

Who is Testing Who?

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[0 : 00] Now, I've had a great new idea for church. I've not run this past Eric yet, but I thought what we could do is have maybe a new way of selecting people who come to church instead of just letting anyone in.

I think we should start letting people in who we say, who can benefit the church, who say successful, people that we look at in the world and we think, yeah, they've made it.

You think we could start off people with money, that would be good. They'd boost the church's finances. Or people with loads of charisma, they'll draw a crowd. It's a great idea, powerful people.

It's a great vision. And what we could do is to make things more efficient. It'd be a great idea. What we'll do is, as people come to the door, instead of just welcoming everybody, we'll just ask for CVs.

When people come to the door, we'll say, can you just pass your CV to me? I'll pass it on to Derek. And then we'll have a read. We'll see if we could, should let you in, see if you get our stamp of approval.

[1 : 11] I hope you realize now that if I'm being serious about this, then I should be stepped down from the pulchpit. Because it's a ridiculous idea. It's ridiculous, isn't it?

But that is the way the world works. That is the way the world works, everywhere. It is the idea of justification, to have the mark of approval.

Justification, we think that it's a sort of a fancy Bible-sandish word. But it's not a foreign concept. Justification is everywhere. You think when you apply for a job, the application form normally has two categories, potential and desirable criteria.

And at an interview, you give the employer the reasons as to why you're the right person, whether you have the right standing before the employer.

But it stretches further than that, doesn't it? You think joining a social group. Do you dress right? Do you look right? Do we have the right, the same values for your children?

[2 : 14] Are you with the right socioeconomic background? It's not justification by faith. It's justification by what car you drive.

It's justification by the area you live. It's justification by how much money you earn. And people look, including us, we're not on mute from this and we make assessments.

Do they match up to my approval standing? Have they got a right standing before me? Do I justify them in my side?

That is the world we live in. That is the world we live in. Humanly speaking, we saw this last week, Gideon doesn't have the right CV.

He doesn't have the right approval rating and he knows it. He knows it. We saw that last week, but what he does have, he doesn't have the things that the world would look desirable in the world.

[3 : 18] But he does have the favor and peace with God. He's accepting. He has a right standing, not with the world, but before the Lord.

Although it might be pointing forward, Jesus came a long time after Gideon was alive. Ultimately, we know that Jesus finished work on the cross is for Gideon as well. He is justified, means that he has peace with God.

He's accepted. But despite all that, despite all of that, there's a question that nags him.

He knows that he's accepted, but even in the knowledge of being accepted by God, he still thinks in the heat, will he come through for me?

Will he come through for me? When the chips are down, will God come through for me? I'm scared. Will he come through for me? That is a question we ask.

[4 : 19] That is the way that we often think, I'm accepted by God. I know he's my father. I know that I believe, I know that I'm justified by faith, but will he come through for me today?

And what we see in Gideon's life is we see these two big tests that sort of seem to help us answer that question.

And we see these two tests, and the real question as we look at these two tests is, who's really testing who? Who's really testing who?

And we're going to be looking at that in three points. So we're going to look at Gideon tests the Lord, the Lord tests Gideon, and then the Lord has the victory. Gideon tests the Lord, the Lord tests Gideon, and then the Lord has the victory.

Quick reminder of where we are in the book of Judges. You might remember from last week, the book of Judges is sort of structured in these repeated cycles where, number one, the people of Israel have not listened to the Lord's word, they've disobeyed him, that's the first step, the second step is because they've disobeyed him, the Lord sends a foreign conquering power to conquer the Israelites.

[5 : 33] Because they're being conquered and oppressed, they then call out to the Lord, they cry out to him, and then, fourthly, the Lord then sends a deliverer in response to their cries. There is a fifth step that I missed out last week is that normally then the deliverer defeats the conquering army and they have a big period of rest.

But we're in the middle of one of those cycles and Gideon is one of those, as one of the judges is one of the deliverers that the Lord uses. And so, last week we looked at Gideon's call, but in where he reads the Israel of spiritual idolatry within his family, but in verse 33, there's almost a return to the presenting issue that we start with at the beginning of chapter six.

It's the oppression from the Midianite people. Like I said, the real problem of spiritual idolatry within God's people has been dealt with, they were worshiping Baal and Gideon came and rid them of that, but the Midianite oppression is still there.

It's striking in the early verses how much things have changed for Gideon. He's clothed with the spirit of the Lord we read in verse 34, and the family clan, the bees' rights, they're now following him.

You remember they were just calling for his death, but now they follow him. He's leading them. So that's where we're kind of, that's the story so far, that's where we're up to, which makes what happens next come as a bit of a surprise.

[7 : 07] I must say, I think it does catch us by surprise as we look at our first point, Gideon tests the Lord. In a theme that runs throughout Gideon's life, he struggles with doubt and his faith wavers.

He hesitates, he wants reassurance. That's just like we saw last week when he questions his calling. And we see it again in this famous episode with the fleece, and Gideon in a sense is seemingly testing God.

Verse 36, Gideon speaks with God. If you look with me, he says, if you will save Israel by my hand as you have said, then basically do the following, do this test.

If you'll save Israel by my hand, as you've said, then basically do the following. And notice by testing God, Gideon's not trying to determine God's will.

God's will is clear in his mind, save Israel as you've said. He's not forgotten what the Lord said, what he promised back in verse 16, when he was called in the previous chapter.

[8 : 14] Just look with me. The previous chapter, if you've got your Bibles, and the Lord said to him, I will be with you, you shall strike the Midianites as one man. So he's not forgotten the promise.

He's not determining God's will. He knows God's promise, but his faith in the promise is wavering. And he wants a sign.

That will bolster his faith, that will strengthen him. And so he says to God, I'm laying the flesh, I'm laying the fleece of wool on the threshing floor.

If there is dew on the fleece and the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand. In verse 38, we read, and it was so. That's not quite good enough for Gideon.

And so we see the whole saga repeated, but in reverse, Gideon, as you read the sort of second episode of this test, Gideon, he kind of knows that he's pushing his luck just a little bit.

[9 : 12] You look at verse 39, he says, let not your anger burn against me. He kind of thinks, should I really try this one on? Let not your anger burn against me.

Let me speak just once more. Please let me test you, just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew. It's reversed, and God does as Gideon asks.

Just pause for a minute here, and I just want us to remind ourselves that Gideon's experience with the Lord, with Yahweh, it is pretty limited.

He hasn't had that much time to mature in his faith. I mean, like I said earlier, it wasn't that long ago he was bowing to Baal led by his dad. And at this point, when we read in the Gideon story, a lot of people can be a little bit down on Gideon.

What's wrong with him? Why is he trying to manipulate God? After all that the Lord has done for him in the past.

[10 : 18] Why is he trying to test the Lord like that? Maybe that might be a genuine question you're asking. But there is another angle.

I think it is, I think it's a better one than having a pop at Gideon. Look at the kindness of the Lord. Look at the kindness of the Lord.

He doesn't mind humbling himself to bolster Gideon's faith. He doesn't condemn Gideon or say that he's spoken out of turn.

He's not harsh with him. He humbles himself. You could almost say that he allows himself to be manipulated in a way.

Strengthen Gideon's faith. He's more important to him than saving faith. And don't we waver in our faith from time to time?

[11 : 20] The Lord has done amazing things. He's rescued us. He's redeemed us. We'll have our own, each of us will have our own personal testimonies across our life where we'll remember moments where the Lord's done amazing things in my life, in your life, things that we get so excited about and love to recall.

And yet we still need reassurance that He loves us. That where is children? The living God is not ashamed to stoop down and reassure us in our lack of faith, in our wavering.

If anything, it's totally the opposite. He wants to do that. He knows that our faith is fragile, flimsy, and we're often forgetful.

My little lad Angus, he's three years old and just the other night about three in the morning, he actually happened last night as well. But he had a nightmare and he came running out of his bedroom screaming, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, tears coming down his eyes, help me.

You know what I didn't do? I didn't go out and yell at him, get back to bed. Can't you tell it's the middle of the night? I'm trying to sleep. No, I picked him up in my arms.

[12 : 47] I hugged him. I said, Angus, I love you. You're safe now. I'm here with you.

The Lord God stoops down to reassure us when we're afraid and when our faith wavers. Know the Father's loving embrace towards you.

You know His arms, they're always open wide. You can come to Him for guidance, for assurance, to know His Fatherly care.

That's all He's doing for Gideon. He's just like a little child. I'm scared. Can you show me you'll be there, Lord?

He comes to us, speaks to us in a way that we can understand. That's what we have in the Scriptures, isn't it? It's a living word which the Holy Spirit infuses to our understanding, warms us, encourages us, makes us tangibly aware that He's with us.

[13 : 53] And then He sends His own Son. His Son stoops down to our level, shows us what God is like, His character, His compassion, His heart towards the needy, towards the Gideons.

You feel needy? Stay that way. Stay needy for the Lord.

And so it looks like Gideon's testing God, but really the test is kind of on Gideon. When he feels faithless, where will he go?

Gideon chooses his Lord, and so should we. But if you thought the testing was done, it comes again as we look at our second point, the Lord tests.

Gideon. And so, bolstered by the Lord, Gideon prepares to attack the Midian Isles. There's an interesting detail in the text.

[14 : 53] You might see the place Harrod where they camp. It literally means the spring of trembling, and that's exactly what we're going to see. They tremble at the spring of trembling.

After assuring Gideon, another test comes. This time the test is not to reassure Him, but to weaken Him.

The Lord purposefully weakens Gideon to demonstrate His own power. Just look with me in verse 2 of chapter 7. He tells Gideon, the people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand.

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.

The Lord is rightly concerned for His own glory. And He knows that if Israel were left to themselves to win the battle, if they were left as they were with the men that they have, they would attribute the success to themselves.

[16 : 01] They would praise themselves, be proud of their achievements, ascribing it to their own strength. And so what we see is this, it is a pretty brutal call of Gideon's army.

What we see is it comes in two rounds, and so we've got round one and round two. I don't know if you saw the boxing last night, I think it went to round 11, but we've just got two rounds here.

And so round one, the Lord speaks to Gideon. Verse verse three, he says, whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hear it away from Mount Gilead.

Then 22,000 of the people returned and 10,000 remain. So we know that the army started 32,000 in total if we had those two together.

It's a decent size, 32,000 people. It sounds like a pretty big army to me. But 22,000 leave. That's two thirds of the army.

[17 : 02] Straight up, round one, 22,000 are on their way home. Now you think of Gideon here, I think his knees started to tremble a wee bit.

I think as he saw 10,000 left, that means 10,000, it's not nothing, but that's 22,000 walking away. I think his knees started to tremble.

But then we get round two, verse four. The people are still too many. Take them down to the water and I'll 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 who ever might say to you, this one shall not go with you, shall not go. The way it's worded, it is actually slightly confusing as to who stays and who goes.

And there's different opinions on this. But for my money, it's those who lap the water stay and those who kneel go home. You see that the word for lapping, which is used for lapping, it's used about those who stay in verse five.

[18 : 03] It says everyone who laps with his tongue as a dog lap should be set by himself. That seems to be a group. And then verse six, it says, the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths was 300 men.

It looks like two different descriptions, but the word for lap is used for twice. So actually these two are the same groups in verse five and six. And then comes the shocker, which is verse seven, with the 300 men who lapped, I will save you, with the 300 men.

So started off 32,000 men, then goes to 10,000 men, and then goes to 300. That's quite a sizable reduction by anyone's standards.

And we're at Harrod, the spring of trembling, and I think Gideon's definitely trembling now. His knees have gone. He's quaking in his boots.

I just, I don't know if you can picture it, but in my head I've got a picture of, you know, Gideon's face. You can imagine the color draining out of it as he watches 31,700 men walk away.

[19 : 13] And he's left with 300. We read they leave their kit and their provisions, but what's going through his mind? What's going through his mind?

If we read on later, we know that God has an inkling that he's afraid. God has an inclination that he's afraid.

So here's a guess. He's thinking, how on earth am I going to defeat the Midianites?

Who, I might add, have been joined by more men, the Amalekites and all the people from the East, and we read verse 12, lay along the valley like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance.

Their camels were as many as the sand. That's a lot of camels. That many camels is, I mean, I won't fancy my chances against that many camels.

[20 : 19] Never mind the people riding them. What is going on? How? Why? How am I going to defeat the army with this many people?

You've got to be joking. What is going on, Lord? What are you doing?

Before being in that place, you've been in the same place as Gideon. What is going on? How am I going to get through this?

Does it have to be this way? You felt like that? During the pandemic, we had it.

I just want to see my family. Why, Lord? How can I face this? How are we going to get through this?

[21 : 15] It's impossible. We know the promises of God, but we lack faith.

It wavers. And there's other times, isn't there? Family loss, job loss, that dreaded diagnosis we all fear from the doctor, family divorce.

How are we going to get through this? What are they doing? How? Why? That's what's going through Gideon's mind.

He knows the Lord's within. He knows his promise. He's been reassured just a minute ago, but once again, he's in that place.

The encouragement from Gideon, I think in some ways, is that it's not wrong to be in that place. It might be difficult, but it's not wrong.

[22 : 25] It's not because you've done anything wrong. Gideon's not being punished or disciplined. But he's accepted, he's got favor and peace with God, and so have we.

It's an encouragement. It's not always because he's done anything wrong. It's a similar reminder of what Paul experienced with his thorn in the flesh.

2 Corinthians 12, three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. He said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore, I will boast all the more gladdened of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Paul wasn't being punished.

God was using his affliction, his difficulty, to demonstrate his own power through Paul's weakness. Now, that doesn't mean a fatalistic approach to life.

[23 : 24] Paul still pleaded. He still asked the Lord three times to take it away, but God used it to magnify himself. Do you see how this works?

How powerful must the Lord be if he can bring victory in these circumstances? How powerful must the Spirit of the Lord be in each of us if despite the difficulty, maybe even sometimes because of the difficulty, we don't turn on him, but we turn to him.

Only the Spirit of the Lord causes anyone to react in trial like that. How powerful must the Spirit of the Lord be?

It is a distinctive way to live.

Next comes the Lord's victory as we turn to our third point, victory for the Lord. What's amazing, as I've mentioned, is that the Lord anticipates what Gideon's been thinking.

[24 : 40] He knows he's quaking in his boots. Gideon lacks faith again, but it's already taken care of. Verse nine, that same night the Lord said to him, arise, go down against the camp for I've given it into your hand.

But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Pury, your servant, and you should hear what they say. And afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.

Then he went down with Pury, his servant, to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp. When he gets there, he hears two of the enemy, the Midianites, they're talking.

They're just having a chat, two of them. And one of the soldiers has had a dream. And let's be honest, the dream is slightly off the wall. A big barley cake rolls down the hill and crushes one of the Midianite tents.

And his pal, one of the Midianites, interprets the dream. He says this, and he means the big barley cake, he's basically saying, the big barley cake is no other than the sword of Gideon, the son of Joach, a man of Israel.

[25 : 47] God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp. I don't know, we're not privy as to how he interprets that dream or how he even knows what Gideon is, but nevertheless, Gideon over hears the conversation.

And he falls to his knees in worship because he knows. This wasn't a coincidence. We have that funny phrase, it was a God incidence, placed there specifically to give Gideon confidence.

It's a reassurance again to Bostra's faith again. Once again, it demonstrates.

The Lord's stooping down to reassure him. He stoopes down again, again and again and again. The Lord's stoopes down to his people to reassure them in their faith.

He's, I've got this, Gideon. I've got it. I've got this. I'm going to have my victory.

[26 : 57] So the story continues, they split into three groups of a hundred. We read they make a load of, basically the short version is they make a load of clamour blowing trumpet smashing glass and they shout for the Lord and for Gideon.

What do we, the Lord confuses the Midian army, they flee, they run away and they turn their swords on each other. It is an amazing victory.

And there's just a note in there, just in case we forgot, just a fine detail, small point. If we thought, because it's, let's be fair, it is a pretty unconventional method of fighting.

But if we thought this unconventional method of warfare lay behind the success, it's verse 22 that shows, demonstrates it was the Lord.

When they blew the 300 trumpets, verse 22, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army. They set their swords against themselves, at hearing trumpets.

[28 : 06] Yet again, it is all because of the Lord. It is all because of the Lord. The victory is the Lord's, it belongs to the Lord, it's his. That was the whole purpose behind using a small army.

Before he uses people, make no mistake about that, he used Gideon and the 300 men. But because of the way it's done, the victory can only be ascribed to the Lord.

Only be ascribed to the Lord. It is completely down to him. And in the same way that the victory over the Midianites can only be ascribed to the Lord.

It's the same with maybe the many victories that we experience in our own life. Sometimes we might think that maybe when we battle against sin, the victory, when we battle against those sins and we realize that they're not the same fight as they used to be, the victory is the Lord's.

When we go through these struggles that I've mentioned and our faith remains and it is a battle to get through it, the victory is the Lord's.

[29 : 21] Yes, he has worked through us, but ultimately it's because of his spirit at work, he knows that the victory is the Lord's. Any battle that we face, it is the Lord that we give all the praise to, the adulation, because he's the one who empowers us to get through it by the power of his spirit.

The victory is the Lord's. And ultimately this victory and all the little victories that we will experience in life.

And as I said, as we look back at the history of our faith and we remember the ways that the Lord's worked in our life and the little, many victories that we have, all the victories that we experience, they all point to the ultimate victory that we know is completely down to him, not over a physical army, but the biggest enemies that we face over sin, over death, against the devil, over spiritual evil.

Our salvation is the greatest victory that all the other victories point to. That's why all the praise, the adulation, the glory, the honor, the splendor, the majesty is due to him because it's his victory.

And what about the nature of the victory? We've touched on how the Lord uses our weakness and uses the makeschidium weak to magnify his own glory, but really isn't that the pattern of the cross?

[30 : 59] That God the Son came down and was made man from equality with God to death on a cross. Do you think of Jesus the night before he died?

He's weak, frail, anxious to the point where he sweat his own blood, tears streaming down his face, not quite sure how he's going to get through the next day, and not only the physical suffering, but being separated from his father's embrace.

When Jesus looked towards his father on the cross, he wasn't going to be there. He wouldn't be able to give him a big hug.

No Jesus would be totally alone, weak. He became totally alone for the only time in his life, alone and separated so that his people never will be again.

So for death so that we will live, our punishment on him, that's the gospel. That's the good news. That's his victory.

[32 : 17] Victory and power through weakness. The cross looks weak, but it's the power of God for salvation.

So as we draw to a close, just a reminder of what we've looked at. The Lord tests Gideon twice actually. It looks like Gideon's testing the Lord, but both times it's the Lord.

There's times that in our own lives like Gideon when we're scared, when our faith wavers, when God our Father loves us, he delights to stoop down and reassure us in our fears.

But then he uses Gideon in his weakness. My grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in weakness.

The victory, the power comes from the Lord. He uses us in our frailty, in our doubt and fears. We don't turn away from him but to him. It shows just how powerful his spirit is.

[33 : 21] We come with nothing. We leave with everything.

The church is indeed open to all. It's the free offer of the gospel. Not because of our CV, not because of anything that we can offer, but because of everything that he has done for us.

We have a right standing before the living God because his right standing has been transferred to us and all our sin transferred to him. It's on the basis of his work.

So we do have reason to boast, but only in Christ alone in his victory. Let's pray together.

Almighty and everlasting God, we just praise you for all that you've done. We are so weak, so fragile, our faith wavers, but yet you know us and despite all that, you give us everything that we need.

[34 : 42] You've rescued us. You've put your Holy Spirit in us. You strengthen us. And the victory is all yours. It all belongs to you.

And we thank you so much. We pray that you'd help us to, that you'd reassure us in our faith today, this week, that you'd strengthen us in the ups and downs and that you'd help us to encourage one another, that we would go in peace to love and serve you in every way.

So have mercy upon us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.