

# Weak People, Mighty God

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Text	Judges 6:33-7:25
Confession	<a href="#">Belgic Confession Article 13</a>
Readings	Judges 6:1-7:25

A young man is considering whether or not to ask a girl out on a date, but he's not sure if God wants him to. Perhaps God, who is in control of all things, can guide him. He says to God, "if you want me to go out with her, then when I ring her at home tonight, make it so that she answers. If anyone else from the family answers, I'll take it as a sign that I shouldn't go out with her."

Or there was a woman was considering whether or not she should go overseas to the mission field. She woke up one morning, looked at the digital alarm clock beside her bed. The time showing was 7:47. Ah! A 747... to fly overseas! It must be a sign from God!

Each of these people are displaying a very creative approach to finding out God's will. But is the answer from God? Is that how God guides his people? Is this the way we should work out how to live our lives?

If that *is* how God wants us to live, it seems to me it's mighty difficult to get it right. What if you were supposed to ask it the other way round? That if the girl answers, you're *not* to ask her out on a date? Or what if two people ask about the same thing happening, but ask for opposite signs? So how would I work out what sort of a sign I should ask for?

Or isn't this all a bit open to rigging it so that you get the outcome you want? Let's say that there's something I *really* don't want to do. Well, all I'd need to do would be to attach a very unlikely condition to it, wouldn't I? If Winston Peters apologises and makes up with the media, says that he's sorry for misunderstandings – then I'll do this thing I really don't want to do. But otherwise, I won't!

We appear to find this method of finding out God's will in text today. In fact, it's even become so popular, we even call similar methods like this today "putting out a fleece". But is that really what's going on here in the story of Gideon? Is the purpose of this story to teach us about how we should work out what decisions to make?

No – this story is about God. It's about the power of God, and the grace he shows to a weak people.

And as we come to the story, the first thing we see about God, is that:

## 1. God shows patience to the uncertain

As we read before in Judges 6, God's people are in a bad way. Bands of foreigners are roaming through the land, taking whatever catches their eye. They strip the land bare, leaving God's people to starve. Things even got so bad that Israel cried out to the Lord for help! Isn't that amazing! It wasn't until things reached rock

bottom did they turn to God! That's somewhat foolish; but then again, how often isn't it the case that we act the same way! God is our God, but we don't seek help until things get *really* bad. Only once we've tried everything *we* can do, do we turn to God as the help of last resort. It's not how it should be, but often how it is.

Anyway, the angel of Lord puts in an appearance to Gideon. "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior!" Don't you love the irony – Gideon is hiding away down in the winepress. He's afraid of the Midianites! He's the very opposite image of a mighty warrior!

Nevertheless, the angel commissions Gideon to lead the fight against the enemy. v.14 – "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand". Like Moses, Gideon is uncertain about God's wisdom – he puts up some persuasive excuses. "My clan's the weakest... I'm the least in my family – God, are you sure you've got the right guy?" God's reply? "*I* will be with you"

But this isn't quite enough for Gideon. You would think, wouldn't you, that God appearing to you and giving you marching orders would be a good clue. But Gideon is uncertain. He lacks assurance. He's struggling in his faith. So he prepares the sacrifice and – whoosh! – up it goes in flames. And Gideon's faith is strengthened.

And then the mission begins. Gideon's commitment is going to be tested, as God puts his loyalty to test. Go and ruin your dad's Baal altar, chop down the sacred pole, butcher one of his best bulls. To his credit, Gideon doesn't put family above God – what an act of faith! – although we see that fear is still there; Gideon turns it into a night time raid so he can fly under the radar so nobody can see him. But with 10 servants joining the show, the truth was always going to get out.

Gideon was probably afraid about what his Dad was going to do. After all, the rest of town are calling for the death penalty! But then Gideon's dad has a sudden burst of faith and decides that Baal ought to be able to look after his own problems. God comes through for Gideon. God had *said* he would be with Gideon.

But then the troubles step up a notch for everyone. The army of Midian crosses the river ready for a fight. Yes, God has won a small battle for Gideon, keeping him safe from angry townsfolk. But now what? You see, there's a big difference between Dad sticking up for you, and taking on an army of soldiers. Gideon's hesitating. Struggling. This "mighty warrior" needs courage, but feels only fear.

That's the context in which Gideon lay out his fleece to test God's promises – to see if they are for real. People sometimes wonder, should Gideon have tested God? Was it a sin for him to do so? I can't go along with those who jump in to label Gideon's actions as sin. Rather, I see Gideon wanting to be more sure of God's sure word. He's hesitant, not unbelieving. We don't see an absence of faith, but the caution of faith. As one person has put it, "*God says it – I believe it – that settles it*" might look good on a bumper sticker, but doesn't really cover the struggles of faith for a believer.

So Gideon asks for sign. Wet fleece, dry ground. And the promise is confirmed, so off to battle, right? Hmm. No. Maybe it was just an accident? After all, by its very nature, wool absorbs water. Perhaps it was just luck. A chance occurrence. God, please don't be angry. Please, this time, can I have the opposite. Dry fleece, wet ground. And once again, God steps up to reassure Gideon. How can God do this? Well, we confess that God

rules the world. God's rule of the world includes the details. God's providence means God is *involved* in life and the world. Nothing happens in our world, unless God gives it the go ahead. God rules *all* things.

And so the conclusion we're to draw from this episode in Gideon's life, is not about the sort of faith that we should have, or how to test God's commands. No, what should *grab us* is how merciful God is to those who struggle! Gideon's call sign might have been "Mighty Warrior", but he was scared to bits! And how does God treat him? With kindness, mercy, and patience. What an amazing God **we** have! The Mighty God shows grace to his weak people.

God never promises this kind of guidance to us. We're not told to lay out "fleeces" like Gideon did, and God doesn't promise us he'll answer them. In our decision making, we're to use the wisdom that God gives us. But God can, and does, guide us all the same – even if not in such spectacular ways.

When we recognise that God is ruling over all things and nothing happens without his say-so, then there is a sense in which we can act wisely and still leave outcomes in God's hands.

A couple I know had been away from home for a number of weekends in a row, harvesting a crop on their block of land about 3-4 hours away. It reached a point where it felt to them like they had been away from their church family so much, that it very much seemed like the right thing to do come home. But there was still plenty left to harvest! And bad weather is forecast! Should they abandon the crop?

I think it was entirely right and appropriate for them to do as they did, which was to leave the outcome in God's hands. "God, we feel the right thing to do is to come home, but our crop is in your hands. And if it's still there and able to be harvested in a few weeks time, we'll take that as a sign to continue the harvest." That's not a fleece – that is, something completely unrelated to the decision at hand. No, that's wisdom – wisdom informed by the belief that God rules the world.

Or perhaps you have an important decision you're facing, with two possible courses of action. Neither choice is right or wrong, in and of themselves. And as you weigh up the possibilities, it begins to look like one choice is the more wiser. But recognising that God is active in the world and guides his children, you submit that to God. Perhaps you pray, "God, on the basis of what I can see now and what looks like wisdom, I'm intending to follow Plan A. But if that's not what you'd want me to do, show me why Plan B is wiser."

Sometimes we are uncertain. We're not sure what we should do. But even if we're not to lay out "fleeces", we can take confidence in who God is. Friends, our God is good and kind towards us. God knows our weakness, he knows our struggles. God is patient with us, he gives us what don't deserve.

But, as story continues, there's a second thing we see about God:

## **2. God encourages the fearful**

The battle proper is about to begin. A battle which would make cutting down sacred poles and killing your dad's prize bull seem like child play; a walk in the park.

And at first, you might think it looks promising. 32,000 fighting men have taken up the call to arms. Gideon could be feeling pretty proud of himself. That is, until you see the size of the enemy he's facing! v.12 – the enemy had *"settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore."* It's a little like the scene from Return of the King before gates of Mordor, where the good guys are small and completely outnumbered.

That's a problem to Gideon. But to God, there's a far greater problem, a much more pressing problem.

"Gideon, I'm really sorry I have to bring this up... but you've got too many soldiers."

*"Lord, you've got to be joking! Problem is I don't have enough!"*

"No, I'm serious Gideon – if I win battle for you like this, everyone will think *they've* won the day. So for a start, anybody with knees that are knocking with fright – tell them they can go home."

That's exactly what the rules for warfare in Deuteronomy had said. Only willing volunteers were to fight. If anyone *had* the courage to admit in front of everyone that they *lacked* courage, then that was a ticket to leave the battlefield. Boom! Most of Gideon's outnumbered rag-tag army of 32,000 men are off home. There are only 10,000 left.

"Sorry, Gideon – that's still too many soldiers." And so the army takes a drinks break, and we get the lappers and the kneelers. All the kneelers are given permission to go home, and we're left with the 300 lappers. Gideon's army is now down to less than 1% of its original size! And finally God says – "Yes, that's about enough, Gideon. I can use that few."

You might well ask, "how is this encouraging the fearful? Isn't this just making them more afraid than ever?" And that question brings us to the next episode. The sun has set, night fallen, and God issues attack orders. And then God asks Gideon the understatement of the year – *"If you're afraid to attack..."* If the occasion wasn't so serious, we wouldn't blame Gideon if he'd have fallen over in laughter! Afraid? How could you be anything *but* afraid?

But God wants to encourage Gideon. He can't encourage him through having a massive army, otherwise they would have a misplaced confidence in themselves. But because God governs the world, and because God is the God of details, God can encourage in other ways than just brute strength of numbers. So God sends Gideon and his servant on reconnaissance mission to gather intelligence on enemy camp.

And we see that God uses a Midianite private pulling guard duty in the middle of the night to be his prophet! He showed Gideon that **God** was going to pull this battle off, not Gideon and his 300 drops in the bucket. And Gideon is strengthened. His confidence grows. Because **God** is for him, who can be against him?

Friends, God isn't harsh when we tremble. He doesn't ridicule us for our fears. He doesn't mock us when we're fragile. The typical Christian is not supposed to be someone who is all gung-ho and fearless – confident, assured, dynamic, outgoing, witty, glamorous. That's not the sort of person Jesus seeks out to use in the battle his church is facing. No, Jesus takes uncertain and fearful folk. Us. And he encourages us. And he strengthens us sometimes in the oddest of ways to stand for him in school, or home, or work.

What a wonderful Lord we have! A Lord who can sympathise with us in our every weakness! Who knew what it was like to be scared ahead of battle, when he sweated drops of blood in Gethsemane. Whose own “army” of 12 disciples God whittled down and had desert him moment trouble arrived.

The Lord knows our fears. He knows the places where we struggle. The times when we find it hard to believe that the church can overcome the world.

We are the fearful, but God encourages us. **God encourages the fearful.**

There is one final thing we see about God as we reach the battle, and that is:

### **3. God delivers the weak**

They say that in war, “no plan survives contact with the enemy.” But this didn’t even seem like a successful battle plan in the first place!

Listen in as Gideon briefs his troops. “Men, you won’t be needing your swords tonight; we’ll fight without weapons. Just bring a trumpet and a torch and a loud voice!”

It didn’t need anything more than that, because God had already promised that **he** would do the fighting. Gideon and his band of merry men were almost just forward observers, along for the view. Yes, they played their part. They tooted their trumpets, turned on their torches, performed a loud verbal haka – while the Midianites turned on each other in confusion and took themselves out of the fight.

We’ve seen it before, and now we see it again. God’s strategy is to use utter weakness to display mighty strength. To use **our** utter weakness to display **His** mighty strength. God uses the few to deliver the many.

God did it at the cross. He took the weakness of Christ crucified – a man, bleeding to death on a wooden pole. But God used that moment of apparent weakness, to win the cosmic battle. He used the one, to deliver the many. To display **His** strength, not by staging a coup-de-tat in Jerusalem, but to deliver us forever! To save us from the enemy of sin! And to save us in such a way that we, like Israel, cannot pretend that our own strength has saved us.

It’s a good glorious thing for us to confess and believe God’s providence. That God is in control of everything that happens in our lives. That God watches over us. That God guides us.

But it’s an even better thing, to see who our God is – and worship him for it!

Our God shows patience to the uncertain.

Our God encourages the fearful.

Our God delivers the weak.

What a God! And this God is our God!

Amen.