

Judges 7:16-25 "The Surprise of God" **

Proposition: In Judges 7:16-25 God's Word provides us with two essentials for experiencing God's victory.

An Overview: We see two surprises in Judges 7...

1. God surprised His people (1-15).
2. God surprised the enemy (16-25).
 - I. To experience victory, we must obey God's Word (16-21).
 - A. Gideon developed a strategy (16).
 1. He based it on what God had already done.
 2. He based it on what God would do.
 - B. Gideon prepared the troops (17-18).
 1. He told them what to do.
 2. He took the lead.
 - C. Gideon attacked the enemy (19-21).
 1. The attack involved surprise.
 2. The attack involved dependence upon the Lord.
 - II. To experience victory, we must rely upon God's help (22-25).
 - A. God destroyed the enemy (22).
 1. He caused the enemy to self-destruct.
 2. He caused the enemy to flee.
 - B. God restored His people (23-25).
 1. He involved the Israelites (23).
 2. He involved the men from Ephraim (24-25).

Implications: We learn these valuable lessons...

1. No problem is too big for God.
2. When God is on our side, victory is certain.
3. If we're not experiencing victory, we need to take inventory.
 - Am I obeying God?
 - Am I trusting God?

It's amazing to watch God work. Sometimes God works in quiet, very ordinary ways in the common affairs of life. But at other times He fulfills His plan in spectacular fashion. Indeed, sometimes He *surprises* us.

Such was the case in Judges 7. Judges 7 records one of the most incredible, breath-taking victories to be found anywhere in the Bible.

It's the story of a man known by his peers as Jerub-Baal. We know him as Gideon. Gideon lived some 1,250 years before Christ, during a time of great political and spiritual instability in Israel.

God had given His chosen people, the nation of Israel, the Promised Land a century or so earlier. Unfortunately, the people took God for granted and began to follow other gods. So the True God chastened them by handing them over to oppressors, in this case, the Midianites.

The Midianites made life miserable for God's people—as God intended in order to get His people's attention. In time, the Israelites cried out to God for help. And He responded. He raised up a deliverer by the name of Gideon. Then He told Gideon to go and get rid of the Midianites.

In fact, the Spirit of the Lord filled Gideon so that he blew a trumpet, summoning the Israelites to follow him into battle (6:34). 32,000 men responded to the call to duty, not a lot of men when compared to the innumerable troops of the Midianite coalition (7:12), but a substantial army, nonetheless.

At that point, God threw a couple of surprises into the picture. In fact, the incredible victory recorded in Judges 7 involved two intriguing surprises. We saw the first last time, and we'll see the second today. Let's retrace our steps and reexamine surprise #1 for a few moments, and then we'll look at the second.

An Overview: We see two surprises in Judges 7...

Here's the first...

1. *God surprised His people (1-15)*. Not a little surprise either, but a *big* one! The day before the battle, God told General Gideon, "You're almost ready for battle, Gideon, but there's one slight problem. You've got *too many* people."

Too many people? That doesn't make sense, does it? If you're facing a big army, you need a *bigger* army, don't you? Not if you have God on your side.

God didn't send some troops home merely to streamline things. The purpose wasn't *efficiency*. It was to get rid of *self-sufficiency*.

Here were God's words to Gideon (2), "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that *her own strength* has saved her, announce now to the people, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'"

And two-thirds of the army did. All of the sudden Gideon's army of 32,000 was down to 10,000. Surprise!

But God wasn't done yet. He spoke again to Gideon in verse 4, "There are still too many men!" You have to admire Gideon. Though the word of God didn't make sense to Him, he obeyed it anyway. He took his men down to the water, as God instructed, and divided them into two groups—those who drank by kneeling, and those who drank by lapping, 9,700 kneelers and 300 lappers.

And God said, "I'm going to use the lappers to bring this victory, Gideon. Send home the kneelers (7). I'm going to use these 300 men to win this battle." Are you ready Gideon?

What would you have done if you'd been in Gideon's sandals? You say, "If God told me to attack a huge army with 300 men, I'd have been scared stiff!"

Gideon was no different, and God knew that. To deal with Gideon's fear, God instructed Gideon to venture under cover into the Midianite camp. While there Gideon overheard two sentries talking about a dream of a barley cake rolling into the Midianite camp and overturning the tent. He heard a Midianite utter this interpretation (14), "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands."

Instinctively, Gideon worshiped God. Then he headed back to his 300 troops and said (15), "Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands."

Don't you love Gideon's confidence? The Lord *has given*. Sure, the army is still there, but the outcome is not in question. The victory is as good as won.

I'm intrigued by how much attention God gave to *preparation*. Preparation is the hard work. The actual battle will be the easy part. Unfortunately, we're prone to want to see things happen *right now*, and we don't want

to give God time to prepare us to face the battles of life *His way*.

Well, there's the first surprise, the surprise God gave His people when He sent home 31,700 soldiers and said, "I'm going to win this battle, and I'm going to do it with only 300 men." We'll see the second surprise in verses 16-25. That's where...

2. *God surprised the enemy (16-25)*. And I mean *totally* surprised them, as we're about to discover.

Perhaps you're wondering, "Does this story have anything to do with us?" It sure does! We're about to see in living color an amazing victory that God gave His people some 3,200 years ago. But God is still winning battles for His people, isn't He? Yes, God is still in the business of giving His people a taste of victory for His glory.

But how does He do it? What are we supposed to do when we're facing a huge foe? Like family turmoil. Or cancer. Or a hostile boss. Or an antagonistic neighbor.

At times we feel like Gideon, don't we? Weak, outnumbered, and even overwhelmed. The Midianites are there, and we don't know what to do. How should we respond when from a human perspective the odds are against us? How can we experience God's victory?

We can find the answer in the second section of Judges 7. In Judges 7:16-25 God's Word provides us with two essentials for experiencing God's victory.

I. To experience victory, we must obey God's Word (16-21).

Obedience is not optional, but mandatory. We must choose to obey God, like Gideon did. Listen. There can be *no victory* apart from obedience. Did Gideon struggle with fear? Sure, we all do to some degree. But he resolved to obey God, and his obedience showed up in three courses of action.

A. Gideon developed a strategy (16). A battle strategy, that is. Verse 16 explains, "Dividing the three hundred men into three companies, he placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them, with torches inside."

That's an interesting battle tactic, isn't it? Gideon's got a small army, so what's his first course of action? Make it smaller! Divide it into three companies. And then outfit each soldier with three pieces of "military" equipment: a trumpet [the Hebrew is "shofar"], an empty jar, and a torch.

Why'd he do that? It doesn't make sense, does it? Where'd Gideon get this strategy anyway? Actually, he didn't just "wing it." Rather he based it on two things.

1. *He based it on what God had already done*. What's that? What had God just done to a Midianite sentry? He gave him a dream. What kind of a dream? One that produced great *fear* in his heart.

What was the dream about? An unexpected, bizarre attack—right?—namely, round loaf of barley bread crashing into the Midianite camp.

What kind of battle plan does Gideon devise? One involving an unexpected, bizarre attack, the intent being to induce *fear* in the enemy. Do you see the connection?

Gideon took advantage of what the Lord had allowed him to hear. The aim of his plan was to frighten the enemy and provoke a panic in the camp, not defeat it by a force of arms. In fact, apparently they didn't even take swords with them!

So Gideon based his strategy on what God had already done. Secondly...

2. *He based it on what God would do.* What has God repeatedly told Gideon He would do? He told him when He called him for service (6:14). He told him through the fleece incident (6:36). He told him when he sent home the surplus troops (7:7). And finally He told him just before he heard the dream (7:9).

Here's what God said (7:9), "Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands." What did God say? Not, I *might* give. Rather, I *am going* to give. God gave Gideon a promise. He gave him a guarantee of victory based on His word.

So what's Gideon doing? He's taking action based on what God did and on what God said He'd do. He's stepping out in faith, but not blind faith. It's a promise-based faith.

Is it any different for us? If we want to experience God's victory, we need to "keep in step with the Spirit," as Paul puts it in Galatians 5:25. We need to work *out* what God is working *in*, to paraphrase Philippians 2:12-13.

Ask yourself, "What is God doing in my life?" Are you cooperating with Him, or oblivious to His working—or worse yet, *resisting* Him?

Gideon chose to obey God's Word. He did so, first of all, by developing a strategy.

B. Gideon prepared the troops (17-18). Here's how: "Watch me," he told them. "Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do. 18 When I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all around the camp blow yours and shout, 'For the LORD and for Gideon.'"

Having devised a strategy, Gideon proceeded to implement it. To do so he prepared the troops for battle in two ways. First...

1. *He told them what to do.* In fact, he's very explicit, "Do *exactly* as I do." Go to the edge of the camp, and listen for my trumpet. When you hear it, blow yours and shout, "For the LORD and for Gideon."

What does it take to have unity? There must be a *leader*, and there must be *followers*. Unity occurs when people resolve to follow their leader, rather than doing their own thing.

Guess what would have happened if 295 of Gideon's men followed his instructions, but five didn't. The plan would have flopped, right?

Gideon knew that. So he prepared his men for battle, first, by telling them what to do. And then secondly...

2. *He took the lead.* "Watch me. Follow my lead. Do as I do," he told them. Gideon didn't send his troops into battle. He *led* them. A leader leads best by example. That's true of dads and moms, teachers, coaches. And pastors, too.

By the way, as you read the Bible you'll notice how God used the personalities and individual creativity of the people He chose to do His work. No two leaders lead the same way. Gideon wasn't Moses, or Samuel, or David, so he didn't try to lead like they did. He was *Gideon*, so when he devised a strategy he used his God-given mind to do so. And then he implemented that strategy by preparing his troops and leading them into battle. Then came his third act of obedience...

C. Gideon attacked the enemy (19-21). Verse 19, "Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guard."

Stop for a moment, and you'll notice the first of two key factors involved in Gideon's attack.

1. *The attack involved surprise.* Gideon's men traveled through the darkness the five mile distance from their camp to the Midianite camp. What time did they arrive? At the beginning of the "middle watch." The Hebrews divided the night into three "watches." Keil and Delitzsch says it was midnight. The narrator elaborates and says it was just after the change of guards.

That's not a good time for an attack, is it? Actually, it's a perfect time. For starters, the just-relieved sentries are moving through the camp which will contribute to the confusion when Gideon gives the signal. What's more, most of the troops are sound asleep, which makes the situation ideal for a surprise attack.

And so it happened (19), "They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands." Talk about having your sleep disturbed! One minute the night is quiet. Then suddenly the air is pierced by the blowing of trumpets and the smashing of clay pitchers.

What's the significance of the jar-breaking sound? Is it just more noise, or is it intended to be a particular type of noise—like a barley loaf rolling into camp (whatever that would sound like!)?

The rest of Gideon's army followed Gideon's lead. Verse 20, "The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!"

At first reading it's somewhat confusing as to what happened, but the basic order of events was as follows. First came the loud, concentrated blast of trumpets. This was followed by the shattering of the 300 jars. Then the men raised their torches and shouted the war-cry, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" After that came more trumpet blowing and more shouting.

Now there's an unusual way to attack an enemy! All Gideon and his men did was blow, smash, and stand. And one more thing. *Depend.* That is, this attack...

2. *The attack involved dependence upon the Lord.* Put yourself in the shoes of Gideon and his men again. If God didn't work, they were dead ducks! Really! There they were, standing right next to the enemy's camp. They had actually come right to the enemy, and in essence, by their noise-making said, "Here we are!"

Remember, they're severely outnumbered. They have no real weapons. And they've just awakened the enemy!

It's true. This attack involved not only surprise, but also an absolute dependence upon the Lord to work. By his actions Gideon did what the Lord told him to do, and he did it with the confident expectation that God would take action.

Indeed, if God *didn't*, it was hopeless.

But God did act, just like He said He would. Verse 21, "While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled."

The effect was stunning. When the Midianites opened their eyes, they saw a mass of torches surrounding them. And the sounds they heard—the trumpets, the shattering, and the shouting—confirmed their worst fear. The man in the dream, Gideon, had arrived!

May I reiterate something? All Gideon and his men did was shout, smash, and stand. They obeyed and then waited. And God did the rest.

Is it any different for us? God says, "Obey me, and then wait for Me to work." Don't run. Don't quit. Obey and wait for God. Give God time to work out His plan.

Too often we get impatient, don't we? We may do what God asks us to do. For awhile. But then we start thinking, "Oh, this is ridiculous! Nothing's happening! God's plan isn't working! I'm getting out of here!"

For example, "This habit's too big, Lord. I can't break it. I've tried to do what Your Word says, but it's no use. I can't change. I'm going back to my old ways."

Here's another, "God, I can't keep loving my spouse. I've tried, but he won't change. I can't wait any longer. I've got to get out. Your plan doesn't seem to be working."

Too many Christians give up too quickly. They obey God, but when He doesn't act in their time-frame, they stop obeying Him. They run. They quit. And they miss the privilege of seeing God work.

At the outset I mentioned there are two essentials for experiencing God's victory. The first is obedience—we must obey God's Word. But there's a second essential, and we see it right here in Judges 7.

II. To experience victory, we must rely upon God's help (22-25).

Obedience, then reliance. Both are non-negotiable if you want to experience God's victory.

Gideon did what God asked him to do. And then Gideon waited for God to do what God alone could do. And God did it! In fact, God did two things in verses 22-25.

A. God destroyed the enemy (22). "When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the LORD caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords. The army fled to Beth Shittah toward Zererah as far as the border of Abel Meholah near Tabbath."

Notice carefully. *Who* destroyed the enemy? Did Gideon? Well, he and his men blew the trumpets, smashed the jars, and shouted the battle-cry. But we all know those actions would have been futile—in fact, down right foolish!—apart from God's help.

Yes, God destroyed the enemy. In fact, the text tells us that He did so in two ways.

1. He caused the enemy to self-destruct. When the Midianites first woke up, they started running. Have you noticed how darkness accentuates the emotion of fear? In the eerie night shadows, an ordinary floor lamp suddenly looks like a threatening intruder.

But this was no ordinary darkness. God put fear in their hearts.

God has access to hearts, you know. He can change hearts. He can harden hearts. He can even cause proud-hearted, fearless soldiers to cringe and run for their lives.

You say, "Not me. I'm not afraid of anyone." Oh, really? Did you realize that in the Tribulation God will put such fear into the heart of rebel sinners that they will call on the mountains to fall on them?

The KJV gives a more literal rendering of Judges 7:22, stating, "And the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host." You say, "It sounds like God caused the swords to start slashing on their own!" In a way, He did.

When the trumpets sounded, He caused the Midianites to turn on each other. Talk about crowd control problems! It was massive chaos. And God caused it.

Think about that. The Sovereign Lord has all power at His disposal. He has power to bring people together—as He did when He formed His Church. And He has power to turn people against each other. He can restore—which is what He does every time people place their faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. And He can destroy, as He did here.

In this case He caused the Midianite army to self-destruct. That's not all He did.

2. He caused the enemy to flee. Notice the end of verse 22, "The army fled to Beth Shittah toward Zererah as far as the border of Abel Meholah near Tabbath."

We're not sure of the location of some of the towns mentioned here. We do know that the army fled in a south-easterly direction for about twenty-five miles. The enemy that had ravaged the Israelites for the previous seven years was now fleeing for its life.

How do you explain the turn of events? There is no human explanation for what happened that day. How do you explain 300 men routing an entire army, one which verse 12 described as being "as thick as locusts?"

There's only one explanation. It's *God*. It's the God who said back in verse 2, "I'm going to win this battle, and I'm going to do it in such a way that no man can take credit for it."

Yet there's something that intrigues me. Did you notice? God didn't cause the army to destroy itself entirely. He could have. In fact, elsewhere He did. But this time He chose to allow some of the enemy to flee.

Why? It's not because some just "got away." It's certainly not because the 300 needed help. Rather, God wanted to get the rest of His people involved. He wanted them to experience His victory, too. Which leads to the second thing God did that day...

B. God restored His people (23-25). And again He used Gideon to do it, as verses 23-25 explain, "Israelites from Naphtali, Asher and all Manasseh were called out, and they pursued the Midianites. 24 Gideon sent messengers throughout the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters of the Jordan ahead of them as far as Beth Barah."

So all the men of Ephraim were called out and they took the waters of the Jordan as far as Beth Barah. 25 They also captured two of the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued the Midianites and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon, who was by the Jordan."

Yes, God destroyed the enemy that day, but that's not all He did. He also restored His people, and here's how.

1. He involved the Israelites (23). Which Israelites? The ones from Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh. Sound familiar? Those are the ones Gideon recruited to be in his army in the first place.

Do you see what's happening? The 300 initiated the attack, but then others—perhaps some of the 31,700 that were sent home—joined in to do the mop-up work.

But they weren't the only ones. In restoring God's people, first of all, Gideon involved the Israelites. But then He went a step further. He involved people from a specific Israelites tribe. Which one?

2. He involved the men from Ephraim (24-25). That's interesting. Why? The Ephraimites weren't part of the original 32,000. Gideon hadn't invited them back in 6:34-35, a factor which became a sore spot between them as we'll see next time.

But this time Gideon involved them. Why? For the simple reason that they were in the perfect position to cut off the fleeing Midianites. Which they did. In fact, they even captured and executed two of their infamous leaders, Oreb and Zeeb.

Yet why? Why now does Gideon include some of the very ones he just sent home, not to mention including some he didn't even invite the first time? Was the task too much for the 300? Actually, it was too much for the 300 before the battle even started! But that's not the reason Gideon involved the other Israelites.

I think this is. This was no time to hoard the victory, but *share* it. God didn't raise up Gideon merely to deliver Israel from Midian, but also to restore Israel to Himself. It was Gideon's job to restore Israel's confidence in God.

Remember, until this day the Israelites had been *away from* God. And they'd lost hope.

Maybe you can relate. Is your life a wreck? God's aim isn't merely to get rid of our problems, but to restore us to Himself. He created us to live for Him. In Judges He raised up deliverers to restore His people. But they were just types of what He would eventually do through the Ultimate Deliverer. Who's that? It's Jesus Christ.

Because of what Jesus did at the Cross, we can be delivered from sin's penalty and power. And because of His resurrection, we can experience the fullness of abundant life now and forever.

In fact, Isaiah 9:4 says that what God did in Judges 7 actually foreshadows what Jesus came to do. God used Gideon to rescue a nation from bondage, but centuries later He sent the God-man to rescue the world for His glory.

Dear friend, God doesn't want you on the sidelines. He wants to restore you. He wants you to experience His victory. Are you willing?

You say, "How can I experience God's victory?" It's very simple. To experience God's victory you must obey God's Word and then rely on God's help. It's that simple. Obey God and rely upon God.

It's amazing to ponder what God did in Judges 7, isn't it? Actually, it's life-changing. I'd like to wrap up our study by highlighting the following three lessons.

Implications: We learn these valuable lessons...

1. *No problem is too big for God.* God could take 300 ordinary men, some trumpets, clay jars, and torches, and rout a huge foe. If He could do that, then we can *trust* Him with our challenges. In fact, to not trust Him is to insult Him.

2. *When God is on our side, victory is certain.* Granted, God's ways don't always make sense to us. Indeed, He may surprise us, but know this. With God, victory is certain. Guaranteed. That being the case...

3. *If we're not experiencing victory, we need to take inventory.* If you are not experiencing victory in your life, ask yourself these two simple questions...

· Am I obeying God? Obedience is mandatory. And...

· Am I trusting God? Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.