

August 9, 2026

TRUST: JUDGES 7:1-8,19-23

Introductory Activity

Introduce: In his book *Canoeing the Mountains*, Todd Bolsinger tells the story of the Lewis and Clark expedition. The expedition set out as a water expedition. They canoed up the Missouri River searching for a water route to the Pacific Ocean. As they searched for the Northwest Passage across the continental United States, they came up against the Rocky Mountains. In order to get to the Pacific Ocean, they had a choice to make. They could attempt to portage their canoes across the steep mountains, or they could leave them behind. They had to "downsize" to accomplish the mission before them. They had to let go of what they knew. They had to let go of the tools that had brought them success in the past. It was the only way to move forward. In a church culture "obsessed with big numbers, where quantity often supersedes quality, it's hard to imagine God downsizing in a plan for victory." (ETB LG, 109) Today we are going to see that God does not want us to focus on big numbers to fulfill the mission before us. Instead, He wants us to depend on Him to accomplish His mission. He does this to grow us, but He also does this to show the world that He is the one who brings success.

Summarize and Transition: Last week we examined the calling of Gideon. Today, we will look at the culminating battle against the Midianites. Through the work of God raising Gideon to a leadership role in the nation, the judge has amassed an army of 32,000 men. Our passage picks up with them encamped near the enemy, ready to attack. Before they do so, God will whittle the number down from 32,000 to 300. Let's examine what this passage can teach us about trusting God and moving forward in faith as we work to expand His Kingdom.

1. TOO MANY (JUDG. 7:1-3)

Read (or have someone read) Judges 7:1-3.

Explain: In this passage, we are reminded of Gideon's call. The author calls him Jerubbaal. This is the name given to Gideon by the people of his hometown at the beginning of his story. In chapter 6, Gideon had destroyed an altar to Baal. This had angered the people, and they sought to kill him. Gideon's father Joash, the one in charge of Baal worship in their village, sought to protect his son. In Judges 6:31, Joash declared, "If he [Baal] is a god, let him plead his own case because someone tore down his altar." The name Jerubbaal means "Let Baal contend with him... the use of the name [here] shows that Gideon is preparing to do just that--contend with Baal." (ETBC, 102)

Application: We can be reminded that our calling is paramount, and we should never forget it. Some are called to vocational ministry, and they

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Judges and Ruth* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Judges* (NAC)
- *Exalting Jesus in Judges and Ruth* (Exalting)

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have a distinct calling to the pastorate, age-graded ministry, missionary work, or denominational work. Those specific callings might change over time due to maturity or skill development, but the call to ministry is lasting. Like Gideon, these people have been called to a specific area of ministry. In the local church, the work of these ministers is outlined in Scripture. Ephesians 4 helps us understand their work.

Read or have someone read Ephesians 4:11-13 (See Notes Box.)

It is important to remember that the role of the vocation minister in the local church is to *equip the saints to do the work of ministry*. They do this through preaching/teaching, leadership development, and organizational deployment. This last aspect of their work is vital because it provides the means by which local church members get involved in the ministry of the church. Volunteer recruitment and committee/team structures move church members into service. This service reminds us that while some people are called to vocational ministry, **we are all called to the ministry of reconciliation**.

Read or have someone read 2 Corinthians 5:17-18 (See Notes Box.)

As followers of Christ, we are not simply saved *from* our sin and the consequences of sin. We are saved *to* something—the ministry of reconciliation. We often talk about the Great Commission and the Acts 1:8 Mandate. However, we tend to think of those in terms of the mission field or overt evangelism. However, there is more to the ministry than that. Paul tells us that the ministry should be all-consuming. A few verses after he reminds us of our ministry of reconciliation, Paul tells us that we are “ambassadors for Christ.” Our calling is to the day-in-and-day-out work of pleading on “Christ’s behalf, ‘Be reconciled to God.’” (2 Cor. 5:20) Sometimes that can seem overwhelming. We might not feel we are up to the challenge. Or, on the other hand, we begin to work harder to do the work or work to amass more and more resources to accomplish the work. This plays out differently in the church than in our personal lives, but the model present in the church provides us with a clear example. In church life, we might think we need more—more people, more money, more activity. However, Gideon’s story reveals the opposite.

Reread Judges 7:2 (See Notes Box.)

Gideon had what he needed to fight the battle. It would be a hard fight, but they would win. The Lord had already told Gideon that he would “strike Midian down as if it were one man.” (Judges 6:16) It is possible that in Gideon’s mind he now had what it would take to do what God had promised. However, God had a different plan. He would not allow Gideon to fight with 32,000 men because that would bring about pride and a lack of gratefulness to the Lord.

Notes:

Ephesians 4:11-13

¹¹ And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness.

2 Corinthians 5:17-18

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! ¹⁸ Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

Judges 7:2

² The Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many troops for me to hand the Midianites over to them, or else Israel might elevate themselves over me and say, “I saved myself.”

Guide and Discuss: Guide the group to page 94 of their Personal Study Guide and ask the question: “In what ways might we try to do God’s work by our own might and for our glory?”

Application: The Lord wants us to rely on Him, not our strengths as an individual or the resources that a church might possess. The Lord does not always decrease our resources for the promotion of His glory, but he does choose to use those who lack resources to accomplish His work.

Discuss: Have you ever witnessed or experienced a time when God used those who are “lacking” to do great things?

God will use small churches to reach their community in great ways. God will use the shy young man and make him into a powerful preacher. God will use the church member who volunteers in the kids’ classes to teach the gospel to scores of kids over the years. He can use you to reach your community or your family. We just have to be willing to step out and answer the call. When we do the work of ministry even though we lack skills and resources, God’s glory will be revealed. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says that God chose to use the uneducated (“foolish”), weak, and insignificant to do His work “so that no one may boast in his presence.” Instead, like Israel after the battle before Gideon and his men, they will “boast in the Lord.” (1 Cor. 1:26-31)

Summarize Transition: To accomplish this, God instructed, through Gideon, those who are fearful to return to their homes. This is also instructive for us. God had promised that Gideon would win the battle, but this promise did not necessarily translate into a fearless group of soldiers. God wanted a trusting army, not a fearful, hesitant army. The same is true for us. While God will not dismiss us from service because of our fear, He does want trusting, fearless disciples who do the work of ministry in their personal lives and in the local church. When we faithfully and fearlessly serve even when we lack resources or know-how, we become living examples of God’s power so that He can reveal His glory to the nations. That is why God whittled down Gideon’s army, but He is not done. Let’s look at the next passage.

2. STILL TOO MANY (JUDG. 7:4-8)

Read (or have someone read) Judges 7:4-8.

Explain: God continues with this reduction-of-forces plan. Most generals want more people, not less. They focus on the numbers. In Gideon’s case, God was also focused on numbers, just not in the way we might expect. God doesn’t *need* a large number of soldiers to defeat the Midianites. Moreover, the defeat of the Midianites was only a small part of what God wanted to accomplish. The ultimate plan was to point to Himself and demonstrate His power to Israel and the nations. Therefore, God reduces the number of soldiers even further. He tells Gideon that He “will test them.”

Now we have to stop and go on a tangent here. We do so not because it is essential to the lesson, but because a lot of pastors and teachers will go on a tangent, and that tangent can be a distraction from the main point. In essence, we need to clear up some possible erroneous teachings from the past. God instructs Gideon to have the men drink from the brook. When they do so, some kneel and drink straight from the stream, and others keep up their hand and bring the water to their lips with eyes up and alert. You might have been taught,

as I was, that those who brought the water to their lips were the better soldiers because they were alert for danger, and that is why God chose them. In other words, He left Gideon with the best of the best. Other scholars say these men were actually not the better soldiers. They teach that these men were looking around because they were fearful, like the ones who left before. These scholars say that is why God chose them. He left Gideon with the worst soldiers to bring Himself more glory in the end. Both of these could be correct, but the discussion is moot. It does not matter why they raised the water to their lips, and it does not really matter why God chose them. The point was not the choosing but the losing experienced by Gideon. After this test of the men, God had reduced the army by 99.0625% (see Exalting, 83). Like any good general, God was focused on the numbers, but He wanted fewer, not more, because fewer men would bring Him more glory.

Application: Traditionally, and possibly to the church's detriment, we have judged success by large numbers. We look at people in pews, nickels in offering plates, and people serving to determine the health of a church. None of those things are bad. We want people in pews because they represent people moving forward in discipleship. We need large enough offerings to do the work of ministry. We need a host of people to do that work in the local church. However, "numbers also can become an idol" (ETB LG, 114) in church life. God does not judge success or the health of a church by numbers. Churches can and should grow broader through an increase of numbers through evangelism. However, churches should also grow deeper. Those in attendance should continually take their next step in their discipleship journey.

As they take their next steps to grow deeper in the Lord, they *will* do the work of God's Kingdom. They simply cannot do otherwise *if they are growing in the Lord*. We get a glimpse of that in this passage. After God whittled down the army to 300, they got to work.

Read Judges 7:8 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: After Gideon dismissed those not selected for active service, he and the remaining soldiers got to work. These 300 men were set to do battle against thousands. As we will see, they were successful just as the Lord had promised. Also, the Bible tells us that because they did the work and the glory of the Lord was manifested in their work, others joined the battle and others were drawn to faithfully follow the Lord. We should not let this pass us by. A small group of committed disciples of Christ can successfully do the work of Kingdom advancement. When they do, they will draw others to Christ.

Summarize and Transition: God wanted to deliver Israel from the Midianite oppression. He had called Gideon to the task. Gideon had rallied the troops to do the work. However, God did not want the strength of the army to distract the nation from their true source of strength. That is why He whittled down the army. "Gideon and his diminishing army were playing a supporting role in the battle to come. God was the primary actor." (ETBC, 105) In church life and our personal ministry, God should be the primary actor. He should be the source of our strength. His work through us should cause others to come to faith and begin walking the disciple's path.

Judges 7:8

⁸ So Gideon sent all the Israelites to their tents but kept the three hundred troops, who took the provisions and their rams' horns. The camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

Regardless of our weakness, our lack of resources, or our small numbers, God can do great things. Honestly, God desires to do great things in those situations because it shines a light on Him and people are drawn to the Light.

3. JUST RIGHT (JUDG. 7:19-23)

Read (or have someone read) Judges 7:19-23.

Explain: Before we examine this passage, let's consider the verses we skipped over in our ETB curriculum because those verses tell us something important. You see, after God whittled down the army to 300, the Bible does not tell us what Gideon was thinking. However, the actions of the Lord in verses 9-18 reveal that Gideon was probably fearful. In verse 9, God tells Gideon to get up and attack. Then God says, "But if you are afraid to attack the camp, go down with Purah your servant. ¹¹ Listen to what they say, and then you will be encouraged to attack the camp." (vv. 10-11a) Don't miss that. God knew that Gideon was not tracking with God's plan. Whereas a few days before he had looked out over a sea of 32,000 soldiers, now he is camped with just 300. Fear was seeping into his bones because he did not understand what God was doing.

Discuss: At times, God's plans can look off kilter in our personal lives and churches as well. Things are going well, and you suffer a setback of some kind. Life is good, but you have to relocate for work. Your plans are on point, but something gets in the way. In church life, God might move your pastor to a different church just when things seem great. The church feels led to embark on a new ministry venture, but the A/C unit goes out, and the funds are depleted. Your church is doing the work of ministry and loving others, but the people are not coming. Things just keep knocking you down, and you might be fearful like Gideon. What are some ways you can stay encouraged in the Lord when the Lord's plans seem to be off kilter?

Explain: We stay encouraged by looking at the situation through God's eyes and asking, "What am I not seeing? What is God doing in the background?" Ask God to give you eyes to see His work. God literally did this for Gideon. He sent the judge into the Midianites' camp where he overheard some soldiers talking. Their conversation revealed that the Midianites feared Gideon and his army. They just knew he was going to defeat them. Gideon did not know it, but God was at work in the background. All he saw was a shrinking army, but God had bigger plans.

And that brings us to the plan developed by Gideon. He only had three hundred men. He had to develop a battle plan. The ETB PSG explains the plan: "[Gideon] divided his men into three groups of one hundred in each company. He equipped each man with a ram's horn in one hand and an empty pitcher with a torch inside of it in the other hand. They had dispersed themselves all around the camp. . . . First, they blew their horns. Second, they smashed their jars. Third, they held up their lit torches that had been concealed in the jars. In a normal nighttime military maneuver, only someone at the front of a company would have been carrying a lit torch. Gideon's three hundred men appeared to be three hundred companies surrounding the Midianites." (ETB PSG, 97-98)

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It was a good plan, but if you look carefully at the passage in the Bible, you will notice something interesting. It appears that this plan was Gideon's. God did not give special instructions to do this. That is important. God has done three things (1) he reduced Gideon's resources, (2) He encouraged Gideon through the visit to the Midianite camp, and (3) he gave Gideon the opportunity to develop a plan that aligned with his resources. That is so important. "The huge reduction in forces places Gideon in a position in which he must be resourceful--resourceful for the glory of God." (Exalting, 83) Redmond challenges us to remember that when God reduces our resources, "those are not times to lament what was then and is not now; those are times to look to God and see how to glorify him with less." (Exalting, 84)

"As far as we know, none of this is revealed strategy; it's just Gideon's natural leadership ability being put at God's disposal and used in dependence of on him and for his glory." (Preaching, 144)

"His considerable capabilities were largely hidden, behind anger, fear, and a sense of personal inadequacy, and doubts that God could or would do anything about his situation. Now that faith rather than fear has become the controlling principle of his life, however, all that was strong and good and capable about him has been freed up to flourish." (Preaching, 145)

God's plans might seem off kilter. We might have limited resources. That is not the time to hold back. That is the time to look at what you have and determine how to do the work anyway. Gideon knew he could not launch a frontal attack against the Midianites, so he used the resources at his disposal to fight the battle differently. A person with limited funds or limited training or limited time can still do the work of ministry. They just have to develop a plan to do so within their means. A small church or a church with limited funds can still do the work of ministry. They just have to sit down and prayerfully determine what *they* can do to grow God's Kingdom. But don't miss the most important part of the battle.

Reread Judges 7:22a (²² When Gideon's men blew their three hundred rams' horns, ***the Lord caused*** the men in the whole army to turn on each other with their swords.) Gideon had a plan, but God did the supernatural. "God worked on the very spirits of the Midianites." (ETBC, 108) When we develop a plan that fits our resources, and we *step out in faith* and do the work, God will step up and supernaturally change things. He will begin to work on the very spirits of those in our community.

Summarize and Transition: Hebrews 11:32-34 speaks of Gideon's faith. In Gideon we see "the confidence in God that makes a man sure of what he hopes for and certain of what he cannot see (Hebrews 11:1)." (Preaching, 146) His situation was different from ours. God shrank his army. In our case, God doesn't always decrease our resources (though the might!). Instead, sometimes we simply don't have the resources. However, that deficiency should not keep us from acting. We, like Gideon, should develop a plan and step out in faith that God will act.

CONCLUDE

As we conclude our lesson, consider yourself, your group, and your church.

How can you use your limited resources (time, talent, and treasure) to do the work of ministry? (Maybe you need to find time in your schedule to tell others about Christ or build a relationship with someone who doesn't know Him. Maybe you already see the same cashier every day when you stop on the way to work. Make that your point of ministry. Maybe you need to begin setting aside a small amount of money so that you can give to God's work. Maybe you need to hone your skills by taking an evangelism course or reading a book on leadership)

How can your small, small group begin doing the work of ministry?

How can your church with limited people and resources begin to do the work of ministry?

Lastly, maybe you are not lacking in resources. Maybe the Lord has blessed you with plenty of time, plenty of talent, and plenty of treasure. If that is the case, are you using each of those to do the work of God's Kingdom?