

Boasting well...

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Date: 30 April 2017

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[0 : 00] word. Gracious and loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for the wonder of your work throughout human history, and we pray that as we look back at what you did for your people in Gideon's time, you will speak to us in our time and help us to draw near to you. For Jesus' name's sake, amen.

Well, we look at a story like Gideon because Jesus said all of the Old Testament, when he was talking to people in his time, he said, these are the scriptures that testify about me. So we're looking at it to see how God is speaking to us today about Jesus Christ. And the story of Gideon gets us thinking about boasting. Boasting, the way we use the term today, it was originally a military term, and you might remember from films like Braveheart or Gladiator, that before you kind of have soldiers lined up to battle, usually the kind of military commander might ride up and down on horseback, or he'd shout from where he was, and he'd say, look at your spears, look at those shields, let's do this.

And there was this sense of you can boast in your weapons, let's go. That was a boast. And so when we use the word today about boasting, what we should mean is it's about where your confidence is. In fact, the Bible word boast is sometimes translated rejoice. I boast in my sports ability. I rejoice in it.

It's a way of saying that's where my confidence is. And here's the thing, everyone boasts about something. In Jeremiah chapter 9 in the Bible, it talks about the wise man boasting in his wisdom.

And we see that all over the west end of Glasgow today. Wise people who boast in their intelligence. That's where their confidence is. It says in Jeremiah 9, let not the rich man boast in his riches. And we see that all over our city today. We're in a culture where we have wealth and we boast in it. We put our confidence in money. And even in church, we'll often find that we're tempted to boast in something and put our confidence in it and think, if only we can get that right, our church will really grow and be healthy and good. So perhaps it's a set of gifts that we feel we might have in our church family that some people bring or even just our location or our equipment.

[2 : 27] But there's often something where we think that's where our confidence is. That's what we boast in. And what we see in this historical narrative of Gideon is that God wants to redirect what we boast in.

Sometimes it's even good for us if he takes away from us what we're boasting in so that he makes us put our confidence in him. Just a reminder, last week we started looking at Gideon and at this time in human history, God's people were living in a place, the Promised Land. God had rescued them out of slavery under the leadership of Moses. And they're living in that land and they don't yet have a king.

And they started treating God terribly. They just ignored God and they started worshipping these false gods. They had shrines everywhere for made-up gods. And so God took his favor away from them.

And we read about that at the beginning of chapter 6 of Judges last week. It was a horror story. Every year in the spring, the Israelites would plant their crops on their land. And then an army of marauding barbarians would come, the Midianites. And they raped the land. They killed the livestock and feasted on it. They gave the crops to their own livestock. And when there was nothing left but mud, it was like a scorched earth policy. They just moved on somewhere else and left the Israelites starving.

It says again and again in the story that they were like a plague of locusts in the way they arrived and just swept off again, leaving the Israelites scared and utterly desperate. So desperate, they finally thought to cry out to God and pray to him. So they start praying. And the remarkable thing is, God hears them. And maybe that's something that we need to remember this morning, that we have a God who's so merciful. No matter how badly we've treated him, no matter how often we've let him down and turned away from him, if we will today turn to him and ask for mercy, he will hear us. So the Lord chose a leader to use to save his people from the trouble that they were in. He calls him a mighty warrior.

[4 : 39] And then we find him hiding in a hole, Gideon. Last week, I called him Mr. Jelly. This week, he's Mr. Small. And as God works through Gideon, first he shows us the necessity of weakness.

So Gideon musters together this army. He's a total weed, but 32,000 people join him. They pack their bags. They said goodbye to their children, kissed their wives goodbye, knowing that might be the last time as they go off to battle. And bravely, they set off to join Gideon to try and take on the Midianites.

Something has got to be done about the cruelty of these Midianite people before the nation starves to death. So in verse 1 of chapter 7, Gideon camps in a very good strategic place. He camps by a spring for fresh water. And the Midianites are camped to the north in a valley. And then God does something that no military advisor would ever do. Look at verse 2. The Lord said to Gideon, you have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me.

My own strength has saved me. And then comes the Lord's solution. So we've seen pictures over the last week in the news of North Korea, haven't we, with their military parades. They had another one this week. And it's sending a message to the world, don't mess with us. We can boast in our soldiers and in our missiles. Donald Trump sees this, he says, we're sending an armada there. Turned out that he wasn't. But he sent a nuclear submarine that arrived in South Korea last week. And then last week, China unveiled its new aircraft carrier, the first one they built in China. And you can see the message being sent as they flex their military muscles. But when it comes to God's people in Gideon's time, the Lord says, send the men home. Just imagine Gideon explaining that to his defense chief in the cabinet war room. Verse 3, now announce to the army, anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead. And it turns out that's actually quite a lot of the army. 22,000 of them go home, back up those paths to their homes, families running out to greet them. What happened? Well,

I was a bit scared, actually, and Gideon sent me home. Right, so he's got 10,000 men left. Verse 4, but the Lord said to Gideon, there are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will thin them out for you. And then we get this lapping test. A lot's been written about the lapping test. I think it's arbitrary. It's an arbitrary way of splitting up the group. If the men kneel down to drink, then that's one thing. If they take the water in their hands and lap it, those are the ones that I'll save you with. So then the promise in verse 7, the Lord said to Gideon, with the 300 men that lapped, I will save you, and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the others go home. And this isn't 300 Spartan warriors here, okay? This is 300 emaciated Israelites who, they weren't trembling with fear beforehand, but they might be now, because 9,700 of them just got sent home. Why? Because, verse 2, God wants to win this battle in a way that no one can say, it was our strength, it was our army, it was our leader.

[8 : 10] He wants Gideon to look back and say, that was God's victory, not mine. It's God who saves. The only thing I did was trust and obey. In fact, I don't know if you noticed, even as we had the reading, how little Gideon actually does and says in the chapter. He just trusts and he obeys.

We think of it as a story about Gideon. It's actually just a story about God. Salvation comes from him. And that's a vital principle, not just in Gideon, but in the whole Bible, because we all need to be saved.

Like the Israelites, none of us have put God at the very center of our lives and depended on him for everything and lived for his glory. And that's what the Bible calls sin, that we build our lives on other things.

And what is the right response of our maker God to sin? Well, the Midianites were a way of God withdrawing his favor from his people.

And Jesus warns us that if we live life pushing God to the sidelines, one day he'll remove his good favor from us. And we can't save ourselves. Religion doesn't save anybody.

[9 : 24] Going to church doesn't save you. Giving to charity doesn't save you. Helping old people cross the road. None of that will make us right with the God we've turned away from.

Nothing in ourselves will do it. And so like Gideon, we have to learn that lesson that the Lord can save us. And he will save us if we turn to him for mercy.

We just have to trust and obey. That's our first point, the necessity of weakness. Secondly, though, we see the assurance in weakness. Gideon, imagine him, he's on the ridge and he's looking down at this valley.

And it made me think of in the Lord of the Rings movies, you sometimes have these enormous armies of orcs and goblins, these swarms that are terrifying. That's what it would have been like for Gideon, looking down in the valley.

It's not just the Midianites now. It's the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples. The nations are gathered together against God's people. The entire future of God's people hangs in the balance as Gideon looks down, trembling, with his 300 men behind him camped out.

[10 : 31] And he was probably lying awake in his tent. I presume he couldn't sleep. And we get verse 9. During the night, the Lord said to Gideon, Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands.

If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah and listen to what they are saying. Afterwards, you will be encouraged to attack the camp.

So he goes down and he gets with an earshot of a man in the camp. And he hears this. I had a dream, he was saying. A man was telling a friend his dream.

I had a dream, he was saying. Verse 13. A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed.

His friend responded, This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon, son of Joash the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands.

[11 : 33] Now just think about that for a moment. Where on earth has that come from? We found Gideon hiding in a wine press last week. Gideon doesn't even have a sword.

The Lord has terrified the enemy. And there's such warmth in this, in God doing this for Gideon. Because God didn't have to let Gideon hear that.

He could have just said, Gideon, send your men down tonight. But he wants to encourage Gideon when he really most needs it. And Gideon bows down in worship.

And we see God working in similar ways today. He assures us, as his people, of his love and his commitment towards us far more than he needs to. He does it again and again in the Bible.

In books like 1 John. 1 John is written for Christians who are feeling wobbly. And thinking, is God really on my side? A whole book in the Bible for you. God does it today by his spirit.

[12 : 36] We know from Romans 8 that one of the things that the spirit does for us, the spirit of God, is he reassures us, God's people, that we can call God our father. He gives us a subjective affirmation that we're God's children.

But like Gideon, it might be for us that reassurance comes from God only as we really step out in faith for him. And for my money, it's been the times when I have most taken a bit of a risk for God that I've been most aware in his kindness of his commitment to me, of his trustworthiness.

Think of when I first told my friends that I'd become a Christian. It was a really big deal for me. When I first gave up working as a lawyer to work for a church.

When we moved up here to Glasgow. When we've moved house as a family, following the Lord's lead. At those times, I've most felt reassured by God of his presence with me, of his goodness towards me.

It's the times in my life when I've certainly seen most answered prayer. It's just like in the Great Commission. Jesus says to his people, go and make disciples of all nations.

[13 : 51] And then he says, and surely I'm with you always to the end of the age. So if you're somebody who doesn't feel very aware today of God's presence with you and his power for you.

If you're someone who perhaps feels a bit spiritually dry today. Take a risk for him. Step out in faith. In radical obedience. And find God there reassuring you.

That's our second point. Thirdly then we see the strength in weakness. Let's pick things up again in verse 15. Over the page, verse 15.

When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down and worshipped. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, Get up, the Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands.

He only has 300 men, but he splits them into three groups. So they can approach the camp from different places to give this perception there's more of them. And they do it in the dark. And it would sound as though they're much bigger.

[14 : 56] Because to go with that bluff of coming from different angles. He gives every soldier a trumpet and an empty jar with a torch inside. So trumpet here, jar here.

If they engage in hand-to-hand combat, they're totally finished. But he instructs the men. And look at verse 19. Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch.

Just after they had changed the guard. They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands. The three companies blew their trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, They shouted, a sword for the Lord and for Gideon.

While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled. So it's the perfect time to attack. They're in darkness.

And the guard has just changed in the camp. So maybe as many as a third of the Midianite soldiers are on the move. They're heading back to their tents from having been on the night watch.

[16 : 00] And then there's this sudden noise. And normally in any sensible army, not many people have got trumpets. Okay? Most people have got swords. So when you hear 300 trumpets, you think there's a lot of soldiers with swords out there.

So the people burst out of their tents with this terrifying noise. It sounds like a massive army. And they bump into loads of soldiers. Because it's their own men coming back from the night watch on the changing of the guard.

And they start fighting. They see torches all around their camp. It's chaos. And they attack each other. Verse 22. When the 300 trumpets sounded, the Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords.

The army fled to Beth-Shittar towards Zerarah, as far as the border of Abel-Meholah, near Tabith. And then Gideon brings the nation together in pursuit. And they capture and kill two of the Midianite kings.

And the chapter ends by pointing us back to the beginning. We started the story last week with Gideon hiding in a winepress. And God reassures him at a rock.

[17 : 08] And then the story ends with the leaders of the oppressors of God's people being taken out. Verse 25. They kill Oreb at a rock and Zeb at a winepress.

So clearly the enemies of God's people are not as terrifying as they'd seemed all the way through. And we knew the outcome all along because God said in chapter 6, verse 16, I will be with you and you will strike down all the Midianites together.

And now it's done. A stunning victory for the Lord's people by the Lord. And when we look at a story like this, God is weaving through human history a thread that shows us how he rescues his people.

Through Gideon, we see that God enjoys saving his people in very surprising ways. And through what looks like real weakness. He finds a man hiding in a hole.

He takes his army away from him. And then he uses him to lead his people out of oppression and slavery. And it enriches our understanding of what God has done for us in Jesus.

[18 : 22] The Savior of the world. Born before the internet age. Born in a remote northern town. Far from Jerusalem. Born to a lowly maiden.

He becomes a refugee in Egypt. On an ordinary day in the Middle East, he dies a criminal's death outside the city. His followers have been scattered.

He didn't look like God's mighty warrior when he was nailed to a cross brutally. But it's because of his weakness that, because of his humanity and vulnerability, that he can be our substitute and die in our place.

God uses that death to destroy death forever. To destroy evil. To defeat the devil. So Jesus is the true and better Gideon.

Who didn't just cower in weakness and hide. No, he suffered and died in weakness to save his people. So lastly, let's just think about the implications for us.

[19 : 25] Individually and as a church. First, as a church. Let me ask, do you feel weak? Do we feel weak as a church? If we do, let's be encouraged that God might seek to work in great power through our weakness.

As we point people to Jesus and to the cross. So that all the glory goes to God. It's exactly what he did through Gideon. It's what he did through the Apostle Paul in the first century.

Paul was God's chosen leader for the early church. Taking the gospel to the nations. And God gave him this thorn in the flesh.

Probably a physical weakness. Paul calls it a thorn in his flesh. And Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12 that three times he pleaded with God to take it from him. And the Lord said to him, My grace is sufficient for you.

For my power is made perfect in weakness. In other words, sometimes God needs us to be weak. So that when he does incredible things, we've got no doubt that it was him at work.

[20 : 33] In 1740, there was a parish minister in Canbertsland called William McCulloch. And in worldly terms, he was no use at all. Even his own son said this about his dad.

He was not a very ready speaker. Not eloquent. His manner was slow and cautious. And they nicknamed him in Canbertsland the Ale Minister. I don't know if you've heard that phrase before.

But he was called the Ale Minister. Because when he got up to the pulpit, half the congregation went out to the pub to go for a drink. And through him, God blessed Canbertsland with a revival.

Thousands of people became Christians through his preaching. As he just pointed people to the cross. How brilliant for the people there in Canbertsland at that time.

That none of them could say afterwards, Yeah, but it was all because of William McCulloch. He had that charisma. No, they could only say, God has done something here.

[21 : 31] It's the power of the cross. I don't know what you think about that, but I found that very encouraging for us today. For when we feel very vulnerable as a church, the task of re-evangelizing Scotland is a very daunting one.

I read a blog post by an American this week who'd been to Scotland. He said this, In all my travels, I don't know that I have ever seen opportunity quite like I see here in Scotland.

There are whole neighborhoods here without a church. Buildings are sitting unused and waiting. Will you pray with me that the Lord will send out his workers to bring in this harvest?

Well, he's saying that in America, but the cavalry is not coming. The task is enormous, and we're such a small congregation, really. We've got small growth groups around the city, a small prayer meeting once a month and on a Wednesday morning.

We've got a tiny evening service. We're tucked away off Great Western Road. We haven't got a big spire so that people can see us. How on earth are we going to reach this city for Jesus?

[22 : 43] Well, maybe that suits us. Because Gideon's God is our God today. And when his people feel most weak, he gets to show his great strength.

So let's pray expectantly as a church. Will you pray more this week for the ministry that we're doing together at St. Silas? Pray to the God of Gideon who shows his strength in our weakness.

And then let's take some risks together to share the news about him. And finally this morning, just think about the implications of this Gideon story for our own hearts.

Let me ask you, what are you boasting in? What is your confidence really in? Is it in your popularity or your money or being respected by others?

Now I only noticed this week for the first time how often when the Apostle Paul writes about the cross, he talks about boasting. He does it in Romans, in Ephesians, in Philipians, in Galatians, Galatians, and in 1 Corinthians.

[23 : 51] Talks about the cross, starts talking about boasting. Why? Well he says in Galatians 6, may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

What does he mean? What does he mean that the world has been crucified to him? It's that the world no longer has any claim on him. See if you stop putting your confidence in worldly things and instead put your confidence in Jesus' death on the cross, then the world can't get you with anything.

You can give your money away because you don't need it to boast in. Criticism doesn't kill you because you know God approves of you. Love relationships don't consume you because you rest in the security of God's love.

It was God's kindness to Israel that he chose a weakling like Gideon and took his army away because Gideon flourished when he had nothing else to boast in except the Lord and his salvation.

I wonder if we could think about that and boast more in the cross. Let's pray together. Just a moment of quiet to reflect on God's word.

[25 : 07] Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for the joy it gives us to see you at work in history, that you saved your people through Gideon, showing how marvelously strong you are through his weakness.

We praise you for your character, that you are the God who hears our cry for mercy, the God of patient reassurance, the God who opposes the proud and gives grace and favor to the humble.

We pray that you will look on us in our weakness today at St. Silas, that you will give us courage, that you will give us backbone, give us confidence that the message of Christ crucified is your hope to save our city.

And please act today, this week, this year, to bring many of our friends and neighbors and colleagues to faith in the Lord Jesus through our words and witness that in our weakness we would marvel at your great and wonderful strength.

for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.