

## Judges 7:1-15 – “Gideon: Tests, Reductions, and Encouragements”

(Pew Bible Page: 206-7)

**Intro:** Fear. The whole story of Gideon reeks of it. Gideon trashed grain in a winepress for fear of the Midianites. Gideon was afraid God would strike him dead after he had seen the angel of the Lord face-to-face. Gideon tore down Baal’s altar at night for fear of his father and community. Gideon’s fear drove him to put God to the test, not once but twice, in disobedience to God’s Word. Tonight, we’ll find Gideon again facing his fears, and God seemingly egging Gideon’s fears on! And yet, we’ll also find Gideon rising above his fears, through God’s strengthening powers at work in Gideon’s life. The story of Gideon is all about fear. Fear is one of Satan’s greatest weapons to use against God’s people. Fear can be debilitating, stopping us in our tracks, keeping us from completing the work God has called us to do. How is fear to be answered? Tonight, we’ll learn that fear is answered by faith, and God develops faith in His people, for His glory, through testing and encouragements.

**Proposition:** Fear is answered by faith. God tests and encourages our faith to bring glory to Himself and to teach us to overcome our fears through faith in Him.

Billboard:	(vv.1-2)	Tests
	(vv.3-7)	Reductions
	(vv8-15)	Encouragements

(vv.1-2) Tests – As we learned in our last study, God always tests our faith, and in these verses, God again challenged Gideon to depend on Him in the face of seeming disaster. **Judges 7:1 - 1** *Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod. And the camp of Midian was north of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley.* Gideon moved his army of 32,000 men to within four miles of the 132,000 Midianite invaders. Interestingly, the spring of Harod means, “Spring of Trembling.” Fear was still a factor. God’s answer to fear is not to eliminate it, but to overwhelm it as we’ll see in tonight’s lesson. The anti-dote to fear is faith. But our faith must be in God rather than in faith itself. Faith in faith is no faith at all! That is why the key verse for this passage is verse 2: **Judges 7:2 - 2** *The LORD said to Gideon, “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.’* To strengthen Gideon’s faith God tested it by reducing the size of Gideon’s army. God was clear about His purpose for doing this: He did this to ensure that the victory would be through Him alone, and not through His human agents. He did this to teach Gideon a vital lesson: victory would be given through complete dependence on God alone, rather than on man’s power. Faith must be founded on God, His power, His character, His trustworthiness. Faith must reside in the person of God, not merely in His promises. His promises are a means to His person. Faith can never be strong faith, until it finds its rest in the person of God.

**[DOCTRINAL POINT]** God tests and encourages our faith to bring glory to Himself and to teach us to overwhelm fear with faith in Him alone.

**[ILLUSTRATION]** Before the Normandy invasion in 1944, the Allied forces built an entire army around General George Patton. This army was poised to invade France near the strategic French port of Calais. It was amply supplied with tanks and equipment and was easily spotted from the air by German airplanes as it assembled across the channel in England. Radio traffic was picked up by listening German ears; rumors overheard and even some solid intelligence was obtained from sources in England by German spies. But when the invasion finally came, it fell on Normandy. The long-anticipated strike on Calais never materialized. In fact, the whole army group supposedly preparing for that fight simply disappeared. It disappeared because it had never existed to begin with. The whole thing was an

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elaborate ruse designed to distract and cause fear in German hearts. The “tanks” were inflatable fakes; the rumors outrageous plants; the radio traffic was being broadcast to no one. The whole thing was an illusion, a stage play – just like most of the fears planted in believer’s hearts by our enemy, the devil. Mark Twain once quipped, “I have known a great many fears in my life; most of which never came to be.” Have you noticed the same truth in your own life? Most of the things we fear will happen to us, turn out to be as illusory as Patton’s inflatable army tanks, and for exactly the same reason: Just like Patton, the devil has no actual troops he can hurl against God’s redeemed people. He’s been disarmed at the cross. So, he fakes it – causing us to cower in fear, waiting for the blow he can never deliver. And even if his ally, the world, does manage to attack us – what ultimate harm can it do? No, dear ones, we are secure because of the person of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. He is no illusion; He is real.

**[APPLICATION]** For faith to overcome fear, it must rest in the person of God. To rest our faith on bare propositions alone, wonderful expressions of God’s truth as they are, will not do. At the end of the day, when the battle must be faced and the enemy defeated, only putting our faith in God alone will triumph over our fears. Jesus is no imaginary God. How can we overcome our fears? By keeping our faith fixed firmly on Him.

(vv.3-7) Reductions – God reduced Gideon’s army through two means: Obedience to God’s Word and a casual, seemingly random test. First, the use of God’s Word was specified in verse 3: **Judges 7:3 - 3** *Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, ‘Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead.’”* Then 22,000 of the people returned, and 10,000 remained. God instructed Gideon to send anyone home who was afraid. This is what the Scripture commands in **Deuteronomy 20:8 - 8** *And the officers shall speak further to the people, and say, ‘Is there any man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own.’* Vernon McGhee quipped that Gideon probably should have left too, since he was as fearful as any of them! That raises an interesting question: Why didn’t he go? The answer is that Gideon had faith, even though his fears were great. God’s answer to fear is faith. Someone has said that “courage is not the absence of fear, but the presence of the Lord.” Gideon was afraid, but he stayed because God had created real faith in his heart and that faith overcame his fears. God is the source of faith that overcomes fear.

The second way that God reduced Gideon’s army was through a casual, seemingly random test – how men drank when Gideon brought them down to “The Spring of Trembling.” **Judges 7:4-7 - 4** *And the LORD said to Gideon, “The people are still too many. Take them down to the water, and I will 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 of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ shall not go.”* **5** *So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, “Every one who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise, every one who kneels down to drink.”* **6** *And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was 300 men, but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water.* **7** *And the LORD said to Gideon, “With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home.”* Commentators both ancient and modern are divided on the meaning of this test. One group sees the choice of those who lapped as a sign that those men were more vigilant than those who got down on their bellies to drink. Another group says, “Not at all! The 300 were too delicate to soil their robes. They weren’t more courageous – they were just afraid of getting their cloths dirty! They were the most timid of the men Gideon had to choose from.” However you want to understand it, one thing is certain: the text simply doesn’t tell us why this method was chosen by God. Perhaps the best way to view the matter comes from

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Vanlaningham and Rydelnik of the Moody Bible Institute: “An alternative [to either explanation] and more likely proposal is that the test was purely random and arbitrary, designed to reduce the number of warriors, so that Israel would be small enough to give God glory for the victory rather than take credit in their own military strength.”<sup>1</sup> Whatever the method, God’s purpose to reduce Gideon’s army worked as verse 7 shows. Through this process of reduction, Gideon is faced with an inescapable fact: Either God will win the victory or Gideon will lose. Humanly speaking, God is all Gideon has going for him after the army is reduced to a mere 300 men.

**[DOCTRINAL POINT]** God tests and encourages our faith to bring glory to Himself and to teach us that He alone is all we need.

**[ILLUSTRATION]** We need look no further than the Book of Luke for an example of this principle. In the story of the Prodigal Son, the younger boy loses everything he once had, to discover that in His father, he already had everything he would ever need.

**[APPLICATION]** What will it take for us to learn this lesson? We are so prone as simple men and women to trust what we think we already have, rather than putting our faith firmly in the One who already has us. Someone has noted that it seems as if God cannot greatly use a man until He has greatly wounded him. He takes away all that we put our confidence in other than Himself. In loving kindness He reduces us to those who’s only hope lies in trusting Him. Sometimes, perhaps often, this can be quite frightening, testing our faith to the limits. But we need not fear when He does this; ‘All the time we are pursuing Him we are already in His hand: “Thy right hand upholdeth me.”’<sup>2</sup> Gideon’s fear was quite real, but it was entirely groundless. The reduction of Gideon’s army looked like folly, humanly speaking, but it would only truly be folly if God were not the one doing the reducing. When God takes away our strength from us, it is only so we can discover that we have lost nothing, because in Him we have all we can ever need.

(vv.8-15) Encouragements – In view of God’s extraordinary plan, Gideon now needed encouragement more than ever! In these verses, God encouraged the faith He nearly strangled in verses 2-7. **Judges 7:8** - *8 So the people took provisions in their hands, and their trumpets. And he sent all the rest of Israel every man to his tent, but retained the 300 men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.* Verse 8 intimates that after Gideon instructed the 9,700 unchosen to go home, he apparently had to insist that the 300 chosen to fight the battle stay. The phrase that Gideon “retained” the 300 is used three other times in the Old Testament and in each instance, it means, “detained against their will.” We can understand that, can’t we? What Gideon had done must have seemed like madness to the 300, not to mention to Gideon. In verses 9-14, God gave Gideon the encouragement that he needed to courageously follow God’s plan. **Judges 7:9–14** - *9 That same night the LORD said to him, “Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. 10 But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant. 11 And you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.” Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp. 12 And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance. 13 When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a*

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<sup>1</sup> Vanlaningham & Rydelnik (2014), “The Moody Bible Commentary,” page: 373. Moody Publishers, Chicago, IL.

<sup>2</sup> Tozer, A.W., (1978). “The Best of A.W. Tozer” by Warren Wiersbe, pg. 13. Baker Book House Company, Grand Rapids, MI.

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*dream to his comrade. And he said, “Behold, I dreamed a dream, and behold, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian and came to the tent and struck it so that it fell and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat.”* **14** *And his comrade answered, “This is no other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp.”* Dreams in the Middle Eastern culture of Gideon’s day were often understood as the means through which the “gods” made known their will to men. God began his help to Gideon by ordering him to attack (v.9), but then considered Gideon’s fear, sending him down to the outskirts of the Midianite camp with Purah, his servant. There they overheard what God was doing in the hearts of their enemies: God had created in them a spirit of fear and defeat. Through this means, God strengthened Gideon’s faith and courage so that in verse 15 we find Gideon worshipping and ordering the attack. Warren Wiersbe gives us a good word on this: **“It is significant that Gideon paused to worship the Lord before he did anything else.... Before we can be successful warriors, we must first become sincere worshippers.”**<sup>3</sup> Gideon was confident that God had already won the victory by crushing the enemies’ confidence, so he worshipped God and called his army into action. God reduced Gideon’s circumstances but encouraged his heart.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] **God tests and encourages our faith to bring glory to Himself and to give us courage to depend on Him alone.**

**Conclusion:** Fear. Fear is one of Satan’s greatest weapons to use against God’s people. Fear can be debilitating, stopping us in our tracks, keeping us from completing the work God has called us to do. But don’t miss the greatest irony of tonight’s lesson: God defeated Gideon’s fears by testing and encouraging his faith. At the same time, God defeated Gideon’s enemies by planting fear in their hearts. Fear threatened to be Gideon’s undoing but turned out to be the undoing of Gideon’s enemy. Our enemy, the devil, uses fear against us; but God is for us, and He knows how to turn the tables and send the old enemy running. For the Christian, perhaps the words of Franklin Roosevelt were never more true than when he said, **“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!”** Isn’t it wonderful that God tests and encourages our faith so we can conquer our fears?

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<sup>3</sup> Wiersbe, Warren (2003). *“The Bible Exposition Commentary – Old Testament, Volume 2,”* page 123. David C. Cook Publishers, Colorado Springs, CO.