

Family Service

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[0 : 00] My name is Gideon.

Now, I know some of you are thinking, well, he's just talking nonsense because we know that's not his name. But for the next few minutes, you have to imagine, indeed, you have to believe that I am Gideon.

Okay? That's the first thing. Are we agreed? I'm Gideon. Good. And I want to tell you about something amazing and exciting that happened to me a long, long, long time ago, about 3,000 years ago in a land called Israel.

Now, you've heard of Israel. It's where lots of the stories in the Bible took place. All of us who lived in Israel, myself, my family, my friends, my neighbors, we knew about God.

We knew about the Lord. We knew that He had chosen us. We knew that He loved us. We knew that He had looked after us. We knew that when we had been slaves in Egypt, He had rescued us and brought us safely to Israel, to the promised land.

[1 : 18] We knew all that. But the years had passed. But the years had passed. And we found obeying God just a bit difficult and just a bit dull.

So, we decided that we would stop obeying God. It was just too boring. And there were other things to do. There were other gods. And they seemed so much more exciting.

So, we started worshiping other gods. One of them was called Baal. Another one was called Asherah. They were very exciting gods. And we thought, well, let's just forget about the God of Israel.

And we've got these more exciting gods to worship. And so, that's what we did. And everything seemed to be going fine for a while. But really, it was then that everything started to go wrong.

Our enemies started to attack us from every side. There were lots of different enemies, but the worst ones were called the Midianites. And they would attack us. And they would destroy our homes.

[2 : 18] And they would steal our harvests. And they would kill our animals. And it was just terrible. You can't imagine how frightening it was. And this went on and on and on for ages.

In fact, for seven long, long years, these enemies would come. And we actually had to hide in caves sometimes or hide in the wilderness.

You know, sometimes they would come and they would go and then they would come again. Whenever they came, we had to rush to the hills to save our lives. It was terrible. Well, after seven years, finally, we thought, well, we really need to ask for help.

So, who could help us? Well, we thought maybe the Lord could help us. Maybe the God that we'd forgotten about, maybe He could help us. It was worth a try. So, we cried out. We said, God, help us.

Well, God sent a prophet. I don't even remember what his name was. But He sent a prophet. And the prophet told us what we knew He was going to say. And we didn't really want to hear. He said, it's all your fault.

- [3 : 24] It's your fault that this is all happening. You've disobeyed God. You've rebelled against God. And this is God's judgment. You need to repent. Well, we didn't want to hear that. We wanted God to help us.
- We wanted God to kill all these Midianites. But we didn't want to repent. So, that wasn't going to be a solution. Well, this is where I come into the story.
- Because I was working outside my father's house. We had a farm. I was working one day threshing wheat. And you're thinking, what does that mean? Well, you get bread from wheat.
- And in order to separate the grains of wheat from the chaff or the husk, the part that isn't worthwhile, you can throw it in the air. And the wind will take away the stuff that isn't worth anything.
- And the grains will remain behind. That's what threshing is. So, to do that, you're all very clever and intelligent. So, you'll know that to do that, you need to do that in the open air. Where there's wind that can take away the chaff.
- [4 : 22] But you know where I was threshing the wheat? I was doing it in a wine press. Now, if you don't know what that is, don't worry, because the grown-ups don't know either, I'm pretty sure. A wine press is a hole in the ground where we would normally have put the grapes to make wine.
- But I was threshing wheat in this hole in the ground. Now, why was I doing that? Well, I'll tell you why. Because I was a coward. I thought, if I'm keeping my head down, then if the Midianites pass by, obviously, if they're very close, they'll see me.
- But if they're a little bit further away and they're passing by, they won't even see me. And so, I can thresh the wheat and get the grain and they won't attack me or steal it from me.
- So, there I was when suddenly a man appeared. Now, I'd never seen this man before. I could tell that he was special. I don't know how, but I could just tell that he was special.
- And he sat under an oak tree right opposite me. I was wondering, well, who is this man? I know now. I didn't know then. I can tell you who he is.
- [5 : 26] He was the angel of the Lord. Now, you're probably thinking, well, who's he? And that's a good question. It's actually quite a difficult question. We know in the Bible that angels usually are messengers of God.
- And they bring a message from God. And the angel of the Lord, I suppose, was like that. But he was more than that. It was, and I can't explain it to you really, but it was like God himself had come in human form to speak to me.
- I know that's difficult to understand, but that's more or less what it was. There was this man under the oak tree, and he had come to speak to me. And he said something that was just unbelievable.
- In fact, it was just crazy. Well, I know now it wasn't crazy, but then it just seemed totally crazy. Do you know what he said to me? He said to me this. He said, Now, I'll tell you why I thought that was crazy.
- Well, let's think of the first part. The Lord is with you. And I said to him, I told him, I said, no, he's not. Just look around. This is a disaster. Our enemies are all over us.
- [6 : 33] Our houses are destroyed. They kill our animals. What are you talking about? The Lord is with us. He's abandoned us. That's what I thought. And then he said, the Lord is with you, mighty warrior.
- Now, did he know what he was looking at? I was hiding in the hole in the ground. Now, I don't think mighty warriors hide in holes in the ground. But that's what he called me, a mighty warrior.

I really thought he was crazy. Now, obviously, now I know he wasn't, and it was silly of me to think that. But at the time, it just seemed such a strange thing to say.

But he carried on speaking to me. Even though I said, no, it's not true what you're saying, he carried on speaking to me. And he said to me that he was going to help me defeat the Midianites.

That I was the one called by God to rescue Israel from their enemies. That I was the one. That I was going to achieve that.

[7 : 34] Well, I still couldn't believe that that was true. It couldn't possibly be me. And I said to him, I said, do you know who I am? I am the weakest of my family.

I have brothers. They're stronger than me. I have neighbors who are stronger than me. There are loads of people who are stronger than me. I'm not a soldier. I'm not strong. I'm so weak.

It can't possibly be me. I can't possibly be the man you're looking for to defeat the Midianites. But he insisted. Now, I had a problem.

Because I was kind of excited at being told that this is what I was going to do. But how could I be sure that it really was God who was speaking to me? How could I be sure that this message was from God?

So I said to the man, I said, I need a sign. I need a sign. That it really is a message from God. And he said, I'll give you a sign. Well, I went off to prepare a meal for him.

[8 : 32] You have to do that. He was a very special guest. So I prepared this wonderful meal for him. I won't tell you what it was because it would just make you hungry if I told you. But it was a wonderful meal. And I came back.

And the man was waiting for me. And he said, right. I'm going to have to tell you a little bit about the meal. The goat that you've prepared and the bread that you've prepared, put it on that rock.

So I thought, okay, I can do that. It seemed a bit strange, but I can do that. So I put the meat and the bread on the rock. And the man had a staff, which is like a walking stick.

And with the tip of the staff, he just touched the meat and the bread. And do you know what happened? Can you imagine what happened? From the rock, a stone-cold rock, flames came up and burnt up the meat and burnt up the bread to a cinder.

And I was just amazed. I couldn't take my eyes off those flames as they burnt. And as I watched the flames burning, something else happened. The man disappeared. Just disappeared.

[9 : 33] By the time I'd noticed, I looked to my left, to my right. I looked along the way. And he was nowhere to be seen. He disappeared like a ghost. He'd just gone. So that was my sign.

And it was really only then. Now I've told you who he was. But it was only then that I realized that this was the angel of the Lord. And I was terrified. I was terrified.

More terrified than any Midianite. I was terrified. I thought I was going to die. Because I'd seen the angel of the Lord. And then I heard a voice. And it was God speaking to me.

And God said to me, just a few words, he said, peace, don't be afraid. You are not going to die. I can still remember to this day the words.

They were so, they're so clear in my mind. It's so long ago. Peace, don't be afraid. You are not going to die. Well, I believe that it really was true.

[10 : 31] That I was going to be the great hero who was going to conquer the Midianites. But there was something I had to do first. I didn't think I had to. But God did. And he told me, he said, Gideon, there's something you've got to do first.

First, you've got to get your own house in order. If you're going to be a conquering hero, if you're going to conquer the enemies of Israel, you've got to get your own house in order. Now what was that all about?

Well, I'll tell you. And I'm a little ashamed to tell you, but I'll tell you. In my own house, in my father's house, it was my house as well. Well, there were idols. You know, I told you about Baal and Asherah.

Well, in our own house, we had idols to Baal and Asherah. Not in the house. It was outside up on a hill that everybody could see. And God said to me, he said, you've got to destroy those idols.

That's the first thing you've got to do. If you're going to be used by me to destroy these enemies, you have to destroy these idols first. Now that was awkward.

[11 : 31] It was my father's house. They were his idols. How could I do that? But God had told me I had to do it. So I thought, I know I'll do it in the middle of the night when nobody's watching.

I can do it secretly. God didn't tell me when I had to do it. He just said I had to do it. So I could obey, but in that clever way, in the middle of the night. So when it was the middle of the night and everybody was sleeping, I got some of the servants.

These were big idols. And I destroyed them both and rushed off to bed. Well, if I thought it through, I'd have realized that this really wasn't going to solve my problem.

Because first thing in the morning, the first thing that everybody saw was that these idols had been destroyed. And it was chaos. Everybody was furious. Who has done this? And they soon discovered who had destroyed the idols.

And they pointed the finger at me. They said, Gideon, you did this. And they went to my father and they said, you've got to hand over Gideon because we want to kill him. Now that seems a bit extreme.

[12 : 39] But that's what they wanted to do. They wanted to kill me. So I was terrified again. I'm terrified a lot in this story. They're going to kill me. But then my father, and I still am grateful to my father that though he, like me, was guilty of having these idols, at that time he supported me and he was loyal to me.

And I think God helped him to be very clever. Because he said something to the neighbors who wanted to kill me. He said, well, hang on a minute. My son has destroyed the idol of Baal.

Of this God, Baal. Well, let Baal kill my son. If Baal is a powerful God, he doesn't need you to help him. He can kill Gideon.

And the people scratched their heads and thought, oh, well, I suppose that makes sense. And so that's what we decided. And here I am. Baal didn't do anything to me. Because Baal doesn't exist.

I think my father was quite clever to suggest that to those who wanted to kill me. So, I managed with God's help to put my own house in order.

[13 : 50] Now the time was ready to do what I had to do, to conquer the Midianites. That's what God had said I was being called to do. Well, while all this was happening in my own house, the enemies were gathering.

I mentioned that they would come and go and come and go while they were coming. And they were coming in there thousands, thousands and thousands of Midianites and Amalekites and all kinds of enemies.

They were all gathering in the Valley of Jezreel, which was really close to where I lived. And you could look up from the hill and see them. And they were as far as the eye could see. You could see all these enemies. It was terrifying.

There's lots of terrifying things, I did warn you. But I had to conquer them. I had to fight against these Midianites. And what I did was I said, well, and really God told me that this is what I should do.

I had to gather an army. So, I blew a trumpet. And that was like calling the people to gather this army so that we could fight the Midianites. And I didn't know if people would come or if they wouldn't come.

[14 : 55] I just didn't know what would happen. But they started coming. First a few, then some more, a few hundred, then a few thousand, and then several thousand. I had this great army that had gathered.

So, I thought, well, maybe now I do have an army that's big enough to fight the Midianites. But, you know, I still wasn't sure. I still wasn't sure.

I was still just wavering. And, you know, that army over there just seems so much bigger. And is this really something I should do? I should have been sure, but I wasn't. So, I said to God, I need another sign.

And I said to God, look, here's a fleece of wool. You can imagine a sheep and it's been, had its wool taken off. And a big piece of sheep wool or something like that.

And I said to God, look, I'm going to put this outside tonight. I'm going to put it outside. I'm going to lay it on the ground. And if tomorrow morning the wool is covered in water and everything round about it is totally dry, then I'll know that you are with me.

[16 : 03] And I will fight the Midianites. So, God said, fine. Following morning, I woke up, rushed out to sea, and there was the fleece of wool. And it was drenched in water.

In fact, when I had to wring it out, it filled a whole bowl of water, but all around completely dry. Well, you're probably thinking, well, you were convinced then, weren't you?

Nope. I wanted another sign. Now, that is crazy. I said, God, I want another sign. I'm going to put that wool out again. But this time, tomorrow morning, I want the wool to be completely dry and all around it to be wet.

And God, who was being very, very, very patient with me, said, fine. I can do that. Following morning, went out, totally dry the wool, and all about it, totally drenched.

Well, there was no going back. No excuses left. I had to fight the Midianites. Well, I had a big army by now. I actually had 32,000 soldiers.

[17 : 06] That's a lot of soldiers. 32,000 soldiers. But the other guys, the enemies, they had, I didn't know that then. I discovered afterwards.

I knew they had a lot, but they had 135,000 soldiers. So we had 32,000, which is quite a lot. But they had 135,000.

So I thought, ooh, this is going to be difficult. But we can do it. We can do it. But then God said something very strange to me. He said, Gideon, you've got way too many soldiers.

And I said, what? Too many? I haven't got enough. He said, no, you've got way too many. I want you to go to your army, and I want you to tell them, if anybody is afraid, they can go home.

Anybody is afraid, they can go home. They don't need to participate in the battle. So I went to the army, and I said, if anybody is afraid, you can go home. Do you know how many left of my 32,000 soldiers?

[18 : 08] Do you know how many left? 22,000 soldiers. So do the maths. I had 32,000. 22,000 left.

I was left with 10,000. Just 10,000 soldiers. And the others had 135,000. Just to get you an idea, imagine you were in the playground. Now I know in your schools there's no fighting or bullying or any of that nonsense.

But just imagine you were in the playground with three of your friends. And suddenly you were surrounded by 50 other kids wanting a fight.

So there's four of you and about 50 of them. Do you think you could survive? I think you'd get hammered. Well, that's a bit like what it was like. For Gideon, he had 10,000 soldiers, but the other guys had 135,000.

But then God did something even more strange. He said, Gideon, you've still got too many soldiers. And Gideon, well, I said, too many. He says, yes, we've got to get it down to a smaller number.

[19 : 11] And I won't bore you with the details of how he did that. But eventually he got it down to 300 soldiers. That's all that were left, 300 soldiers.

So we had 300 and they had 135,000. But God told me why he did that. I was confused. I thought this is strange. But God told me why.

He said, Gideon, the reason I'm doing this is that when you win the battle, and you will, I don't want the people to think it was because you had a great army.

I don't even want them to think it's because you are a great general. I don't want them to think that. I want them to realize that the reason you won is because I am with you.

And 300 is more than enough if I am with you. So there were 300 soldiers left, and it was time to go to battle. But you know, and this is really embarrassing to have to admit again, but I was still scared.

[20 : 16] I really shouldn't have been scared by then, but I was. I was scared. And God knew I was scared. And he said, Gideon, I know you're scared. So what I want you to do before you go to battle is I want you to go down to where the enemy are.

I want you to go to their camp, just very secretly, that nobody would find out, nobody would see you, very secretly go and see what's going on there. So I did. I went down with a friend, and I heard two men, two of the Midianite soldiers speaking.

And one of them said, I had a dream last night. And in my dream, I saw this giant loaf of barley bread rolling down the hill and smashing into my tent and knocking it down.

Now this sounds like something out of a Disney movie, this giant loaf of barley bread rolling down the hill. But that was his dream. You know what dreams are like. You can see all kinds of crazy things in dreams.

So the Midianite soldier was saying, that's what I saw. And he said to his friend, he said, I think that means that Gideon and his army are going to defeat us.

[21 : 18] Well, when I heard that, I thought, thank you, God. Thank you, God. This is, I'm ready now. I'm ready now. So I rushed back to my 300 soldiers, and I said, we're going to battle.

And off we went, 300 of us. I'll just tell you a little bit, just a little bit about the battle, because the battle is always the most exciting part. So I'll tell you a little bit about the battle.

What we decided to do is, well, what I decided to do, God was helping me, but what I decided to do is we would split the 300 soldiers into three groups of 100 each. Okay?

All of us had trumpets, right? Every single soldier had a trumpet. And every single soldier also had a torch. Now, not a torch that you flick on with batteries, but a torch with a flame coming out of it.

Maybe some of you have seen the news about the Olympic torch. Next year, it's going to go all around the country, and people are going to be running with this torch, but it's with a real flame. So we had a trumpet.

[22 : 17] We had this torch. But the torch had to be covered in a pottery jar so that you couldn't actually see the light. That was covering it.

Well, this sounds all very strange. But the idea was that the three groups would go down to the valley where the enemy were, 135,000 soldiers, and we would surround them. It's pretty difficult with 300, but we would place ourselves just kind of surrounding them.

And Gideon said, when I blow my trumpet, I will blow my trumpet. I'll smash the pottery jar so that immediately the flames can be seen. When I do that, and all the 100 in my group, the rest of you are going to do the same.

Agreed? And they all nodded. Yes, we can do that. So off we went. And at the appointed time, that's what I did. And all the night sky lit up with the flames, and the noise of the trumpets was deafening.

It was just an amazing sound. And when that happened, all the enemies in their camp, they woke up, and they didn't know what was happening, and they thought there were thousands of us. And they were so confused, and they were so frightened, and they were so terrified that they picked up their swords, and they started fighting each other.

[23 : 31] You see, in the dark, they weren't sure who anybody was. And they ended up fighting each other and destroying themselves and running. Those who weren't killed just ran and ran and ran, and they ran all the way to the Jordan and tried to cross the Jordan River out of Israel.

And we won, with God's help, an amazing victory that day. And you know, we had suffered seven years of suffering, of violence, of our enemies all over us.

And after that victory, we enjoyed 40 years of peace. And I still remember it all to this day. It's still vivid in my mind.

I can remember every detail. I haven't told you every detail. And as I think about it, as I think about what happened, as I think about what God did with us so long ago, I think there are important lessons for me and for all God's people, for all who wish to live lives that are pleasing to God.

And I think there are three lessons I learned, certainly, and I hope you can learn as well. The first lesson that I want you to remember is that it's always a bad idea to disobey God.

[24 : 52] You see, that's why we were in a mess in the first place. That's why we were in such a mess, because we disobeyed God. We did our own thing. We thought we knew better. And so when the prophets would say, well, God says you've got to do this, we would say, ah, what does God know?

All these rules, and He's so strict, and that's old-fashioned. And we knew better. We knew better. We could live lives as we saw fit. But we discovered that it's a bad idea.

It all ends in tears. And I learned that lesson very well that day. I didn't always remember it, but that was an important lesson.

The other lesson that I want you to remember from what happened so long ago is that God can use anybody. Remember, I was just a young lad.

I was the weakest of my family. I wasn't a soldier. Anybody would have said, well, Gideon. Gideon couldn't do all this. But God used me.

[25 : 58] And God can use anybody. He can use you. It doesn't matter if you're not the smartest in your class. It doesn't matter if you're not the strongest. It doesn't matter if you're not the most popular. It doesn't matter.

God can use you. If you are willing to listen to Him and obey Him, God can use anybody. And He can use you. And there's one other lesson.

And I think maybe this is the one I remember most. And it's this. That if God is on our side, then we are on the winning side.

Just imagine 300 of us against 135,000. I know some of you, not all of you, but some of you like football. Well, just imagine it like this.

Imagine if Ross County had to play Barcelona. Okay? But in the first five minutes, Ross County have three men sent off. Okay? So they're down to eight. And imagine that their goalkeeper is blindfolded.

[26 : 57] Okay? And they beat Barcelona 5-0. You think, well, that's crazy. That couldn't happen. Well, when we beat the Midianites, it was a bit like that.

It was impossible. It couldn't happen. But it did. Because for God, nothing is impossible. So if God is on our side, we are on the winning side.

Maybe at school you're the only Christian. Maybe your friends don't go to church. They don't know anything about the Bible. That's not their fault. And you feel alone. You think, well, I believe.

Nobody else seems to believe. But if God is on your side, as He is, if God is with us, then we are on the winning side, even if we are just a very few, or even if we do seem to be all alone.

And that's something else I remember and I learned as a very important lesson from what God did so long, long ago in Israel. So, my name is Gideon.

[27 : 59] And I hope you remember everything that God did through me so long, long ago. Let's pray.