

Gideon's Story: 2. The Power of Weakness

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn now to our Bible reading for tonight, which is in Judges, the book of Judges, chapter 6, and you'll find this on page 206 in our big church Bibles.

Judges, chapter 6, and I'm going to read in a moment from verse 33, and then we shall have most of chapter 7 as well. But let me just say a little word or two about this before we start, so we can just set the scene and get the action, so to speak, in our minds before we actually have the reading.

We're continuing with the story of Gideon, and we started that story last week in chapter 6, the beginning of chapter 6. And the situation is that the people of Israel, at this stage in their history, are in great trouble and distress.

The reason is they've turned away from the Lord, and the Lord, in consequence, has given them over to the power of an oppressor, who are the Midianites.

And the Midianites, a warlike tribe, live on the eastern side, the right-hand side if you're looking at the map, eastern side of the River Jordan. And in chapter 6, which we read last Sunday evening, we found out how the Lord raised up a particular individual, Gideon, a modest and lowly character from the Jewish tribe of Manasseh.

[1 : 22] And the Lord tells Gideon that he is the one who is going to strike and overpower the forces of Midian. Now, just imagine being on the receiving end of a message like that.

Imagine being Gideon, hearing that God has chosen you to do this job. So, Gideon quails, understandably, and the Lord then tells him to pull down the altar set up to Baal, which his own father, Joash, has put up at the family home.

In other words, to raise a defiant challenge to the idolatry of his own people and even his own family. So, in one day, in one day, Gideon finds himself, A, having to raise an army to fight the dreaded Midianites, and B, having to thumb his nose at Baalism in his own family.

Each of those two challenges, Gideon knew, might well have cost him his life. But he plucks up courage, he breaks down the altar to Baal, he then offers a sacrifice to the Lord on a new altar, which he has built in place of the old altar.

So, this young man finds himself catapulted into a situation of great danger. He's contending with Baal, he's given this name, Jerob Baal, which means, let Baal contend with him.

[2 : 36] And he knows that he is soon having to take on the Midianites as well. I think if I had been Gideon, I might have opted to take a holiday in Blackpool. So, let me pick up the story from Judges, chapter 6, verse 33.

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. Then Gideon said to God, If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, Behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor.

If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said. And it was so.

[3 : 48] When he rose early 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.

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 Jerob Baal, that is Gideon, and all the people 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 Moray 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.

[5 : 04] 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.

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, you shall set by himself.

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

And 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 provisions in their hands, and their trumpets. And he sent all the rest of Israel, every man to his tent, but retained the 300 men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

[6 : 16] That same night, the Lord said to him, Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. But if you are 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, his servant, to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp.

It's clearly nighttime by now. 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 his 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. As soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshipped.

[7 : 36] 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 three hundred men into three companies and put trumpets into the hands of all of them and empty 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 hands the torches and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, A sword for the Lord and for Gideon.

Every man stood in his place around the camp and all the army, that's the Midianites, ran. They cried out and fled. When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army.

[8 : 58] And the army fled as far as Bethshittah towards Zerera, as far as the border of Abel-Meholah by Tavath. And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh and they pursued after Midian.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord and may his blessing be upon it to us this evening. Well, let's turn again in our Bibles to Judges chapter 6 and 7.

page 206 in our church Bibles. Well, we'll pick up the story just where I began to read at chapter 6 and verse 33.

I think we're meant to imagine that perhaps a few months have passed between verse 32 and verse 33. There's been a winter and a spring and then the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east come together and cross the Jordan just as the crops are ripening.

So this confederacy of the enemies of Israel, they come across the Jordan from east to west and they camp in the valley of Jezreel, which is up in the northern part of Israel. And it's at this point when the threat is suddenly right in front of Israel's nose that the spirit of the Lord clothes Gideon.

[10 : 26] As you'll see, it's put in verse 34. The spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon. Now that's a striking expression and similar expressions are used later in the book of Judges in relation to Jephthah just before he went out to attack the Ammonites and defeat them.

Samson, I think it comes three or four times in the story of Samson. For example, just before he kills the lion with his bare hands as it comes roaring at him. We read the same thing happening to King David.

Well, he wasn't king, actually, at this stage. He was still young. But shortly before his battle with Goliath, again, the spirit of the Lord rushed upon him. So the idea is that all of these men, all of them warriors, are being clothed with power from God before they take on some fearsome enemy.

So what happens in Gideon's life just after he is clothed with the Holy Spirit? Well, the answer is he raises an army. So verse 34 tells us he sounded the trumpet.

That was the call to arms. And the Abiezrites, that was the men of his own little clan. They were the first to come to him. Then in verse 35, warriors from the whole of his tribe of Manasseh came and then warriors from the three neighboring tribes of Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali.

- [11 : 44] All in the north of Israel, they all answered his summons. And we learn from chapter 7, verse 3, that he now had an army of 32,000 men. Now that is some army.
- It's nearly half the size of the British army of today. But although Gideon had been clothed with the Spirit of the Lord, it's at this point in chapter 6, verse 36, that Gideon has a wobble.
- And his confidence seems to desert him. So he says to God in verse 36, if you will save Israel by my hand as you have 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 have said. So here's my first point.
- I've got two main points for tonight and here's the first. It's okay to need reassurance. Now that's what Gideon is looking for as he puts out this fleece.
- [12 : 48] He's asking for a sign from God to reassure him. Just notice the repetitions there. Verse 36, if you will save Israel by my hand as you have said.
- Then verse 37, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand as you have said. So Gideon clearly understands that God has spoken to him and has told him that he is to be instrumental in saving Israel.
- We know this as we look back at chapter 6, verse 14. Just turn back to 6, 14. Here's what the Lord had said to him a few months earlier. The Lord turned to him and said, go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian.
- Do not I send you. In other words, I'm sending you. And look at verse 16. The Lord said to him, but I will be with you and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.
- So God has said it and Gideon knows that God has said it. But, and here I think we need to be very sympathetic to Gideon, he's wobbling. He's got what you might call pre-match nerves.
- [13 : 56] A bit like Andy Murray just before stepping onto center court, I guess. And surely you or I would be very apprehensive if we were in Gideon's shoes in a situation like this.
- Now just look at the situation. Verse 35. The army has already been recruited. There is the army with him. 32,000 men. He knows, once you've got the army together, the battle has to be fought pretty quickly.
- So the battle has got to be fought within a couple of days. Look on to chapter 7, verse 1. You'll see that Gideon and his 32,000 men are up early in the morning and they journey to the spring of Harod and they camp beside it, knowing that the Midianite camp is only some two or three miles to the north of them.
- So this fleece incident takes place after the great army has been gathered and immediately before the battle. It is a time of great tension. Now let's just stand back from the drama for a moment and think about this famous fleece or fleeces.
- I can think of times when Christian friends have said to me, I put out a fleece to test whether I was making the right decision. And this Christian friend has been at some kind of crossroads in life.
- [15 : 11] Perhaps they're having to make a big decision. For example, they're working in Glasgow and they can carry on with that work, but an opportunity has come to take a different job in a different place and they're torn between the two.
- They're rather tempted to take this new job. So they're asking, shall I or shan't I? That's the question. So they think, I'll devise a kind of test. So they might say, for example, if I get a phone call from my mother within the next seven days asking me to stay in Glasgow, I'll take that as a sign from the Lord that I must stay in Glasgow.

But if I hear nothing from my mother, I'll take it as a sign that I can move away. So they've substituted a phone call for a fleece. But they're thinking of it as a parallel procedure, as though God will guide them by means of a clear sign.

Now the problem is, they are comparing two very different things. Gideon did not need guidance as to whether to follow plan A or plan B.

There was no plan B in Gideon's case. There was no option. He knew that the task God had given him to do was, in his own words, to save Israel by my hand as you have said.

[16 : 27] And he's already shown his commitment to what God has commanded him by raising the army. The campaign is already launched. So what he needed at this stage was not guidance. He knew what he was supposed to be doing.

He needed reassurance. That's why he put out the fleece, not just once, but on two consecutive nights. And God graciously reassured him with a wet fleece on the first night and a dry fleece on the second.

And that reassurance gave Gideon the necessary boost to his confidence to set off to the battle with his 32,000 men. But this is not the only reassuring thing that the Lord does for Gideon in the story.

Look back to chapter 6, verse 17. Here's another sign of reassurance. 6, 17. He, that's Gideon, said to him, that's the angel of the Lord, if now I have found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speaks to me.

Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you. And the angel says to him, all right, I will stay until you return. And a sign is indeed given.

[17 : 37] The angel of the Lord stays there while Gideon goes indoors and prepares a meal for him. And in verse 21, the angel touches the food with his staff and fire springs out and consumes it.

And then he vanishes. Well, it's a clear and remarkable sign from heaven. And there's one more yet. Look on to chapter 7, verse 9. That same night, 7, 9, the Lord said to him, arise, go down against the camp for I've given it into your hand.

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.

So Gideon, even at that stage, is still very apprehensive and who can blame him. And the Lord says to him in verse 9, go down against the camp for I've given it into your hand.

And he could easily, the Lord could easily have finished speaking at that point. But he doesn't. He says, but if you're afraid, which really means I know you're afraid, so I'm giving you a bit of extra stuff.

[18 : 42] If you're afraid, go down with your servant, Pura, and you are going to hear something which is going to give you the strength and the resolve to go down and join battle. And Gideon is still fearful.

So he creeps off under cover of darkness down the hill with his faithful servant, Pura, to the outposts, the very outposts of the camp. You'll see that verse 12 again emphasizes the enormous strength of the enemy like locusts in abundance and their camels were without number as the sand on the seashore in abundance.

Wouldn't this make a terrific film? Perhaps somebody will tell me afterwards it's been made a film, but it would be a great film, wouldn't it? You can picture these two men, Gideon and Pura, his servant, half terrified, creeping down the hill, careful not even to loosen a stone which might roll down the hill and be noticed by an alert night watchman.

And they creep towards this huge group of camels. What do camels sound like in the night? In great numbers, grunting and spitting. I won't try to imitate it.

But they hit the soldiers. What would they have sounded like? Snoring and coughing. And then suddenly there's a voice. Hey, pal. Must have been a Glaswegian Midianite, wasn't it?

[20 : 00] Hey, pal, he says, I've had a dream. A little barley loaf came tumbling into our camp and it hit the side of the tent and turned it over flat. Ooh, says his friend. I can interpret that for you.

That's the sword of Gideon, the son of Joash, a man of Israel. God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp. Now look at verse 15. There's Gideon and Purah hiding just a few yards away and Gideon hears every word of this conversation and as soon as he hears it, he knows that it's the message promised in verse 11 and he bows his head and silently worships the Lord and thanks him for yet another reassuring sign.

And as soon as he has heard this faith-bolstering message, he goes straight back up the hill to his own camp and in verse 15, he says to his army, Arise, the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand.

So his fearfulness at last has been dispelled and he's able to take the next decisive steps with confidence. Now it's fascinating to see how the Lord reassures Gideon not once or twice but three times.

He not only speaks clear words to Gideon, but he backs up his words with these unmistakable proofs of his approval and his blessing. First of all, the food prepared for the angel which is consumed by fire, then the fleece wet and then dry and then this extraordinary dream and its interpretation.

[21 : 30] So why did the Lord give all these reassurances to Gideon? Perhaps it was because the problem was so acute. This great horde of invaders who'd been coming for the last seven years every summertime stripping the land bare.

We're not told the reason why in quite so many words but a great lesson for us is that our God is sharply aware, wonderfully aware of our need for reassurance.

The God who bolstered up Gideon's flagging faith is our God, the God we trust and know and he doesn't change and he knows that our flagging faith needs also to be bolstered up regularly. But we don't need to ask him for special reassuring signs in the way that Gideon did because he's given us a whole range of reassurances which were not available to Gideon.

What are those reassurances? Well, first and foremost, he has sent his own son, the Lord Jesus, to demonstrate beyond all doubt that he is committed to us in love for us.

[22 : 37] God so loved the world that he gave his only son. That's the demonstration of his love. So when we read in the New Testament of the death of Jesus on our behalf and of the resurrection of Jesus on our behalf and when we read all the teaching of Jesus and his apostles, we realize that we could not wish for more solid grounds of confidence in God than we already have.

Paul puts it like this in Romans chapter 8. If God is for us, which he is, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

So the life and teaching and the achievements of Jesus, they're the most wonderful solid proof of God's kindly and gracious care for us. But there's a great deal else which God has given us to bolster our faith besides the knowledge of Jesus.

Christians. We have the whole Bible which Gideon didn't and we can read the Bible every day to delight us and to strengthen our grasp on the Lord and the truth.

And as well as the Lord Jesus and the Bible, we have the church. We have the church's people and the church's leaders and the Lord has given us our fellow Christians to be a continual support and encouragement to us.

[23 : 57] We can be with our fellow Christians twice on a Sunday and often during the week as well. And we have other things. We have the Lord's supper, the Lord's table, the bread and the wine regularly remind us of the death of Jesus and his power to save us.

We have baptism which demonstrates before our very eyes the washing away of our sins in the sight of God. We have so much to reassure us. And that's why we don't need to put out fleeces in the way that Gideon did.

So you don't need, for example, to leave this building tonight and turn left and go up Bath Street saying to the Lord, Lord, if I see a yellow dog in the street between here and the top of Bath Street, I'll take it as a sign from you that I should ask Eustacia Jones to marry me.

If that's your way of thinking, you might as well read your horoscope in the Daily Express, mightn't you? If Eustacia Jones is the girl for you, go and ask her.

You don't have to wait for permission from a yellow dog. Maybe you're thinking about that old sheepskin rug which is stashed away in the glory hole back at home folded up.

[25 : 15] Maybe you're wondering whether you should perhaps put it out in the backyard overnight. Friends, forget it. We live in the west of Scotland. It's bound to be wet by morning, isn't it? We really don't need fleece-ology but we do need reassurance regularly.

We need reassurance that the gospel is true, that our sins really are forgiven, that we really belong to the Lord's people and that we really are bound for the new creation.

But that assurance will grow and it will keep on growing and becoming stronger and stronger as we get to know the Bible better, as we get to know the Lord Jesus himself better and as we play our part ever more fully in the life of the Lord's church.

The Lord God knows that our hearts are fragile. After all, he made us. He knows our hearts and he has provided abundantly for our ongoing reassurance. So there's the first thing.

It's okay to need reassurance as Gideon needed reassurance. Now secondly, and this is really an even more important lesson. It is necessary for the Lord's people to be weak.

[26 : 27] Necessary to be weak. And the way in which the author of Judges writes up the story I think greatly emphasizes this point. Just look with me at chapter 7, verse 1.

Now that's a verse which states very simply the geographical details which the author wants us to have in mind before we read the account of the battle. Gideon and his men, 32,000 of them are encamped beside the spring of Harod which is just a few miles to the south of the Sea of Galilee on the western side of the Jordan.

And the Midianite army is camped on the hill of Moray about two miles to the north of the Israelites. Now look with me at verse 2 because verse 2 is the key that opens up the meaning of the whole story to us.

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 that's an innocuous looking verse but it is the key to the whole story. What is the Lord really saying to Gideon in verse 2? He is saying I know what the hearts of my people are really like.

[27 : 42] They're inclined to boast. And if they should win a great victory over the Midianites with this huge army of 32,000 men who is going to get the credit and the praise?

They will. They will congratulate themselves over abundantly. They will exult over their military prowess and they'll make sure that you Gideon are decorated in the Queen's birthday honors list.

But that would be an untrue reflection of reality because the reality is God says that I am going to defeat Midian not you and Israel needs to learn all over again who their saviour and God really is because they've forgotten.

The people with you Gideon are too many so I'm going to reduce their number. Lest Israel notice these words in verse 2 lest Israel boast over me saying my own hand has saved me.

Now of course the Lord is putting his finger here on a universal human problem and that is the problem of taking pride in one's perceived strength.

[28 : 52] It starts very young. Think of the life of little boys. I can't speak for little girls but remember I remember being a little boy a little boy of about 3 or 4 years old a very tiny boy rushes around doesn't he roaring like a lion as if to say take me on whoever you are and I'll beat you up because I'm tougher than you are.

When we get older it's just the same syndrome but we get a bit more subtle with it. I'll give you an example of this. A young man you've got to be under 40 I think for this but a young man will sometimes be discovered stripped to the waist looking at himself in the mirror in the bedroom and flexing his muscles the muscles of his chest and his arms and as he looks at himself like that he says who's a big boy then?

And if his wife should happen to come into the bedroom and see him doing this she will laugh herself out loud won't she? Of course she may have her own female version of how to exercise power and influence.

It could be something to do with eyelashes or it could be something to do with fingernails. Is there such a thing as a nail bar? It's not a cousin of a Mars bar is it?

Somebody tell me afterwards what a nail bar is. Could be to do with fingernails. Could be to do with having a nice orange tan on her face or elegantly cut clothes and she looks in the mirror and she says and who's a pretty girl then?

[30 : 23] Now aren't we absurd creatures men and women? Think of this not just as individuals but how do churches think of themselves and present themselves? I guess a church website is a major means of self-presentation these days.

How do churches present themselves to the admiring public on their websites? Have a look at some websites and watch out for key words like passionate, exciting, stimulating and dynamic.

Especially passionate. Our church is blessed with a range of exciting and stretching programs. Financial is strong due to the generosity of our members. Our 300 home groups are fully interactive fostering personal growth and godly adventuresomeness.

Our administration is undertaken with painstaking thoroughness. Our youth work is unparalleled. Our pulpit preaching is fresh, fizzy and dynamic. Our church buildings are beautifully maintained and everything is done with passion to promote the welfare of the environment or something like that.

Now aren't we absurd? Aren't we absurd creatures? But it's what we're all like. If we give ourselves half an opportunity, we start boasting about our skills and our power and our achievements.

[31 : 40] Look back at verse 2. God is saying to Gideon, I want to make it impossible for Israel to boast over me. Impossible for Israel to say how strong I am.

So what does the Lord do next? Well, he whittles down these 32,000 men to a mere 300. Think mathematics for a moment.

Think percentages. The Lord removes over 99% of the original army. Now let's see how he does it. It happens in two stages. First of all, in verse 3, the Lord says to Gideon, say to your people, whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead.

And immediately 22,000 fearful souls, I guess wiping their brows in relief, thankfully scuttle home. So that reduces the army by about 70%. Then verse 4, the Lord says to Gideon, the people are still too many.

Take them down to the water, the spring of Harod, 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. And anyone of whom I say to you, this one shall not go with you, shall not go.

[32 : 57] And the Lord then gives Gideon this rather extraordinary way of separating his men into two groups. Now just picture yourselves for a moment hiking in hill country on a hot day.

I guess many of us have done that, maybe in the highlands of Scotland or somewhere else. And you get very thirsty, don't you? And imagine you come to a lovely clear stream running off the hillside, a lovely clear burn.

You look up the stream and there are no dead sheep lying in it. Just cold, clear, fresh water bubbling out of the hillside. Now my question is, picture yourself there, how do you drink it?

Do you get right down on your knees and put your head right in the water and slurp it up directly, mouth to water, like that?

Or do you scoop up some water in your hands and lap it like a dog, like that? Now I know that I personally would have been sacked from Gideon's army because I'm a right down on your knees man.

[34 : 00] And probably most people are like that as well because the result was that out of 10,000 men, 9,700 got down on their knees to drink and it was only 300 who lapped the water with their hands to their mouths.

But that was the distinguishing test. So Gideon sent the 9,700 men home hard on the heels of the 22,000 who had also gone and he was left with 300.

But notice carefully now what the Lord says to Gideon in verse 7. With the 300 men who lapped, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand.

So the 300 men have got their part to play but it's the Lord who does the saving. And that is the pattern right the way through the Bible. Men and women, Christian men and women play their part but it's the Lord who does the saving.

And we all of us recognize this gladly. If you are saved, if you're a Christian, if you're saved in the greatest and most eternal sense, it was the Lord who saved you and you know that.

[35 : 09] He probably used various Christian people to teach you the gospel and to persuade you to put your trust in Christ. But it was the Lord himself who rescued you.

Do you remember the last line of the great prayer that Jonah utters from the belly of the great fish when he's at the bottom of the sea? The last line is he cries out, salvation belongs to the Lord.

And as soon as he has cried out those words, the fish vomits him out and there he is rescued on dry land again. Salvation belongs to the Lord.

That is the strap line of the whole Bible. It's what the whole Bible is all about. Salvation is by the power and will of God and not by the power of men. Look again at the way it's put in Judges 7-7.

With the 300 men who lapped, I will save you. Well, let's see how this battle of the hill of Moray actually turned out.

[36 : 08] We've already looked at verses 9-14 and the reassurance that the Lord gave to Gideon through the Midianite soldiers' dream. Then in verse 15 we noticed how Gideon rejoices and worships the Lord and he goes straight back to his little troop of 300 men and he says to them, Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand.

You see, he's learning where the power lies. The Lord has given Midian into your hand. Well, what happens next? The soldiers now have to get their arms ready, don't they?

Get armed. Kalashnikovs, Bren guns, rocket launchers, cruise missiles. No. Trumpets. Trumpets.

Is this the brass section of the Halley Orchestra? What else? Empty jars. Clay jars with torches inside the jars. General Gideon, you cannot be serious.

Yes, I am. Yes, I am. Verse 17. 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.

[37 : 27] So the army's equipment is a trumpet, an empty jar containing a torch and a pair of lungs for shouting. With weapons like that, no man is going to be able to say, What a skillful warrior I am.

And no one is going to be able to say what a fine military strategist General Gideon is. The praise and glory can only go to one person. And that is the unseen victor, the Lord himself.

We cannot mistake the way in which the author of Judges is telling the story. Now let's look on because the point becomes even clearer. Verses 19 and 20. They blow the trumpets, they smash the clay jars, and with the jars now smashed, they hold the lit torches up in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands, and they shout, A sword for the Lord and for Gideon.

Now look carefully at verse 21. Every man, that's Gideon's men, every man stood in his place around the camp.

They were stationary, having blown their trumpets and smashed their jars and shouted. That's about a total of 30 seconds worth of activity. They simply stood there and watched as the Midianite army panicked and cried out and fled.

[38 : 48] Now, verse 22. When they blew the 300 trumpets, the Lord, the Lord, set every man's sword, this is the Midianite's swords, against his comrade and against all the army.

It was the Lord who did it. The 300 Israelites are simply watching stationary up on the hill and the Lord is creating mayhem in the Midianite camp.

So as you look back to verse 2 again, you can see that it's the key to understanding the story. The Lord is not going to allow Israel to boast over him and to claim my own hand, my own power has saved me.

300 men with trumpets and clay pots are never going to be able to say, aren't we wonderful? Now, this lesson about learning to boast in the Lord and not in our own power, it's a lesson that runs right the way through the Bible.

How does the Bible begin? In the beginning, man. No, God. How does the Bible end? The Bible ends with man in his weakness crying out, come Lord Jesus, come, because we need you to come back and save us fully.

[40 : 04] We have no power to bring ourselves into your kingdom. Come back for us. One of the great lessons that Paul, the apostle, had to teach the immature and arrogant Christians in Corinth was that boasting in men, whether in Christian leaders or in themselves, was absolutely off limits.

Let him who boasts, said Paul, quoting Jeremiah, boast in the Lord. In fact, in 2 Corinthians, Paul teaches the Corinthians to boast in their weaknesses.

Now, isn't that counter-cultural? Isn't that entirely contrary to the spirit of our age where the world applauds and glorifies the strong? I wonder if the Bible insists on this theme so often because Christian people are so reluctant to take it to heart and to have it reshape our thinking.

We know that men and women of the world glorify human strength and ability, but we tend to do it ourselves in our own thinking. There's a danger, friends, in belonging to a church which is relatively strong in numbers and resources.

Our church is not strong compared with many churches around the world, but in British terms or Scottish terms, we are relatively strong. And I guess we all have a tendency to glorify the abilities of men and women who are working hard and doing useful things in Christian service.

[41 : 31] We might think, for example, of the administration of the church or the money or the building projects or the teaching and training or the catering or the music or the new members coming in.

Now let's be thankful to the Lord for all his blessings in these ways, but let's learn not to step over the line and start glorying in human strength as though the decisive element in all this were human ability.

Gideon's 300 soldiers, they had something to do, but when the sharp end of the story came into view, it was the Lord who defeated the enemy and saved his people.

Any lasting work and lasting blessing in the life of the church is the Lord's doing. When an individual comes to Christ and is saved, it's the Lord who saves that person.

When a congregation makes a painful decision in line with the teaching of the Bible, it's the Lord who strengthens that congregation. We're such proud little things, aren't we, by nature?

[42 : 36] Aren't we? I say this just about as much about myself as about anybody. I went to a boys-only prep school near London. It was an excellent school in many ways and I was very happy there, but this boys prep school trained us in self-satisfaction.

If you did well at this school in your academic work or in other ways, you were awarded red stars. A red quarter star for good work, a red half star for very good work, even a whole red star for outstandingly good work.

You could also earn black quarter stars for lazy work or for bad behavior. And every week, the school, the headmaster and the school secretary would display a great big board outside the secretary's office and there were listed the names of all the boys in the school and their stars for the week were added to what they had before and the boys would all crowd around to see what they'd got, how many new red stars or black stars.

And I can well remember the feeling of mortification and shame if a black star went against my name. And equally, I can remember a feeling of gloating and proud satisfaction if there were red stars against my name.

A system like that trained us to take pride and pleasure in our abilities and our strengths. Now, in a sense, schools have to reward good effort and punish laziness.

[44 : 08] How else can indolent boys be encouraged to use their brains? But the danger is that a system like that sows in the mind habits of pride which are hard to shake off.

It's only the Bible that can rearrange our thinking and undermine the habits of a lifetime. Gideon needed reassurance.

So do we. He was given plenty and we're given even more. But the people of Israel also needed to see that they depended upon the Lord for everything, that they were utterly weak in themselves.

And it will be a great blessing for us if we can learn that lesson because it is one of the great lessons of the Bible. So let me end by reading verse 2 again.

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.

[45 : 13] Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. Amen. Our gracious God, we thank you so much that it is you and you alone who save.

Those of us who are Christian men and women, we look back to the time when you laid your hand upon us and rescued us out of our pride and our self-reliance and our sin and saved us indeed from the wages of sin which is death.

All the power is yours, our gracious God. We've deserved nothing of any of this but you are great and wonderful. We confess to you that naturally we are proud of our strength or any ability but we do pray that you will continue to reshape our thinking according to the scriptures and according to the message of Judges chapter 7 and we ask it so that our Lord Jesus may be lifted up in glory.

Amen.