

Trust

GOD PROVIDED VICTORY AND BROUGHT HIMSELF
GLORY THROUGH GIDEON'S ARMY.

There are a lot of things that we trust without thinking about it. For example, most of us trust our navigation app. If you are like me, though, you may not have trusted the app initially. From time to time problems arise. A few years ago, for example, Apple® decided to develop their own map application. However, the new app had significant issues. There were reports by people saying the app directed them to the wrong locations. While some errors were minor (simply leading people to the wrong side of the street, for example), others were more problematic. One person was directed to the middle of a cornfield, and another's told him that his destination was in the middle of the ocean! One news report noted that several people in Australia had to be rescued after becoming stranded in a remote desert because of bad app directions. One day a few years ago, my family and I were attempting to get to a show using the Google Maps™ app. We were driving along a busy highway overpass when our app announced, "You have arrived." We were baffled until we looked over the edge of the overpass and spotted the event venue many feet below. If we didn't mind ramping our car over the guard rail and plowing into the roof of the convention center, the app was technically correct.

The point is that trust is earned. We typically trust things based on our experience. Yet when something erodes that trust, it takes time to rebuild it. If our navigation app sends us in the wrong direction, we may double check it the next few times we drive. On a more personal level, this question of trust also applies to people. We all have good friends and family members that we trust with the personal details of our lives. We trust them to keep our struggles private. We trust them to help us when we are in a vulnerable spot. We are shattered if they betray that trust.

In this week's session we see God asking Gideon and his troops to trust Him fully. He asked Gideon to put himself in a vulnerable position so that if success was achieved, it would be clear that the victory was because of God. God doesn't leave people stranded and alone in a dangerous place. Yet Gideon would test God a bit before fully trusting Him, much like I tested my map app.

Judges 7:1–12:15

Gideon and Israel achieved victory over the Midianites (Judg. 7:1–8:21). Starting in 8:22, we begin to see the long-term effects of the victory Gideon achieved with God’s help. Firstly, Gideon refused the offered kingship and noted that God alone was the true Ruler of Israel. Yet in the next breath, Gideon requested gold from the people to make an ephod (vv. 22-27; see Ex. 28:6-14). Some commentators believe that Gideon intended to make the ephod a memorial to the victory over Midian. Others argue that Gideon was trying to create some kind of representation of God’s presence like the ark of the covenant. Gideon placed the ephod in his hometown of Ophrah, indicating that he wanted people to remember his role in their deliverance. It did not take long for this ephod to become an idol. Sadly, Gideon’s later life seems to be more focused on himself than on trusting the Lord and leading His people to do the same.

Abimelech, Gideon’s son, continued this downward spiral. He used his connection to the town to convince the people of Shechem to help make him king. To prevent any challenges to his claim, he then killed nearly all his half-siblings in cold blood. As with all wicked things, Abimelech’s kingship did not last. God stirred up animosity between the people of Shechem and Abimelech, to the point that the people rebelled against their new king. In the ensuing battles Abimelech was killed (Judg. 9).

The Israelites again practiced illicit worship of other deities (10:6). As before, God turned the Israelites over to the peoples and false gods they worshiped, with the Philistines and Ammonites becoming Israel’s main oppressors. When the Israelites called out to God for deliverance, He responded by asking why He should save such a faithless people yet again. From this interchange, the narrative turns to the story of Jephthah (Judg. 11–12). We see the people treated Jephthah much the same way they had treated God—rejecting him until they needed his help. Eventually, Jephthah agreed to help.

When Jephthah prepared for war, he foolishly vowed if God gave him victory, he would sacrifice the first person to come out of his house upon his return. While Jephthah gained a God-given victory over the Ammonites, it is also evident from the nature of his vow that he knew little to nothing of God’s character. Jephthah sacrificed his daughter and encouraged a conflict with Ephraim that resulted in the death of 42,000 Ephraimites.

Too Many (Judg. 7:1-3)

As Gideon and his army prepared to attack the Midianites, the Lord told him he had too many troops. God didn't want the Israelites to think they could save themselves by their own might. When Gideon announced to the troops that whoever was afraid could leave, twenty-two thousand men left, and ten thousand remained.

VERSES 1-2

Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the troops who were with him, got up early and camped beside the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them, below the hill of Moreh, in the valley. 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.’”

With that context in mind, let us return to the story of Gideon's victory in chapter 7. One can hardly miss the name **Jerubbaal (that is Gideon)**. This name (given to him by his father after Gideon tore down the family altar to Baal) means “Let Baal contend with him” (6:32). It is no accident that the author lists this name first as Gideon prepares to fight the oppressors of Israel: the use of the name shows that Gideon was preparing to do just that—contend with Baal. The challenge to Baal that started at home was going to continue on a larger scale. The author may also have been signaling Gideon's inconsistency here. He was of two minds. He waffled, and his trust in God wavered, but he also obeyed and leaned into his trust of God. After all, Gideon on the one hand was called a valiant warrior (v. 12), but on the other hand doubted God's word and required more than one sign before he agreed to lead an army to overthrow the Midianites (vv. 33-40). The author may have been hinting that both character qualities remained in Gideon. He contended with Baal but doubted God as he led the men to battle. Which quality would win out?

Gideon and his troops camped at **the spring of Harod**, which is in the foothills above the Jezreel Valley. This location gave Gideon and his army access to fresh water as well as the advantage of the high ground from which they could observe the enemy unseen. The Midianites on the other hand, were apparently prepared for battle and had camped in the Jezreel Valley itself, near **the hill of Moreh**. While this position gave the

Midianites the advantage of having relatively free movement on the level ground, it also exposed them to attack from the hills. At this point in the narrative, Gideon and his army seemed to have the advantage in terrain and possibly even numbers. Victory seemed reasonably assured.

It is this context that makes God's comment surprising (7:2). When He explained to Gideon, **"You have too many troops,"** most people would wonder how that was possible for an army wanting to achieve victory. The Lord went on to clarify the issue however: He would be the One to **hand the Midianites over** to Gideon's army. It must be clear that the victory would only be due to God's intervention, not to military might. The demonstrated nature of the Israelites was to act independent of God and go their own way. Superior numbers and other advantages would have tempted the Israelites to take credit for winning the day rather than recognizing the Lord's victory. There must be no room for the Israelites to **elevate themselves** and say, **"I saved myself."** After all, their tendency to elevate themselves and to abandon God was the fundamental problem throughout the book of Judges. It was only when they were in dire straits that the Israelites turned to God.

VERSE 3

"Now announce to the troops, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'" So twenty-two thousand of the troops turned back, but ten thousand remained.

God gave instructions: Gideon was to tell the troops that **whoever is fearful and trembling** could leave. This phrasing echoes the rules for war that God laid out in Deuteronomy 20. In that chapter, God explained that when the Israelites came up against an army that had greater numbers, they were not to be afraid. This lack of fear was tied to the fact that God would go before them in battle. In other words, it would not be their numbers or power that brought victory in battle but rather the presence of God going before them. In Deuteronomy 20:6-8, then, God gave a few reasons why individuals might go home rather than stay and fight. One reason given (v. 8) was that if someone was afraid, they should not stay, lest they affect the morale of others. The point in both passages is the same: the battle is the Lord's; it does not depend on the number of soldiers. If the people had success, it would be because God gave them that success and not because of any power or numbers on their part.

The word for *fearful* in this context means being afraid of battle and its consequences, including death. Deuteronomy 20 notes that such

fear can be demoralizing among the troops (v. 18). Perhaps not surprisingly, more than two thirds of the men left the camp. One wonders if the remaining troops started to feel somewhat afraid at this point! Ten thousand troops would still be an effective force, but the loss of so many eliminated much of the military advantage that Israel had. One thing is for sure: a small attacking force coming up against a much larger defending force is rarely successful. A defending army can withstand an attack by a greater force if they have good defenses. The attackers, though, can count on greater losses and therefore need a greater number of troops.

The location of **Mount Gilead** is unknown. There are a couple of possibilities arising from the text. First, there may have been a spelling mistake in some of the early manuscripts so that the place should have read Mount Gilboa. There is no designated Mount Gilead near the scene of events but there is Mount Gilboa. There is a range of hills referred to as Gilead but this does not fit the context. A second possibility is that the original wording was “the hill of Galud” with Galud being another ancient name for the spring of Harod. The spring is still called *Ain Galud* today. Galud means trembling or fearful. Either way, the exact names are not that important as the location of the spring and the Valley of Jezreel are well known.



Explore Further

Has there ever been a time when you felt that God was asking you to do something that you were afraid to do? Perhaps He prompted you to share the gospel with a friend or convicted you to stand up for what is right, even though it might cost you a great deal to do so. How does knowing that the battle is the Lord's impact your thinking? What are ways to

- overcome fearfulness by stepping out in faith knowing God is with you?

Still Too Many (Judg. 7:4-8)

The Lord proposed a test to reduce the troops even more. He instructed Gideon to lead his remaining troops to the water and to separate those who drank by kneeling down to put their faces in the water from those who used their hands to bring water to their mouths. The three hundred men who lapped water from their hands would compose Gideon's army.

VERSES 4-6

Then the LORD said to Gideon, “There are still too many troops. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. If I say to you, ‘This one can go with you,’ he can go. But if I say about anyone, ‘This one cannot go with you,’ he cannot go.” So he brought the troops down to the water, and the LORD said to Gideon, “Separate everyone who laps water with his tongue like a dog. Do the same with everyone who kneels to drink.” The number of those who lapped with their hands to their mouths was three hundred men, and all the rest of the troops knelt to drink water.

God stated, **“There are still too many troops.”** We are not told Gideon’s reaction to this news. This lack of response may suggest that Gideon was at this point fully committed to trusting God. Either way, the narrator’s focus here is not on Gideon’s words but on his obedience, and this time it did not waver like it did earlier. God was making it clear that Gideon and his diminishing army were playing a supporting role in the battle to come. God was the primary actor. Gideon, it appears, did not question the Lord’s plan.

To reduce the numbers further, God told Gideon to take the troops down to the spring of Harod where God would **test them**. The Hebrew verb for *test* refers to the practice of smelting metal—refining metal through extreme heat. In this process, the heated metal liquifies and the impurities in it rise to the top. This layer of impurity is then scraped off. The result is a metal, such as gold or silver, that is absent of the impurities that would cause weakness or reduce its value. In the context of Judges 7, then, God was going to remove more troops, and while this process would result in a smaller army, the troops that remained would be the bravest and truest of men. The number of soldiers would go down, but the quality of the army would go up.

God would tell Gideon which soldiers could go into battle and which ones would need to go home. He used one test to determine who would continue to be part of the army: the way in which the men drank. Any man **who kneels to drink** the water would be part of Gideon’s army. **Everyone who laps water with his tongue like a dog** would be sent home. What was the test meant to reveal? It seems likely that the point was whether the men kept themselves in a state of readiness for battle. Those that scooped up water with their hands in order to drink it remained vigilant. They did not take their eyes off of the horizon and could drop the water and draw their swords with relative ease since they

were kneeling. Those who placed their faces close to the water were more vulnerable. While this approach was more effective in terms of getting a good drink quickly, it left the men vulnerable to sudden attack.

After this test, the remaining Israelite soldiers were a mere **three hundred** in number. The army that came out to support Gideon in his battle against the Midianites had gone from thirty-two thousand to three hundred. Any hope for a victory based on the size of the army itself was gone. Victory could only come through divine intervention.

VERSE 7

The LORD said to Gideon, “I will deliver you with the three hundred men who lapped and hand the Midianites over to you. But everyone else is to go home.”

The LORD confirmed that the victory would belong to Him when He stated, “**I will deliver you.**” The Hebrew verb for *deliver* is the base word for the names Joshua, Hosea, and Jesus. It means to save, deliver, help, or to be victorious. The meaning of a given word is determined by its context, but Hebrew thinking tended to play on the multiple possibilities of a word’s meaning more than western languages do. In this case, God would quite literally save the Israelites from the oppression of the Midianites by delivering them through victorious battle. The victory would belong to God, Gideon, and three hundred men, in that order. Gideon and his men would help, but God was the hero.

VERSE 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.

Gideon sent all the **Israelites** who had been dismissed **to their tents**. The remaining three hundred troops **took the provisions**. In other words, they prepared for the march to battle. They also took **their rams’ horns**. This latter detail naturally captures the reader’s attention. While it would not be atypical for army troops to carry horns as part of their equipment, pointing out that all three hundred men took rams’ horns is unusual. The narrator was alerting the reader to the special role that these horns would play in the following narrative. The scene closes with the location of **the camp of Midian**. The Midianites remain in a somewhat vulnerable position, perhaps out of overconfidence. They were not prepared for the attack to come.



Explore Further

As humans, we often turn to God in difficulty, only to forget Him or go our own way when things look up. We see this pattern with the Israelites as well. This struggle is a common human failing—one I think we can all relate to. Why do you think this is? Why do we tend to cling to God more tightly in seasons of challenge and trial than during seasons when things are going smoothly? How can we remember the Lord at all times?

Just Right (Judg. 7:19-23)

Gideon's army defeated the Midianites with only rams' horns, jars, torches, and shouts. After the battle, men from the tribes of Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh joined the pursuit of the Midianites.

VERSE 19

Gideon and the hundred men who were with him went to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch after the sentries had been stationed. They blew their rams' horns and broke the pitchers that were in their hands.

That night, after their preparation for battle, God encouraged Gideon. When it was nearly time to start the attack on the Midianite camp, God gave Gideon an option: if he was afraid, he should go spy on the Midianite and Amalekite camp. Apparently, Gideon had some trepidation about the forthcoming battle because he took God up on the spying suggestion. What he overheard in the enemy camp encouraged him greatly: the Midianites were already scared. God had been using ominous dreams to undermine their courage. Gideon worshiped the Lord in response to this news and prepared the men for battle (vv. 9-18).

Gideon took his position with **the hundred men who were with him**. (Earlier he had divided the three hundred men into three groups so that they surrounded the enemy camp on three sides; v. 16) They made their attack in **the middle watch after the sentries had been stationed**. *The middle watch* of the night was approximately from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. This means that most of the Midianite soldiers would have been asleep and startled awake in panic when the loud attack began.

VERSES 20-21

The three companies blew their rams' horns and shattered their pitchers. They held their torches in their left hands and their rams' horns to blow in their right hands, and they shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" Each Israelite took his position around the camp, and the entire Midianite army began to run, and they cried out as they fled.

The Israelite companies **blew their rams' horns** and **shattered their pitchers**. The obvious tactic here was to make as much noise as possible. The sound of crashing and horns blowing on three sides (no doubt magnified by echoing off of the hills surrounding the enemy) would have been terrifying. The Israelites apparently lit their torches and held them aloft as they blew their horns. Imagine not just experiencing the onslaught of sound, but being surrounded by bright lights and flame. In the dark and as your eyes adjusted to the sudden light, there would be no telling how many enemies you had before you. The weakened morale of the **Midianite army** could not bear up under the pressure. As a result of the terrifying sounds and lights, the Midianite army **began to run**. They fled across the Jezreel Valley, making their way toward the Jordan River. It's worth noting that Gideon and his men followed God's battle plan faithfully. In addition, the cry of the Israelite troops ("**A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!**") kept the priority of God's role first.

VERSES 22-23

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. They fled to Acacia House in the direction of Zererah as far as the border of Abel-meholah near Tabbath. Then the men of Israel were called from Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh, and they pursued the Midianites.

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**. The horns had their desired effect: the Lord caused blind panic among the Midianites. God worked on the very spirits of the Midianites so that they attacked each other in the confusion of the darkness; He fought for Israel by causing the Midianites to destroy themselves. God's tactic in this battle was psychological warfare at its best.

Other men from the tribes of **Naphtali**, **Asher**, and **Manasseh** were called to help pursue the fleeing Midianites. The territories of these

tribes were located around the area of battle. Now that the enemy was on the run, other men were allowed to participate in the final victory. A few scholars believe Gideon's call to these tribes was a failure on Gideon's part here. Since God had mandated that the Midianites be defeated by only three hundred men, that was to be the end of the matter. Therefore, when Gideon called on the tribes surrounding the area of battle to help in the conquest, he was forgetting the whole point of God's reduction of the number of troops. The text does not relay that Gideon sought the advice from God before calling on the other troops. Additionally, it seems likely that the troops that came were the same ones that God had dismissed earlier for being fearful or lapping the water like dogs. Gideon, in his rising confidence, showed the typical spiritual independence that characterized the Israelites when things were going well. It is also telling that the voice of God is silent for the rest of Gideon's story. Is this silence a result of Gideon doing what was right in his own eyes at this point? While we cannot be sure, it seems likely that Gideon had lost sight of God's purpose. Like a child at Christmas who loses sight of the meaning of the holiday once the desired gift is obtained, Gideon was lost in his own happiness with no thought of how he came to be in that position. Yet the author marks, by the way he weaves Gideon's story onto the pages of Scripture, that no one could question that the victory came from God.

Gideon's story after the battle is one of growing hubris and, at the very least, a wandering away from God's requirements for the nation of Israel. He was successful in overthrowing the power of the Midianites because of God's power and action. He acknowledged that God was the leader of Israel but thereafter, his life was characterized by a focus on himself. There is no record of him seeking God again nor of God speaking to him. As soon as Gideon died, his legacy quickly crumbled with the Israelites turning away from God and ceasing to honor Gideon or his descendants. Just as Gideon seems to have forgotten God, so too was Gideon forgotten. He failed to change Israel's downward trajectory.



Explore Further

Read "Deliverance, Deliverer" on page 411 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How has the story of Gideon impacted your understanding of God providing deliverance? Has your understanding of God's role changed in any way? How so?
