

Trust in the Strength of the Lord

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[0 : 00] Down in southern Wisconsin, I think we're about as far apart from each other as we can get in our classes, but it's a joy to be here with you, joy to be present with you and on behalf of the Council of Delavan CRC as well as the congregation of Delavan CRC, I bring you greetings and just joyful to be here with you and to serve you in this way here on this Sunday morning.

It's just such a pleasure. So thanks for having me. It'll be good. It's been great already and I look forward to the rest of our time together. Before reading our text from Judges chapter 7, just let me set the stage a little bit to remind you or if you're unfamiliar with the book of Judges to teach you a little bit of where we are in God's word.

In a moment, we're going to read about Gideon and Gideon was one of the judges of Israel. Not necessarily a judge like a courtroom judge that we often think about here in North America, but a judge in the sense of a military or political leader of the time.

And in the time of the judges, for Gideon, before all of this, what happened is God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt and they had wandered for 40 years in the desert with Moses and Joshua as their leaders.

And then they had been brought in and received the promised land. But then after Joshua died is when the judges came to be. This is before the monarchy, before King Saul and King David and King Solomon.

[1 : 36] So we're kind of in this time between Moses and Joshua, but before all the kings of Israel is where we are. And so some of the characteristics of the time of the judges was it's like a repeating cycle that happened.

And actually, as you read the book of Judges, it's more of a downward spiral of the nation of Israel. They would be following the Lord and being faithful for the most part to the Lord during the time of a judge.

But then when that leader died, they would fall away from God and they'd begin to act like the nations around them and serving the other gods of the nations around them and rebelling against the Lord.

And so he would allow another nation or people group to oppress his own people. And then eventually they would cry out to the Lord for help and then he would send a judge.

He would send a deliverer. And so that's the cycle that happens in the book of Judges. And so in that cycle, we are in Gideon. And so for Gideon, the people of Israel were being oppressed by the people of Midian, which were a nomadic tribe of people.

[2 : 46] And this story starts back in Judges chapter 6. And in chapter 6, verse 33, we see that the Midianites, the Amalekites, and the other eastern peoples joined forces and crossed over the Jordan and camped in the valley of Jezreel.

So there is an imminent threat to the people of Israel. Midian has marched into the promised land and into the land of Israel. But God calls Gideon to lead his people.

So that's kind of setting the stage in where we are in the story. So I invite you to join with me, to read with me in Judges chapter 7. Judges 7, verses 1 through 25.

I think it's on the screen for you. Otherwise, I always encourage people to have a Bible open themselves so you can see what we're talking about. Keep a Bible open if you so desire.

My wording might be a little different because I'm reading from the ESV. I noticed it's NIV, at least in the front row here. But it should be ESV on the screen for you. So let's read the word of the Lord.

[3 : 51] Then Jeroboam, that is Gideon, and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Herod. And the camp of Midian was north of them, by the hill of Moreh in the valley.

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.

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. 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 one of whom I say to you, This one shall go with you, shall go with you. But any of whom I say to you, This one shall not go with you, shall not go. So he brought the people down to the water.

[4 : 51] And the Lord said to Gideon, Everyone who laps the water with his tongue as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise, everyone who kneels down to drink.

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. 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. So the people took the 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. That same night, the Lord said to him, Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand.

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

[5 : 56] Then he went down with Pura, his servant, to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp. 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. When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a 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.

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. As soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshipped.

And he returned to the camp of Israel and said, Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand. And he divided the 300 men into three companies and put trumpets into their hands of all of them and empty jars with torches inside the jars.

[7 : 09] And he said to them, Look at me and do likewise. When I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then blow the trumpets also on every side of all the camp and shout, For the Lord and for Gideon.

So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch when they had just set the watch.

And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars. They held in their left hands the torches and in their right hands the trumpets to blow.

And they cried out, A sword for the Lord and for Gideon. Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran. They cried out and fled. When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army.

And the army fled as far as Beth Shittah, toward Zerera, as far as the border of Abel Melola, by Tabath.

[8 : 21] And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali, and from Asher, and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian. Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, Come down against the Midianites, and capture the waters against them, as far as Beth-berah, and also the Jordan.

So all the men of Ephraim called out, and they captured the waters, as far as Beth-berah, and also the Jordan. And they captured the two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeb.

They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeb they killed at the winepress of Zeb. Then they pursued Midian, and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeb to Gideon across the Jordan.

And this is the word of the Lord for us here this morning. Please pray with me.

Lord God, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that you are with us always. And we thank you that you are a God who speaks to your people, especially in a world where there are so many other voices vying for our attention, whether they be podcasts, or news stations, or neighbors next door, or whoever it may be.

[9 : 45] Lord, we need to hear from you. Above all things, above all beings, in all the universe. And so Lord, we thank you for speaking, and we trust now that you will speak to our hearts and to our minds.

Open us, Lord, to receive you and your word. And we pray this all in your precious name. Amen. Do you trust God?

Do you have faith in God? These are questions that I have asked my own congregation fairly regularly over the years, but I just keep coming back to them, and I bring them to you because they are such crucial questions for our lives as Christians.

Do you trust God? Do you have faith in God? I see heads nodding out there. That's good. And we can think about faith in a couple different ways. One way is in the sense of salvation, right?

Do you have faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior? Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that He died on the cross to pay the debt for our sins and that He rose again to conquer death three days later?

[11 : 02] Do you believe in Jesus? Do you have faith in Jesus as your Lord and as your Savior? That's one way to think about faith and trusting in Jesus. But a second way to think about faith is do you have faith in the sense of trusting the power of God?

Do you trust Him to watch over you, to take care of you, to provide what you stand in need of and to be with you always? This is more faith in God to take care of us in this life.

The first is about salvation. The second is about provision or presence with. Do you trust what God says and do you have faith that He will and is able to take care of you?

Especially when things aren't going well, when life is hard and when things are going badly. It's easy to say that we trust in God when things are going well, but what about when life is hard?

And that question about having faith in the hardness of life is why I hate the phrase, God won't send anything you can't handle. Similarly, I also hate a similar phrase that maybe you've heard or used both of these.

[12 : 19] God sends the biggest battles to His strongest soldiers. Maybe you've used phrases like that before. Maybe you like phrases like that. I'll forgive you for that.

And I'll ask that you forgive me and what I'm saying about these phrases, but I hate both of those phrases because they just aren't true. And in actuality, those phrases are 100% anti-biblical.

I mean, think about it. Why would we need to have trust in God if He never sends anything that I can't handle? If I can handle it, why do I need to trust Him?

Why do I need Him? Why do I have to have faith in Him? The real biblical question is not how strong are you or how strong am I? The true biblical question is how strong do you believe God to be?

How powerful do you believe the Lord to be? Do you trust God and His power, especially when life is bigger than you can handle?

[13 : 27] Do you trust God? Well, this narrative of Gideon is a perfect example of needing to trust in God. In this narrative, there are two main themes that I will draw out for you over the course of our time together.

So if you're a note taker, you can write these down. And I'll try to point them out along the way. It won't be, I'm not going to flesh them out in a nice outline for you. We're going to kind of tell this story.

So I'll point to these themes as we go along. But two main themes to draw out. The first theme is fear or lack of faith. However you want to write that down.

Fear or lack of faith. And the second theme is the power and provision of God. So right at the beginning of this story, fear becomes a theme.

And we're told right in verse 1 that Gideon and all the men with him camped at the spring of Harad. Now, that is a name of a place. It is what that spring was called.

[14 : 29] But it's deeper than that. Because there is a literal meaning to that word Harad. And it means trembling. So the way the author of Judges is phrasing this, Gideon and all of his men went to the spring of trembling.

They went to the spring of fear. It's a literary way of communicating what's going on. And from a human standpoint, they had every right to be afraid at this point because the army they are facing is enormous compared to themselves.

Verse 12 tells us that the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore.

So that's figurative language to depict how huge of an army this is. I mean, imagine standing on the beach in the summer and how many little tiny grains of sand are laying in front of you.

And imagine how impossible it would be to count all of those little tiny grains of sand. That's the image being cast out here to describe the force that Gideon and the Israelites are facing.

[15:47] But with that, for some of you that are a little more literal people, the math people that want the quantifiable number, were actually given that. You can actually flip over the page or whatever it may be to chapter 8, verse 10.

And we're told in that verse that the Midianite army, when it started, was about 135,000 men. So this is a huge force. 135,000 people thick as locusts, locusts, camels like the sand on the seashore. Well, what about the other side? What about the people of Israel? Well, in verse 3, we're told that they had, they started off with 32,000. So right at the outset of this, they're outnumbered about 3 to 1 or 4 to 1 odds.

Right off the bat, Israel is at a huge disadvantage. They are vastly outnumbered. And suddenly, being at this spring of trembling makes a lot of sense. It would make sense that they are trembling at this point.

Trembling with fear. Well, it's at this moment in verse 2. The Lord said to Gideon, the people with you are too many.

[17:00] Really, Lord? Too many? Are you sure you said that correctly? But continuing on with verse 2, you can see this there. It says, 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.

So Israel, they're vastly outnumbered by the people of Midian. But the Lord says, Gideon, you still have too many. Why? Well, because if Israel somehow won, even in those odds, even being outnumbered 4 to 1, they could still boast that they had won in their own power or in their own strategy or something like that that they had come up with.

And that's the point God is making here. If you win with these numbers, you will still think that you did it and not me. You will think that you are strong enough or smart enough and that you didn't need me.

This is God speaking to Israel rhetorically. So what God does is start dwindling down Gideon's army. And here is where we see this theme of fear continue to build.

Look at verse 3. It says, 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.

[18:23] Okay, that sounds reasonable. That actually was part of the Jewish law from Deuteronomy chapter 20. That anyone who quaked with fear could go home.

So this is actually falling in line with how God had instructed the people of Israel back in the book of Deuteronomy. We'll look at the second half of verse 3. So, 22,000 of the people returned and 10,000 remained.

That's a lot of fear. 22,000 men said, I am too afraid to fight. So I'm going to go home. And only 10,000 left against 135,000.

So now, they are outnumbered 13 and a half to one. But God says, there's still too many. So, to dwindle them down more, God has Gideon tell them to drink water.

And there's some different translations in how these words are put together and different interpretations of exactly what's going on in all of this. Some people think that with Scripture telling us that those who drank by putting their hands to their mouths, it indicates that they were more aware of their surroundings and therefore would be better soldiers because they could keep an eye on what's going on around them.

[19:43] And that's a possible interpretation of those verses. And there's some interesting thoughts and interesting debates that we can have about how to specifically interpret those verses along those lines of how this separation is actually happening.

But notice in those verses the lack of one very important detail. This passage does not assign a better method to drink.

The Lord tells which ones to take, but He doesn't say which one is better. It doesn't say that those 300 men who put their hands to their mouths did something better in a sense.

There's no reason they're getting lifted up. And the main point isn't what these men did to be separated. The focus isn't meant to be on them.

The main point to grasp here is God is simply dividing up the people culminating in what God says in verse 7. And this is where we start to see that second theme this morning of the power and the provision of God.

[20 : 51] In verse 7 it says, With the 300 men who lapped, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand.

That's the main point for us to take out of this. Again, we can have fun talking about and debating about the separation and how it happened and why these 300 and whatever. And that's good and that's fun and all those things.

But the ultimate thing to draw out is God is the one who's going to save Israel. This is all a part of His divine purposes. God is the one who will save His people with 300 men.

It's all about Him. It's all about His power. It's all about His might. And so, 300 men from 32,000 to 10,000 to 300.

At this point, there is no human hope that they would ever win this battle against the Midianites. 300 against 135,000.

[21 : 51] That's just crazy to think about. But God makes a promise here and it's a sure statement. He says, With the 300 men that lapped, I will save you.

What God is doing here is He is stripping away everything that Gideon would have put his confidence in. He's stripping away everything that Gideon could point to and put his trust in. He's putting him and He's putting Israel in a situation where they have no hope in themselves. Their only hope is to trust God and trust His Word.

He's taking away every other explanation for victory other than Himself. There's no way that this is going to work unless God acts.

Imagine the fear of Gideon in this situation. Now, we experience that stripping away of confidences and we experience that fear in our own lives sometimes, don't we?

[22 : 58] God will take away certain things in our lives that bring us comfort, that give us stability, that give us confidence and put us in situations where they will not work out unless He acts.

What has brought fear into your life lately? In what areas of your life will it not work out unless the Lord acts, unless the Lord moves?

Is it relationship issues? Is it health issues? Financial issues? That fear is real.

And it's okay. It's part of being human, right? To have fear, to experience fear, to experience questioning. That's part of being human. The question is, what are you trusting in?

What ultimately provides the safety and the security that you're looking for? What do we put our faith in? Are you putting your total faith in those doctors?

[24 : 05] Are you putting your faith in those counselors? Are you putting your faith in those financial advisors or in those teachers? Are you putting your faith in your own wisdom or your own knowledge or your own decision-making process?

Sometimes God strips away things that we put our hope in and calls us to do something that seemingly doesn't make any sense to get the focus back on Him.

To put our trust back in Him as the true source of our hope. That's what He's doing with Gideon and Israel in this passage. He's stripping away everything that Gideon can trust in.

He's putting him in an impossible situation that will only work out if God acts. And He says, trust me. Have faith in me, Gideon.

I will save you. With these 300 men, I will save you. Are there things in your life that you trust in more than God?

[25 : 11] That you put confidence in more than God? And has He been stripping some of those away and saying, trust me? Well, for Gideon, after God had stripped away His army from 32,000 all the way down to 300, He says in verse 9, get up, go down against the camp because I'm going to give it into your hands.

So, again, a very straightforward promise from God to Gideon. Get up, I'm going to bring victory here. But I love this next line in verse 10 because it's really a verse of grace in a sense because God says in verse 10, if you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp and listen to what they're saying.

He's saying, Gideon, I'm going to bring you victory. Go attack and win. But if you're still afraid, go down, listen to what the Midianites are saying, and you'll be encouraged.

So He's extending him even more grace here. And what does Gideon do? Does he say, no, God, I'm good. I have complete trust in you. We'll go and attack right now. No.

Very next line. It says, So he and Purah, his servant, went down to the outposts of the armed men. He still doesn't fully trust God. There's still fear there.

[26 : 32] He doesn't know how it's going to work out. So he takes God up on his offer, of this offer of grace. Even though God has said clearly in four verses, in a span of four verses, God has clearly said to him, I will bring you victory.

Gideon is still afraid. He still doubts. So he goes down to the camp, and just as he gets there, one man is telling another his dream.

You know, you could call this chance. If you're someone who believes in chance, I would call it the providence of the Lord, of the timing of this. As they walk up, this one man is telling the other of this dream that he had, of a loaf of barley bread that tumbled into the camp, and it hits a Midianite tent and topples it down.

And instantly, the other soldier knows what that dream means, which again is amazing to think about. But he's like, this can be none other than the sword of Gideon.

He didn't ask any clarifying questions. He didn't sit there and think about it. He's like, that's a weird dream. Well, let's go on with our day. He's like, no, this can be none other than the sword of Gideon. God has given into the hand Midian and all the camp.

[27 : 50] So Gideon overhears all this, and it says in verse 15, when Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped God. Now we have to give Gideon props here for recognizing the power of God in this moment.

He praises God because he knows now God is going to bring victory. Even the enemy, the Midianites, are proclaiming the truth of God that they're going to lose.

But again, the downside of this is Gideon didn't believe the Lord at first. He didn't trust the word of the Lord. God told him several times that he was going to bring victory for Gideon and for Israel, but Gideon didn't believe God's word at that time.

But now Gideon hears this message from these Midianite soldiers, and now he believes. Now he worships. Which poses a different question for us.

Do you trust the word of the Lord? Do you trust what God says in His word is true? Do you trust the word of the Lord?

[29 : 00] That God's word spoken to you is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness? Or do you trust what other people say more?

Do you trust God's word or the world? Do you trust other books or other so-called experts? Do you put your faith in the news or in social media influencers or in teachers or in friends more than the word of God?

Gideon heard the word of God clearly several times. God was going to bring him victory, but he still didn't believe it until he heard it from a Midianite soldier. He didn't trust God's word, but he trusted a Midianite soldier.

Well, at least Gideon ended up where he was supposed to be. He finally believed God and worshipped God. And so he goes and he takes those 300 men into battle and they have this strange strategy of what they're doing.

They don't take anything more than trumpets and torches and jars and their voices. And with all of that, God uses them to rout an army of 135,000 men.

[30 : 15] When those 300 men smash their jars and have those torches ablaze and they shout and they blow the trumpets, God causes the Midianites to fall into confusion and they begin striking down each other.

This entire story of Gideon is a story of God's incredible power and his undying faithfulness to his people and the grace that he extends to them.

It's a story of God's power because of the sheer fact that he did what he said he was going to do. Gideon, you have too many men. You're outnumbered four to one but that's still too many. I'll make you outnumbered 450 to one and I'll still bring you victory. And just to make it that much greater, you won't even have to fight.

All you'll have to do is smash some jars, shout, close some trumpets and you're going to win. God is a God of power that can bring victory out of the most illogical places.

[31 : 23] And again, he absolutely gives us logic, right? He gave us minds to use. He obviously gives us things in this world like doctors and nurses and money and brains to use and so often he works through those things.

God is a God who uses means to accomplish his purposes. But the main question is in what are you putting your trust? Do you trust God?

Do you trust him to provide for you and to care for you even when it seems like things are not going well? Even when it seems like following his word makes no sense at all?

Do you trust him even when he strips away everything from your life in which you've been putting your confidence? Do you trust what he says in his word?

That salvation is by Christ alone? That he loves you? That you are his child? This story of Gideon is an incredible story of God's grace.

[32 : 28] Gideon didn't trust God at first. He doubted God the entire way. He didn't believe what God was saying. And that can be incredibly encouraging to us, I hope, if you find yourself relating to that.

Gideon is every one of us in a sense. He was afraid. He doubted. He was not this larger than life figure that we can't relate to. But God continued to reach out to Gideon in grace.

He graciously stripped Gideon of everything that he put confidence in except God himself. And God came through. And so I urge you, trust in the Lord.

No matter what is going on in your life right now, especially if it is bigger than what you can handle in your life right now, don't try to prop yourself up with some nice sounding Christian motivational posters about being God's strongest soldier or whatever it is.

The point is not how strong you or I are. The point is how strong do you believe God to be? And do you trust that he is with you?

[33 : 38] And that in all things he's working for the good of those who love him? As Romans 8 verse 28 proclaims. So if you find yourself in a place where you are stable and life is going well, ask yourself, what am I really trusting in?

Even though life is good, am I trusting in God? Or am I trusting in this thing that's providing stability? Or if you find yourself in a place where things that you have put your trust in are being stripped away, ask the same question, in what am I putting my trust?

That stuff that is being stripped away? Or the Lord? Do I trust God? Amen.

Let's pray. God, our Father, Triune God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, we thank you that you are a God of grace who walks with us through our shortcomings, through our doubt, through our fear.

And that in the midst of that, you extend grace, you extend peace, that we can trust in you no matter what. You are a good, good God.

[34 : 52] And so we praise you for that, Lord. And we praise you that you are a God of power. And Lord, we see all of this come to a perfect culmination in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

That he came in weakness. He submitted himself to the authorities to be nailed to a cross and to suffer eternal anguish on the cross for our sins and to die.

But through that work, Lord, you were conquering our enemies of sin and of death. And so, Lord, I just thank you for your grace. I thank you for your peace.

And I thank you that ultimately, three days later, Jesus rose victorious over the grave and ascended to heaven and it is the Lord of life that as we celebrate this sacrament together, we have this visual representation of your grace and of your power and of your victory.

Not only over sin and death, but over all enemies. And so, Lord, help us to rejoice in this privilege of celebrating together the body and the blood of Christ.

[36 : 14] Grow our faith in you, we pray in your precious name. Amen. Amen.