help us to do as Gideon did and we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.