

# JUDGES—WEEK 6

## THE TRAINING



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)  
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

God has Gideon run numerous gauntlets. Gideon pulls down his dad's altar to Baal and almost gets killed by the townsfolk. Then God gives Gideon a couple of dramatic signs to confirm everything.

He's almost ready.

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Joshua, Week 6 — The Training  
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1 Judges 6:25–27 (ESV)

*That night the LORD said to him, “Take your father’s bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it and build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in due order. Then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down.” So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night.*

An ancient altar is a platform, or even just a pile of stones, where you would kill (and maybe burn) a sacrifice. Gideon uses a yoke of bulls (the pickup truck of that day) to yank the whole thing down and build a proper one in its place. Then he sacrifices the second bull on it (not his dad’s bull, lest he tick the old man off).

As we’ll see in tomorrow’s passage, Gideon’s father (Joash) is remarkably unticked-off about all this. There’s a lesson in that.

Joash’s allegiance to the Baals and Asherahs was weak. He wasn’t worshipping them instead of Yahweh; he was worshipping them in addition to Yahweh. That’s very bad. Consider this analogy.

It’s terrible to be left by your spouse. If, instead, your spouse stays but has relations with others, that’s okay, right?

Not. In a way that’s a greater offense.

But in God’s case, it’s even worse. Unfaithfulness in a spouse is awful, but it’s not an absurdity. Giving any worship to the Baals and Asherahs is absurd.

Where were they when the LORD laid the foundations of the Earth? Nowhere. They’re nowhere now.

The whole thing is nonsense.

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This is why the first commandment is so strongly worded. In Hebrew, it literally says, “You shall have no other gods to my face.”

Non-believers can believe anything they want. That’s not great, but it’s not especially offensive to God. Non-believers are expected to act like non-believers.

But when believers blend their faith with nonsense, what does that mean?

Okay, but do we do this too?

We don’t literally worship other gods using altars, but we have conflicting priorities.

Do we care about other things to the point that it qualifies as allegiance? Even worship?

2 Judges 6:28–32 (ESV)

*When the men of the town rose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the Asherah beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar that had been built. And they said to one another, “Who has done this thing?” And after they had searched and inquired, they said, “Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing.” Then the men of the town said to Joash, “Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has broken down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it.” But Joash said to all who stood against him, “Will you contend for Baal? Or will you save him? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down.” Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, “Let Baal contend against him,” because he broke down his altar.*

In “*Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*” there’s a moment where Captain Kirk realizes that the “God” they’re dealing with isn’t who he claims to be.

The “God” says, “*This starship could carry my wisdom beyond the barrier.*”

But Kirk asks, “*What does God need with a starship?*”

Joash has a moment like that here. If Baal is who he’s supposed to be, Gideon wouldn’t have had such an easy time tearing down his altar. Baal shouldn’t need someone to help him punish Gideon either.

Somethin’ ain’t right.

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Joash’s radar kicks in at just the right moment, but what’s even more impressive is that he’s able to convert the whole crowd so quickly. One moment, everyone is saying, “*Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has broken down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it.*”

But next thing you know it, Gideon has a new nickname of honor—*Jerubbaal, that is to say, “Let Baal contend against him,” because he broke down his altar.*

Joash’s argument has carried the day. But how? Here are the clues.

First off, we know that everyone involved is a Jew. They know the LORD, even if they think Baal is real.

Second, the altar and the Asherah belonged to Joash, even though the whole town cared about them.

Next, the line, “*Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning,*” is a threat, though it isn’t clear whether the threat is from Joash or from God.

Joash’s concluding line is his point. “*If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down.*”

That’s a pretty strong argument. It feels like logic has carried the day. The townsfolk connect all the dots.

Joash backing up his logic with a threat is a nice touch though.

3 Judges 6:33–40

*Then all the Midianites and Amalekites, the people of the East, gathered together; and they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. But the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon; then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites gathered behind him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, who also gathered behind him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and they came up to meet them.*

*So Gideon said to God, “If You will save Israel by my hand as You have said— look, I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said.” And it was so. When he rose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water. Then Gideon said to God, “Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more: Let me test, I pray, just once more with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew.” And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground.*

Everything’s going gangbusters. Even *the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon.*

Then suddenly he gets a case of the yips and asks the LORD for a confirming sign. Then he asks for another one. How can this be? Gideon is the greatest of the judges, a superstar in the annals of faith, and yet his faith isn’t up to the task.

This is normal, and there’s a great lesson in it. Gideon isn’t a Marvel Comics superhero; he’s a flesh-and-blood human being who is being called by God.

This is training.

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Like all great teachers, the LORD challenges His students and can push them to, or even beyond, their limits. Gideon is about to go into battle as the odds-on underdog. He’ll be vastly outnumbered.

But the LORD says that He’ll be with him. Great. It’ll be a piece of cake, right? Gideon can relax.

Ha! No one’s that cool. Gideon’s worried because he’s normal.

And God’s reaction to Gideon’s fretting shows that he’s not out of line. The LORD utters not a word of criticism for his lack of faith. He simply performs the confirming signs Gideon asked for.

This is exactly what Gideon needs. Despite all the other great and awesome things the LORD had done, Gideon’s not sure he’s got everything straight. (The plan does sound super far-fetched.)

God’s respect for that is one of the great lessons of scripture. He expects us to act like people. Yes, we’re sinful, and that can get annoying, but even when we’re at our best, we’re weak. Our faith flops around like a bass in a boat.

The takeaway is simple—be yourself. Don’t pretend to be some kind of super-saint, especially in prayer.

4 Judges 7:1–8

*Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the well of Harod, so that the camp of the Midianites was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley.*

*And the LORD said to Gideon, “The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’ Now therefore, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, ‘Whoever is fearful and afraid, let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead.’ ” And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained.*

*But the LORD said to Gideon, “The people are still too many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. Then it will be, that of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall go with you,’ the same shall go with you; and of whomever I say to you, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ the same shall not go.” So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, “Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself; likewise everyone who gets down on his knees to drink.” And the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people got down on their knees to drink water. Then the LORD said to Gideon, “By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the other people go, every man to his place.” So the people took provisions and their trumpets in their hands. And he sent away all the rest of Israel, every man to his tent, and retained those three hundred men. Now the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.*

The Hebrew idioms for how people drink water are confusing here. God wants only the few men who dip water with their cupped hands and then drink the water out of their hands. He doesn't want those who kneel down to drink directly from the source. The text mentions a dog lapping because the way people drink out of cupped hands looks like a dog lapping (though a dog has no hands and would have to drink directly from the source—not unlike the rejected group).

Curiously, this test has nothing to do with courage or fighting ability (unlike the initial winnowing of sending anyone who's fearful home). That's kind of the point. If God had gotten the army down to just the best of the best soldiers, victory might still seem possible. Instead, God rejects 97% of the remaining army based on a meaningless trait. Now, with only 300 soldiers, they're hopelessly outnumbered.

They were hopelessly outnumbered when they had 32,000.

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As we will see later there's a good reason to get the army down to only 300. God's plan is brilliant, but it breaks every known rule of military strategy. That's the lesson.

Our perspective is limited. We can't see what God is up to. Because of that, God's plans often don't make sense—or even seem totally nuts.

This will turn into a great example showing us how we only “*see through a glass darkly.*”

5 Judges 7:9–14

*It happened on the same night that the LORD said to him, “Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand. But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant, 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 outpost of the armed men who were in the camp. Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude.*

*And when Gideon had come, there was a man telling a dream to his companion. He said, “I have had a dream: To my surprise, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to a tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent collapsed.”*

*Then his companion answered and said, “This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp.”*

Gideon gets yet another shot of courage. He needs it, too. We know that because he takes Purah with him down to the camp. God specifically gave him that option when He said, *“But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant, and you shall hear what they say; and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.”*

What makes this such a great lesson isn’t just that God gave him that option; it’s that Gideon took it. He was honest enough with himself to choose door number 2—“I’m afraid.” A lot of guys are too macho to do that.

The benefits of being yourself with God are huge.

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*“Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own imagination.” — Franz Kafka*

The word *“necessarily”* is probably worth a whole DEEP all by itself, but let’s just zoom in on this hero thing. Gideon wants to be a hero just as much as anyone else, but he’s an exception to Kafka’s rule because he realizes he’s not there yet. That’s a super rare combination, but completely understandable in this case.

Imagine being in Gideon’s shoes. The plot is thickening so fast you can barely keep up. God is definitely in contact, and that’s thrilling, but He keeps asking you to do things no sane person would do. The phrase, *“Trust me,”* applies here, but even with God Himself in contact, you can’t just relax and trust. So, on top of everything else, you feel guilty about your lack of faith.

Of all the wonderful things about this experience, the best thing might be how humbling it is. No way are you going to be full of yourself. You are hanging on by your fingernails while you grow at light-speed.

Welcome to judge school. God is building a servant. He does that with us too.

But if you want this kind of life you have to ask for it. Are you ready? Willing?

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. When do conflicting priorities cross the line?
  
2. Why is logic such a frustratingly weak tool for leading people to Christ?
  
3. When are we least likely to be ourselves?
  
4. When have you seen something nuts work out brilliantly?
  
5. Why do we shrink from serious commitment?

*Items for prayer:*