



LOSING THE NEXT GENERATION

Judges 1:1—3:6

The faith that marked the Israelites under Joshua was soon lost, and the nation fell into apostasy. Israel's sad experience teaches us the importance of consistently walking with the Lord and diligently communicating our faith to the next generation.

We now begin our Wisdom Journey through the book of Judges. Both Jewish and Christian tradition credit Samuel the prophet with recording this history to pave the way for David's reign as king. This Old Testament book covers more than three hundred years in the life of the nation of Israel. Frankly, it's a nation given to sin and rebellion against God's word—and it sounds a lot like our world today.

The key verse in the book appears two times: in chapter 17 verse 6 and then again as the last verse of the book. It says it all: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The people all did their own thing. And that's God's diagnosis of this entire period of history.

The book of Judges is so named because God raises up one judge after another to serve as national leaders during this time.

But two major problems surface here almost immediately. The first is this: *Israel only partially obeyed God.*

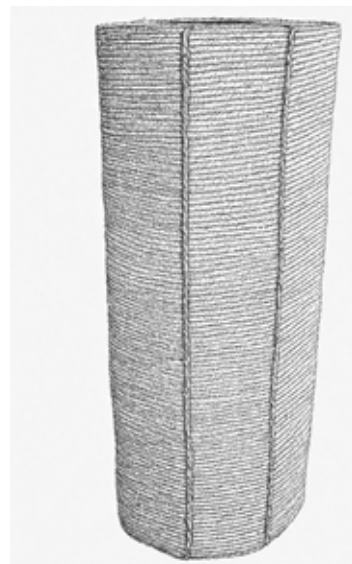
The conquest under Joshua years earlier had subdued the unrepentant nations in the land, but now it's up to each tribe to complete the victory and settle their own land inheritance from God. The book of Judges records their halfhearted obedience in this.

Let me tell you, beloved, here is a principle that still works to this day: partial obedience can lead you to total defeat.

Now at first, everything here seems successful, especially for the tribes of Judah and Simeon. Verse 4 of chapter 1 tells us:

Judah went up and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand, and they defeated 10,000 of them at Bezek.

But after Judah defeats them, we're told in verse 6 that they catch the Canaanite king and "cut off his thumbs and his big toes." This is the traditional way



Annals of Tiglath Pileser III from Nimrud



of making sure an enemy can't hold a sword or stand on his feet with any balance.

This kind of mutilation was typical among the pagans, but God had commanded His people to put these kings to death, not torture them.

Throughout chapter 1 we see troubling descriptions of partial obedience. For instance, in verse 19 we read:

[Judah] took possession of the hill country, but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron.

Judah doesn't have iron chariots, which was state-of-the-art military firepower. But the real problem here isn't Judah's lack of firepower; it's Judah's lack of faith!

And Judah isn't alone; in chapter 1 we read seven different references to Israel's partial obedience. Here are some examples:

Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean and its villages . . . the Canaanites persisted in dwelling in that land. (verse 27)

When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out completely. (verse 28)

And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, so the Canaanites lived . . . among them. (verse 29)

God has something to say about this in chapter 2, when the Angel of the Lord shows up to speak to the people. This is the Lord Himself in some physical manifestation, and He announces in verses 1-3:

"I brought you . . . into the land that I swore to give to your fathers.

. . . But you have not obeyed my voice. . . . I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you."

And let me tell you, the rest of the book of Judges is the fulfillment of this warning. These wicked nations indeed become "thorns" in the side of Israel.

After all the victories recorded in the book of Joshua, we are now entering a merry-go-round of defeat in the book of Judges. Why? First of all, it's because the Israelites did not completely obey God.

The second major problem we see here at the outset of Judges is that *Israel did not personally know God*. Notice verse 2:10:

And all of [Joshua's] generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.

They knew something *about* the Lord, but they didn't personally *know* the Lord.

Part of the challenge here is that this younger generation had not seen what God did in the days of Joshua. They had not seen the parting of the Jordan River or the collapsing of the walls of Jericho. In fact, they had never personally entrusted their lives to God. And the end result of that is revealed in verse 12: "And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers."

There's the problem—they abandoned the God *of their fathers*. He was their *fathers'* God, but He isn't *their* God. They can sing about the faith of their fathers, but it isn't their faith. Every generation has to make their own decision to follow God, and this generation isn't interested. And so, it's not long before they trade God in for Baal, the chief god of the Canaanites.

Now, as you encounter references to Baal here in this book, you might wonder why Baal worship was so



appealing. Why were the Israelites always running back to Baal?

Well, for starters, Baal was considered the god of fertility and life; he supposedly had a mistress named Ashtareth—sometimes called Astarte. The Canaanites believed the fertility of their crops and cattle and even people depended on the sexual union of Baal and Ashtareth.

So, Baal was worshiped, so to speak, by people going to these pagan temples and having sexual relations with temple prostitutes. They believed every act of fornication would encourage Baal and Ashtareth in their union and therefore produce fertility for them and their land. The religion of Baal justified immorality, so it's no wonder everybody was standing in line to get involved.

And how do you think God is going to respond to Israel? Verses 14-15 tell us: "The anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel . . . and they were in terrible distress."

They have made a mess of their lives. And who is going to remind them of what it means to follow the true and living God? God will graciously send them judges to fulfill this role. But let me ask you a personal question: Are *you* telling the next generation about the holiness and faithfulness of God?

I read the results of a survey that said the average father talks to his children less than five minutes a week, and "Do your homework" and "Pass the butter" didn't count. Imagine, less than five minutes in meaningful conversation per week.

Listen, it's going to take much more than five minutes a week to communicate the truth about God and what it means to live for Christ.

Tell your children and grandchildren what it's like for you to stand for Christ. You will be surprised at how interested they are. Tell them about the last office party you had to attend, when you refused to drink and carry on with the others, and you felt like you didn't fit in. That's going to matter so much to them as they are facing peer pressure at school or in their careers.

Frankly, we are always in danger of losing the next generation. Somebody has to tell them why God is worth following and what it looks like and feels like to walk with God.

That's exactly what God will do here for Israel. He's going to give them judges to lead the way. Verse 16 gives us a preview: "Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them."

How gracious God is! Though the first verses of chapter 3 tell us He will leave in the land the pagan people Israel failed to expel, He, too, is still present and working on behalf of His people.

Partial obedience is disobedience.
How has partial obedience robbed
you of joy and peace with God?
Which is typically the cause of your
partial obedience: ignorance, laziness,
rebellion or other? Why is it important
to name the causes of your partial
obedience?

In what ways are Leviticus 26:1-17 and
Judges 2:1-3 connected? How does
the connection provide you with an
encouraging understanding of who God
is and how He operates in the world?

How does Romans 10:14 impact your
thinking about your ministry to the
next generation of believers? How
does your personal testimony of faith
in Jesus help an unbeliever move from
just knowing about God to knowing
God? With whom is the LORD calling
you to share your testimony?

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USING THE UNLIKELY

Judges 3:7-31

God's work in this world is not reserved for "perfect" candidates. Instead, He uses people who, with all their flaws and shortcomings, are available for Him to use. Such people demonstrate, not their abilities, but God's power. Israel's first three judges are prime examples.

Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission in the 1800s, was a man of faith whom God used greatly. But Hudson Taylor once wrote, "God chose me because I was weak enough. He trains somebody to be quiet . . . and [small] enough, and then uses him."¹

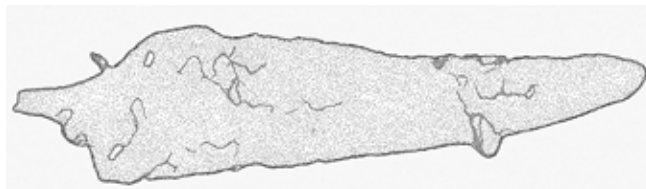
Average Christians today are often discouraged because they don't think they're the kind of Christians God can use. Well, journey with me through the book of Judges as we watch God use one judge after another—people who all have this in common: they are all ordinary, unlikely servants, but they're available for God to use.

Now when you picture these Old Testament judges, don't think of courtroom judges wearing long black robes, quiet and somber. No, they are more like cowboys riding into town with their six-shooters. Their primary function is to deliver the people from their enemies.

As we come to chapter 3, we encounter this repeating cycle we see throughout the book. Each cycle follows the course of sin and oppression, then repentance and deliverance. We enter the first cycle in verses 7-8, where we read:

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia.

In our last session, I explained that Baal was the chief Canaanite god. His name simply means "lord." But he is no lord at all. In chapter 2, Baal's mistress is Ashtareth; here in Judges 3 is another mistress, Asherah, or Asheroth, another pagan goddess. It was believed that Baal and Asherah would become sexually involved, and she would give birth to springtime. She was often symbolized by a carved pole standing



Bronze dagger from Megiddo



beside an altar to Baal. So, whenever you read that God's people cut down the Asherah, they were simply chopping down these wooden poles.

Israel has now become involved in the temple practices of sexual immorality that accompany the religion of Baal. And God hands them over to the king of Mesopotamia, who rules over them for eight years. His name here is *Cushan*, and attached to that is his nickname, *Rishathaim*; which means "double evil." How's that for a nickname? He's double trouble.

After eight years of oppression, the Israelites cry out in repentance, and the Lord responds by raising up a judge. Verse 9 tells us he is "Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother."

Verse 10 tells us:

The Spirit of the LORD was upon him . . . He went out to war, and the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand.

Israel then has "rest [for] forty years" (verse 11). Now, we have already encountered Othniel before in Scripture (Joshua 15:17; Judges 1:13). He's described as a courageous and faithful soldier; and that's exactly the kind of man we would expect God to use, right? He's got a great family background, he's courageous, and he has all the right connections.

And listen, God *can* use people like that! Don't be silenced by criticism that you are being used by God because you have all the right connections or because you come from a godly family. Just ignore the critics, and keep pressing on. But don't get too big for your britches either. Don't become proud and self-reliant. God isn't using you because of your connections; He's using you because of your commitment to Him.

Now after the death of Othniel, the cycle begins again:

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight

of the LORD, and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD. (verse 12)

This time the bad guy is the king of Moab; he's taken possession of Jericho—called in verse 13 the "city of palms"—and he's been tormenting Israel for the last eighteen years.

Israel finally cries out to God in verse 15, "and the LORD raised up for them a deliverer [and his name was] Ehud." We are told Ehud is a Benjamite. Up to this point, the tribe of Benjamin has not produced any heroic leaders. In fact, this tribe failed to drive out the enemies in their territory according to Judges chapter 1. So, it seems pretty unlikely that a national hero will come from Benjamin.

We're also told here in verse 15 that Ehud is left-handed. The Hebrew word translated "left-handed" is a compound word that means "defective in the right hand." Ehud was left-handed because he was evidently disabled in his right hand; we're not given any details about his disability. But we *are* told that Ehud goes to meet with this enemy king, and verse 16 states, "Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges . . . and he bound it on his right thigh under his clothes."

Ehud completes the mission, killing King Eglon when the two of them are alone, and then he leads the people of Israel to march against Moab. As a result, Israel wins back their freedom. Verse 30 says: "Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years."

Now don't miss this: Ehud had no family connections; he came from the wrong tribe, so to speak; he didn't have any experience; and he was in some way physically disabled. Yet God used him to deliver his people.

Beloved, what's your excuse? What is it about yourself that has convinced you that God can't use you? Remember this left-handed judge and offer your-



self—all your abilities and all your disabilities—to the Lord for His service.

*Offer yourself—all
your abilities and
all your disabilities
—to the Lord for
His service.*

Now there's one more judge named here in chapter 3. We meet him in verse 31: "Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel." There is just one verse about Shamgar, but this verse is loaded with clues about this unusual judge.

The first clue is his name, Shamgar. This is not a Hebrew name. He wasn't born into an Israelite family. In fact, his father's name here is Anath, and that gives us another clue. Anath was the name of the Canaanite goddess of sex and war. Shamgar's father and family were part of the Canaanite world of idolatry.

A third clue we're given about him is the weapon he uses to kill 600 Philistines—an oxgoad. This was a long wooden rod with a metal tip on one end to prod oxen that were pulling a plow; and on the other end was a sharp blade used for cleaning the plow. This was a common tool used by farmers in that day.

Evidently, Shamgar was an ordinary Canaanite farmer who converted to the God of Israel. Somewhere along the line, God's truth reached the heart of this

farm boy who had grown up in the home of unbelievers. He left his Canaanite world behind him and became a faithful judge in Israel.

Beloved, God doesn't depend on your pedigree or position; He isn't waiting for you to get stronger or smarter. Those are blessings God can use, but His work is not dependent on your resume. He's looking for people like Hudson Taylor—people who are weak enough and small enough to depend on Him alone.

As Martin Luther, the reformer, said, "God created the world out of nothing, and so long as we are nothing, He can make something out of us."

What do the cycles you see in the book of Judges tell you about the nature of people? What does God's response to them tell you about God? Why is it important to acknowledge you are vulnerable to living in the cycle that is destructive and rebellious?

What encouragement do the judgeships of Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar give you? How do their weaknesses or advantages help you see your own potential to serve the LORD? What "once unreachable" ministry might you now see God has prepared for you?

¹ John Pollock, *Hudson Taylor and Maria* (Zondervan, 1970), 125.





HOORAY FOR THE HOUSEWIVES

Judges 4-5

The era of the judges saw repeated episodes of apostasy and the drastic consequences of it. But God was not absent, and neither had faith completely disappeared. Deborah, Barak, and the people who followed them are a bright light in a very dark world.

Samuel Clemens, otherwise known as Mark Twain, gave a humorous piece of advice to parents back in the 1800s. He suggested that when children turn thirteen, you put them in a barrel and feed them through a hole; then when they turn sixteen, you plug up the hole! Well, I'm not recommending that, by the way.

But at this point in the book of Judges, you might expect God to go looking for a barrel for the children of Israel.

Judges chapter 4 begins with the Israelites rebelling against God again; and this time, the Lord allows Jabin, the king of Hazor, to defeat them and trouble them for some twenty years. He has an army equipped with nine hundred iron chariots under the command of his general, Sisera.

Humanly speaking, Israel is powerless. But remember, Israel's problem is never military weakness but spiritual waywardness. So, when Israel finally cries out in repentance to the Lord, God responds. Only this time, God doesn't raise up a warrior judge; He chooses a woman in Israel named Deborah.

We don't know a lot about Deborah, but we *are* told in verse 4 that she is a prophetess as well as a wife. She is what we would call today a housewife. That's not

a demeaning term at all; it happens to be the hardest job on the planet. On top of that, Deborah is serving as a judge in Israel; she's sitting under a palm tree



Locations and movements mentioned in Judges 4



rendering verdicts as the people of Israel bring cases to her (verse 5).

God leads her to recruit a general named Barak to lead Israel into battle against General Sisera and his iron chariots. But even though Deborah gives Barak God's guarantee of victory, his response is a little embarrassing. He says to Deborah in verse 8, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go."

He sounds more like a weakling than a warrior. And Deborah thinks so too. I can imagine her patting him on the helmet in verse 9 as she says:

"I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will [give] Sisera into the hand of a woman."

Even though Barak lacks courage, the people of Israel step up with courage and faith. In fact, let me take you through this chapter and give you some qualities we see in the people that are worth imitating today.

First of all, *the people volunteered without any hesitation*. Verse 10 says: "And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him." Ten thousand men immediately volunteered.

Deborah's song in chapter 5 reveals that men from the tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin also signed up, and verse 15 says men from Issachar "rushed at his heels." That means they couldn't wait to join the army. There was no ad campaign telling them how wonderful life would be in the army; it was more like, "If you want to risk your life against iron chariots, God will help you."

Now there were some tribes, unfortunately, who refused to get involved. After the battle, Deborah asks the tribe of Reuben in chapter 5 and verse 16, "Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds?" In other words, why did you just sit there and do nothing?

In verse 17 she says, "Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan." That means the tribes of Gad and Manasseh did not keep their promise to cross the Jordan and help the other tribes when they went into battle (Numbers 32:31). Deborah says here also, "And why did [Dan] stay with the ships? Asher sat still at the coast of the sea."

This is a roll call of shame. And by the way, in days to come, the tribe of Asher will have no significant impact on the history of Israel, the tribe of Dan will nosedive into apostasy, and the tribes of Gad and Manasseh will be overrun.

Listen beloved, when you refuse to serve others, you will shrivel up spiritually. You might not be put in a barrel and fed through a hole, but you will be living in a closed-up little world where everything revolves around you. You don't want to live like that. You want to live like these Israelites who volunteered without any hesitation.

*Listen beloved,
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spiritually.*

Secondly, *they trusted God without any explanation*. The Israelites who signed up didn't have all the answers; they just followed God.

And here's what happened next—back to Judges chapter 4 and verse 15:

The LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. And Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot.



The Lord did this! And we are given a clue *how* He did it in Deborah's song of victory over in chapter 5 and verse 21: "The torrent Kishon swept [the enemy army] away."

God evidently used a flood to mire down the wheels of these iron chariots in the mud, and then they were swept away in the rushing water. Oh, and by the way, their god, Baal, was supposed to be in control of storms.

Well, General Sisera jumps out of his chariot and runs for his life. He stumbles into the tent of another housewife by the name of Jael. Here in verses 18-21 of chapter 4, she pretends to welcome him. She even feeds him and gives him a glass of milk to drink. He falls asleep, and she takes his life while he's sleeping.

God uses two housewives and an army of volunteers to bring about a great victory. They volunteered without any hesitation and trusted God without any explanation. Thirdly, *they gave God the credit without any reservation*. Deborah's song of victory in chapter 5 begins and ends with the glory and power of God.

Now you might wonder why God put these volunteers through all this trouble. Why did they have to rush down a mountainside into the face of iron chariots, only to have God rescue them at the last moment by a flood?

Beloved, following God doesn't erase the challenges. God is not just interested in delivering you; He is interested in developing you. We are called to strap on the armor of God every day and stand for Christ; and that means when you get knocked down from time to time, you get back up, you get back in the battle, and you walk with Christ with even greater humility and trust.

A zookeeper named Gary Richmond wrote a book about his experiences that offered some spiritual

analogies. On one occasion he had the privilege of watching a giraffe give birth at the zoo. Mother giraffes deliver their offspring while standing up. As Richmond watched, the baby dropped to the ground and lay there a while; then the mother kicked it. And with that, the newborn giraffe struggled to stand up on its wobbly legs. No sooner had it gained some balance and the mother kicked it again, sending it sprawling to the ground. Gary asked, "Why'd she do that?" The nearby veteran zookeeper explained that in the wild, a newborn giraffe is easy prey to wild animals. The mother knows her baby needs to immediately join the herd. It needs to remember how to stand up. ¹

And beloved, that's my prayer for you as God continues to develop you, rather than immediately deliver you from the storms of life.

Barak is mentioned in Hebrews 11:32 as an example of faith. How does Matthew 17:20 help you understand why he's listed among the faithful? Why should the object of your faith be your primary concern as you walk with God?

What challenges are you facing today? How can you see God using these challenges in your spiritual development? How can God use your story to draw an unbeliever to Himself? Who in your life might be encouraged in their own faith by your story?

¹ Gary Richmond, *A View from the Zoo* (W Publishing Group, 1987), 16-17.

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PUTTING AWAY THE FLEECE

Judges 6

Gideon was an unlikely hero—fearful and hesitant to obey the Lord. We are much like Gideon, but his experience reminds us that God’s work is not dependent on our abilities but His. He can and will use us if we step out in simple faith and follow Him in spite of our fears.

Evangelist D. L. Moody was used tremendously for the Lord during the late 1800s. But if you had met him in his early years, you would never have imagined he would have a global impact for Christ.

In fact, when he was eighteen years old, he went to the deacons of a church to apply for church membership. Following the interview, the deacons made him go through a year of biblical instruction because he knew so little about God’s Word. The following year he was interviewed again and was allowed to join, but with reservations from the deacons. He seemed an unlikely candidate for God’s service, but God would use him in a mighty way.

As we arrive at Judges chapter 6, there is no one less likely to be useful to God than a man named Gideon. He was an ordinary man, but he was available to God. And as my mother used to tell me, the greatest ability is availability.

As chapter 6 opens, that old cycle of sin and discipline starts all over again. In verse 1 we read:

The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years.

The Midianites didn’t overrun the land; they just waited until the harvest and then swept across the Jordan River and stole Israel’s crops. Finally, after seven years of this, the Israelites cry out to the Lord.

And God calls an ordinary man to become Israel’s deliverer. Verse 11 takes us to that moment, and we read: “Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites.” This work was normally done at a threshing floor, a flat area near the wheatfield. But Gideon is separating the wheat from the chaff by hand at a *winepress*. And that’s because



Camel raiders being pursued by Assyrian troops



this will be the last place a Midianite will come looking for grain.

And the Angel of the Lord (the Lord Himself) appears in some angelic form and says to Gideon here in verse 12, “The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.” Gideon doesn’t look much like a mighty man of valor, does he?

But the Lord adds in verse 14, “Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?” God is promising victory here, not on the basis of Gideon’s power, but through God’s presence.

Later that same night, the Lord commands Gideon to pull down the local altar of Baal and burn the Asherah—that is, a wooden pole representing Asherah, the mistress of Baal—and build an altar for the Lord (verses 25-26). Essentially, Gideon will be declaring war on Baal.

By the way, Gideon will be doing this in his own backyard. According to verse 25, this altar to Baal belongs to his own father. It is there on the family farm. And Gideon is so afraid of what will happen, we’re told in verse 27: “Because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night.”

He did it in the middle of the night. But don’t be too hard on him; sometimes the hardest place to represent the Lord is in front of unbelieving family members and neighbors. Maybe you have discovered that it’s easier to share the gospel with perfect strangers than with your own parents.

Let me show you three results from Gideon’s obedience to God.

First, *the entire city explodes in anger*. When the villagers discover what has happened, they demand that Joash, Gideon’s father, turn his son over to them. They say: “Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has broken down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it” (verse 30).

Note the irony here: *Israelites* want to kill Gideon for removing an altar to Baal. This shows how far Israel has fallen spiritually.

The second result is that *Gideon’s father takes a stand*. Verse 31 says:

Joash said to all who stood against him, “Will you contend [fight] for Baal? . . . If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down.”

Joash has been the shrine keeper of Baal all these years, but now he defends his son’s actions. He knows Gideon is right; he also knows this is something he should have done years ago.

The third result is that *Gideon’s reputation is established*. In verse 32 he is given a nickname: “Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal.” Jerubbaal means “Baal contender,” the man who fights against Baal.

Now it’s going to take more than a nickname to defeat the Midianites. That is why we read in verse 34 that wonderful phrase, “The Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon.” Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Gideon blows a trumpet, and people gather to him and prepare for battle.

But Gideon is still afraid; in fact, he has some serious doubts about all this. He’s not a warrior; he’s a farmer. So, he goes back to the Lord in verses 37-38 and says:

“Behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, 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 next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water.

Well, that settles it, right? Not quite. You see, God had already promised Gideon victory. When you’re



doubting the word God has already spoken, putting out a fleece won't bring peace of mind.

So, Gideon goes back to God and reverses the test in verse 39, asking that the fleece stay dry this time while the ground gets wet. And God graciously responds again.

Now I don't have to tell you how popular Gideon's practice is to this day. Many Christians use a "fleece" to try to determine God's will. "Lord, if the phone rings tonight at eight o'clock, I'll take option number 1; and if it doesn't, I'll take option number 2."

This isn't trusting God; it's testing God. We're not trusting Him to lead us; we just want an answer, and we want it now.

Beloved, laying out a fleece doesn't develop your faith; it distracts your faith. Gideon's fleece had nothing to do with God's word; God had already delivered His promise of victory.

Now, let's be honest; we all suffer the same weakness as Gideon. We all want answers; we want some sign of encouragement or direction. Why? Because our faith is weak.

Have you ever thought about the fact that the Lord has already promised to take care of you and lead you and direct you and eventually take you home? God's Word says:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him [put Him first] and he will make straight your paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

Let's not test the Lord; let's trust the Lord, each step of the way.

And along the way, let me recommend you keep that fleece stored away in the attic. Instead, pray for wisdom, get counsel from wise believers, discuss options with your spouse, consider your hidden motives, and above all, saturate your mind with the Word of God and trust His promises.

In these "cycles of sin," Israel toils many years in oppression before calling out to the Lord. What truths does this reveal about the human heart? What does this reveal about our covenant-keeping God?

In what ways does "The LORD is with you" make "O mighty man [woman] of valor" a reality? How does this reality encourage you as you consider your ministry opportunities alongside your shortcomings, failures, and weaknesses?

How does Matthew 4:7 address your own testing of God? Describe the role Satan and your flesh play in your "laying out a fleece" for God? How does a "working knowledge" of God's promises set a hedge against "fleecing" God?

¹ James Hewett, ed., *Illustrations Unlimited* (Tyndale, 1988), 48.





NO ROOM FOR HEROES

Judges 7:1–8:21

Sometimes we need to be reminded that we aren't in control. The Lord would give Gideon and Israel victory, but it would not be an impressive victory against great odds; it would be an amazing victory against impossible odds—a victory that could be attributed to God alone.

God's work never depends on impressive people. He doesn't depend on celebrities. And as we arrive at Judges chapter 7, it appears Gideon is surrounded by too many celebrities and not enough servants in his army.

Now from their encampment, they can see the Midianite army in the valley. The Midianites are described here in verse 12 as being "like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number." Over in chapter 8 and verse 10, we're told the Midianite army has 135,000 soldiers, while Gideon leads 32,000.

This is why the Lord's announcement in verse 2 of chapter 7 is so shocking:

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.'"

The problem isn't the size of the Midianite army—the problem is the size of the Israelite ego! Even though the Israelites are greatly outnumbered, God knows

they will pat themselves on the back after winning the battle.

By the way, if our victories in life make us swell up with pride, then being victorious is more dangerous than being defeated. Jesus didn't say to us, "Apart from me you can do *something*." No, He said, "Apart from me you can do *nothing*" (John 15:5).

So, God tells Gideon to release any soldiers who are frightened, and 22,000 of them go home, leaving 10,000 soldiers to fight the Midianites.

But then the Lord says to Gideon, "Your army is still too big, so take them down to the water and give them a test." Verse 5 tells us:



Hill of Moreh



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.”

Well, more than 9,000 soldiers kneel down, which implies they’re taking their eyes off the enemy. But 300 soldiers crouch down to scoop water into their hands, keeping their eyes alert and ready.

And the Lord says here in verse 7 that Gideon’s army is going to be made up of these 300 men—300 Israelite soldiers against an army of 135,000!

And here’s a rather interesting battle plan as Gideon rallies his troops:

He divided the 300 men into three companies and put trumpets into the hands of all of them and empty jars, with torches inside the jars. And he said to them . . . “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.’” (verses

16-18)

In verse 19, the Bible says they’re going to do all this at the beginning of the middle watch—that’s between 10:00 p.m. and midnight—and that’s the perfect time to create confusion.

So, on Gideon’s signal, the men blow their trumpets of rams’ horns, and they smash the clay jars in their

hands. This does two things. First, it exposes the light of their torches, making it appear the Midianite camp is surrounded by a vast army. Second, it makes a loud crashing noise, which sounds like soldiers fighting; this sound probably stampedes the livestock, creating even more chaos. The pandemonium of shattering jars and yelling and torches all around the camp terrifies the Midianite soldiers, who turn on one another in their confusion.

Gideon’s men just stand in place! Don’t miss this—there’s not one Israelite soldier carrying a sword. What an unforgettable lesson: you can’t be too small for God to use, but you can be too big.

In verse 24, Gideon asks the tribe of Ephraim to cut off the remaining Midianites’ escape at the Jordan River. They respond and end up catching and executing some Midianite leaders in the final verses of chapter 7.

Now most Christians know all about Gideon’s 300, but few know about the serious threat to Israel’s unity that takes place next. Following their victory, you would expect Israel to celebrate. But chapter 8 and verse 1 tells us the tribe of Ephraim is offended that they were left out of the military campaign, and they want to know why.

We must understand that this disunity has been developing over many years. Ephraim was the most prominent tribe in Israel; this was Joshua’s tribe, and the tabernacle is currently at Shiloh, within their borders. Ephraim had assisted Judge Ehud in chapter 3 and Judge Barak in chapter 5. They’re the most famous tribe around—they’re the celebrity tribe. But now they have missed the spotlight here with Gideon, and their damaged pride threatens to divide Israel.

Gideon could have told them to go jump in the lake. But instead, he answers them with graciousness and tact, which is what is needed in times of hurt feelings and divisiveness.

He answers them in verse 2, “What have I done now in comparison with you?” He’s not just flattering them; he’s telling the truth. He didn’t really do anything more than blow a trumpet and hold up a torch.



He says further in verse 3: “God has given into your hands the princes of Midian . . . What have I been able to do in comparison with you?” Gideon is reminding them that he had not fought in hand-to-hand combat like they had. But Gideon also puts the focus where it belongs. Notice he says here, “*God* has given [them] into your hands.” Listen, God is the only one who deserves the spotlight. God should be the only celebrity in your life.

Now with that settled, a second problem arises as Gideon and his men pursue the remainder of the Midianite army across the Jordan River and through the territory belonging to the Israelite tribe of Gad. Verse 4 says, “The 300 men who were with him were

*Disunity and
disloyalty are
dangerous enemies
of God’s people.*

exhausted, yet pursuing.”

So, when they arrive at Succoth, Gideon asks these leaders of the tribe of Gad for some much-needed food. And if you can believe it, the leaders refuse. They are actually afraid to take a stand with Gideon.

Gideon moves on to the next town, and they do the same thing. So, Gideon tells them, “When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower” (verse 9). In other words, he’s going to punish them for refusing to help. And the verses following in Judges chapter 8 tell us that’s exactly what he did.

To this day, beloved, disunity and disloyalty are dangerous enemies of God’s people. Ego and pride have ruined many congregations in our world today. Frankly, Christians today can act like the tribes of

Ephraim and Gad and show little interest in the welfare of their brethren. Too often they refuse to stand for truth and righteousness.

What do you do when that philosophy professor asks your college class, “Is anybody in here foolish enough to believe the Bible?” Do you remain quiet? Or when your business associates invite you to golf on Sunday morning, do you tell them you’re going to sleep in, or do you tell them that you’re going to church? When other believers experience difficulties, do you lend a hand or ignore them?

Let’s remember what it means to stand together as brothers and sisters in Christ, protecting the unity of the church family, and helping and encouraging one another along the way.

Look at the heart-attitude of Jonathan illustrated in 1 Samuel 14:1-6. How is the Lord trying to develop this in Israel with Gideon’s victory? In ministry, believers can often feel insignificant by their resources or perceived potential. What should our heart-attitudes be?

Recall a time when your body was exhausted, yet your heart pressed you to pursue God’s will to the end. How might that story encourage an exhausted fellow believer? How can such a story give an unbeliever hope that God is worth pursuing?

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FAILURE IN THE FINAL LAP

Judges 8:22–9:57

A good start and past successes do not guarantee a good end. God greatly used Gideon, but Gideon greatly failed God in the end. His life and sad end serve as a warning that we must remain ever diligent in our walk with the Lord and never let our guard down.

Someone once told me that the weather was so cold where he lived that a local politician was caught with his hands in his *own* pockets. Now I'm not against politicians—I'm praying for them—and frankly, I wouldn't want their difficult job. But I'm al-

ways concerned about political and religious leaders who don't live the way they should.

Gideon is one of those leaders who started out so well as an amazing judge and leader, but sadly, he's going to trip up, so to speak, in the final chapter of his life. God gives us the account here in the Bible because He evidently wants to warn us all to stay on track—all the way to the finish line.

We are now in Judges chapter 8, where Gideon and his 300 men have seen God defeat the Midianites. And what happens next is *not* surprising. The people want to crown Gideon as their king. Verse 22 says:

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us . . . for you have saved us from the hand of Midian."

Now wait a second—Gideon didn't save them. God saved them miraculously. But let me tell you, you will not find one word of thanksgiving to God in this entire chapter. Instead, the people want Gideon to establish the first royal dynasty in Israel. Note their words in verse 22 again: "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also."



Statue of a deity (El)



Gideon's response, by the way, is outstanding. He says, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you." This nation is to be governed by God, not Gideon.

Now if we could close the biography of Gideon with his answer here, it would make a terrific ending. The problem is, Gideon keeps talking—and this marks the beginning of a downward spiral in his life.

And Gideon said to them, "Let me make a request of you: every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil." . . . And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil. And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold. (verses 24-26)

That is about 800 ounces of gold, worth well over a million dollars. Gideon is no longer a poor farmer like he was six months earlier; he's now a rich man.

There's nothing wrong with being rich, but it's been shown time and time again throughout history that adversity is spiritually safer than prosperity.

But Gideon's motive here isn't greed for gold but for influence. Verse 27 tells us what Gideon did with this gold:

Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.

The ephod was very significant in Israelite worship. It was fashioned like an apron, and it was worn over the outer garments of the high priest.

Gideon makes an imitation ephod out of gold and starts playing the role of high priest. But why? Well, we can put some clues together.

First, the priesthood is corrupt and ineffective at this time. Nowhere in the entire book of Judges do you read of a high priest leading the people in worship.

Second, the tabernacle, the central place of worship, is located in Shiloh, in the territory of Ephraim. We saw in our last study that there is a lot of bad blood between Gideon and the tribe of Ephraim.

Third, Gideon evidently assumes that since he is the one God has spoken to in the past, he is the one God will speak through in the future.

Gideon just takes it one step further and begins to play high priest. He moves worship services from Ephraim to his own hometown.

According to God's Word in Exodus 28, only the descendants of Aaron can wear the ephod and serve as high priest. So, Gideon effectively creates a rival priesthood at a rival location. He might have been sincerely motivated, but he was still sincerely wrong.

People in authority can get tripped up by thinking that they are a special case and can live by a different set of rules. The truth is, leaders *do* have something special—they have a special *responsibility* to follow God because of their special *influence*.

So, what does God do to Gideon here? Verse 28 might surprise you:

So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more. And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon.

God doesn't do anything. There is no thunder from heaven, no bolt of lightning to judge Gideon and this false worship. Instead, Israel has peace for forty years.

But let me tell you something: just because God is silent when we sin doesn't mean God is sleeping.

In Gideon's case, there are no *immediate* consequences, but they do arrive. For one thing, the door is now open for *national* idolatry. Skip ahead to verse 33 and



note what happens forty years after Gideon started this rival worship: “As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made [him] their god.”

They are already worshiping the wrong way, under the wrong high priest, in the wrong place; and as soon as Gideon dies, they just completely abandon God. This is national idolatry.

Second, there is *personal* compromise. As he grows older, Gideon becomes more and more sinful. We read in verse 30: “Now Gideon had seventy sons . . .

*Don't be fooled by
clear skies over a life
of sin. God will have
the last word.*

for he had many wives.” Gideon is living the lifestyle of a Canaanite king, not an Israelite judge.

What happens when you disobey God's Word? You follow your own word, your own feelings, reasoning, and desires. You become the authority in your own life. It's either God or you.

Verse 31 tells us Gideon even has a concubine over in Shechem; a concubine is a mistress. So, Gideon has dozens of wives, but he keeps a woman in Shechem too, and she bears him a son. But this isn't just any son. The text tells us in verse 31 Gideon “called his name Abimelech.”

Abimelech means “my father is king.” Remember, forty years earlier Gideon answered, “I will not rule over you; I'm not going to start a family dynasty. I'm not the king; God is your king.” Well look at him now forty years later: “I really am the king, and Abimelech will be the start of my royal dynasty.”

With this last entry in his biography, verse 32 tells us Gideon dies. But the consequences of his sin keep rolling in. Along with compromise and idolatry, Judges chapter 9 records the mass murder of Gideon's seventy sons, killed by—guess who—Abimelech. He is not about to have any rivals to his throne. Chapter 9 informs us that Abimelech will reign as king for three years until he's killed in battle, and that wipes out the dynasty of Gideon.

Eventually, the heavens *did* thunder and God *did* bring judgment. The world today thinks God doesn't exist or He doesn't really care because the sun is still shining. Don't be fooled by clear skies over a life of sin. God will have the last word.

If you're a believer, let Gideon's biography warn you to stay on the path. Don't get sidetracked by power or greed or moral compromise. Just remember that Gideon began wonderfully but ended tragically. Run your race—all the way to the finish line.

Why is acknowledging the Lord as
your King, while being personally
praised, such a challenge at times?
What are the benefits to you of daily
acknowledging the Lord as your King?
What habits or attitudes are you
pursuing today that are hindering
your desire to acknowledge the LORD
as your King?

Have you mistaken God's silence
as His acceptance in any areas of
your life? How does Numbers 32:23
dissuade you from falling for that lie?
What role does God's word have in
“breaking God's silence” in your life?

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SURPRISING GRACE

Judges 10:1–11:11

God's grace shines brightest against the backdrop of human failure. Jephthah was rejected by his own people and had no reason to help them. Yet God's surprising and gracious choice of Jephthah allowed him to deal graciously with those who had rejected him.

Following the death of Gideon's son Abimelech, God reminds Israel that it isn't His plan for them to have an earthly king at this time. In fact, after Abimelech's death, Israel is going to experience several decades of peace under the leadership of two different judges.

Now in Judges chapter 10, verse 1 introduces us to Tola. He's from the tribe of Issachar, and he's going to serve as judge for twenty-three years. We're also told that Tola "arose to save Israel," which indicates some kind of military victory, although we are not given the details.

In verse 3, Jair takes the reins of leadership, and he's from Gilead, east of the Jordan River. For twenty-two years he will judge Israel. We're told in verse 4, "He had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had [ruled] thirty cities." This would be like saying today that Jair has thirty sons who drive thirty Rolls-Royces and are the mayors of thirty cities. This is quite a wealthy and powerful family.

The good news is there's no mention of rebellion in Israel during this time. God in His grace sent these two men to lead Israel, and God gave the nation peace and stability.

But following the death of Jair, that old cycle of sin and rebellion returns. We read these familiar words beginning in verses 6-7:



Collection of Millstones

The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him. So the anger of the LORD was



kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites.

The Philistines and the Ammonites will oppress Israel for eighteen years, until they finally cry out to the Lord. But the Lord gives them a cold shoulder with these words in verses 13-15:

“You have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress.” And the people of Israel said to the LORD, “We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you.”

Verse 16 then adds: “They put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD.”

And with that, we can determine they were genuinely confessing their sin. False confession tells God what He ought to do; genuine confession submits to whatever God decides to do. False confession keeps on sinning; true confession results in turning away from sin.

When they turn back to the Lord, He sends them a new judge to lead them out of trouble. That judge’s name is Jephthah. He will become one of the most colorful, outspoken, and unlikely of Israel’s judges. In fact, his resume is a testimony to God’s grace, and I believe this is what God is highlighting in these chapters.

Chapter 11 opens with his background:

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead

was the father of Jephthah. And Gilead’s wife also bore him sons. And when his wife’s sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, “You shall not have an inheritance in our father’s house, for you are the son of another woman.” (verses 1-2)

These verses are enough to make a self-righteous Israelite shudder. Surely there’s no way God is going to use this kind of man to lead Israel—he has at least three strikes against him.

Strike number one: He is the illegitimate son of a prostitute. His father, Gilead, was unfaithful and paid a dear price for his sin, and Jephthah is never going to live it down.

Strike number two: He is rejected by his family. His half-brothers hate him, and I can imagine Gilead’s wife also resents him. Their home seems to be a battleground.

In fact, we are told that when his half-brothers drive him away from home, his father doesn’t offer any support. Verse 7 reveals that even the elders of Israel are involved in wanting Jephthah to leave town. He’s an embarrassment to both this leading family and the community. So, Jephthah is run out of town.

Verse 3 tells us: “Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him.” The Hebrew word for “worthless” does not mean poor or uneducated, but unprofitable. Evidently Jephthah surrounds himself with evil young men from the back alleys of life.

And that leads me to *strike number three:* Jephthah essentially becomes the leader of a gang. This region of Tob was a gathering place for criminals on the run.

Jephthah was unloved and unwanted by everyone except other young men who also were unloved and unwanted! He had grown up being told he was



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decides to do.*

worthless, so he makes his home with other young men who may have been told the same lie.

But let me tell you something about the grace of God. God isn't limited by a shady past, or sinful parents, or social standing.

When God chooses Jephthah, this is His way of telling you that nobody needs to be a prisoner of their past. No matter how many strikes you have against you, God's grace can wipe the slate clean. The apostle Paul put it this way: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Now look at what happens next. The elders from Gilead suddenly are desperate for a courageous leader. So, they hop on a stagecoach and ride out to Tob and say to Jephthah, "Come and be our leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites" (verse 6).

These are the same guys who kicked Jephthah out of town! He responds in verse 7: "Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?"

But then, amazingly, Jephthah says, "If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your [leader]" (verse 9).

He chooses to help those who had refused to help him. His gang members probably think he's crazy. How in the world can Jephthah forgive them for the

pain they had caused him? We are actually given the answer in verse 11:

*So Jephthah went with the elders
of Gilead, and the people made
him head and leader over them.
And Jephthah spoke all his words
before the LORD at Mizpah.*

Although everyone had abandoned him, Jephthah knew God had not. Somehow, through all he suffered, he knew that whatever he was and wherever he had been, God had not forgotten him.

Look, no matter who you are—no matter what your past, no matter how desperate, no matter how sinful—Jesus died for you. By His grace, when you turn to Him in faith, He will not only forgive you and save you but also will empower you to serve Him. He will enable you to move beyond your past and say with Jephthah, "If God does something in and through my life, it will be for one reason only—to demonstrate God's amazing grace."

*To what of Jephthah's life can
you relate? Why are negative
life situations not automatic
disqualifications for useful ministry?
What encouragement do you find in
this?*

*How you relate to Jephthah's
interactions with his former enemies?
How can your story become healing
and hope to another hurting believer?
How might an unbeliever see God
when you, through grace, offer
forgiveness to someone?*

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CROSS YOUR HEART AND HOPE TO DIE

Judges 11:12–12:15

If we really believe God's Word is final and He is trustworthy, we will not seek to manipulate Him with our vows. We will simply trust Him and obey His instructions. Jephthah's failure to fully trust the Lord's promise led to his being caught in his own trap.

The Bible introduces us to God. Through this inspired book, God reveals who He is. Now, the Bible doesn't tell us everything about God, but it does tell us everything we need to know about God—enough to walk with Him and trust Him. As we continue our study in the book of Judges, we're going to watch Jephthah, the judge, make an unwise decision instead of trusting the Lord.

We are in Judges chapter 11, where Jephthah is offering peace to the enemy nation of Ammonites. He gives them a little history lesson on why Israel had a divine right to their land—the land of God's promise. Well, the Ammonite king is not interested, and a war between them begins to brew.

As the battle approaches, Jephthah knows he needs the Lord's help. But instead of trusting the Lord, he makes a foolish vow. If you want to know the truth of the matter, this is nothing more than a spiritual bribe to get a guarantee from God.

Jephthah says to God:

"If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my

house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering."

(verses 30-31)

Now making vows isn't necessarily wrong. In fact, vows are mentioned throughout the Old Testament. But Jephthah's vow comes from a lack of faith; Jephthah doesn't believe God's promise can be trusted. He says here in verse 30, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand."



Wadi es_Sir between the Arnon and Jabbok Rivers



The problem is that God already had said He would do this. Let me say this, beloved: God is faithful to His promises whether you make a vow to Him or not. *You* might not keep a promise, but God always does.

You might remember from our last study that Jephthah's father was an unfaithful man. He didn't keep his wedding vows to his wife. Later on, he wouldn't defend Jephthah from his half brothers and the elders of Gilead so that Jephthah was driven into exile. Frankly, Jephthah's father was an untrustworthy man who didn't keep his word.

A young person's view of God is greatly influenced in the formative years of life by his or her father's character. The way a father keeps his word will shape that child's view of whether or not God is going to keep His word.

I had the privilege of growing up with godly parents. I couldn't imagine my parents telling a lie. I knew I could trust their word, and that helped shape my view of my trustworthy heavenly Father.

I'm not defending Jephthah here; I'm trying to understand him. His father could not be trusted; the elders of Gilead could not be trusted. And Jephthah now doesn't think God can be trusted.

But Jephthah isn't alone in his perspective. Many people today think God can be bribed by good deeds or church attendance. They think His promises are for sale—send in a little money, and God will make sure you get promoted at work.

My friend, God cannot be bought or manipulated. You don't pay Him off to keep His word.

I remember as a kid out on the playground, it was one thing for somebody to make you a promise, but if you *really* wanted to make that person's promise to you binding, you would say, "Cross your heart and hope to die?" I mean that proved you were serious! I wonder if we try to get God to "cross His heart and hope to die" because we don't fully trust Him.

Well, just as God promised Jephthah, verse 32 tells us that "the LORD gave them into his hand," and in

verse 33, "the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel."

Jephthah has vowed to offer as a burnt offering the first thing that runs out of his house when he comes home from battle. He assumes it will be a goat or a chicken or, better yet, one of the household cats—which would be fine with me!

*I wonder if we try
to get God to "cross
His heart and hope
to die" because we
don't fully trust Him.*

But verse 34 informs us that it isn't a goat or a chicken or a cat, but his only child—his daughter. And Jephthah is devastated.

Now there are a lot of opinions on whether or not Jephthah actually offered his daughter to God as a burnt offering, and since I can't list all those opinions here, I will just give you the *right* one. Let me start by giving you four reasons why Jephthah did *not* literally sacrifice his daughter to God.

First, God's law condemned human sacrifice. If you're thinking maybe Jephthah didn't know God's law, verses 37 and 38 tell us there was a two-month delay before he fulfilled this vow. In that time, the elders surely would have told him that God would not accept this kind of sacrifice.

Second, the tragedy described here is Jephthah's loss of future children, not the death of his daughter. Verse 34 says:

*Then Jephthah came to his
home at Mizpah. And behold,
his daughter came out to meet*



him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter.

The emphasis is on the fact that she is the only hope he has for grandchildren and a family legacy in Israel.

Third, Jephthah's daughter does not weep over losing her life but over never being able to marry. She says to her father in verse 37, “Leave me alone two months that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity.” She’s not weeping over being sacrificed on an altar; she’s weeping over the fact that she will not get married and have children of her own.

Now I personally believe that Jephthah’s vow is going to be fulfilled by dedicating her to God for tabernacle service for the rest of her life. You might remember that Hannah does this with her son, Samuel. Jephthah’s daughter will serve in the tabernacle at Shiloh, and Jephthah will seldom, if ever, see her again.

There’s one more reason I believe this is what happened. We are told in verse 40 that “the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah.” The Hebrew word for “lament” can be translated “commune,” or “talk with.” This verse says they went every year to Shiloh, to spend time communing—talking with—Jephthah’s daughter.

Unfortunately, Jephthah’s foolish decisions are not over. In Judges chapter 12, those angry Ephraimites show up again to cause trouble. They are angry that Jephthah did not invite them along in the victory march against the Ammonites. They’re so angry that in verse 1 they say, “We will burn your house over you with fire.” They’re so angry, they want to kill him!

And Jephthah responds like that old gangster he had been back in the land of Tob. He attacks them and drives them back across the Jordan River, killing many of them along the way. This brings a sad ending to what should have been a time of celebration, following their victory over the Ammonites.

Jephthah will serve for six years in Israel until he dies. At the end of chapter 12, we are given the names of three little-known judges who followed him. Very few details are given about them.

The primary lesson here is that we need to trust the Lord when He makes a promise. He never breaks His promises. We don’t need to bribe Him or manipulate Him; we simply need to obey Him and trust Him.

How can intentionally studying and applying God’s word help you avoid destructive beliefs? Why is assuming God can be bribed so offensive to Him? How does your “bribing” God hinder an unbeliever’s understanding of the gospel?

Over many decades, Israel is now killing their own. What does this teach about the danger of “Everyone doing what was right in his own eyes?” How does active accountability in a bible teaching church helpful to avoid this danger?

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THE MAN WHO HAD IT MADE

Judges 13–14

Samson is undoubtedly the best known of Israel's judges. He was blessed with godly parents and Spirit-given strength to deliver his people from oppression. Yet from the very beginning this strongman demonstrated some troubling weaknesses.

When people today think of Samson, they typically think of a man with long hair and superhero strength—a heavyweight champion who was knocked out by a featherweight named Delilah. But there is much more to learn from his biography here in the book of Judges.

Before Samson is even introduced, an entire chapter is devoted to his mother and father—and that's where we begin today, in Judges chapter 13, and verse 1:

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.

The Philistines oppressed Israel longer than any other nation during the days of the judges. But God was behind this nightmare. This was God's discipline on the rebellious people of Israel, who had abandoned Him. Even the religious leaders and priests in Israel had become immoral and corrupt.

Against this dark setting, we're introduced to a faithful Israelite couple here in verses 2-3:

There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. And his wife was barren and had no children. And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman



Sumerian statue of a man with a goat for sacrifice



and said to her, “Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son.”

In the next few verses, the woman is instructed to raise her son as a Nazirite. According to Numbers 6, a Nazirite was separated to God’s service and marked by not drinking wine, not cutting his hair, and not touching a corpse.

She runs to tell her husband, Manoah, the news, and he asks the Lord for more information (verse 8). The Angel of the Lord shows up again and repeats his message.

This Angel is a theophany—a visible, physical manifestation of the Lord. In verse 17, Manoah asks the angel what his name is, and the Lord answers in verse 18: “Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?” This is the wonderful Counselor! “Wonderful” could be translated “incomprehensible.” This is the incomprehensible Creator.

When the Lord ascends upward in the smoke of their burnt offering (verse 20), Manoah is pretty sure he and his wife are going to die, having seen the Lord (verse 22). I love his wife’s reassuring words in verse 23; she sort of pats him on the arm and says, “If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands.”

All this introductory information about Sampson’s parents is a testimony of faith in a dark period of rebellion. The closing verses of chapter 13 indicate they faithfully raised Samson according to God’s instructions. Verse 24 says, “The young man grew, and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him.”

It’s about time for him to begin his public ministry. But then Judges 14 begins, rather surprisingly, with Samson wanting to marry an idolatrous, Philistine woman.

What in the world happened between the last verse of chapter 13 and the first verse of chapter 14? Maybe you have wondered what happened to your child

between the ages of 16 and 17 or when that son or daughter went away to college.

Well, in Samson’s case, chapter 14 gives us some clues as to what happened. As we work through the chapter, I want to draw out some important and timeless principles to consider.

First, *someone can follow external rules and completely lack genuine character*. Outward appearances don’t always reveal inward attitudes. Samson had all the external marks of a separated Nazirite—someone devoted to God. But his heart was far from God.

Second, *someone who ignores inward purity will eventually be governed by outward impurity*. Chapter 14 opens by giving us Samson’s first recorded words. Speaking to his parents in verse 2, he says, “I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife.” Then in verse 3, he says, “She is right [or she looks good] in my eyes.”

This woman might be a follower of false gods, but so what—she’s beautiful. Samson is governed by his eyes. Ironically, he will eventually lose his eyes.

Mom and Dad are stunned and ask in verse 3:

“Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?”

In other words, “Can’t you find a girl who follows after God?” Their hearts are broken.

Let me give you a third principle to keep in mind—this one is for parents: *Parents who walk with God might have children who walk away from God*. Beloved, it’s possible for godly parents to have ungodly children. This truth is often missing in the average church seminar for parents.

Now as parents you do everything possible to make your children civil—and you should—and to introduce them to the gospel; but only God’s Spirit can open their eyes to see their need for Christ. (John 6:44) So,



it's possible for godly parents to end up with ungodly children; and, by the way, it's possible for ungodly parents to end up with godly children by God's grace.

As you raise your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (as Ephesians 6 tells us), remember that if they turn out to be godly, you shouldn't take the credit; and if they end up walking away from God, you shouldn't take the blame. Only God's Spirit can produce spiritual life.

Now here's one more principle to consider: *The failure of God's people never defeats God's purpose.* Verse 4 hints that even though Samson is rebelling in wanting to marry a Philistine, God is going to use this marriage to judge the Philistines.

Verses 5-6 go on to tell us Samson kills a lion that attacks him. Later, he discovers that honeybees have made a beehive in the carcass of that lion. And then at his wedding celebration, Samson turns this beehive into a riddle—verse 14: “Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet.”

Samson tells the Philistine men at the wedding that if they can guess the riddle, he will give them new clothing; but if they can't figure it out, they have to give him a closet full of new clothes—which is a clever way of getting some wedding gifts you actually end up using.

Of course, they can't figure it out, so they pressure Samson's bride to get the answer for them. She agrees and turns on the tears in verse 16:

And Samson's wife wept over him and said, “You only hate me; you do not love me. You have put a riddle to my people, and you have not told me what it is.”

Well, after seven days of this, and 700 boxes of Kleenex, Samson gives in and tells her, and she quickly passes on the answer.

Now *Samson* is obligated to get these men new clothing. So, he goes out and kills thirty Philistines and gives their clothing to the men to pay off his debt. We're told in verse 19 that “the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him.”

Now in Old Testament times, the Holy Spirit empowered people for various tasks but did not permanently indwell them as He does every New Testament believer.

Samson has essentially begun his role of delivering Israel. The sad truth is that while he has wonderful parents and incredible potential, he is about to throw most of it away, as we will see when our journey continues.

Your entry into the world may not be as grand as Samson's, but your purpose is. How does Ephesians 2:10 impact your understanding of your purpose in God's eyes? What evidence can you point to that you're pursuing that purpose?

What contrasts so far do you see between Samson and his parents? What accounts for the differences, and what do they teach you? How can Aunts and Uncles also utilize these principles to become godly influences on the lives of their nieces and nephews?

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O BE CAREFUL LITTLE EYES

Judges 15–16

Samson demonstrates that God can use even arrogant, foolish, and morally weak people to accomplish His purposes. Yet how much more this judge could have helped his people had he truly walked with God in holiness, leading his people, not just as a warrior, but as an example.

There's a little song I learned growing up that goes, "O be careful little eyes what you see." I can't help but think of that song as we begin to watch a man ruin his life because he follows the desires of his eyes.

Judges chapter 15 picks up the narrative with Samson returning for his Philistine wife, only to be refused by her father, who informs Samson in verse 2 that he has given her to another man. Samson responds by going out and catching a trainload of foxes—or jackals—tying them together in pairs, attaching a burning torch between each pair, and then letting them loose. They run around burning up Philistine fields and orchards (verses 4-5).

The Philistines retaliate by killing Samson's wife and her family. Then in verse 8, we are told that "[Samson] struck them hip and thigh with a great blow." "Hip and thigh" is an expression for total destruction.

Evidently the Israelites are too afraid to help Samson in this fight. In fact, the tribe of Judah is willing to hand him over. Samson allows them to tie him up and deliver him to the Philistines; but once inside the Philistine camp, he single-handedly destroys 1,000 Philistine soldiers.

As chapter 15 ends, we are told in verse 20, that Samson "judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty

years." In other words, God brought deliverance from the Philistines through Samson's leadership.

Samson might have defeated the Philistine armies, but he could not defeat the lust of his eyes. The Bible begins now to record the downward spiral of Samson, beginning in chapter 16, verse 1:

Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went



Letter from Pharaoh Ramesses II to the Hittite king Hattusili III



in to her. The Gazites were told, “Samson has come here.” And they surrounded the place and set an ambush for him . . . at the gate of the city.”

I don’t need to fill in the details, but Samson should have been singing, “O be careful little eyes what you see.”

When Samson decides to leave around midnight, he comes out to the locked gates of the city, where the Philistines are hoping to trap him. But look at verse 3:

He . . . took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up . . . and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill.

This town has a hole in their city wall and a major dent in their city budget!

The real tragedy here is that Samson’s strength came after a night of sin. He has spent the night with a Philistine prostitute, and then he rips the doors off the city walls. He is now fully deceived into believing that no matter how he lives, he is invincible.

At this point, Samson is set up to fall when he meets the next woman, whose name is Delilah. Now you need to know that Delilah is an Israelite name, not Philistine. By this time, Samson is around fifty years of age. He’s judged Israel for twenty long and difficult years.

It’s quite possible Samson wants to settle down, and he chooses an Israelite woman. The trouble is, he and Delilah are living together before marriage, so he’s going about it in all the wrong ways.

Verses 4-5 set the stage:

After this he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. And the lords of the

Philistines came up to her and said to her, “Seduce him, and see where his great strength lies . . . that we may bind him.”

When Delilah comes to Samson in verse 6 and says, “Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you,” that should have set off some alarm bells. A woman in love would want to know how to defend him; she wants to know how to defeat him.

What follows is a little cat-and-mouse game. Delilah is the cat; Samson is the mouse. Only in this case, the mouse is dumb enough to think he can play with a cat.

So, Samson toys with her in verse 7, telling her if he is tied up with bowstrings, he will be helpless. He goes to sleep, and she ties him up. She then wakes him by saying, “The Philistines are upon you!” He easily snaps the bowstrings and probably laughs at this little game.

Now don’t picture the Philistines here rushing upon Samson. Nowhere does the text say they come out of their hiding place. They are not going to show up until Delilah has figured this thing out.

Eventually, Delilah turns on the crocodile tears and wears him down. Verse 17 records:

He told her all his heart, and said to her, “A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother’s womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man.”

Notice carefully here that Samson believes his strength comes from his hair. He doesn’t connect it to his vow as a Nazirite and the power of the Spirit of God.



And with that, Delilah gives him a haircut while he's sleeping; and verse 21 tells us the Philistines capture him, and the first thing they do is put out his eyes. For his entire adult life, Samson has been spiritually blind; now he becomes physically blind.

Samson's hair had not given him power. The Lord had. But Samson had slowly abandoned his Nazirite vow to God, and now the last remaining symbol of that vow, his long hair, is gone.

While he's in prison, Samson's hair, we are told, "began to grow again" (verse 22). Don't misunderstand. This does not mean his super strength is returning because his hair is growing. His power came from the Holy Spirit. This phrase is a reminder that God has not abandoned him; God's power is still available—if he will live up to his Nazirite vow. So, instead of keeping his hair cut, he is letting it grow long again, which implies his repentance and spiritual growth.

Verse 23 describes a great festival, where several thousand Philistines, along with their rulers, have gathered to praise their god for delivering Samson to them. And when Samson is brought forth, he cries out to God:

"O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes." (verse 28)

This prayer, "remember me," reveals that Samson is truly repentant. "Remember" is a word linked to forgiveness over past sins. That thief hanging on the cross said to Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). In other words, "forgive the sins of my past."

Samson's prayer shows not only his repentance but also his dependence. Did you notice that for the first

time, he understands his strength is not in his hair but in his God! "Strengthen me only this once, O God."

And God answers his prayer. He dislodges the pillars, and that arena comes crashing down, destroying this Philistine kingdom and its rulers, along with Samson himself, who effectively dies here as a soldier in battle.

Here's the warning for us today: What are we looking at? What are we following after? What are we desiring? O be careful little eyes what you see.

God's will was accomplished in spite of Samson's sporadic faith and obedience. Why ought that truth be an encouragement to you in your ministry? Practically, how does sporadic faith and obedience become consistent?

Perhaps you have blown it spiritually and feel set aside by God. What of God's years of quiet interaction with Samson gives you hope that you too can be restored to useful ministry? Even if you feel steady and useful in your spiritual walk, what Sampson-like characteristics could use rooting out in your heart?

What gifts, abilities and experiences has God entrusted to your stewardship? How can you best utilize those gifts to fulfill your purpose in life and bring glory to Him?

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HOMEMADE GODS

Judges 17–18

People who reject the true God inevitably create their own gods. This is the sad lesson of Israel's history and the enduring legacy of humanity. Judges 17–18 presents not only a warning against rebellion but also a plea to embrace and cling to the truth of God's Word.

Following the death of Samson, no more judges are going to be sent by God to fight for Israel, pray for Israel, or even preach to Israel.

Here's the main point: Four times in these final chapters of Judges we read, "There was no king in Israel." That's Samuel the prophet's way of saying Israel was rejecting the authority of King Jehovah. And when you reject the authority of God, ultimately, you are going to create your own false religion.

Judges chapters 17 and 18 give us several characteristics of false religion, revealing what it looks like for any person in any generation, in any nation—to this very day.

First, *false religion is driven by personal convenience*. Judges 17 begins with these words:

There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. And he said to his mother, "The 1,100 pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and also spoke it in my ears, behold,

the silver is with me; I took it."
And his mother said, "Blessed be my son by the LORD." (verses 1-2)

Now this is strange. This man stole money from his mother, and his mother pronounced a curse upon whoever stole the silver. This must have scared the man, because he gives the money back. But then she gives a blessing to basically counteract the curse. Then she takes it a step further:

[She] said, "I dedicate the silver to the LORD . . . to make a carved image." . . . So . . . his



Hill country of Ephraim



mother took 200 pieces of silver and gave it to the silversmith, who made it into a carved image . . . And it was in the house of Micah. (verses 3-4)

This little narrative tells us that the Israelites might use the name of God, but they are given over to idolatry. Frankly, it's more convenient to make their own little idol of silver than to make a trip to Shiloh to visit the tabernacle of the true and living God.

False religion is always popular because it's convenient and comfortable and never convicting.

Second, *false religion is robed in religious appearances*. Verse 5 says: "The man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and household gods, and ordained one of his sons, who became his priest."

God isn't impressed with the way things look.

In other words, Micah goes along with his mother's idolatry. He makes his own priestly garments and even ordains one of his sons to pretend to be a priest. It all looks so sacred, but it's actually sinful. It looks impressive, but *God* isn't impressed with the way things look.

Now a new character shows up in verse 7. He's a traveling Levite who is invited to stay in Micah's house for the night.

You will remember the Levites were set apart to serve the Lord. Only one branch of the tribe of Levi, those descended from Aaron, were allowed to serve as priests. The other Levites, which included this man, were supposed to assist the priests and provide spiritual direction to the nation.

Well, when this Levite travels through town, Micah sees an opportunity to "upgrade" his little fake religion with a genuine Levite.

So, he offers this Levite, whose name is Jonathan (as noted later in Judges 18:30), a great deal:

"Be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year and a suit of clothes and your living." . . . And the Levite was content to dwell with the man. (verses 10-11)

Now this Levite doesn't have any more right to serve as a priest than Micah's son. This is totally contrary to God's Word.

To this day, millions of people around the world have fallen into this same error. They want the appearances of religion without a relationship with God, through Christ. They're going to get their babies christened in some cathedral; they're going to get married by some minister; they're going to want somebody religious conducting the family funerals. They want the benefits of God while ignoring the Word of God. That's false religion.

Third, *false religion justifies sin*. Chapter 18 now brings in the rebellious tribe of Dan, as the plot thickens:

And in those days the tribe of the people of Dan was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in, for until then no inheritance among the tribes of Israel had fallen to them. So the people of Dan sent five able men . . . to spy out the land and to explore it . . . and they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there. (verses 1-2)

The tribe of Dan had failed to conquer the land God had allotted to them. And rather than obey the Lord and remove the enemy nations, they started looking around for another place to live.



So, they sent out five men to check out the land, and they end up staying overnight in Micah's house. They are surprised to discover a Levite living there, and they ask him for his advice. This Levite doesn't ask God for wisdom; he simply gives them false assurance, saying in verse 6, "The journey on which you go is under the eye of the LORD."

"God is with you." Well, that's just a bunch of baloney. He should have rebuked them for disobeying God, but instead he tells them what they want to hear.

By the way, how many so-called preachers are telling people what they want to hear, rather than what the Word of God says? They are satisfying the "itching ears" of their audience, the apostle Paul writes, rather than delivering sound doctrine (2 Timothy 4:3).

Now there's one final characteristic of false religion here: *False religion opens the door to even more superstition.*

Later, when the tribe of Dan marches over to steal the land from a peaceful community of people who can't put up any resistance, they stop over at Micah's house and hire Jonathan to go along with them. We read in verses 19-20:

They said to him . . . "Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe . . . in Israel?" And the priest's heart was glad. He took . . . the carved image and went along with the people.

The priest is happy to go along with them. After all, he is getting a promotion.

The tribe of Dan then conquers the peaceful city of Laish and renames the city Dan. Verse 30 says, "And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves." In other words, they set up their false god and their false religion and their false priest. They want spiritual direction; they just don't want it from God.

Let me tell you, beloved, today most people get their spiritual direction from those who deny the Word of God. In fact, today more people believe in reincarnation than in the reality of Jesus; millions of people today think their lives are influenced by the stars and planets, but they reject the Creator; many people today believe they have had contact with someone who died, all the while ignoring Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead.

And what happens? Well, rejecting God's counsel always leads to greater spiritual confusion.

Jesus Christ said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Let's follow His way. Let's find the truth about God in this Book we are journeying through together. We are on a true Wisdom Journey.

Why is it so tempting to reduce your relationship with the Lord to a set of rituals? What choices and spiritual habits will guard you against this temptation? Take the truth of John 15:4-5 and go before the LORD and ask Him to show you any ritual in your life that is offensive to Him.

In what ways can you relate to the Danites' actions described here? What is your heavenly Father calling you to do in response?

What are you doing to communicate the preeminence of God's Word in the midst of those in your life who are not yet believers? What are you doing to help them further their pursuit of false religion?

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DARKNESS

Judges 19–21

The last chapters of Judges give us a glimpse of how depraved human beings can become when they reject God and His Word. They remind us of how destructive sin is and how vigilant we must be to nurture a loving, obedient relationship with the Lord.

As we come to these final chapters in the book of Judges, we are given a fresh warning that moral guidelines are not up for a vote. Moral purity is not decided by the courts or church councils; it's determined by God, who created us and knows what is best for us.

Now let me warn you that chapter 19 is disturbing. It opens with a man chasing after his wayward wife:

A certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem . . . And his concubine



Remains of a house at Hazor

was unfaithful to him, and she went away from him to her father's house. (verses 1-2)

Later on, we're told that the Levite had actually married this woman; that is, he had added her to his harem, his collection. Let me tell you something, beloved: no matter where you go in the world today, wherever God's design for marriage is abandoned, women are not honored. They become playthings or beasts of burden; they are not given the honor and dignity that God designed for them.

Now verse 3 tells us the man finds her and talks her into coming back with him. So, they begin their journey home. That night they arrive in the town of Gibeah and sit out in the open square of the city with nowhere to stay for the night.

Villagers back then were expected to take in travelers as a demonstration of national unity—it was a sacred duty. Finally, an old farmer returning from his fields invites them to stay with him for the night.

Now look at verses 22-24:

[But] the men of the city, worthless fellows, surrounded the



house, beating on the door. And they said to the old man, the master of the house, “Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him.” And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, “No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly; since this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing. Behold, here are my virgin daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out now. Violate them and do with them what seems good to you, but against this man do not do this outrageous thing.

What a tragic, wicked offer he makes to these evil men.

Continuing, we read:

But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and made her go out to them. And they . . . abused her all night until the morning. . . . And her master rose up in the morning, and when he opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, behold, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house . . . He said to her, “Get up, let us be going.” But there was no answer. Then

he put her on the donkey, and . . . went away to his home. (verses 25, 27–28)

Now you can imagine why this isn’t a favorite passage to preach on Sunday morning. It’s tragic; it’s brutal; it’s immoral; it makes you want to weep for this poor woman.

The men of Gibeah had rejected God’s created design and embraced sexual sin. And in our world today, if someone calls sexual activity outside of God’s design for a husband and wife sinful, that person is immediately accused of being hateful.

Beloved, this doesn’t have anything to do with being hateful; it has everything to do with being biblical. The Bible warns us in Isaiah 5:20, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil.” Let me tell you, a million words of approval from your culture does not erase one word from God.

Now back in Judges 19, instead of burying his wife, this man cuts her body into twelve pieces and sends one part to each of Israel’s twelve tribes. He wants to shake the nation up—to wake it up to its moral corruption—and evidently, it works.

Here in chapter 20, the Israelite tribes gather a huge army and demand that the people of Benjamin turn over these wicked men or prepare for war. Verse 13 informs us of their response:

The Benjaminites would not listen to the voice of their brothers . . . [they] came together out of the cities to Gibeah to go out to battle against the people of Israel.

They are going to fight to defend these men rather than hold them accountable to God’s moral standard.

Civil war breaks out, and the tribe of Benjamin is nearly wiped out in battle, all except for 600 men. But nobody in Israel is celebrating this victory. They’re weeping that one of the tribes of Israel is on the brink of extinction. They cry out as a nation in Judges 21:3: “O LORD, the God of Israel, why has



this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?”

But what are they to do? These 600 young men need to rebuild the tribe of Benjamin, but they have no wives. This is a real problem since verse 1 informs us, “The men of Israel had sworn . . . ‘No one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin.’”

Now they realize that vow is going to hinder the rebuilding of this tribe. But instead of going to God for a solution, they come up with their own. And it’s also sinful and tragic.

Here in verse 8, they notice that the Israelites living in Jabesh-Gilead had not sent any soldiers to help them in this civil war. So, they decide to wipe out that city—except for the unmarried virgin girls.

How is that for a solution? Step 1: Kill everybody in the city but unmarried virgins. Step 2: These young women won’t have anywhere to live since their families have been killed, so they will agree to become wives of these 600 men from the tribe of Benjamin.

And that’s exactly what happens. The problem is, only 400 young virgins are found following this battle, and that still leaves 200 men without wives.

So, they come up with another wicked solution—and by the way, there’s no mention anywhere of praying or seeking the Lord for wisdom. The new plan is for these 200 men to hide out in the field and then rush in and kidnap young unmarried Israelite women who have come to celebrate at the annual festival at Shiloh.

This way, the Israelites will not have to break their vow since they are not technically “giving” their daughters away and the men will get their wives. And that is exactly what happens.

Beloved, you read the last few chapters here in the book of Judges, and you want to go take a bath: total defiance against God’s created design for love and marriage and family.

And what does God say about all this? Verse 25, the final verse in this book, says it all: “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” God had not abandoned them; they had abandoned God.

Now, let me draw from the book of Judges two final, timeless truths we need to remember. First, whenever God’s Word is abandoned, dissatisfaction in a person’s life becomes inevitable. In other words, those who defy God are never satisfied. But, second, whenever God’s Word is followed, satisfaction in a person’s life becomes possible.

And here’s the promise to sinners like you and me who repent and take God’s Word as our guide: And here’s the promise to sinners like you and me who repent and take God’s Word as our guide:

This is the promise of God’s Word as we choose to not be conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds. We will discover that good and acceptable—that satisfying—will of God for our lives.

Why is it important for you to understand the depravity of fallen human nature? What are the practical implications for you personally, your ministry to believers and your relationships with friends and family who are not yet believers?

To what degree is it true of you, “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes?” What biblical choices, habits and actions are you taking each day to either reverse or prevent this heart-attitude from being true of you?

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