

THE BOOK OF JUDGES

“Anarchy Breeds Apostasy”

I take this title for the book of Judges from the key verse, which I believe to be 17:6 (repeated in 21:25). Judges 17:6, *“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* Those two verses are identical in English translations and in the Hebrew text. The children of Israel had promised Joshua that they would walk in the ways of the Lord, and this they did for a time, as long as the elders who served with Joshua lived. The time came, however, when they began to follow their wicked hearts instead of God’s righteous law. This led to a period that consisted of a repeating cycle of disobedience, chastening, crying out to Yahweh, deliverance through a judge, and a season of peace and rest. In many cases, the judge who had led to deliverance by military force became a civil leader as well.

A summary of the book would go like this: After Joshua, and before Samuel and Saul, the absence of leadership lent to anarchy and apostasy. On seven occasions, sin led to servitude and oppression. Each time repentance was rewarded with deliverance and rest. Chapters 17 - 21 depict the type of evils that likely prevailed throughout the period of the judges.

At least four Hebrew Scripture references to this period are found: Ruth 1:1; 2 Samuel 7:11; 1 Chronicles 17:10; 2 Kings 23:22. In the New Testament: Acts 13:20; Hebrews 11:32.

The events recorded here occurred in the last half of the second millennium before Christ, about 1400 - 1050 B.C. The number of years mentioned in Acts 13:20 (450) throws us into a bit of confusion about how long this era lasted. The scholars suggest (among other things) that 450 was the years of the Egyptian slavery (400) plus the years in the wilderness (40) plus the years of conquest and distribution of the Land (10). Again, some confusion prevails, and you can settle it in your thinking as you delve deeper into the issue. Here is a suggested outline for the book:

- I. REASONS FOR THE CHAOS (1:1 - 3:6)
 - A. Deficiency in occupying the land (1:1 - 2:5)
 - B. Decline in religious condition (2:6 - 3:6)
- II. RECORD OF THE CHAOS (3:7 - 16:31)
 - A. Captivity under Mesopotamia (3:7-11) Othniel
 - B. Calamity under Moab (3:12-31) Ehud, Shamgar
 - C. Cruelty of the Canaanites (4:1-5:31) Deborah (Barak)
 - D. Catastrophe under Midian (6:1-8:32) Gideon
 - E. Circumstance with Abimelech (8:33-10:5) Tola, Jair
 - F. Conditions under the Ammonites (10:6-12:15) Jephtha, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon
 - G. Chastening by the Philistines (13:1-16:31) Samson
 - H. Cycle in Each (12 Judges in all, 13 counting Barak)
 - 1. Rebellion
 - 2. Retribution
 - 3. Repentance
 - 4. Restoration
- III. RESULTS OF THE CHAOS (17:1 - 21:25)
 - A. Idolatry
 - 1. Private Sanctuary of Micah (17)
 - 2. Priest Sells Out for More (18)
 - B. Immorality
 - 1. Rape of the Levite’s Concubine (19)
 - 2. Revenge of Israel Upon Benjamin (20)

CHAPTER 1

This chapter is famously known for its record of Israel's failure to expel the Canaanite "squatters" when they came home from the Egyptian captivity and the wilderness wanderings. It resembles a major section of the book of Joshua, the portion dealing with the conquest of the land. The incomplete victories caused by the failure to fully possess the land brought a great deal of misery to Israel, and this book is the record of that misery. In many cases, when the tribes became stronger, they put the occupiers to forced labor, which gave them a ready source of help for mundane tasks like hewing wood and drawing water. This would be somewhat of an economic boon, but at what spiritual cost? Acting somewhat like spiritual "chameleons," the Israelites became corrupted by the worship of the false gods of the people whom they left in the land. Those seasons of apostasy, rebellion, led to God's chastening hand upon them again and again.

CAUSES OF THE COMING MISERY - DEFICIENCY IN OCCUPYING THE LAND **DEATH OF JOSHUA AND THE DESIRE OF THE JEWS**

1) Joshua 1:1 began with *"After the death of Moses..."* It is right and fitting that Judges 1:1 begins with *"After the death of Joshua..."* God buries His workmen, but His work goes on. There was obviously more claiming of land to be done, and so the Israelites sought the Lord for direction. They did not ask if they should go up and fight, for they knew the land had to be conquered. They rather asked, *"Who shall go up first ... to fight?"* A poet asked the question, "Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize, and sailed through bloody seas?" Then he answered it, "No, I must fight if I would win, increase my courage, Lord." This world is a battlefield for believers, and the foes include the world, the flesh (sinful nature), and the Devil. Let us not waste time battling each other but join forces against the real adversaries!

DIRECTIONS FROM GOD

2) Yahweh's answer was swift and clear - *"Judah shall go up."* And He added a statement that would give them confidence and courage, saying that Yahweh had given the land into their hands. The past tense means that it is as certain as if it were already done!

DESCRIPTION OF THE EFFORT

FIRST - JUDAH AND SIMEON

Strength

3) The elders of Judah spoke to those of Simeon, suggesting that they join forces in driving out Judah's remaining foes. Then they added that the sons of Judah would also help the Simeonites with their advancing of God's plan for them. Was this a lack of faith by Judah, or was it simply a wise strategy that would benefit both tribes? In either case, Simeon was completely inside Judah's borders (the only such case in Israel), and it made sense for them to work together.

4) Yahweh was, as always, good to His Word, and 10,000 Canaanites and Perizzites were slain at Bezek. The location of this place is uncertain. As in the earlier days of Joshua, the secret was not in military prowess or overwhelming numbers. It was in this simple fact, *"...the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand..."*

5), 6), 7) "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" was my first thought on reading this. "Adoni Bezek" means "lord of Bezek." This wicked man fled from before the Lord's army, but they caught him. The removal of thumbs and great toes would be so debilitating! Our hands work so well in large part because of the opposable manipulation of the thumbs. If they are removed, we become so limited. The big toes are essential for balance, and to remove them would make walking so very difficult. It seems a cruel thing they did to him until you hear his own words. He said that he had that

very thing done to 70 monarchs, who then ate scraps from his table. Now God has done it to him. "Like sin, like punishment" is a principle on which God often works. This now-crippled man would be brought to Jerusalem, where he would die.

8) This was clearly not the conquest of the entire walled city, but more likely a portion of it on one side. The ultimate conquest of Jerusalem would not even come through the Benjamites, in whose possession it lay; that task would wait for King David, generations later.

9) Three of the major topographical features found in Judah's parcel are mentioned here. The hills, the Shephelah (foothills, or piedmont), and the Negev. There were Canaanite strongholds in each of these areas, and the men of Judah fought against them in all three places.

10) Hebron is a significant city in Israeli history. It was formerly called "Kiriath-Arba," meaning the "village of Arba," who is called "a great man" in Joshua 14:15. It was the place where Sarah died, and Abraham mourned for her there (Genesis 23:2). This became part of Caleb's inheritance in the promised land (Joshua 15:13, Judges 1:20). The people of the three sons of Anak were finally driven out and defeated.

Sidelight

11) - 15) While discussing Hebron, the author told how Caleb's daughter and her husband came to be together. Debir, formerly called "Kiriath-Sepher," needed to be conquered. Caleb put out an offer that whoever (presumably within the family) would take Debir could have his daughter, Achsah, as wife. An enterprising young nephew (?) named Othniel accepted the challenge, and he won the town and the girl! They were quite a team, for she persuaded Othniel to ask Caleb for a field, and she petitioned her father for springs to water their crops and flocks. As daughters can do with fathers, she moved him so much that he gave her two sets of springs.

Shortcoming

16) The family of Moses' father-in-law had come along with the Israelites and were in need of a place to live, so having left the area of Jericho (the city of palms), they settled in the Negev, a few miles south of Hebron.

17) Now the men of Judah turn their efforts to help their brother Simeon in his territory. Bear in mind that the fathers of these tribes were full brothers, both being sons of Leah. They together defeated the Canaanites in a place called Zephath, later Hormah. This was about 10 miles east of Beersheva, just over 20 miles south of Hebron.

18) Three of the five prominent Philistine towns in later Israelite history were also captured by the men of Judah - Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron (the other two were Gath and Ashdod).

19) Success and failure in one verse. Judah was able to conquer those in the hill country (the Hebrew word is "Har," as in "Har-Megiddo," or "Armageddon") - success. But the failure was their inability to conquer in the plains, where the adversaries had chariots of iron. The Hebrew word for "plain" is "emek," often translated "valley." You can see this word on maps of Israel even today.

20) Here is a brief recapitulation of Caleb receiving Hebron, as Moses had promised.

21) The important city of Jerusalem was on the southern border of Benjamin's territory. The walled city of the Jebusites proved too much for the Benjamites to conquer. The result was the prolonged inhabiting of the city by the Jebusites until King David and his men slipped in surreptitiously through a water tunnel and took the city. David would make it his capital city, and he would bring the Ark of the Covenant there. His son Solomon would build the first Temple there.

FOLLOWING - THE OTHER TRIBES

22) - 26) You will remember that here at Bethel Jacob had the dream about a ladder reaching to heaven. Formerly called "Luz," he renamed it "House of God," "Beth-El." The "*house of Joseph*" mentioned here is Ephraim, since Bethel is in their allotment. In their reconnaissance, they encountered a man who agreed to show them how to get into the city. They had promised to "*deal kindly*" with him, and when they "*struck the city with the edge of the sword*," they spared their informant and his family. The man took his family and went away into the land of the Hittites, where

he established a city which he called by the original name of his former home, “Luz.” This was likely to the far northeast, in modern Syria. How wonderful that God touched the heart of a “Goy” (Gentile) to aid Israel in their conquest. We say “Amen” to the statement in the opening verse, *“And the LORD was with them.”*

27) West Manasseh’s large territory was literally “from the river to the sea” (the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea). In their eastern region, they stopped short of driving out the inhabitants of Beit She’an, which would become a “Decapolis” city in Christ’s time. It is an archaeological marvel to visit today. Taanach, Ibleam, and Megiddo were more nearly in the central part of Manasseh, while Dor was on the coast. Megiddo is another “must-see” place on a trip to Israel. Its water tunnel alone will leave you breathless! These five cities contained stubborn Canaanites whom they did not expel; this was disobedience and a lack of faith.

28) Again, it is stated that *“when Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor.”* This was a double-edged sword, providing economic benefit on the one hand, but a negative spiritual influence on the other hand. Whenever material gain becomes a priority over spiritual things, a terrible mistake has been made, and the consequences will always be disastrous.

29) Gezer is 15 miles from the coast and just over 20 miles from Jerusalem. Ephraim’s success at Bethel was followed by failure at Gezer. They left the Canaanites there, who lived with them for a long time after.

30) The shortcoming of Zebulun was to leave Canaanites living in two of their towns, Kitron and Nahalol. The pattern of their neighbors was followed by the sons of Zebulun, as they pushed the Canaanites to forced labor.

31), 32) Asher was a coastal territory, and there were seven of her towns in which they left Canaanites. The wording here takes an interesting turn; the previous statement about Zebulun was that *“the Canaanites lived among them.”* Here we read that the Asherites *“lived among the Canaanites.”* Does this suggest that they felt the land belonged to the Canaanites, and they were guests with them? Surely, such a thing should not be! This was Israel’s land, given them by God!

33) Naphtali reached from the border shared with Asher on the west to the upper Jordan River and Sea of Galilee on the east. The Beth-Shemesh here is not to be confused with the one of the same name in Judah. This town, along with Beth-Anath, had Canaanites that were not driven out. Here is repeated the upside-down idea that the men of Naphtali *“lived among the Canaanites.”* The same old pattern is followed here of reducing them to forced labor.

34) The tribe of Dan are misfits in Israel. They were the most idolatrous tribe to be sure. And they did not claim the land allotted them under Joshua, allowing the Amorites to control where they lived - keeping the Danites in the “Har” (hills) and not in the “Emek” (plain, valley). They ultimately migrated north of the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) alongside East Manasseh’s parcel. They settled there permanently, and the excavations at Tel-Dan are fascinating to observe.

35) Mount Heres, Aijalon, and Shaalbim fell to Ephraim, maybe having been in Dan’s abandoned parcel. The Canaanites here were allowed to stay and were put to forced labor.

36) That the Amorites (a subset of the Canaanites) still had a border and a land was not good testimony for the Israelites, no matter how small their place may have been. God’s plan was to drive them out and possess the land entirely by the Israelites. The rest of this book is the sad saga of the consequences of not obeying the Lord in this matter.

CHAPTER 2

We are reminded in this chapter of the importance of godly leadership. The author takes us first here to a place called “Bochim,” which name means a place of weeping. There is a divine chiding here for the Israelites’ failure to separate themselves from the Canaanites; this chiding is what causes the weeping, but there is no indication of repentance. The death of Joshua is revisited, and

mention is made of how the people followed the Lord when he lived, and during the lives of the elders who served with him. With godly leadership gone, the people rebel against the ways of Yahweh, and chastening comes. Their cries of distress lead to God raising up judges, periods of obedience after deliverance, and then sinking back in apostasy when the judge was gone.

CAUSES OF THE COMING MISERY - DEFICIENCY IN OCCUPYING THE LAND - Continued **DISOBEDIENCE REBUKED**

SERMON - A WORD FROM THE LORD

- 1) The great works done for Israel by Yahweh are rehearsed here in summary form by the Angel of the LORD. This is Jesus in a pre-incarnate human appearance. This title is seen 56 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, 19 of them in this book of Judges. He reminded the people that it was He who brought them out of Egypt and into the land of promise. He further declared that He would never break the covenant He made with them (likely referring to the Abrahamic Covenant).
- 2) The Angel of the LORD reminds them of His command (Deuteronomy 7:2) forbidding covenants with the people of the land. He had also instructed the Israelites to destroy the Canaanite altars (Deuteronomy 12:3). They had miserably failed in these spiritual duties. How convicting should have been the question, *"What have you done?"*
- 3) This disobedience will lead to a withdrawing of Yahweh's assistance in expelling the squatters. The relationships that will come with the Canaanites will be spiritually devastating to the chosen people. Fraternizing with people of false faiths (and everyone has a faith, even if it is simply materialism or hedonism or some such) leads to indulging in their worship - a snare to Israel.

SORROW - WEEPING IN THE LAND

- 4) What was it that brought them to tears? The fact that they continued in their disobedience would indicate that they were not sorry for their sin, but perhaps they wept because of the coming consequences that Yahweh declared to them.

SACRIFICE - WORSHIPING THE LORD?

- 5) What comes to mind here are Samuel's words to Saul that *"to obey is better than to sacrifice."* It is easy to do routine acts of so-called worship, but to give our hearts in devotion and obedience to God is true worship. A word about the name they gave the place, "Bochim." In Hebrew there is no "ch" sound as in "chicken." It is more like the "ck." The "o" is long, and the "im" is plural. The word is properly pronounced "Bo-Keem."

DEATH OF JOSHUA REVISITED

- 6) This is a glance back at the close of Joshua's ministry and life. Before he passed away, he had sent the people out of military muster and off to their respective land allotments.
- 7) Again, it is stated that the result of Joshua's godly leadership was that the people served the LORD. That influence lasted even through the life spans of the elders who served with Joshua.
- 8) Joshua is identified as the *"son of Nun,"* and he is characterized as the *"servant of the LORD"* ("eved Yahweh"). This is a brief but blessed obituary, including a long life of 110 years. O, how sweet to be called *"the servant of the LORD!"* May that be true of us.
- 9) His interment was there where he lived in the inheritance in the land of promise. He was born a slave in Egypt, yet by God's grace he died a free man in Israel.
- 10) *"All that generation"* must refer to him and to Caleb (and their spouses?) since all else of their age had died in the wilderness. In spite of good leadership, the next generation did not know the LORD or His great works done on behalf of Israel. May we be diligent and prayerful to teach those who come behind us to know, love, trust, and serve Jesus! May this writing contribute to that.

The sinful depravity of the human heart should be an undebatable issue. That anyone could seriously argue for some innate goodness in the heart of man is unthinkable. The daily television news, as well as the printed news media contain evidence of man's wickedness. How different from

Joshua is the book of Judges! In Joshua we read of faith's victory, in Judges, of sin's defeat. In Joshua we see God's people at their best; Judges shows them at their worst. The book of Joshua is a chronicle of effective leadership; Judges relates the disaster that occurs in the absence of such leadership. A key verse in the book is 17:6 "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." This important verse is repeated in 21:25. This sad book covers some of the darkest days in Israel's history. Even today, people need a leader with strong moral backbone. We in America seem to be reliving the era of the Judges, including idolatry and weak leadership. We need for God to raise up men and women of high moral character to be used of Him to lift us out of our present spiritual depression. Our largest issues are spiritual, not political, economic, or educational.

LOVE THE WORLD, OR LOVE THE FATHER

APOSTASY OF THE JEWS

11) After the death of Joshua, the absence of strong spiritual leadership resulted in the sinful nature of the Jews taking over control of their behavior. God was still observing them, and their actions were evil in His sight. What actions were these? Actions of worship! False worship is evil! All worship is NOT acceptable to God - only that which is to Him, done according to His commands. This sheds considerable light on the cults and false religions of today. They are abhorrent to God, not alternate ways of worshiping. We must detest them as God did Baal.

12), 13) In relation to belief in God, one may be an atheist, believing in no God, a monotheist, believing in one God, or a polytheist, believing in many gods. Israel had a special, a unique relationship with Yahweh. They were the original organized monotheists. God nurtured them from birth when He called Abram to leave Chaldea and go to Canaan. He had seen them through four arduous centuries of slavery in Egypt. He had brought them out of Egypt with His mighty arm, and He had brought them into the land of promise to possess it. They repaid Him for His grace and kindness by forsaking Him and turning to other so-called gods, thus practicing polytheism and violating the first commandment of the decalogue. The covenant relationship between Israel and God had been broken on their side. They went after other gods. The marriage relationship of the heavenly Husband and the earthly, national wife had also been violated. It is no wonder that the Lord became angry. What contractual partner wouldn't? What loving husband wouldn't? His chosen people had gone away after these fertility gods.

14) Actions always have consequences; Israel's sin brought upon them difficulty from the hand of God. His sovereign control is seen in the two parts of this sentence, "*He handed them over...He sold them.*" Israel had chosen the gods of the nations around them, and so God allowed them to experience the life of those nations without His protection. When they honored Yahweh, they crossed the Red Sea and the Jordan River, and they conquered Jericho. When they forsook God, they were plundered and overcome by small local raiding bands.

15) In many passages in the law of Moses and in the chronicle of Joshua, it is recorded that if the Israelites turned against God, His anger would burn against them (Joshua 23:16 is a prime example). When Israel had met other enemies, Yahweh had fought for them, and they had invariably been victorious. Now because of their apostasy, God fought not **for**, but **against** them. The result of their sin was their great distress. God keeps His Word!

APPEARANCE OF THE JUDGES

16) Seven times in the book of Judges we find the cycle of 1) Sin, 2) Servitude, 3) Oppression, 4) Repentance, 5) Deliverance, and 6) Rest. God's people need a leader, and the list of leaders in Judges is a spiritual hall of fame. Note Samson, Gideon, Deborah, and Jephthah among them. For about three hundred years, this cycle repeated itself again and again. Israel was as slow to learn from past mistakes as we are in America today.

17) This generation of Israelites was particularly rebellious. The writer says, "*They would not listen,*"

and "they quickly turned from the way..." They had a revelation - the law of Moses. They had an example - the lives of the fathers. They had leaders - God had raised up Judges. None of these advantages availed to set them on the righteous path. They broke their marriage vows with Yahweh, prostituting themselves to other gods. How sad!

18) Here are several revelations about God that warm the heart. He had compassion on His suffering people, even though they suffered justly because of their own sin. He took action - He raised up a judge, a deliverer, who led the people in driving out the oppressors. He blessed the judge with the power of His presence during the duration of his or her ministry, giving success where failure because of sin had reigned before.

19) Again, we see the need of God's people for a spiritual leader. Following the death of each and every judge, there was a period of apostasy. Also seen here is the incurable depravity of the heart of man. He will be a sinner until he dies, and he must have the help of the Lord and of other believers to live a godly life. Why, then, do men turn from God and His church when here is the only hope for redemption and righteous living? That turning away leads to self-destruction.

ANGER OF YAHWEH

20), 21) What did Israel do that made God "very angry?" Well, He gave them a law to obey and a land to occupy. They failed to drive out all the inhabitants of the land, so God then used **them** to test the faithfulness of Israel to His word of command. They failed miserably! They developed an affection for the people of the land and the gods of those people that rooted out their affection for Yahweh. Do you have worldly affections that root affection for God out of your heart? Had they only obeyed the Lord, keeping the covenant from Sinai, God would have finished what He started with Joshua and driven out the godless nations from before them! How much suffering they would have been spared! But they chose the path of disobedience and the suffering it brings.

22), 23) God uses many things to test our love for and faithfulness to Him. Any circumstance that comes into our lives can help shape us, make us better as we obey God's Word, follow His Spirit's leading, and seek the lessons we should learn. The wicked nations of Canaan could have been the dark backdrop against which the shining obedience of Israel might have stood out like a diamond on black velvet. They could have been a testimony to the nations of what a people are like who follow the Lord. Or, as it happened, the influence of the evil nations could drag Israel down into disgrace. May God give us wisdom to be shaped for good in this world of sin.

CHAPTER 3

This chapter begins with a review/preview of the apostasy of which Israel was guilty. It identifies the peoples who are left in the land, and it indicates a dual purpose for these people being there. On the one hand, they were there so the Israelites could know war, and many in this generation had not known war. Secondly, they were there to test the spiritual loyalty of the Israelites - would they or would they not obey the LORD's commands? Sadly, they did not fare well in the matter of their testing. Like Genesis six taught us, intermarrying with the godless draws the godly down. Then the careers of three judges are documented: Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar.

AND SO COME THE JUDGES

BACKGROUND AND THE NEED FOR JUDGES

1), 2) Military preparedness is necessary in a world plagued by sinful people who do not respect the rights of others, particularly the rights of life and property. Men will take the lives of other men to seize their property, whether in personal or national circumstances. We see these very things in action in our world today - again, both in personal and national examples. Most of us desire the coming day spoken of by the prophet, Isaiah 2:4, "He (Messiah) shall judge between the nations,

and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” Until Messiah is present to enforce peace, the nation who turns their military machinery into agricultural equipment may reap a bitter harvest.

3), 4), 5) Here find the peoples left in the land and a second purpose for them being there. There are listed the five Philistine lords, Canaanites, Sidonians, Hivites, Amorites, Perizzites, and Jebusites. The purpose mentioned was a spiritual testing. It is sad to read again that *“the people of Israel lived among”* these peoples, rather than that they lived among the Israelites.

6) God strictly forbade the Israelites from intermarrying with the Canaanites when they would come into the land. Deuteronomy 7:3, *“You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons.”* Their failure here was another step down in moral decline. In the church today, Christians should not marry nonbelievers. 2 Corinthians 6:17, *“Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you.”* The negative influence on one’s spiritual life is too great a risk to take, even for love. The last clause shows this truth: *“...and they served their gods.”*

THE BEGINNING OF THE JUDGES - OTHNIEL

7) This is so telling about the danger of religious intermarriage. The evil was twofold; they forgot Yahweh and they served Baal and Asherah. This apostasy shows us clearly:

The Influence of Family

Their Indifference Toward God

The Idolatry That Follows

They forsook *“their”* God, ***the true One***, in favor of their ***neighbors’ false gods***.

8) Actions have consequences, and this action stirred the anger of Yahweh against His own people! He *“sold them”* into servitude to another nation for eight years. The slavery of Egypt was upon them again, but this time in their own land! Abram had left this very place, Mesopotamia, Chaldea, centuries before to obey God and become the father of a new nation. Now that nation’s disobedience and rebellion brought them into servitude to their Godless relatives.

9) How longsuffering is our God before He brings upon us the consequences of our actions in chastening! But how swiftly He responds to our cries for help. His response in this case was to raise up a man named Othniel to deliver them from their oppressors. This was the same man who showed sterling character in driving out giants for Caleb and receiving his daughter, Achsah, as a bride for his efforts.

10) Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Othniel led the warriors of Israel in successful war against Cushan-Rishathaim. Once again, the children of Israel were free men in their own God-given land.

11) The peace and rest from outside interference lasted for 40 years, during which they ate their own crops, lived in their own homes, cherished their own wives and children, bowing the knee to no earthly oppressor.

The deliverance God wrought through Othniel brought a peace that lasted 40 years, but Israel returned to that part of the cycle of the period of the Judges where they sinned nationally. So God raised up Eglon, King of Moab, to oppress them, this time for 18 years. As is His custom, when the Israelites cried out to God for help, He raised up another deliverer, Ehud, the left-handed hero from Benjamin, descended from him whose name means “son of my right hand.” Going on 60 years ago I entered Piedmont Bible College as a theology student. There was a Bible test we all took in those days; as best I can remember it was to let us know how much we had to learn. One of the questions on that test had to do with the *“left-handed judge.”* I recall that I was able to answer it correctly, identifying him as Ehud. This is how his story begins.

A LEFT-HANDER SERVES AS GOD'S RIGHT HAND MAN

THE APOSTASY BRINGS IN THE MOABITES

12) The southeastern neighbors of the Israelites were called Moabites. They lived to the east and south of the Dead Sea, and they were descendants of Lot by an incestuous drunken liaison with one of his daughters. Not often friendly to Israel, they were used by God to chastise them because of their return to disobedience after the death of Othniel. Yahweh even strengthened their king Eglon sufficiently to subdue his cousins to the northwest.

13) Eglon induced the Ammonites (a people with a similar history as theirs, but by Lot's other daughter) to join him (along with the Amalekites), and they came against and defeated Israel. They captured and controlled Jericho, the city of palms (Deuteronomy 34:3).

14) Once again, the emancipated slaves of Egypt, the people of Israel, became subservient to another nation and its king, which servitude lasted 18 long years.

THE AMBASSADOR BRINGS A GIFT

15) To the credit of the Israelites, when in deep distress, they did finally cry out to Yahweh. Jesus would later teach, *"Ask, and you will receive, seek, and you will find, knock, and it will be opened to you"* (Matthew 7:7) Surely it was true here - they "cried" and *"He gave them a deliverer."* Benjamin was noted for its "left-handed" warriors, men who could wield a sling with great accuracy. Ehud was no less valiant than these "slingers," as he sought to end the Moabite oppression of Israel, led by their king, Eglon. It began with a ruse about delivering tribute to him.

16) Ehud's weapon of choice was a home-made double-edged dagger, about 18" long. In a real "cloak-and-dagger" move, he strapped the dagger under his cloak to his right thigh (where he could easily access it with his dominant left hand). God can use even the wiles of a clever assassin to accomplish His divine deliverance.

17) How hard it must have been for an Israelite with "national pride" as one of God's chosen people to pay "protection money" to this wicked man! The hours of hard labor by many industrious Israelites were "wasted" as this "tribute" was paid to an enemy of Israel. Many an American taxpayer must feel this way about our often poorly used taxes.

THE ASSASSIN DOES HIS DEED OF MURDER

18), 19) Now begin the actions of intrigue that are the heart of our story. With what deference, and with what pomp and circumstance our hero and his retinue would have come into the presence of the "great king." With what bowing and scraping, what "apple-polishing" (as we might call it) they make him feel important in their eyes. Walking backwards so as not to insult the king by turning their backs on him, the group leaves the palace. Ehud sends the others on their way, but he returns to Eglon with the promise of a *"secret message"* for him. Appealing to that part of us all that likes to know a secret, Ehud puts the king off guard, causing him to be careless about his personal safety. Apparently excited at becoming privy to some juicy piece of information, Eglon dismisses his servants, including his bodyguards. The scene is now set for Ehud to spring into action against his enemy!

20), 21), 22) It is said that the handshake evolved from an ancient custom of extending your right hand with no weapon in it to indicate a peaceful approach. Could it be that our hero extended an empty right hand as he approached the overweight, arrogant monarch, who was so concerned about "hearing a secret" that he did not notice the left hand of his guest? Ehud declares that his message is from God - surely adding to the intrigue working in Eglon's mind! Unwarily the king stood to greet the bearer of this *"secret message from God."* The Benjamite moved his left hand swiftly under his cloak and pulled out the lethal weapon. With strength and skill, he thrust the weapon into the belly of the obese monarch - surely an easy target to hit! Imagine a man so large in girth that the handle of an 18" dagger disappears into his belly just as the point comes out the back!

The deed is done - the oppressor is slain. Deliverance is near at hand, but first the gallant man must effect his own escape!

THE ADVERSARY ESCAPES AND GATHERS AN ARMY

23) As is often the case in matters of life and death (in this case, Eglon's death and Ehud's life), time was truly "of the essence." To gain precious moments, the cagy descendant of wily Jacob locks the doors of the chamber of murder from the inside. He then is able to make his escape while the guards think the pair are still conversing.

24), 25) This scene is at once humorous and tragic. The servants at length return to attend their master, who by the way, lies dead in his own filth behind locked doors. These men, surely not the best or brightest in the kingdom of Moab, do not have the initiative to burst in after so long a delay. Afraid to make a decision, they wait outside the doors. All this waiting aided Ehud in his escape, as they knew not that he was gone, or that their king was dead. At length, out of embarrassment, they seek entrance without success; locating a key (they appear like the "Keystone Cops"), they enter the room to find Eglon dead. Can you imagine the scene among these men?

26) Again, the long delay of the bodyguards enabled Ehud to cover a lot of ground in his "getaway." The destination of his escape route was a place called "Seirah," about which we know no more than is seen here.

27) This verse informs us that Seirah may have been in Ephraim, for that is mentioned as to where Ehud sounded the trumpet to call warriors together to battle. The trumpet did its work, and the people mustered for the conflict ahead. Note this special verse here: Numbers 10:9, *"And when you go to war in your land against the adversary who oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the LORD your God, and you shall be saved from your enemies."*

28) The people followed Ehud down to the Jordan River, where they seized the fords to prevent any aid coming from Moab (which was on the east side of the river). This leader was confident of the LORD's help, saying, *"...the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand."*

THE ATTACK, VICTORY, AND TIME OF PEACE

29) It looks to me as if there was an occupying force of Moabite soldiers in the land (maybe in Jericho - verse 13). Perhaps these were the men slain in this single attack. 10,000 Moabite soldiers were slain by the Israelites, with no soldier of Moab escaping. How complete is the victory when God provides leadership, and His people follow Him! May we be wise to so follow Him ourselves.

30) And so another cycle is complete - Israel has rest from her enemies. This is the longest single period of peace for them in the period of the Judges - 80 years! Moab is reduced from oppression to servitude to Israel. It appears that this time of rest was likely the setting for the story of Ruth. So, we thank Ehud for setting things up for a Moabite girl to come to Bethlehem and meet Boaz! Surely, this left-hander was God's right hand man!

31) Such a short history blurb here! We are introduced to Shamgar, apparently a great warrior, who killed 600 Philistines with a stick used to prod an ox and make it move. How heroic an act was this, and one which with no further explanation is said to have *"saved Israel."* He is mentioned again in Judges 5:6, with which we will deal when we get there.

CHAPTER 4

The roles of women in society have changed dramatically over the last few decades. Interestingly, the roles of women in Bible times also change from time to time and place to place. Sometimes folks confuse issues, taking an incident from one era and trying to apply it as a principle to another.

*For instance, some would use the fact that Deborah was a leader in the era of the Judges to press for women in positions like pastor and deacon in the local church. One circumstance has absolutely nothing to do with the other. God used Deborah as an encouragement and voice from heaven for Barak, but when it was time to go to battle, it was the male Barak who led the male troops into battle versus Sisera. The era of the Judges in Israel is sandwiched between the leadership of Joshua (Moses' successor) and the monarchy. The theme of the book is found in two identical verses, 17:6 and 21:25 - **"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."** Periods of apostasy were followed by seasons of judgment. The people would cry out to God for help, and He would raise up deliverers called "Judges." They would expel the enemies, and there would follow a time of peace. But the people would invariably go back to their sin, and the cycle started again.*

A WEAK MAN'S HANDS STRENGTHENED BY A GOOD WOMAN

THE CRY FOR HELP

- 1) Key in the book of Judges is this: the absence of leadership leads to anarchy, followed by apostasy. When the judge Ehud died, Israel returned to their sinful ways. Two eternal truths are here - anarchy will produce apostasy; and the human heart is incurably evil. Jeremiah 17:9, *"The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?"*
- 2) Another eternal truth is here - sin has negative consequences. Sometimes those are material/physical, and at other times they are simply spiritual. When we draw near to God, He draws near to us. Likewise, when men turn from God, they can expect His blessing to turn. Here God allows a mighty oppressor with a tyrant in charge of its army to subdue the rebellious Israelites. The Canaanite Sisera becomes the bad guy in this life drama.
- 3) Eighty years of peace is now followed by twenty years of cruel oppression. These militaristic marauders from the Galilee used their iron chariots to wreak havoc upon the Israelites. The gravity of the judgment God had allowed on His people is seen in the fact they cried out to the Lord for help. Trouble often makes us look up.

THE CALL FOR LEADERS

- 4) This was not the first time God had found and used a godly woman to accomplish His will. The list is like a female hall of fame: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Jochebed, Ruth, Esther, and more. It is interesting that at this time a lady was in leadership in the nation. Deborah ("honeybee") was called here "a prophetess," as well as a judge.
- 5) Her heart was certainly with Israel, and she answered the call and gave her time to administer justice among the sons and daughters of Abraham. With all that responsibility, she was now to be called upon to go over 50 miles to the north and deal with this Canaanite invasion and oppression. Busy people will have more to do....
- 6) The territory under siege was nearer the home of Barak, who lived in Kedesh. Men whose families are in jeopardy will fight the more earnestly. God told Deborah that Barak was His chosen vessel to lead the men into battle. So, Barak was to recruit and lead 10,000 men into battle with the Canaanites. The battle would take place across the Jezreel Valley from Megiddo, near Mount Tabor. This is the second of 10 Bible mentions of Tabor, all in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- 7) The worst bad guy in the story is here introduced - Sisera. The sovereign God said He would draw Sisera and his men and their chariots into the lowlands of the Kishon river in the Jezreel Valley. The battle is always the Lord's; Barak and his men would not be alone in the fray. God promised they'd win. Here God would give Barak the victory by sending torrential rains to stop the mighty chariots in their tracks - rendering them useless to fight!

THE CONDITION BY BARAK

8) Here is a frightful thing - a man puts a condition on his obedience to God's command! It was bad enough that he and his neighbors had not done anything to oppose the Canaanites; it was worse that God had to use a lady from far away to motivate him to action. Now he adds to that another mistake by saying, "I will ...if you will..."

9), 10) Here is Barak's rebuke: Deborah agrees to go with him, but she assures him that though he will venture into battle and win, he will receive no honor for the victory; it would rather go to a most unlikely place - to a woman. And we today demonstrate the truth of this as we remember Jael and her courageous slaying of the wicked Sisera. Barak obeys God's word revealed to him through the prophetess, Deborah, in summoning the 2 northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali to produce soldiers for his army. They come through in answer to his call to the tune of 10,000 men. As he requested, Deborah also accompanies the troops to the high ground of beautiful Mount Tabor.

11) Here we are given an introduction to Heber the Kenite, who will be mentioned again later (in verse 17) as the husband of a lady who became the heroine of the story. It was because of this nomadic move mentioned here that Jael was in place geographically to enter the account.

12), 13) In on-the-ground fighting, tanks are a formidable adversary. They are still referred to as "cavalry." This may be because they replaced the horse and later the chariot, which was in ancient battle a fearsome weaponry. As soon as Sisera received word that Barak had mustered troops at Tabor, he made plans to get 900 of those chariots, made of iron, to face the Jewish leader. Such chariots were impervious to normal battle weapons - sword, spear, bow and arrow. In addition to the chariots and their crews, Sisera had an infantry of unknown quantity, but no doubt of significant size. The odds were clearly against Barak and his troops by human standards. Yet there is more than a human standard when the people of God go into battle at His command. He is with them.

THE CONQUEST OVER THE CANAANITES

14) The Israelites held the high ground, sitting atop towering Tabor. They were safe in their lair, but God wanted them to take the battle to the enemy. How comfortable we may get in our Christian lives, but God didn't call us to comfort. He called us to contend for the faith - to take the battle to the enemy, to snatch brands from the burning. So, Barak led his troops down Mount Tabor (is this a sudden burst of courage? Will he finally lead?).

15), 16) Faith's action laid hold of God's power. The waters of Jordan didn't open for Joshua and Israel until the priests set their feet in the water. God did not destroy Sisera and his army until Barak and his men charged down the hill. Once they moved forward in faith, God moved by putting fear into the hearts of the Canaanite warriors. The battle turned in favor of the smaller army because they had the One on their side Who made the minority into a majority. That truth still holds: *"If God be for us, who can stand against us?"* Even Captain Sisera, that renowned warrior, abandoned his chariot and fled on foot.

17) Sisera, the great general of the Canaanites, showed his true color (yellow) as he fled the battle and took refuge in the tent of a woman named Jael. Oh, what a mistake that was! Did any man ever go into a place so dangerous without knowing the danger?! Better to have stood and died in battle than to have entered that tent. He fled here because of a treaty of peace between his king (Jabin) and the house of Heber. A not so peaceful surprise awaited him at that tent.

THE CROWN GOES TO A WOMAN

18), 19) In keeping with eastern hospitality, Jael invited Sisera into their family tent. He no doubt felt safe because of the peace his people had with this family in Israel. Jael covered him with something that would hide him from pursuers, and when he asked for a drink, she blessed him with some milk product. Surely, he could stop trembling and feel safe now, so safe that the weary man could take a nap.

20) Sisera then posted Jael at the tent door as a sentry, instructing her to hide the fact of his

presence there. Then he fell asleep, and he was taking his last nap.

21) What a warrior woman Jael was. Her weapons were strange, but they were effective. A gracious invitation and a glass of milk, a blanket under which to take a nap, and a position at the tent door as a sentry against Sisera's discovery. When Sisera fell asleep, Jael's hand found a tent peg and a hammer, not normally weapons, but what she had at the ready. She drove the peg through the temple of Sisera, taking his life. She was a courageous and noble soldier.

22) We must hand it to Barak in the end. He wavered at first but warred at the last. When God supernaturally sent defeat to the Canaanites, Barak didn't stand back and watch, he joined in the battle. And as the foe was defeated to the last man, Sisera, he pursued him to finish the job. Alas, it was never his job to finish. As the prophetess had said, a woman would get the honor of slaying the general Sisera - and we remember Jael.

23), 24) The oppression that came as a result of rebellion was now put to rest. This is the way spiritual things often work - divine intervention coupled with human responsibility. Note the phrases, "*God subdued Jabin... Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin...*" God wants to do great things for us and through us, and He requires our participation in the efforts. Deborah, Barak, and Jael are names we shall remember always.

CHAPTER 5

There are a number of times in Scripture when signal events are celebrated with a song. Exodus 15 is a perfect example of this as Moses and the people sang a song of victory over the Egyptians at the Red Sea. The song of Mary in Luke 1:46-55 is so very well-known. This particular song seems to be a duet featuring Deborah and Barak. Their song of victory covers many episodes in Israel's recent history, and it comes to focus on the conquest over Jabin's Canaanite forces led by Sisera. The three earthly heroes are enshrined in this song - Deborah, Barak, and Jael. James wrote that if any are cheerful, they should sing (5:13). Let us sing melodies of praise to God for His goodness!

THE SONG OF DEBORAH AND BARAK REJOICING IN THE VICTOR

THOUGHTS OF THE LORD

1) In September, 2004, I met a man who became a dear friend and Israeli guide; his name was Avi. I asked him about his name, and he told me it was "Avinoam," and that I could find it in Judges 4 and 5. Remember that in Hebrew the letters b and v are the same character. I looked it up and saw that he was the father of Barak, and I was delighted to hear that Avi and Dahlia had named their first son "Barak." This Biblical Barak joined with Deborah to compose and sing a song of praise to the God Who gave such a great and improbable victory to His people.

2) The ballad began with recognition of the leaders and people of Israel that God used to bring about this victory. Bold leadership and willing service combined wonderfully, just as they would later in Nehemiah's day. The prophet would lead boldly, and the people had a mind to work. This is still a winning combination in doing God's work here on earth. When it happens for us, we, too, should bless the Lord, as they did.

3) This song of praise would not just be sung in the villages and towns; no, it was to bless the ears of noble kings and princes. It was to be a song for all people for all time. This was clearly a song and melody of worship, for though men would hear it, it was "*to the LORD, the God of Israel.*" When we worship, we do well to remember the saying, "worship is for an audience of One."

4), 5) Elisha struck the waters of Jordan (2 Kings 2:14) with his talith and said, "*Where is the God of Elijah?*" The question really is this, "Is the God of the past still the God of the present?" This song declares the answer a resounding "Yes!" The God of Sinai, Whose mount trembled in the cloudy darkness, the God Who brought victory of Edom, He is still God today. While we recognize that God

does not always do things the same way in every age, He is yet the same gracious God Who cares for His people.

TERROR IN THE LAND

6), 7) Two recent, so very recent, circumstances proved Yahweh's faithfulness again. The Philistines made the people of Israel miserable and caused them to quake in fear, and then Shamgar arose and slew 600 of them with a working stick! Even since then Jabin's Canaanite hordes under the cruel leadership of Sisera had struck fear in the hearts of Israel. People of Israel would slink through wood paths rather than walk openly on highways, so great was their fear. But that was to change with the arrival of Deborah on the scene!

8) The reason for the national malaise was a spiritual decline - "new gods" were idols, as Israel had abandoned the right worship of the true God, Yahweh. This violation of the first two commandments brought about their subservience to the Canaanites, causing them to cry to the LORD (Judges 4:3).

9) The cowardly creeping through the bypaths was quite in contrast to the recent courageous and willing service to the Lord and His people that were seen under Barak and Deborah. From two tribes, Naphtali and Zebulun, 10,000 warriors answered the call to defend the nation!

10), 11) None are to miss the jubilation resulting from the recent victory. The rich are characterized by those who can afford white donkeys on which to ride. They place on the donkeys' backs rich saddle blankets for comfort. They are to rejoice! The poor are seen in those who get from place to place in a pedestrian manner - walking by the way. They, too, are to join in with the merriment. Another way of describing people of differing social standings is here - those in the rural setting, with flocks gathered at the wells are less wealthy. Those who live within the protection of the city walls and gates possess more of this world's goods. Yet each is to rejoice in what God has done!

REVIEWING THE VICTORY

TASK OF THE LEADERS

12) Most great accomplishments begin (humanly speaking) with leadership. To end the scourge of Canaanite oppression, God raised up these leaders, Deborah and Barak. This is not a text to enter into arguments about male and female roles in the church. It is rather a place to rejoice that a strong woman was able to rouse a man from his fearful and introverted state to step up and lead men into battle against an imposing enemy. I cannot count or recall all the times God has used my mother, my wife, or my daughter to support and help me be the best version of myself. Thank God for the Deborah-like people in our lives!

13), 14), 15) It was not the entire nation that procured victory over Jabin's army, but it was rather a remnant, pieces of which are described here. Only Zebulun and Naphtali had been mentioned in the register of warriors against Jabin, but others are seen in this roster. Some 900 chariots of iron awaited them in the valley, and it would have been easy to stay up on Mount Tabor rather than face this imposing cavalry. But under the leadership of Barak, the infantry rushed down the beautiful slopes of Tabor to engage the Canaanites. We learn here that Issachar had been bold to join the effort, a thing not mentioned earlier. And victory was given them by Yahweh.

16), 17), 18) Sometimes the divine record doesn't include everything that happened - on occasion later revealing something that was indeed left out of the record. The incident in Jonah is an example of this, where we are told after the fact that Jonah (1:10) had related to the sailors that he was fleeing from the LORD. So here we discover that apparently Zebulun and Naphtali were not the only tribes asked to help in the battle, or Deborah and Barak would have been out of line in chiding them for not doing so. Reuben and the other Gileadite tribes are mentioned in censure, along with Dan and Asher. The "sitting still" mentioned in verse 18 was said by someone to be "indolence" that led to "indecision." This is a rare charge of laziness against some of God's people. It is followed up by a great compliment to Zebulun and Naphtali for their sacrifice in defense of Israel.

19) It seems it was a new experience for Jabin's armies to fail in battle and not be able to loot and

plunder. Yet at Taanach, just five miles from Megiddo, such defeat came to the Canaanites. 20), 21), 22) Yahweh often employed natural elements to aid His people in battles - hornets, hailstones, and such. Here He did so again. Divine intervention must have come in the form of torrential rains. The dry valley at the foot of Mount Tabor became a marsh in which the chariot wheels sank and became a battle liability. Normally, the horses would have been a terror when the chariots were functional, but now they just made noise. God knows how to turn things around in favor of His people, and He certainly did that here.

23) Another location, this time a lone city, is not chided, but is cursed for the failure of its people to come to the aid of the nation in time of battle. Meroz is of uncertain location, even after consulting several Bible atlases. Perhaps the curse of this song sent it into infamy and made it lost to memory. More chilling is the fact that this curse is actually attributed to *“the angel of the LORD”* - Jesus!

TRIUMPH OF THE LADY

24) This courageous and strong lady has her name honored by many females in Israel and world Jewry today. You will see it spelled “Yael,” for there is no “J” in Hebrew; “Jael” is an Anglicized form of her name. You may have noticed that I prefer to write Yahweh instead of Jehovah for that very reason. Here Deborah and Barak harmonize in a beautiful note of honor for Jael. She is blessed for her brave act. Her biography is that she married Heber, and they lived in a tent. O, but her resume includes the brave assassination of Sisera, a great enemy of Israel, and she, like Mary of Bethany, will be remembered as long as this Word of God is around (which it will be eternally). The men of the city of Meroz were cursed, but this nomadic female was blessed.

25), 26), 27) The act that made Jael famous is detailed here in the song of Deborah and Barak. They sing of Sisera’s request for a drink of water, to which she responded with *“curds in a noble bowl.”* This is like giving a full-course meal on the best china to someone who sought a snack. The slaying of Sisera was an act of courage and strength. He might have awakened at any moment and slain her, but she risked it. Tent peg in one hand and mallet in the other, she literally “nailed him to the floor.” It was instantaneous death to a villain who himself had slain so many! The final scene is of her standing over him in victory, like the emblem on the flag of my home commonwealth of Virginia. If she knew Latin, she might have said, *“Sic Semper Tyrannis”* (“Thus always to Tyrants”). 28), 29), 30) These verses shift location to some far-off scene where waits Sisera’s mother for her victorious son to return from battle with great spoil. Alas, he comes not! His chariot has sunk in the mire of the Jezreel Valley in the shadow of Mount Tabor. Its wheels will not roll into home, nor his horses hooves beat down the path to Ima’s (mother’s) house. To her voice of impatient inquiry are added those of other young women, princesses. They all want to know what is taking their champion so long to get home with the spoils of war. They might have kidnaped young Israelite women to be concubines for the men. Beautiful clothing, with brilliant colors and embroidered images on it would be expected. And these women had no care that people would die, and kingdoms would fall just for them to have a nice payday! What callous hearts are theirs! How selfish and unfeeling can they be?

31) As sad as these last lines have been, o sweet is this conclusion. A prayer arises to Yahweh, including a request that all His enemies be like Sisera, lying dead pool of their own blood with a tent peg driven through their skull! A second desire in this prayer is for all those who ally themselves with Yahweh (*“your friends”*) to be like the sun, rising in its might. Certainly, this last is a blessing for those called “friends.” In John 15:15, Jesus said, *“I have called you friends.”* Deborah and Barak sang “Victory in Jael;” today we sing “Victory in Jesus.” 2 Corinthians 2:14, *“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession.”* O, the blessing that now the land would have rest for 40 years.

CHAPTER 6

Joshua's work was done; he had led the people in entering, conquering, and dividing the land among the tribes. The great leader had passed off the earthly scene and the long period of the Judges had begun. This time was one of a cycle of disobedience, judgment by the oppression of some neighboring nation, the cry for help, and God raising up a deliverer (one or more of the Judges) to lead them in casting out the oppressing nation. Gideon was one of the most famous of those Judges. A period of 40 years of "rest" had followed the defeat of the Canaanites by Deborah and Barak, described for us in Judges 4. Chapter 5 is the transcript of the song of Deborah and Barak. Now Judges chapter 6 introduces us to Gideon, whose name was adopted by a group of Christians who now place Scriptures in many languages in critical places throughout the world. God allowed the Midianites to be a scourge to Israel because of Israel's disobedience to Him. Like the Edomites, the Midianites were "stepcousins" of the Jews, since they descended from Abraham by his second wife Keturah (whom he married after the death of Sarah). For seven long years the Midianites had oppressed Israel, stealing the produce of the land. Before God raised up Gideon, He sent an unnamed prophet to remind them of why they were suffering (6:7-10). It is seen in this phrase at the end of verse 10: "But you have not obeyed my voice."

HERE COMES THE JUDGE, AGAIN

A CALAMITY BECAUSE OF SIN

- 1) Here are described phases one and two of this particular cycle. The author doesn't detail the sin of the Israelites; he rather only summarizes it as they *"did what was evil in the sight of the LORD."* The immediate consequences of their evil was a seven-year subjugation to the Midianites. Actions have consequences; God made good on His warning and threat.
- 2) The Midianites were apparently descendants of Abraham through his marriage to Keturah after Sarah's death (see Genesis 25:1,2). These cousins of Israel seasonally invaded Israel, coming to raid and plunder at harvest-time. Imagine a thief showing up each week just when you arrived home from the grocery store - to steal all your food! So the Israelites left their towns and villages, hiding in shelters made or found in the hill country, such as caves or clefts.
- 3) There are all kinds of thievery in the world. This type was a foreign power stealing the product of another nation. Some thievery is intra-national, that is, within the nation. Such as when one person works hard to make a living, a life, and a future for their family, and the government comes along and by legalized force takes from them to give to someone else. God directs us to help the less-fortunate, but he does not tell the government to forcibly do it.
- 4), 5), 6) The method of the invaders was to overwhelm an area in Israel with such numbers that the invaded people could not withstand them. They would steal crops recently harvested, as well as the livestock belonging to the Israelites. The invaders were so numerous that they were compared to the swarms of locusts that often devastated the foliage in a land. And these swarms of Midianites would devastate Israel, bringing them to such a low estate that they cried out to the LORD for assistance. The cycle is so clearly seen here.

A CRY TO GOD

- 7) There is a skill common to many - to cry out to God when things are tough. God may be forgotten, ignored, or even abandoned during the good times; but O, how we remember His number when it is time to call for help. Israel is not alone in this. And those who follow this pattern in life need to learn the simple art of day-by-day walking with God. So many problems in this world would disappear if the sons of Adam would practice living God's way!
- 8), 9), 10) The LORD might have ignored their cry, or delayed His response, saying, "Let them bleed a little first." But this God Who chose Israel as His people to show forth His glory and be a trophy of His grace, acts in grace to them. They do not deserve so quick a response, yet they got one from Yahweh. He sent them an un-named prophet who reminded them of what God had done **for** them, and what He required **from** them. God had saved them from Egypt's slavery, and He had given

them the promised land, driving out before them the squatters who had occupied it while they were in bondage to Pharaoh. How beneficent God had been to this people, and what had they done in return? They spurned His Word that commanded them to be a monotheistic people, worshiping only Him. They committed spiritual adultery by worshiping the so-called gods of the Amorites. What things draw our attention, focus, and devotion away from our Savior? Are we guilty, as Israel was guilty? Does the Word of God not convict us of our transgressions?

A CONVERSATION WITH GOD

11) The peace in Israel that followed God's deliverance from the Canaanites through Deborah and Barak had now ended. A return to sin had led to another oppression in Israel, this time by the Midianites. So sad was Israel's plight that instead of threshing grain on the high, breezy, flat hilltops, Gideon was treading out his grain harvest hiding in a winepress. Oh, the cowardly shame that can be ours when we refuse to trust God and to walk in His ways. And yet it is God Who takes the initiative to bring us into the place of blessing.

12) A strange meeting takes place here - Gideon comes face to face with the Son of God (often referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures as "the Angel of the LORD"). The words of Christ do not seem to fit the man in his present circumstance - he didn't appear to be a mighty warrior, enjoying the presence of God. He looked more like a coward, hiding from the Midianites to thresh his paltry harvest. Isn't it wonderful that things aren't always really as they appear?

13) Gideon challenged the greeting he received with two questions and a declaration. 1. "Would we be in this mess if God was really with us?" 2. "Tradition says God performed many wonders in emancipating our fathers from the slavery of Egypt; why isn't some of that going on now?" 3. Contrary to enjoying God's presence (as You say), we have been abandoned by God. Gideon was going strictly on appearances, on circumstantial evidence.

A COMMAND FROM GOD

14) That this "angel of the LORD" is deity is confirmed here. He is now referred to as "the LORD." Christ sees something in Gideon that Gideon doesn't see in himself. He challenges him to go in a strength which Gideon doesn't feel he has and deliver Israel from the oppressor. What a strange command He makes to this weak "coward." We can be assured of this, whatever God commands us to do, He will equip and enable us to accomplish. Gideon will learn this in time.

15) Humility becomes Gideon, since he and his nation have been brought so low. It is good that he recognizes his inability to do what God calls him to do. But meekness must also be accompanied by faith; Gideon must believe the God Who stands before him. And in that faith, he must go forth to do the impossible. How can this thing be? He will discover this as he accepts as true what God says and then acts on it (the very essence of faith).

16) The answer comes forth in simple terms, *"I will be with you."* This presence (Exodus 3:12) gave Moses strength to lead Israel out of Egypt. And as God was with Moses, so He was with Joshua (Joshua 3:7), a presence that enabled him to lead Israel to victory. Gideon can count on the same power emanating from the same presence. We have a similar promise in Christ's great commission - *"I will be with you always, even to the end..."* (Matthew 28:20).

17) In 1 Corinthians 1:22, Paul stated that *"The Jews require a sign."* In John 4:48 Jesus said to a man in Capernaum, *"Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe."* Gideon's story illustrates this ancient principle that God would accommodate the need of the Jews for miracles to confirm His words to them. Moses saw it at the Red Sea, Joshua (1:5) at the Jordan, and the woman in 1 Kings 17, for which please examine verse 24 for the principle: *"Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."* The primary purpose of miracles in Scripture is always to confirm the miracle-worker as God's man with God's message.

18) Later Gideon would ask for a more specific sign, two of them, in fact - regarding the wetting of

the fleece on a dry ground, and the wetting of the ground with the fleece remaining dry. Here he simply asks that the Stranger stay until he goes to bring Him a gift. In each case, God deals gently with the weak, but growing, faith of Gideon.

19) In typical eastern hospitality, Gideon seizes the opportunity to bless his Guest with a prepared meal. The meat from a slain goat, and the amount of bread made from a half bushel of flour may seem excessive, but Gideon wants to show his honor and appreciation to the Guest for His encouragement and challenge. Would this likely include some element of sacrifice on Gideon's part, since the Midianites had left the people so stripped of agricultural and livestock possessions?

20) In this one instance the phrase "the angel of the LORD" was changed to "*the angel of God.*" We would normally think of this latter phrase as referring to an ordinary angel and not deity. But the interchangeable use here allows us to see mention of Jesus. The heavenly Visitor instructs Gideon to place the meat and bread on a rock and pour the broth over them. Gideon is quick to obey. God can turn any rock into an altar of worship for Him.

21) As Gideon no doubt looked on in amazement, the Guest reached out with His staff and touched the offering, at which it immediately burst into flames which consumed the entire offering. At that, the angel of the LORD simply vanished from sight! Gideon had asked for a sign, and this was it!

22), 23) There seems to have been an understanding that men could not see the face of God and live. God had said as much to Moses in Exodus 33:20, "*But, he said, 'you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.'*" So, when Gideon grasped that this was "*the angel of the LORD,*" he cried "Alas!" God calmed his fears and offered Gideon peace, saying, "*You won't die.*" The God Who makes the rules can suspend them when He wishes.

24) The vision of God and the kindness shown to Gideon led him to worship. He built an altar at the place (Ophrah) and named it "*Yahweh Shalom,*" meaning, "the LORD is Peace." And so in the midst of a near famine because of the Midianites, and following an encounter with God that could have spelled death, Gideon was granted peace. That is how our God works so very often.

THE CHANGING OF THE ALTARS

25), 26) Gideon was from a family that had apparently been worshippers of Baal and Asherah. The first step that he was to take before being a leader in the nation was to show leadership in his home and community. The altars to Baal were generally on high places, and so to destroy this one would be a public display of challenge to idolatry and obedience to Yahweh - a good first test for Gideon. He was to destroy the altar to Baal and construct one to Yahweh. Then, using the wood from the Asherah pole, he was to make a fire and offer one of his father's bulls on it. This would be quite a show of courage and faithfulness to the true God.

27) It became less of a show than it might have been, however. Still suffering from some fear - fear of his family and of the men of the town who might oppose his efforts - Gideon obeyed the LORD, but he did so at night. He engaged ten of his servants in the task, which was a good witness to them. In a few hours, everyone would know what happened.

28) Just as expected, the townspeople discovered what had happened early the next morning. They found Baal's altar destroyed, the Asherah pole cut down, a new altar to Yahweh set up, and a bull having been sacrificed on it. Strange, isn't it, that the stones of the old altar, now forming a new one, and the wood of the vile Asherah pole had together finally been employed in true worship. Prior to this night it was false worship to a non-existent idol deity.

29) Someone must have seen the nocturnal activity of Gideon, or perhaps some of the servant helpers told the news. In any case, the townspeople discovered that it was Gideon, the son of Joash, who had done this thing that was abhorrent to them, but pleasing to Yahweh.

30), 31) In the Judeo-Christian tradition, vengeance belonged to God. If man tried to execute revenge on his own, he was not allowing Yahweh to do that which was His alone to do. The father of Gideon applies a similar reasoning when the men approach him for satisfaction. Joash was

spoken to as the head of the home, and perhaps they felt he might agree with their conclusion and plan. They cried for Gideon to be brought out to them that they might kill him for desecrating the altar of Baal and the Asherah pole. Did his son's courageous act spur Joash to recall better days and better worship? In any case, he asked the vengeful idolaters if they would contend for or save their god? He boldly asserted then that any who persisted in contending for Baal would be put to death. His closing statement was powerful, and it demonstrated the impotence of the idols. *"If he is a god, let him contend for himself."*

32) The pursuit of Gideon seemed to end there. Joash's questioning what kind of god Baal was if he couldn't defend himself shows him to be repentant. Gideon was given the nickname "Jerub-Baal," signifying either (or both of these): "Let Baal plead for himself," or "Baal's Antagonist." If they meant this as a slur on the good name of Gideon, it backfired badly, becoming a badge of honor.

THE COLLECTING OF AN ARMY

33), 34), 35) Before going out to fight Goliath, David had shown great courage against a bear and a lion. Before answering God's call to resist the Midianites, Gideon was shamefully threshing wheat in a winepress to hide from marauding bands. It is amazing what his one act of courage in his own village could do to his reputation and his self-estimation. He had said that his clan was the weakest in the tribe of Manasseh and that he was the least in his father's house! Yet now when the Midianites, bolstered by their allies, the Amalekites, cross the Jordan and flood the Jezreel Valley, Gideon sends a call throughout his tribe and several others, and men flock to him! Clothed in the armor of the Holy Spirit, Gideon was invulnerable while doing God's work. The Jezreel Valley is in Lower Galilee, so it was natural for Gideon to seek conscripts from the Galilean tribes, Manasseh, Asher, Naphtali, and Zebulun. The Israelite warriors from this huge swath of land are mustered now to face the unnumerable hosts invading from the east.

THE CONFIRMING OF GOD'S PROMISE

36), 37), 38) According to the New Testament (1 Corinthians 1:22), *"The Jews require a sign."* Gideon was such a "sign-seeker." He asks God to confirm that He is going to use Gideon to save Israel by giving him a sign. His specific request is that tomorrow morning he find a dew-soaked fleece on the dry ground. *"Then I shall know,"* he said, that it will be *"as You have said."* We should not criticize Gideon for this, for Yahweh does not. In fact, He honors the request perfectly. The next morning the fleece is saturated, and Gideon wrings a bowl full of water from it. *"Ok, God, that's it."* 39), 40) But no, Gideon makes one more request - asking God to wet the ground with dew and leave the fleece dry. God did exactly as His growing child asked, without criticism or censure. In my adult life I have heard of a good many people "putting out a fleece." I will not commend or criticize such an act, but I do recall some old divine saying, "The Devil can wet on a fleece, too."

CHAPTER 7

In the plain of Esdraeldon, situated between Nazareth and Beit She'an, is a place called the "Spring of Harod." It was identified in verse one of our chapter as the location of the gathering of troops to Gideon. So much history is in this geographical area. To the north (verse one again) is the hill of Moreh, on whose eastern and western slopes two famous women lived. Luke 7 tells of the widow of Nain, whose son Jesus raised from the dead. Nain is on one side of Moreh. On the other side lay the area known as "Shunem," where a woman in the Hebrew Scriptures made a prophet's chamber (2 Kings 4) for Elisha to occupy when he ministered in their region. Elisha prophesied that this barren woman would have a son, and she did. The boy died, and the prophet raised him from the dead. What a miracle region!

GIDEON DISPATCHES THE MIDIANITES REDUCING THE TROOPS

THE CAMP

1) Between the jagged slopes of Mount Gilboa and beautifully smooth and rounded Mount Tabor is the smaller hill of Moreh. It is at the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley, where one could look northwest and see the mountains of Carmel all the way to Haifa Bay and the Mediterranean Sea. You could also look southeast to Beit She'an and the Jordan River Valley. These valleys were a vital passageway for travel from Asia to North Africa, and whoever controlled the valleys controlled that travel. The Midianites were encamped there, along with Gideon's new army.

THE CROWD AND THE COWARDS

2), 3) Because Israel returned to their sin, God delivered them into the hands of the Midianite oppressors for 7 years. As was their custom, the suffering Israelites cried out to their ever-listening God. God raised up Gideon, to whom 32,000 men gathered to fight. God told Gideon, "There are too many men in your army; they might brag of being saved by their own strength." God would shame the cowards, silence the boasters, and show Himself mighty in delivering with the few. Moses' rod, the widow's mite, Abraham's faith - all these were things that seemed small, but they accomplished great exploits. God had Gideon announce to the 32,000 that anyone who was afraid could go home; result, 22,000 left, trimming the ranks to 10,000. Many with spirits weakened by long-term oppression, now nearly fainted at seeing the enemy. God, Who wished smaller numbers, excused them. Those whose spirits were not courageous and confident in God, went home.

THE CARELESS

4) God's ways differ so from ours. We would use "many" and "might;" He chose to use "few" and "faith." Still there are too many for God to get the glory, so He orders Gideon to assemble troops at the spring of Harod where He could further thin the ranks. God would show Gideon whom to keep and whom to dismiss. He knows the heart of valor and wisdom, and He chooses such. I plan to revisit this beautiful spot when I next travel to Israel!

5) What a practical God we have! His second test of worthiness to serve in this army is watchfulness. He has Gideon send the men to the water to drink, perhaps after some training exercise. The hot, thirsty men drink in one of two ways. They fall on their knees and stick their heads in the water, or they kneel down, bring water to their mouths in their hands, and lap it there as a dog would, with their eyes up, watching for a would-be attacker.

THE COURAGEOUS AND CAREFUL

6) You already know the numbers - 9,700 were careless; 300 were cautious, as well as courageous (having passed the earlier test). Surely Gideon must have trembled as he hoped that the larger group was going to be by him in the fight to come. What would God do? Two thirds of the troops were already gone; how many would go now?

7) Then came the decree, "Keep the 300; send the rest home." Here are 2 great things - a **divine promise**: "I will give the Midianites into your hands by the 300," and "I will save you." The divine promise is accompanied by the **divine presence**. Jesus said, "*Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the age.*" This truth is eternal - If God be for us, who can stand against us?

8) The three hundred got victuals (supplies of food) and trumpets from the common shares of the army, and the rest of the people were heading home. Unbelief would view trumpets and pitchers as unlikely weapons of war. Faith, on the other hand, knows that God can use whatever He wills to accomplish His plans. How large must have looked the camp of Midianites to this little band of 300 men! And yet how large is their God to be able to win with few instead of many. We remember little Moses against big Pharaoh, David against Goliath, and suddenly we can take heart with the 300.

REVEALING THE TURNOUT

RECOGNITION OF FEAR

9) Once Yahweh has said, *"I have given it into your hand,"* nothing else should be necessary for Gideon. Yet God knows the weak and fainting heart of His servant, and He provides what Gideon needs. Our God knows what we need, and even if our faith falters, He still keeps giving.

10), 11) Yahweh is all-knowing, and He directs that Gideon accompany his servant Purah on a "recon" mission to the outskirts of the huge Midianite military camp. God knew that what Gideon would hear there would strengthen his heart with confidence. These two men move stealthily across the area separating the Israelites from the Midianites, making their way close enough to hear the guards' conversations - yet they were in the dark and unseen.

REASON FOR FEAR

12) Again is given the description of the size of the enemy forces. The Midianites, Amalekites, and other eastern mercenaries cover the valley floor like innumerable locusts! The camels, perhaps Midianite cavalry, were also without number. What an adversary this was! But it is not the size of the enemy **against** them that mattered; the real confidence would lie in the size of the God that is **for** them. The carnal mind would guarantee victory for Midian, but the spiritual mind, the one guided by faith, sees an enemy that will be vanquished. This mission is designed to increase his faith.

REMEDY FOR FEAR

13) 10,000 men drank at the spring, but only 300 kneeled, bringing water up their mouths in their hands, remaining watchful as they did. Gideon must have been a little fearful, for God told him He would be encouraged by what he saw and heard that night. He went near enough to the camp to hear a Midianite soldier telling his friend about a dream he had.

14) The dream was about a barley loaf rolling into the camp of Midian and knocking over a tent, and it was interpreted by the other soldier as meaning that the God of Israel would give all the host of Midian over into the hand of Gideon. What a God we serve, Who can give unredeemed men dreams that tell of coming events - remember Pharaoh in Egypt, and Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar?

15) God always keeps His word - He promised (7:11) that Gideon would be encouraged by what he heard at the camp of Midian. Once Gideon heard the dream and its meaning, he prostrated himself in worship before God! Now that he was strengthened in spirit, the leader returned to the Israelite camp and roused the soldiers to prepare for a battle that he promised was already won. He passed on to them the confidence he had received from God! He encouraged them to *"Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand."* The battle was as good as over and won!

ROUTING THE TYRANTS

FOOLISH WEAPONS

16) The three hundred men were split by Gideon into three companies of one hundred each. Every soldier was given three things: 1. A trumpet (the ram's horn, or shofar, not a metallic instrument), 2. An earthenware jar or pitcher that could be easily broken, and 3. A lit torch placed inside each jar. This was not exactly modern weaponry, even for 1300 years before Christ. What in the world was going to be the strategy? Of course, long-time Bible students know what would happen. Do you ever wish you were reading some of these accounts for the very first time so there could be suspense and more drama in your study experience?

FOLLOWING GOD'S MAN

17), 18) With simple weaponry there cannot be a complicated plan. Gideon directed them to watch him and do as he did. Then he shared what he was going to do. They would surround the camp, and at Gideon's signal, they would all blow their trumpets. Then they would shout in unison, ***"For the LORD, and for Gideon!"***

FELLING THE ENEMY

19), 20) The strategy included dividing the men into three 100-man companies and placing them around the Midianite camp. This they did at night when inability to see added to the fear of the enemy. By most reckonings it was 10:00 P.M. The second (middle) watch had just begun, and the

guards were weary, having only slept a little, or perhaps none at all. With pitchers, lamps, and trumpets as their strange weapons, the Israelites took up their positions. What was God doing? Already He has reduced a large army (32,000) to a shadow (300) of its former strength; He has sent 99 of every 100 soldiers home. And now He has armed them with tools of home and tabernacle, not weapons of warfare! How will this discomfit and destroy an enemy?

21), 22) Here is what God is doing! Pitchers crash, torches burn and glow, trumpets blow and 300 look and sound like many thousands. Steadfastly stood the 300 with flames leaping from their torches. The hosts of Midian had their swords turned against each other. Survivors fled and were slain by pursuing Israelites. Providence, faith, and strange weapons secured a mighty victory and a great deliverance for Israel. True it is that "little is much when God is in it." It was He, Yahweh, Who turned the swords of the Midianites and their many allies against their fellow-soldiers. As the men fled in fright, they seemed to know which way was toward home, for the flight directions all seem to be to the south and east.

RECLAIMING THE TERRITORY

23) As the victory was progressing, there were too many of the Midianite coalition for the 300 to slaughter, so they called out reinforcements from Asher and Manasseh to help with the pursuit.

24) Next the tribe of Ephraim was called upon to send help. Their mission was to move in between the fleeing Midianites and the Jordan River, cutting off their escape route. So, the fleeing, frightened enemy soldiers were caught between Asher and Manasseh on their west and Ephraim on their east. Pinched between these two fresh fighting forces, they would begin to lose hope of escape.

25) It seems that the vanguard of the fleeing troops must have made it over the Jordan, but they didn't get all the way home. The Ephraimites caught up with them, capturing their princes, Oreb and Zeeb. These men they slew at places that were named for them, and they brought their heads to Gideon, who was back on the west side of the Jordan River. The victory was complete.

CHAPTER 8

The final chapter in Judges dealing with Gideon's final chapter in life and influence, is before us here. There are yet some remnants of the Midianite alliance to be dealt with by Gideon and Israel. This will be done with relative ease, yet some internal national strife will accompany the effort. Gideon will show wise leadership in handling the conflict. The latter portion of the chapter depicts a spiritual lapse by the great man, whose leadership began well in humility, but it ended poorly in pride. Whereas earlier deliverances resulted in good times of peace and rest following the judge, the people of Israel wasted no time in returning to apostasy upon Gideon's death.

GIDEON'S FINAL DAYS

THE STRIFE HE ENCOUNTERED

DISTRACTION FROM EPHRAIM

1) Gideon and those who followed him had wrought a great victory for all of Israel, even though he had only conscripted troops from the tribes closest to where the enemy invasion occurred. Now Ephraim rises up in a fit of petulance to accuse Gideon of purposely not including them in the early days of the military effort.

2), 3) Solomon would pen several centuries later a noble principle: Proverbs 15:1, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Gideon acted on this principle as he responded to the angry Ephraimites. He compared his work to the harvest and theirs to the gleanings, but in such a way as to make the latter look more impressive than the former. "Why, you captured the kings, while we only slew lowly foot-soldiers!" His great wisdom defused what might have developed into a massive civil strife. O, that God may make us wise to give soft answers when we come under

verbal assault. So much strife could be avoided if we do so.

DENIAL OF ASSISTANCE

4), 5), 6) The Israelite army had pushed the fleeing Midianites eastward, and they had now crossed the Jordan, *“exhausted, yet pursuing.”* They arrived at the town of Succoth and asked the residents for some bread to feed the hungry troops. It seemed a reasonable request to make of their Gileadite brothers. In a self-serving and cowardly response, the leaders of Succoth refused the aid because the Midianite kings were not yet apprehended. They clearly feared reprisals from Midian a greater threat than helping their own people was a responsibility!

7) Gideon reminded them that the Lord would give them the victory they sought, and when He did, Gideon would return to Succoth and punish them for their refusal. He promised to flail their flesh with thorns and briars - a fitting reprisal for their wicked dealing.

8), 9) Pressing his men five miles further east to Penuel, Gideon made a similar victual request from them. These fearful men gave a like answer, refusing the aid requested. Again Gideon had an apt reply for their cowardice, *“When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower.”* In my mind’s eye, I see Gideon looking up and speaking to the people who looked down from this place of safety, so they thought. Time will tell how safe the tower makes them indeed.

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE ENEMY

PURSUIT OF THE MIDIANITES

10) We find here that the Midianite army began with 135,000 troops! 90% of them had fallen in battle, and the remaining 15,000 had fled to Karkor, likely further southeast in Ammonite lands.

11), 12) The Midianite remnant *“felt secure”* in their distant refuge. Surely the Israelites would not pursue them this far! But they were mistaken, as Gideon’s men attacked them there, sending the kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, fleeing for their lives. Their flight was in vain, for Gideon captured them, throwing what was left of the army into a panic, making them useless as a fighting force.

PUNISHMENT OF THOSE WHO REFUSED HELP

13) - 17) The Midianite army gone, and the two kings now as prisoners, Gideon leads his troops on the homeward journey. But it is not a straight route to be taken home, for there are promises to be kept to two peoples who feared enemies more than they trusted their God and His man, Gideon. The account includes an interesting twist in the capture of a young man from Succoth who gave Gideon the names of 77 leaders and elders of Succoth. These men alone were paid back for their cowardly refusal to help the exhausted, hungry soldiers of Israel days before. The historian says that Gideon *“taught the men of Succoth a lesson.”* Actions have consequences, and in this case *“inactions have consequences.”* At Penuel, Gideon made good his word to break down the tower that was their *“refuge of safety,”* and he went further to slay the men of the city.

PUTTING TO DEATH OF THE KINGS

18) -21) There are times in Scripture when something is referred to from the past that wasn’t beforehand reported on. This is one of those times. When they arrive back at Ophrah, Gideon’s home base, he asks Zebah and Zalmunna to describe some men that they had slain at Mount Tabor before Gideon’s army dispatched the Midianites. Did they hope to ameliorate their situation by flattering Gideon, saying that he looked like a *“prince?”* Gideon didn’t go for it; in fact, it made things worse for them, as he realized it was his brothers they had slain! Upset at the discovery that these wicked men, invaders of his homeland, had added to their wrongs that they killed his brothers, Gideon charged his son, Jether, to rise and kill them. The young man, though his eldest son, was too young and tender to strike the blows to kill. These vile men then taunt Gideon to do the job himself - were they suggesting he wasn’t *“man enough”* to do it? If so, they were wrong, for he rose and killed them immediately. The last phrase reminds us that there was likely a great deal of spoil from this war that came to enrich the families of the soldiers. God often makes the wrath of man to praise Him (Psalm 76:10).

THE SHUNNING OF THE ENTHRONEMENT

GIDEON'S MEEKNESS

22), 23) Gideon was a great leader, and he was an even better man! The great deliverance that God had wrought through him led the people to desire for him to be a king, beginning a dynasty that his progeny could continue. They mistook agency for authorship - Gideon was the agent through whom Yahweh authored the deliverance of Israel from Midian. Gideon recognized the proper order, and he declined the throne and the dynasty. He correctly set forth God's ideal government for Israel (or for any people), a theocracy. *"The LORD will rule over you,"* were his marvelous words. O, Lord God, please occupy without rival the throne of my heart and life. Let me not usurp Your authority by trying to run things myself. You do it so much better than I ever could!

GIDEON'S MISTAKE

24) A good man makes a bad decision! Having selflessly declined elevation to royalty, Gideon does make a request of the people. The spoil of the recent war was great, and the people had so much jewelry from their enemies. *"Every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil."* Thus far, it only appears to be a request for material gain, but the story doesn't end here.

25), 26) There was an amazing response to his request. They "willingly" gave the earrings, and (as one writer calculated) it amounted to over 40 pounds of gold - a king's ransom! His actual wealth also included much more, such as ornaments, pendants, garments, and collars from the necks of camels. He would live like a king after this (verses 30, 31).

27) Whatever his intentions were, the ephod that Gideon had fashioned and put on display in Ophrah became a snare to many, including his family. This no doubt beautiful thing became an object of worship, and therefore a cause of spiritual adultery for Israel. You will recall that the serpent of brass Moses made in the wilderness, with good purpose, became a similar snare as people worshiped it, and it had to be destroyed (2 Kings 4)! Father in heaven, please help me to worship You and You alone, never putting anything or anyone in Your place in my heart and life!

THE SUMMARY OF THE EVENTS

PEACE IN ISRAEL

28) So often when we become weary, we pause in our work, sometimes not returning to the original task. Gideon did not make that mistake; even when he and his men were *"faint, yet pursuing,"* they pressed on toward the decimation of Midian's military capability. So successful were they that Midian never rose in threat again. Let us learn to persist in our God-given work, pressing on even when exhausted. Such effort will be blessed by heaven, and the rewards will be great! During Gideon's life and leadership, the land enjoyed 40 years of peace and rest. This was the last such period described in Judges.

PROGENY OF GIDEON

29), 30), 31) We all wish for our children and later offspring to live well, especially to know the Lord and serve Him. Gideon lived like a king, with a large harem and 70 sons born to him. One of those was from a concubine who lived in Shechem - his name was Abimelech. The story to come of this son and his treachery would have devastated Gideon, had he been alive to know of it.

PASSING OF GIDEON

32) Having lived to a good old age, Gideon went the way of all the earth, and he died. He was entombed in honor with his father, Joash. Many good deeds are on his record, and God saw to it that we knew of his shortcomings, as well. Yahweh does not sugarcoat the accounts of His servants - their word portraits are painted "with warts and all."

PROCLIVITY FOR EVIL

33), 34), 35) Such a great deliverance as the Israelites had experienced should have led them to honor the God Who gave it, as well as the leaders through whom He accomplished the great

victories. Alas, it was not to be so! Gideon was not cold in his tomb before apostasy returned, and the Israelites adopted an old idol-god in place of Yahweh, making Baal their deity. How short were their memories of the blessings and the Blesser! May we join the Psalmist in this thought: Psalm 103:2, *“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and **forget not** all his benefits.”*

CHAPTER 9

O, the struggles we face in life because of bad decisions. Gideon (in this chapter called Jerubbaal) violated God’s principle of one man and one woman in marriage and married many wives. These many wives gave him 70 sons, and he even had another son by a concubine in Shechem, about 25 miles from his home in Ophrah. That son was named “Abimelech,” which some translate “my father the king.” Gideon rejected the throne, but Abimelech relished the idea of being king. He made the offer to the people of Shechem, and they agreed, giving him money from an idol god’s treasury to rise to the throne. With that money he hired malicious mercenaries to help him slay his father’s other sons. This was done except that the youngest, Jotham, was able to escape the genocide. The rest of the chapter is like scrambled eggs with the broken shells left in the skillet. It was a mess! In the end, the chickens come home to roost and some manner of justice seems to be served.

THE SAD SAGA OF GIDEON’S SONS **THE SCHEME OF ABIMELECH**

1), 2) This wicked son of a good man visited his hometown of Shechem with an offer of leadership over them. He made two points in favor of his plan: 1. Better to have one man as your leaders than to be under the thumbs of 70 men, and 2. *“I am your bone and your flesh.”* There may have been some tribal rivalry involved here, as Ophrah was in Issachar’s allotment, and Shechem was on the border of the two greater tribes, Manasseh and Ephraim (sons of Joseph). Why should not a Shechemite rule and from Shechem, rather than 70 men share governance in the small inheritance of a tribe from a man without ambition, Issachar)?

3) - 6) The men of Shechem were worshipers of Baal-Berith, a false god with vile worship. Their hearts were apparently twisted and not in tune with right thinking, and they were inclined to accept Abimelech’s proposal. They funded his need to be rid of his half-siblings by slaying them with money from Baal-Berith’s treasury. He hired a bunch of thugs, as we would call them, and went to Ophrah and murdered Gideon’s other sons, with the exception that one got away safely - the youngest named “Jotham.” With the deaths of men he considered rivals for the throne, Abimelech was now crowned king at Shechem. Men who are driven by hubris and narcissism are apt to do wicked and vile things in pursuit of some “holy grail.” So it was with Abimelech.

THE STORY OF JOTHAM

7) Yahweh had appointed earlier that when they were in the Land, the people of Israel should stand on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim to shout the blessings and the cursings of the Law across the valley between the mountains. There must be something special about the acoustics there, and that comes into play in our text. Shechem lies in the valley between these famous mountains, and Jotham went to Gerizim to address the Shechemites who had facilitated the murder of his brothers and made Abimelech king there.

8) - 13) In his speech, Jotham gave personality to trees and vines, including speech and volition as characteristics. Each successive pair of verses here has the trees asking a different fruit-bearing relative to be their king. First the olive tree was asked, and it replied that it was too engaged in producing an abundance of its fruit to bless others to leave that work and rule over others. Then the fig tree was asked, to which it gave similar reply, saying it would not leave the production of its

sweet fruit (and I do love ripe figs!) to hold sway over the trees. Finally, the trees approached the vine, seeking that it become their ruler. Again, they were rebuffed that the vine had a higher calling, that of producing the grape that makes the cheering wine. Gideon had said “no” to an effort to be made king, but his son by a concubine sought it out in pride. He, Abimelech, is compared next to things that Jotham and his hearers could see before them in the valley and on Gerizim’s slopes.

14), 15) Now Jotham insults Abimelech and charges the men of Shechem with an unwise choice for their king. He does so by leaving the stately orchards of olive and fig, and the beautiful vineyards of the valley, when he compares Abimelech to a bramble! How different this windblown collection of dead branches and broken off vines is from the trees and the vineyards! He has sought the position without being asked to fill it. Furthermore, and more egregious than this, Abimelech has sought to promote and elevate himself without divine calling or approbation! “Take refuge in my shade?” “Fear fire coming from me to devour you?” Is the bramble joking? How has it so high an opinion of itself as to claim things which to it are impossible? The lowly, insignificant bramble even threatens such marvels of height and strength as the cedars of Lebanon!

16) - 19) Young Jotham speaks with courage and eloquence to the mob in Shechem. He reminds them of how his father, Jerubbaal, had fought on their behalf, delivering them from the Midianite oppression. He asks if they did well in honoring their hero by murdering 70 of his sons? Is this what Gideon’s deeds of valor deserved? He risked his life to save you, and you have repaid him by taking the lives of his sons! If you did this in your “good faith and integrity,” then may you and your bramble-king rejoice in each other! His words are sharp, and they must cut some hearts, if there are those left in Shechem who have a conscience and a heart!

20) If this was done without integrity and not in good faith, then may you and your king destroy each other! Surely such an alliance, founded in treachery and the shedding of innocent blood, cannot enjoy the blessing of God. As if these people cared one whit about God anyway! Dr. Wiersbe calls this Scripture’s first parable. There are certainly many more to follow, especially from the lips of Jesus! This one is biting and has a stinger in it, if the people have a sense of right sufficient to enable them to grasp the depth of their sin.

21) Jotham now leaves the matter with his God and with the consciences of men. He is too wise to run into a fire he has lit, and so he escapes from danger by fleeing to a place called simply “Beer,” which means “well,” and it could be any one of a number of places too numerous to discuss. The younger son of Gideon has shown brilliance in his fable, and he has clearly put Abimelech and the people of Shechem in the wrong, regardless of what they might reason in their twisted thinking.

THE STRUGGLE WITH SHECHEM

22) - 25) The three-year rule of Abimelech over Israel was fraught with conflict. In bringing justice to the national scene, God sent a spirit of evil between the “king” and the men who put him on the “throne.” God would use the division between the one-time allies to bring retributive justice on both. This would bring about justice for the murders of Gideon’s 70 sons, of which both Abimelech and the men of Shechem were guilty. It was his idea, and they provided the means to get the dastardly deed done. One step in the process was the men of Shechem setting ambushes at the mountain passes to rob people who came through. This would upset the tribute collections for Abimelech’s treasuries, weakening his hold on the leadership position. All these deeds were related to Abimelech, no doubt sowing seeds of animosity between him and them. If Abimelech himself had come along the route to such a pass, they might have laid hands on him and “done him in.”

26) - 29) You will recall from Genesis that the place Shechem was named for the popular son of Hamor. It is likely, since the Israelites were not thorough in driving out the Canaanites, that many residents of Shechem were Gentiles. When the newcomer to town, Gaal, tried to undermine Abimelech here, he appealed to latent Antisemitic feelings so often had by non-Jews. If their ancestor was Hamor, it resonated with them when he said to serve Hamor rather than the son of the

Israelite, Gideon. Gaal was a strong personality, and he came with a large family of brothers who would make up the nucleus of a resistance force against Abimelech and his underlings. At grape harvest time, there was held a festival (no doubt riotous because of the wine) during which Gaal began to ridicule Abimelech, even challenging him to raise an army and prepare to fight!

30) -33) Abimelech had a deputy in Shechem named Zebul. The words of Gaal reached him and infuriated him. He sent clandestine messengers to Abimelech. This man was a faithful and wise representative (O, how we need more of those in D.C.) for his overlord. His suggested plan was for Abimelech and an army to come to Shechem by night and lay in wait outside the city. By morning Gaal and his following would know of their presence and go out to challenge them. Then, Zebul suggested, you can take care of them as you see fit.

34) - 41) A wise leader in this moment at least, Abimelech follows the counsel of his deputy, Zebul. Meanwhile, Zebul is wearing a mask with Gaal, making him think they are friends, even confederates. In the first morning light, Gaal sees men moving toward the city, but Zebul plays it off as shadows from the mountain. A bit later, it is all too clear that there are troops moving toward Shechem. When Gaal points it out to Zebul, the latter removes his mask and taunts Gaal. "Where is your mouth now, big talker? Go on out and fight, since you issued Abimelech the challenge." The battle is engaged, and the forces of Abimelech prevail, sending Gaal and his family running away from Shechem. The rebellion put down, Abimelech returns to Arumah, and Zebul drives out the rest of those who followed Gaal from Shechem.

THE SLAUGHTER OF SHECHEM

42) - 45) Verse 27 had told us that the citizens of Shechem, in their wine-induced courage at the festival, had cursed Abimelech. Apparently having been made aware of this, the son of Gideon by a concubine decided to destroy the entire city. So, his army that had recently dispatched Gaal and his rebel associates was divided into three companies (had he learned this tactic from his father's success with it?) which lay in ambush outside the walled city. When the people began coming out to work the fields, he attacked them with two companies while the third entered the city, devastating it. The city was completely destroyed, and its inhabitants were slain. The land was sowed with salt, an ancient taunt to sterilize the soil and make it uninhabitable for generations to come.

46) - 49) This appears at first glance from the previous paragraph's activity of destruction, but more likely it is the description of part of the attack on the city of Shechem. As it became evident that hope was lost in Shechem, the last refuge was a tower built for the purpose of protecting against invasion. About 1,000 people had made their way into the tower, probably hoping to wait there until the enemy under Abimelech had gone. We are not told of what material the tower was constructed, but it was clearly not impervious to fire. Abimelech was not afraid of hard work, as he took an axe and cut a large bundle of firewood. He bound it into a bundle, lifted it to his shoulder, and instructed his men to do the same. They brought the wood to the base of the tower, piled it up, and lit it on fire. The flames ultimately destroyed the tower, killing all who were in it. Did any of them recall the curse of Jotham (9:20) that fire should come from Abimelech and consume them?

THE SLAYING OF ABIMELECH

50) About ten miles to the east-northeast of Shechem is the town of Thebez. For undisclosed reasons, Abimelech made an encampment near and then mounted a siege against this town. Had they sent any aid to Shechem in their rebellion against Abimelech? Had they helped in other ways? 51) Many of the citizens of the town, especially the leaders, sought refuge and safety in a tower, just as some had done in Shechem. Some made their way to the roof of the tower; did they do so to watch the activities below?

52) Abimelech knew how to deal with this, having just done it to their southern neighbors. So he began the process, and he drew near to the tower's door with a view of burning it.

53) A nameless woman pushed an upper millstone over the edge of the roof. Did God guide its falling trajectory to land it on the head of Abimelech? In whatever case, it crushed his skull.

54) It is strange the things one thinks of at the time of imminent death. It seems that Abimelech didn't want to be remembered as a man killed by a woman (like Jael slew Sisera). So while he could still speak, he ordered his armor-bearer to strike and finish him off to prevent that being said. And yet, we all know from the record here that it was a woman who "did him in!" Now the books are balanced. The Shechemites, who were guilty of aiding Abimelech in murdering his half-brothers, are dead. Now Abimelech, whose idea it was to kill those 70 siblings, is dead also. Payday had finally come, as it always does.

55) When leadership is gone, men do what is right in their own eyes. Abimelech dead, his men did not think it worth their risk to continue the fight, so they went home.

SOWING AND REAPING

56), 57) Centuries later Paul would write, Galatians 6:7, "*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.*" The principle was in play long before Paul wrote about it. Here are two other similar statements about actions having consequences. Job 4:8, "*As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.*" Hosea 8:7, "*For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.*" God's justice may come slowly, but it will always come. And in this case, the curse of Jotham was fulfilled completely. In the end, he was the only son of Gideon to live.

CHAPTER 10

The Israelites between the days of Joshua and the formation of the monarchy were little different from sinners in any generation. Men sin because they are sinners, but they don't like the consequences of their sins. They, or should I say "we" all know how to cry out for help when the crisis arises because of our sinful choices. This cycle is better illustrated in the book of Judges than anywhere else I can recall. Over and over men sin, suffer, cry out to God, are delivered, enjoy peace, and then go right back to their sinful ways! Will we ever learn this side of heaven to break the cycle?!

THE APOSTASY AFTER ABIMELECH

TOLA'S JUDGESHIP

1), 2) The Biblical biography of this man, Tola, is so very brief. We know that 23 years he served as a judge in Israel after Gideon. We are told that he was from the tribe of Issachar. The record tells us of his parentage for two previous generations, his father being Puah, and his grandfather was Dodo. Though descended from Issachar, we find that he resided in Shamir, a town in Ephraim's hill country. Whether his work was to calm civil strife or to defeat alien invaders, we are not informed about the trouble he was to address in his term as judge. When he died, they made his grave in the town where he lived, Shamir.

THE TERM OF JAIR

3), 4), 5) This judge, Jair, is as little known as his predecessor, Tola. With Tola, we learned about his forebears; with Jair, we are told about his offspring. To have had 30 sons, we assume this man had multiple wives, suggesting he was wealthy enough to provide for a large family. More evidence of this is seen in that each son had his own donkey, a luxury in those times. His sons were clearly adults as they each governed their own city in Gilead. Nothing is shared about the nature or events of the 22-year rule of this man, ending with his death. He was buried in Kamon, which appears to have been in Gad's portion of Gilead on the east of the Jordan River.

THE TURNING OF THE JEWS

REMOVAL FROM THE LORD

6) What an indictment against the Israelites this is! They forsook Yahweh and followed after and served the false gods of the people living among and around them. The Syrians were on their northwest, the Sidonians to the northeast, and the Moabites were to their southeast, beside the Dead Sea. The Ammonites were to the east, and the Philistines were on their southwest. The one true God, Who had saved them so often, was left behind for false deities who could do nothing for them. This apostasy would bring on another oppression and the need for another leader to arise. 7), 8), 9) The Lord gave the Israelites over into the hands of two of the nations whose gods they followed - Philistia and Ammon. When God is for us, we are safe from all harm, but when He sets His face against us, none can help us but God. The Philistines and Ammonites *"crushed and oppressed the people of Israel"* for 18 years. Most of that was on the east of the Jordan River in Gilead, the region inhabited by Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh. The oppression by the Ammonites included some raids across the river in which they distressed some in the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Judah.

RETURN TO THE LORD

10) The sinful ways of Israel are once again described as forsaking Yahweh and serving false gods. This wickedness resulted in God delivering them into the hands of 2 perennial adversaries, the Philistines and the Ammonites. Part 3 of the oft-repeated cycle comes into play as the distressed Israelites cry out to God in repentance.

11), 12) God chides them for their wayward behavior. He reminds them that He had delivered them from no less than seven oppressors. They had cried out during each oppression, and God had never failed to hear their cries. Nor had He ever failed to respond with a great deliverance. His very words were, *"Did I not save you from their hands?"* Of course, God had done this through human agency with the likes of Moses, Shamgar, Ehud, Barak and Deborah, and more. We would say that the people of Israel were not worthy of their deliverers, nor of God's grace to them. Let's notice that hand with the pointing finger - it has several pointing right back at us. We are certainly not worthy of the Savior God sent for us. The very meaning of grace is that the good things God does for us we do not deserve, nor can we earn them. I see myself in this story; do you also find your image?

13), 14) I can almost hear my father's voice in this text. "Boy, you made your bed - now sleep in it!" Hard words, made even harder because of the ring of truth in them. God had chosen Israel as His own - an act of pure grace. In return, Israel had rejected their Deliverer and chosen other gods for themselves - that were no gods at all. Is it any wonder that Yahweh chides them to cry out to the gods they had been serving, threatening to not help them in their distress? God challenges the sincerity of their supposed repentance. There is an eternal principle at work here, "Actions have consequences!" God says, "You have worshiped others; now look to them for help."

15), 16) In Matthew 3:7, John the Baptist would challenge some of his "religious" hearers to *"bring forth fruits meet for repentance."* So here the Israelites cried out to God with similar words as before, *"we have sinned!"* This is always a good start, but men need to do more than **say the right words**. They, we, need to **do the right deeds**. They did just that! They got rid of the foreign gods, no doubt at great personal financial loss. This is sacrifice. And they served Yahweh. We know these expressions of heart were genuine because they touched the heart of God. *"And He could bear Israel's misery no longer."* What a God, this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!

17), 18) The Ammonites lived in the area of modern Amman, Jordan, east of the Jordan. They gathered fighting forces together, and the Israelites mustered in Mizpah, the one east of the Jordan. In that day, Gilead was part of the possession of the Jews, two and a half tribes having settled there after the Exodus and wilderness trek. Now comes an interesting leadership search. Today we elect

leaders based on how they look on camera, how well they speak, how much name recognition they can buy. Here was a test - the man who will launch the attack will be our leader! This was going to be a test of accomplishment; wouldn't that be refreshing in America today!

CHAPTER 11

Several nations of peoples were “cousins” to the Jews. We saw the Midianites, descendants of a son of Abraham by his second wife. We have seen the Edomites, descendants of Esau, Jacob’s brother. The Ammonites descended from Lot’s drunken, incestuous relationship with his younger daughter, and the resulting son, Ben Ammi. In this case, sin resulted in a people group that opposed Israel, not unlike Abraham’s ill-advised relations with Hagar, which gave us Ishmael and the Arabs. Many of these Arabs have been a thorn in Israel’s side for generations. At the time of our text, the Ammonites were Israel’s primary adversary. A leader was sought, and O, how the people needed good leaders to go before them in the effort to subdue the Ammonites. Jephthah was the man they sought. An interesting note here - Jephthah had been kicked out of town by his brothers because he had a different mother, a prostitute. He had become an ancient “gang leader,” as worthless fellows gathered around him. My best friend was a leadership training instructor for the Army for years. He told me that some of the best leaders to be found are gang leaders. If they can get a bunch of thugs to organize to accomplish even bad things, they must be good leaders. This was the kind of man we find in Jephthah.

THE ADVENTURES OF JEPHTHAH

PLACING JEPHTHAH AS LEADER

CHASED AWAY

1), 2), 3) The man Gilead is one of several (3?) men by that name in the Hebrew Scriptures. This Gileadite had two families, or as some in our culture would say, “inside children” and an “outside child.” The unnumbered inside children were born to his wife; the outside child (Jephthah) was born to a prostitute. When the wife’s children grew up, they exiled Jephthah, excluding him from the family inheritance because of his birth circumstance. Described as a “mighty warrior,” he nonetheless capitulated to his half siblings’ desire and fled (probably north) to Tob. Folks can be very cruel to each other. Jephthah had no control or bore no guilt for the nature of his conception and birth. And yet he was punished for it. We in God’s family need to be as kind as we possibly can to anyone we meet, knowing they are each a candidate for God’s grace and salvation. Our mistreatment of them could drive them away from Christ, as these drove Jephthah away from hearth and home. As can happen when a person is excluded by those who should love him, this man became surrounded by a band of men of questionable character, whose leader he became.

CHOSEN AS LEADER

4) Chapter 10 related to us how the Israelites forsook the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and served the so-called gods of their neighbors - the Syrians, Sidonians, Moabites, Ammonites, and Philistines. For this, God judged them, in this case by bringing one of the just-mentioned nations against them in ongoing military conflict.

5) Gilead, as you should know, was the land east of the Jordan River where the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and half of Manasseh settled after the exodus from Egypt. The Ammonites were their near neighbors and relatives (descended from Lot, Abraham’s nephew); they were anti-Semitic back over 3,000 years ago. When they attacked Israel, the elders of Gilead went to Tob, where Jephthah had settled when they kicked him out, in an effort to get him to return and lead them.

6) Note that when Gideon was needed to lead, Yahweh went directly to the man Himself to extend His call to come and lead the people. This is different in that the needy people themselves go “head-hunting,” as we would call it today. We can ask the question whether this was the will of God,

or the will of men? In either case, God could and would use Jephthah to deliver the Israelites in Gilead from the military oppression of the Ammonites.

7) I recall the visit to Egypt by 10 of Jacob's sons in their time of famine. There they bowed before the younger brother of another mother that they had despised, rejected, sold, and sent away. Here Jephthah makes his suitors squirm by asking the reasonable questions about why they would come now to him for help. Distress will often even drive people to pray to the God they ignore before the difficulty comes - and often continue to ignore when trouble is past.

8) Judges 10:18 said that the people were willing to make whoever would lead them against Ammon to be not only their military head, but also their civil leader. The first offer of the elders only mentioned the military position; this second offer sweetens the pot by including the post-battle civil headship a part of the deal. Perhaps they sensed reluctance in Jephthah's questions, even resistance that had to be met with the greater offer to him.

9) Jephthah is clearly not swayed in any naive way by their overtures. He has been burned, and he has become tough in his leadership negotiations. To be clear, he declares that if he comes to lead them and wins, he fully expects no more exile, but rather to remain in Gilead as the leader of the people. This is a real *quid pro quo*, "something for something."

10) Here is an interesting scene! The illegitimate son of a prostitute, perhaps a Canaanite woman, making him only half Jewish, is controlling negotiations with the ranking leaders of his former people - who incidentally kicked him out of town! They must want Jephthah badly! So, they have made two offers, the second the better one. Jephthah has challenged one offer, clarified the next, and now receives an oath from them for certainty.

11) Satisfied that they will do as they promised, Jephthah returns to his former home. There his former countrymen install him as their civil and military leader. He will, of course, only remain civil ruler if he is successful against the Ammonites. This happened at Mizpah, probably with a priest and ephod there: "*before the Lord.*"

PLAN OF DIPLOMACY

INQUIRY

12) Had Jephthah learned from leading his band of brigands? He showed wisdom by pursuing a peaceful negotiation with the Ammonites. Through messengers (verse 13) he seeks to know why they are coming against the land of Israel. It is a good thing to do, this quest for peace. Jesus would say, "*Blessed are the peacemakers*" (Matthew 5:9).

INSINUATION

13) The unnamed Ammonite king responded that there had been a theft of some of his people's land by the Israelites returning from the Egyptian slavery. He described a section from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan. The Arnon flowed east to west and emptied into the Dead Sea about halfway down. The Jabbok flowed in the same direction about 50 miles north into the Jordan River. This 20-mile wide swath of land was 1,000 square miles! The Ammonite king arrogantly says, "*now therefore restore it peaceably.*"

INSTRUCTION

14), 15), 16), 17) An arrogant and demanding message received a reasoned reply based in history - good for Jephthah! Israel took nothing from the Ammonites was the opening salvo from Jephthah. Then he described the history as it really happened - "truth" being "a report that agrees with reality." The first phase of this saga is that Israel, camped at Kadesh-Barnea, sent to Edom and Moab asking permission to pass through their land. Their cousins refused to let them pass, so they remained longer at Kadesh.

18) - 22) Well-versed by some unknown means, Jephthah continued the history lesson to the Ammonite king. So, denied permission to enter Edom or Moab, Israel circled around them and came to Heshbon, the kingdom of Sihon, the Amorite (not Ammonite!), and they asked permission

to go through his land westward to their destination and home. Sihon not only said, “No,” he also came out in battle against Israel, who had no recourse except to defend themselves. Having won a war they didn’t start, Israel now possessed some land in southern Gilead, the land now in question. This has such a modern-day ring to it for those who know 20th century Middle East history! Israel has more land than they agreed to accept from the United Nations action (the Partition Plan) of November 29, 1947, because of winning a war they didn’t start with nations all around them (and against all odds, I might add).

23) - 27) This summary begins by declaring how Israel came into possession of the disputed territory of Heshbon, not Ammon. Jephthah then challenges the king to enjoy all the land that his so-called god Chemosh gives him to possess, adding that we will enjoy the land Yahweh has given us. He then advances the argument that the Moabites lived next door to Israel for 300 years, and they never went to war to “reclaim land.” If this was your people’s land, why have they not said or done anything to take it back during that time? We haven’t done anything wrong against you, but if you, being in the wrong, make war against us, then our God, Yahweh will show who is right and who is wrong. This ended the plea for reason and peace, so well done by Jephthah!

INSISTENCE

28) Unreasonable people will not listen to reason, and this king did not rise to his position within Ammon on his intellectual merits. He refused even to listen to the message from Jephthah. As actions have consequences, that which follows will be upon his own head.

PROMISE OF OFFERING

29) Jephthah first tried diplomacy (verses 12-28) to no avail. The Ammonite king had false claims about land taken from them when the Israelites came from Egypt. It being time for battle to settle the issue, the Holy Spirit came on Jephthah to empower and guide him to victory. As Davy Crockett said, “Be sure you’re right, then go ahead.”

30), 31) Upon leaving home for fear of Esau, Jacob vowed that if God would protect and provide for him, and bring him home in peace, he would give God a tenth of all he had. Jephthah’s vow was not so specific and clear; it left room for the tragedy that came later. He did successfully engage and defeat the Ammonites, and when he arrived back at home, his daughter came out first in a celebratory dance to greet her victorious father. This would have usually been a delight to any dad’s eyes, but it was a grief to Jephthah. How did Jephthah know the history of Israel so well and not know the heart of Israel’s God any better than to make such a rash vow? It is likely that he grew up in Syria, where Yahweh was not known, and where evil practices like human sacrifice were known. There is debate as to whether he actually sacrificed her or if he redeemed her with silver, the law forbidding human sacrifice. I take the latter position.

PROVISION OF VICTORY

32), 33) Jephthah tried to reason with the enemy, giving an eloquent and reasoned defense of Israel’s possession of the land which the Ammonites were claiming belonged to them. When they would not reason, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he overcame 20 towns of the Ammonites. As Jephthah had said, *“Let the LORD, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites”* (11:27). It was in this context that Jephthah uttered that for which he is best known - an ill-advised vow as to what he would do if God would give Him victory. Even in great accomplishments, men of clay feet (and we all have them) make serious errors.

PAYMENT OF VOW

Reading Leviticus 27:1-8 is a good exercise here. The law strictly forbade human sacrifice, and redeeming a person in jeopardy by some difficult vow was clearly prescribed in the Leviticus passage. I, for one, cannot believe that this girl was slain as a sacrifice to Yahweh. She must have

been redeemed, and she may have been required to remain an unmarried virgin for life (context). Dr. Wiersbe has a valuable (lengthy) discussion of this issue in his book **Be Available**, that is so helpful. The essence of it is this: at the end of verse 31 there could be an “or” between the phrases “it shall be the Lord’s” and (or) “I will offer it up as a burnt offering.” His conclusion - if a person came out of the door, they would be the Lord’s (perhaps as Samuel was as a child); if an animal met him, it would be a burnt offering. Greater minds than mine have struggled with this passage, and great scholars disagree completely. Ask the Spirit to give you the proper conclusion for it.

34) So Jephthah arrives back in his new home at Mizpah (in Gilead, just south of the Jabbok). The door flies open and out runs his only child, a daughter, doing a victory dance with tambourines.

35) In a traditional expression of grief, Jephthah tears his clothes. He cries out that she has brought him very low, for he has made a vow and must keep it.

36) Did the young lady know what her father had vowed when she told him he must keep it? She acknowledges that Yahweh has given him victory over the Ammonites.

37) Then she asks permission to spend two months with her (feminine) companions bewailing her virginity. This could mean that she was to become an unmarried servant at the Tabernacle (as Anna spent her widowhood in the Temple). Since it was the desire of women to marry and bear children with their husbands, this would be something to “bewail.”

38), 39), 40) However you interpret this larger passage with regard to sacrifice or redemption with dedication, the sadness of a man who would never bounce a grandchild on his knee is to be seen here. An obscure holiday (and I know of no practice of it today) came out of this series of events - one in which Israelite maidens would lament the daughter of Jephthah.

CHAPTER 12

The old “green monster” of envy or jealousy rears its ugly head again. Ephraim had challenged Gideon for not including them in the beginning of his effort against the Midianites, and Gideon had dispatched them with kind words. Here they go again, a good long time later, complaining to Jephthah that he didn’t call them to aid against the Ammonites. The refusal to accept his explanation led to a civil war that cost 42,000 Ephraimites their lives. The cost of strife is often great, but the results of peace are so much to be preferred. May we in the 21st century church learn to get along with one another and avoid the costly results of division and strife.

THE SAD AFTERMATH OF A GREAT DELIVERANCE JEALOUSY IN EPHRAIM (AGAIN!)

ENVY OF EPHRAIM

1) How blessed is the man who can approach a difference with a brother in a quiet and peaceable way. Peace is so often commended to us as a good way to live - Romans 12:18, “*If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*” Psalm 34:14, “*Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*” Matthew 5:9, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*” Yet without provocation, the Ephraimite warriors crossed the Jordan “ready for a fight.” They ask why they were not included in the force to repel the Ammonites when they came against Gilead. Then, without waiting for a reasoned answer, they threaten to burn Jephthah’s house with fire with him in it. Calm down, boys, and let’s discuss the matter.

EXPLANATION OF JEPHTHAH

2), 3) Jephthah’s reply was rather filled with egocentrism - 12 times the first-person personal pronouns (I, me, my) are found in this short section! He adds that he did call them, and they didn’t respond, contradicting their claim of not being called (who is truthful, we may never know). Gilead is east of the Jordan River, and the Ammonites were east of Gilead. Geographically, Ephraim was not affected. The battle was over, the enemy vanquished, so what was their problem? Did they want a

share of the glory of victory? Were they envious of not getting the spoils of war? For 18 years the Ammonites had battered Gilead, and the Ephraimites had never offered their help, making it odd that only after the victory is secure do they “put their oar in.”

ENCOUNTER WITH EPHRAIM

4) Not content with Jephthah’s explanation, the men of Ephraim taunt the Gileadites, calling them refugees who were stuck in between Ephraim and Manasseh (geographically). The men of Gilead had endured enough from these wags, and so the battle was joined!

5), 6) The Ephraimites were on Gileadite soil, having forded the Jordan to whine and moan. The men of Gilead circled around them and cut off their escape route to home, securing the fords of the Jordan. When men would ask permission to cross the river, the Gileadites would ask their tribal connection, “*Are you from Ephraim?*” If they said, “No,” then they would ask them to pronounce “shibboleth,” the initial sound of which they were not able to say, a peculiarity of Ephraim. When they said, “Sibboleth,” they were found out and slain. In the battle, or in failed retreat, 42,000 men of Ephraim died - what a price to pay for jealousy and pride!

EPITHET OF JEPHTAH

7) As post-war leader in Gilead, Jephthah presided over six years of peace and rest for Israel. Once shunned by his siblings for his mother’s sake, he became an honorable leader and was laid to rest in Gilead. This was a good ending for a story that didn’t always go so well.

JUDGES IN ISRAEL

8), 9), 10) The next three named judges are often referred to as “minor judges.” No doubt this is because of the shortness of the record concerning them. When looking over the shepherds’ fields at Bethlehem, I have often cited facts about the little town, one of them being that it was the birthplace and burial place of this man Ibzan. How many wives did it take to give him sixty children? And he saw to it that each of the 30 boys had wives “*brought in from outside.*” He also gave the 30 girls “*in marriage outside his clan.*” Jephthah, the great leader, had no grandsons, but this veritable unknown may have had hundreds! The size of his family somewhat overshadowed the length of his judging Israel - a short 7 years.

11), 12) Probably the only judge we know to be from Zebulun’s tribe, Elon served in that role for ten years. What a brief record - then he died and was buried! Perhaps in eternity we will learn more about him and his life in Israel.

13), 14), 15) Then came Abdon, who judged Israel for eight years. We assume he was an Ephraimite, for he lived and died in Pirathon, which was in that tribe’s inheritance. As with Elon, a bit of his domestic life is shared here - he sired 40 sons, who then gave him 30 grandsons. Again, we assume him to be a man of wealth because all 70 of those offspring possessed and rode their own individual donkeys. Remember that Jesus had to “borrow” a donkey for the Palm Sunday ride.

CHAPTER 13

The 31 consecutive years of rest under four different judges (Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon) had ended, and the people of Israel had returned to doing evil in the sight of Yahweh. The result was that God gave them into the control of the Philistines for forty years! Our attention turns strangely to the tribe of Dan and a couple there who had no children, Mr. & Mrs. Manoah. Things are not good for Israel, and things are sad for the barren couple. How God delights to change the circumstances of people who will trust Him! And how He is pleased to use people to accomplish His purposes when we will obey Him. Some reading this today are longing and praying for an intervention of God in your lives. An old friend recently shared with me how he had prayed for his brother to come to Christ for 39 years. One day his brother called and asked my friend to send his pastor to see him. The brother told the pastor he needed to be saved, and the man trusted Christ

just six weeks before he passed away. Keep praying!

A MIRACLE BIRTH FOR A BARREN MOTHER

THE LADY CANNOT BEAR A CHILD

- 1) As we have clearly seen in the previous chapters of Judges, a vicious cycle of sin's disobedience, followed by God's judgment, had occurred several times between the death of Joshua and the monarchy beginning. The judgment was usually oppression by some neighboring nation; such was certainly the case here. This time God called on the perennial adversaries of the Israelites, the Philistines, to serve up His judgment on the wayward sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Actions have consequences, and sinful actions brought consequences of judgment.
- 2) The tribe of Dan had little to commend its history, being among the most idolatrous in Israel. Here is a bright spot for the descendants of Jacob and Bilhah's son. One of the best-known of the judges was born to a family from Dan. Manoah, a man of the tribe, had a wife that could have no children. The couple lived in Zorah, a part of the original tribal inheritance of Dan near Judah, before they moved north to the Huleh Valley. Zorah was due west of Jerusalem, between Kiriath Jearim and Beth Shemesh. Here lived the sad, childless couple.
- 3) Introduce "*The Angel of the LORD.*" Many Bible scholars, and I agree with them, see in this title the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ in a pre-incarnate appearance. The expression occurs 50 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, 12 of them coming in Judges (more than in any other book). He cared about the plight of this unnamed wife, and He came to take away her disgrace. He predicted, no doubt to her great delight, that she was going to become pregnant and have a son! Christ still delights in raising the circumstances of the lowly, in assisting the needy.

THE LORD PROMISES HER A SON

- 4), 5) The heavenly Visitor now instructs her about her personal diet and her son's hair as related to the fact that he was going to be a Nazirite. Even today mothers are cautioned about taking care of themselves for the sake of their unborn children. They are told not to smoke tobacco or to use alcohol or drugs, as such might negatively affect their baby. This was more a matter of dietary separatism than a matter of health. Moses had recorded in Numbers 6:2-6 the specifics related to this "vow of separation." Manoah's wife would begin, and Samson would continue the rules of separation related to his position. God's Messenger also prophesied the fact that her son would be used to bring deliverance from the Philistine oppression. What joy must have been hers! This prefigures the joy of Mary, who was told that her Son would effect a larger deliverance still. I imagine that most mothers want the best from and for their children, and their hearts must ache when the dreams are not realized as young men and women choose wrong paths. Thank God He redeems, even from bad choices.
- 6), 7) As has been the case since ancient times, Manoah's wife seeks out her husband to share this wonderful news with him. Remember that Manoah's wife was barren - she had no doubt longed for a child, but to avail - until God stepped in! Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah in the Hebrew Scriptures, and Elisabeth in the gospels, knew what Samson's mother felt. They, too, had felt the shame and known the stigma of childlessness, but each in turn had received word from God about a coming birth that would reverse their fortunes! Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Elkanah, and John thrilled at the messages of births. How often have men been blessed when a wife says, "We are going to have a child!" This, however, is so much more than a birth announcement - this is a revelation from God, communicated by an awesome being. She describes Him as looking like a Messenger of God, and she was so certain that God sent Him that she didn't have to ask from where He came. She relates some parts of His revelation to her about the very special son she and Manoah would have.

Manoah does finally get to see the Messenger; he and his wife stand in awe, then fall in worshipful

fear, when the heavenly Visitor rises back to heaven in the flame ascending from a sacrifice that Manoah offered to the Lord!

THE LORD CONFIRMS THE MESSAGE TO MANOAH

8) Can you hear Manoah saying, "O, I wish I had been there to hear all you heard, and to ask questions of this Visitor from heaven!" He now expresses that desire in prayer to God. How much less we would miss of God's blessings for us if we did less "wishing" and more "praying." Let us learn from Manoah this timeless lesson.

9) Isn't it wonderful that when God's people pray, He listens!? Manoah's desire to know more about his and her parental responsibilities is clearly in line with the will of God. We know that because so many places in Scripture tell us, and because God answered his prayer. *"...if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us"* (1 John 5:14).

10) Manoah's wife thrills that her husband's prayer has been answered, and she runs to tell him of the arrival of the Man of God. Scripture often speaks of people hurrying to tell others good news. What a joy to have heard the good news of Christ, and what a thrill to share it with others. Let us seize every opportunity to do so.

11), 12) There is a mutual confidence between this husband and wife. She wants Manoah to meet the messenger, and he trusts her report that the Man has returned. One of the great cracks in our culture's spiritual armor is the weakness of spousal relationships. Manoah comes trustingly, and his wife is not offended by his desire to meet and confirm her account of the previous meeting and get more information from this Guest. Would to God that every set of parents would seek divine guidance in the raising of their child(ren) like Manoah does here. God did, after all, give us a guidebook for bringing up our offspring - it is called the "Bible." Let's use it.

13) The Angel of the LORD tells Manoah that his wife should follow all his previous instructions - mentioning again abstaining (herself) from the fruit of the vine or any unclean food.

14) The Messenger continues His conversation with Manoah - does he even know that he is talking with Deity? Clearly he does not (see verse 16). The dietary guidelines for a Nazirite are repeated to Manoah, and the parents can work in harmony to follow them. That the Messenger had "commanded" her indicates His authority. He is the second Person of the Godhead, the Lord Jesus Christ!

15) In the custom of eastern hospitality, Manoah invites the Messenger to stay for a meal. Now this was not a microwave quick dinner. It took time to bring a kid from the goat herd, slay it, butcher it, and cook it. While this work was being done by someone else, the host would engage the Guest in conversation. Our culture is worse off for our hurry-up approach to moving through life. Those conversations would improve our lives a great deal. As I am writing this, a request has just come in from a friend to meet for lunch and fellowship - I was glad to accept the invitation.

16) The Messenger declines the invitation to dine, but He suggests an alternative - that the kid be offered to Yahweh as a burnt offering. This illustrates the Lord's desire for us to worship Him. May God teach us how to live lives of unceasing worship, and may we keep Him on our minds and hearts throughout the waking hours of the day.

17) The Jewish people put a great deal of emphasis on names and their meaning, much more, I think, than we do in our culture. A survey of Scripture reveals God changing names of men and women to indicate a new season in their life. He even names certain people before they are born, and those names carry rich meanings. With that in mind, Manoah asks the Guest to tell His name. His stated purpose is expressive of faith that the words He had spoken would indeed come to pass, at which season they wished to honor Him by name.

18) The names of God are a fascinating subject for study. We learn so much about His character, His attributes from them. The Hebrews hold one name in such reverential esteem that they will not speak it. That name I prefer to translate Yahweh (rather than Jehovah). The religiously observant

Jews substitute “Adonai” for it in passages like the She’ma (Deuteronomy 4:6). The Messenger tells Manoah that His name is “Wonderful,” the same word used in Isaiah 9:6.

19) So, instead of a meal, the kid becomes a burnt offering to Yahweh, of Whom it is spoken here that He “works wonders.” A special child with a divinely given mission being born to this formerly childless couple was indeed going to be a thing of wonder. The word “wonders” is the same root as “wonderful.” The hopeful, awe-filled couple watch as the sacrifice is consumed on the rock.

20) The worshipping couple stood awestruck as their Guest Messenger slipped into the flame of the offering and ascended toward heaven before their eyes! What a sight they had been privileged to behold! It left them so amazed that they both fell on their faces, prostrate before God.

21), 23), 24) Here is another support for the idea that “*the angel of the LORD*” is a divine Being. First, Manoah recognizes that the Messenger is the angel of Yahweh. Next, he asserts to his wife that they will die, having looked upon God. In 6:22, 23, Gideon has a similar experience, reaction, and assurance from heaven that he will live on. His wife reassures him that they will not die, indicating that if God intended to kill them, He would not have accepted their offering or revealed the things to them which He had. She is a wise woman who thinks clearly.

THE LAD IS BORN AND IS BLESSED

24) In time, the son was born, fulfilling the promise made by the Lord and claimed by Manoah’s wife. It is described that he grew and that the Lord blessed him. Similar language is used of other children in Scripture, including Samuel (1 Samuel 3:19), John the Baptist (Luke 1:80), and Jesus (Luke 2:52). And so begins Scripture’s longest record of a single judge, the story of Samson, both heroic and tragic, but then life is often a blend of these things. He was a powerful man in physical strength, but he was a puny soul in morality.

25) Samson is like many characters in Scripture and in post-Scriptural history; he began well but then loosed from his moorings and strayed into a dissolute life. Certainly, Saul and Solomon walked this path, as did Demas in the time of Paul. Had Samson remained in the Spirit’s leadership, what a great man he might have been. Alas, his enslavement and untimely death, though an historic and courageous choice, came from his pursuit of worldly pleasures.

CHAPTER 14

The chapter before us shows Samson on a downward path from righteousness. He violates his parents’ wishes with regard to marriage. He rejects the Law of Moses in its plain teaching about marrying people of another faith. He walks into a vineyard, a risky place for a Nazirite. He scraped honey out of a dead carcass, violating laws of hygiene. At his wedding feast (or so it was supposed to be), Samson talked too much - giving a riddle intended to confound the guests. So, Samson clearly was a man living on the edge. Hebrews 11 calls him a man of faith, but he was not a man of purity or one strictly obedient to the Law.

SAMSON’S EXPLOITS, PART ONE

ROVING EYE OF SAMSON

1), 2), 3) Two inclinations that often can lead to sin are seen in verse one: 1. Being in the wrong place, and 2. Having a wandering eye. If Samson had been content to stay in Israelite territory, the rest of the mistakes of this chapter’s saga would be less likely to have happened. O, how we need to guard where our feet take us! Then he spent too much time looking at a beautiful woman, and as often happens, a look leads to lust and longing, and he wanted her for his wife. Did it all begin when Eve “kept on looking at” the fruit of the forbidden tree? Samson’s eyes got him into trouble, and ours can do the same; let’s be careful where we look. He then asked his parents (it is actually an imperative in the text!) to get the woman for him as a wife. His parents understood the Mosaic

prohibition against intermarriage with the people of the land, and they urged him to find “nice Jewish girl.” Unmoved by their counsel, Samson issued another command, “*Get her for me...*” And again, the basis for his choice was that he thought her to be good looking. In my over half-century marriage, I was blessed to have a godly, wise wife; and she was also beautiful on the outside!

4) What the parents didn’t know was that the sovereign Yahweh was working out a plan to judge the Philistines. He would use Samson’s bad choice as a springboard to begin that judgment. Even though God was going to use this for His purposes, Samson was still responsible for his actions.

RENDING OF THE LION

5) As a nazirite from his mother’s womb, Samson was obligated to avoid grapes, raisins, grape juice, and wine. What a mistake to take a detour into a vineyard for such a man! A person with diabetes needs to avoid the ice cream shop, and an addictive personality should never take the first drink of alcohol. Needless to say, if that were me in the vineyard, the roaring lion would end that detour in a hurry. Not so with our hero.

6) Unarmed except for the power of the Holy Spirit, Samson tore the lion apart, killing it. He did it as another might have done something requiring little strength at all! But he kept the matter secret from his parents. Most of the men I know would have been bragging about such a feat forever! Perhaps there is a glimpse of good character here in Samson.

RIDDLE TO THE WEDDING GUESTS

7) A brief courtship consisted of an extended conversation with the Philistine beauty; Samson did not change his mind about wanting her as wife after the talking time.

8), 9) The arrangements apparently having been made by his parents, Samson returned home until the time for the wedding. Going back to Timnah for the big event, Samson takes another detour into the vineyard - once again being unwise to place himself so near temptation. He happened upon the carcass of the slain lion, in which he found that bees had swarmed there and produced some honey. In violation of the principle in Leviticus 11:39, Samson made himself ceremonially unclean by coming into contact with the lion’s carcass to get some honey. He ate some honey, and he carried some to his parents, but he did not tell them its source.

10) We learn here a bit about eastern wedding customs. The groom’s father went to the girl. Was it to watch out for her, to make sure she kept herself pure? Was it to advise her that the groom was on his way? All we know here is that he went to Timnah. In our culture, the bride’s family takes care of the wedding reception (in most cases), but here Samson was responsible for providing a wedding feast.

11) The reason for the gathering of these 30 young Philistine men is uncertain. Were they wedding guests, or groomsmen? These men become a central part of this chapter of Samson’s saga.

12), 13) Not averse to taking a risk, Samson made a wager with the 30 young Philistine men. Confident that he would win the wager, Samson set the stakes high - promising each of them a new suit of clothes, from the skin out, if they could solve his riddle. If indeed he won the wager, they would each give him a single similar change of clothes, 30 in all. There was a time limit with the riddle; they had to solve it within the 7 days of the wedding feast. As self-confident and boastful as was their host, so the guests said, “*Put your riddle, that we may hear it.*”

14) I love the way the old King James Version puts this,
“*Out of the eater came forth meat,
And out of the strong came forth sweetness.*”

Of course, we know that his riddle came from his recent experience in the vineyard, but they had no idea what Samson was saying - they were stumped for at least the first three days of the feast.

15) What a bunch of scoundrels these were! Unable to solve the Hebrew’s riddle and not wishing to lose face or lose the wager, they resorted to extortion to get their answer! There is a difference in

Bible versions' renderings here - some say "the fourth day," while others translate it "the seventh day." More important than which day it was before the end of the feast is that these wicked men now threaten and cajole Samson's fiancé, promising to burn hers and her father's house if she doesn't get them the information. Then they complain in questioning form, *"Did you invite us here to make us poor?"*

16), 17) The soon-to-be wife of Samson began to shed tears, saying to him that he did not love her. What was her evidence of his lack of love? He didn't tell her about the riddle. What a sob story is this! And what a weakling Samson showed himself to be, in spite of his great physical strength. In spite of the fact that he had not even told his parents, he gave in to her days of tears and told her the riddle, which she immediately then told to the 30 guests.

18) The week is almost gone, and the sun is setting on their chance to win the wager with Samson, but they speak "at the last minute," as we say. These ancient men showed signs of a poetic nature in their revelation of the answer to Samson. Hebrew poetry is the rhyming of ideas rather than sounds. So they respond:

"What is sweeter than honey,

"And what is stronger than a lion?"

He may have been a dullard when it came to the woman's tears, but Samson immediately saw through their ploy, responding in poetic style himself,

"If you had not plowed with my heifer,

you would not have found out my riddle."

His reply clearly tells them that he knew of their cheating treachery. It also suggests that he is now not as fond of this lady, calling her a "young cow." What the Philistines could not get by their wit, they stole by unfair measures.

RAGE OF SAMSON

19) The purpose of Yahweh in beginning to deal in judgment with the Philistines now comes to fruition. Samson goes about 25 miles southwest from Timnah to Ashkelon, on the coast, where he kills 30 Philistine men and takes their garments as spoil. This he did in the power of the Spirit of Yahweh. In "hot anger" he presents the booty to the men who answered his riddle. I wonder if they had the blood of the slaughter on them; I hope they did!

20) He must have stormed out in anger and have been gone for a while, for the girl's father went ahead and gave her in marriage to one of the Philistines who was to be involved in the wedding.

CHAPTER 15

The marriage that didn't happen and the slaying of 30 Philistines in Ashkelon were just setting the stage for further exploits by Samson against the perennial enemy of Israel, Philistia. In this chapter of that saga, his own people don't take a stand with Samson; they cannot match his courage, but he forges on without their support. While I cannot say that Samson is "Christlike," there are similarities seen between their experiences as related in this chapter. We shall see some as we move through the text.

SAMSON'S EXPLOITS, PART TWO

REVENGE OF SAMSON

1), 2) What a turn of events we have now! Samson has cooled off from his fit of rage, and he returned to claim his bride. He even brings a kid, a young goat, as a gift (is it perhaps a peace offering?). To his dismay he finds she is married to someone else! The father of the bride offers her younger sister, perhaps as a peace offering, saying she is lovelier than her sister. One is reminded of Laban's chicanery with Jacob so many years ago. These Philistines are getting on Samson's last

nerve, and he is going to show them his disfavor in a significant way!

3) The Hebrew judge puts them on notice that there is going to be a severe payday for the way he has been treated. And this time he is even more justified than he was when he slew the 30 men of Ashkelon. Actions have consequences, and theirs will be painful indeed!

4), 5) One place where people do not like to be hit is in the pocketbook, and in this case, it was also a devastating blow to their food supply. Samson knew how to make them hurt in the worst kind of way. Grain for bread and olives for many purposes are two staples of the Middle East both in diet and economy. These became Samson's targets. It was an amazing feat to capture 300 foxes, then tie them tail-to-tail in pairs and place torches between them. But Samson did it, and he set them loose on the Philistine fields and orchards. The result was that shocked grain and standing grain burned up, and the fire spread into the olive groves. The devastation was immense.

6) Those who lost so much in the wildfires sought the identity of the one who caused this. The answer came back twofold, Samson did it because his father-in-law gave his wife to another man! You may wonder with me if the men who came to burn her and her father with fire were the same ones who threatened to do that if she did not help them get the answer to Samson's riddle. So she saved their lives by trickery on Samson, and they lost their lives for reneging on the marriage deal.

7), 8) There is no way we can know if the fiery deaths of the girl and her father were the Philistines seeking justice for the wrong they did that led to Samson's attack on their crops. It may possibly be that they were lashing out at Samson through the death of a woman he loved (?), hoping to draw him back to where they could then deal with him themselves. In any case, their actions provoked him to turning on them in great fury, slaying many (we don't know how many) in the most vicious and ferocious way (the meaning of "hip and thigh").

REQUEST OF THE PHILISTINES

9), 10) Some Philistines come and start making raids in Judah. The men of Judah ask them why they are doing this, and they reply that they want Samson so they can repay him for his actions against them. Not unlike the Jews of Jesus' day, these Judeans have no problem handing Samson over to the Gentiles for punishment, perhaps execution.

11), 12), 13) These Judeans were quite concerned about their status under the rule of the Philistines. Does that sound like the religious leaders of Jesus' day? John 11:47-48, *"What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."* Rather than seeing Samson as God's man to help throw off Philistine oppression, they view him as angering the Philistines, making life harder for the Jews (sounds like the Israelite slaves in Egypt when Moses came to help free them). They want to turn Samson over to them, and he agrees to let himself be bound by his 3,000 cowardly countrymen on the condition that they swear not to kill him themselves. They agree, and he is bound and carried to meet the Philistines.

ROUTING OF THE PHILISTINES

14) Samson's being bound was only temporary. The Judeans brought him to an agreed-upon place where the enemy could then take him. When the shouting mob of Philistines **came toward him**, the Spirit of Yahweh **came upon him**. The rabble were no match for the power of God, and Samson burst his bonds as if they had caught on fire and burned off him.

15) Samson may be most famous for this briefly chronicled event. He took a jawbone from a recently deceased donkey and slew 1,000 Philistines with it! God has often delighted in making great victories in unlikely ways. Think of Gideon's 300 with pitchers, torches, and shofars against 135,000 Midianites. Or recall a teenager with a sling and a stone against a 9-foot tall warrior. How about an itinerant Jewish Rabbi and an old rugged cross. Samson's strange conquest is listed with such as that, all enabled by divine power.

16) Thinking back on the great triumph of that day, the ancient strong man poet wrote:

*"With the jawbone of a donkey,
heaps upon heaps,
with the jawbone of a donkey
have I struck down a thousand men."*

17) Samson disposed of the jawbone. What a museum relic it would be if it had survived and been kept safe for the generations to follow. Yet, men would probably worship it, and so it is best lost to history and returning to dust. But for some memorialization, the place was named "*The Hill of the Jawbone.*"

REFRESHING OF SAMSON

18) Great triumphs are often followed by trials, and it can have a humbling effect when we are prone to become proud. Samson was quite thirsty, and he cried out to God. His plea was, "Did you give me this great salvation to then let thirst weaken me so that my uncircumcised enemies can overtake me?" Can you think of Elijah after the triumph at Mount Carmel?

19) As He had done for the Israelites in the wilderness, Yahweh caused water to spring out of the earth and slake the thirst of our man Samson. "*Call unto me, and I will answer thee...*" (Jeremiah 33:3). Another place is now sanctified in history with an appropriate name - "The Spring of Him Who Called."

20) The length of Samson's term as deliverer and judge is said here to be 20 years. We will see this data again in the next chapter, as the story is not quite finished.

CHAPTER 16

The story of Samson is a sad saga. A man of much promise, he fell captive to his own shortcomings, but he was still able to accomplish some good things for Israel and the kingdom of God. From Samson we may learn these divergent truths - the physical power of a man who is filled with the Spirit of God, and the spiritual weakness of a man who is controlled by his own fleshly desires. The sovereign God is able to take what Samson is and use him in His work.

THE COST OF A CARNAL LIFE

SAMSON SURROUNDED

1) The place we call "Gaza" today was ancient Philistia, land of the Philistines, perennial foes of the Israelites. In Philistia there were five cities that were controlled by the five "lords of the Philistines." Those cities were Gaza, Gath, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Ekron. Why Samson had a penchant for spending time in this Gentile domain is a mystery, but his weak moral condition probably led him to hang around with women of loose morals themselves. Surely more of these were found in Philistia than in Israel. On this occasion, the man of great physical strength and great moral weakness went in to visit a prostitute, which can be the end result of a life of lust.

2) Samson was *persona non grata* with the men of Gaza because of the havoc he had brought about there, and because of the many he had slain among the Gazites. When word of his presence there was made known, men of Gaza surrounded the place where he was, planning to kill him the next morning. This man who was a slave to his passions had put himself in danger, but the strength he had from Yahweh would bail him out of the difficulty. That would not always be the case.

3) This is the occasion of one of Samson's great feats of strength. While his would-be captors and killers lay in wait for the morning, Samson arose at midnight, and he somehow dislodged the city gate and the posts on which it rested. He placed them on his shoulders and carted them off toward Hebron. The text isn't clear as to whether he trekked the entire 30-some miles to that city or just in the direction of Hebron. In either case, the security of Gaza was breached by the man whom they

wanted to slay. Imagine the scene - these men lay in wait for the gate to open, at which time they plan to kill their unsuspecting foe. To their awaking surprise, the still-barred gates are suddenly lifted up by Samson's super-human strength and carried away. Samson wins again!

SAMSON SEDUCED

4) The strongest man who ever lived had a significant weakness. He could conquer a city and carry away its gates, but he could not control his sexual passions. Already he had been involved with two other women; now he falls for Delilah. Certainly, he never made a worse choice of paramours, for she had a lust problem, too - the lust for money. We know little of this woman's background, but her place in history is sealed forever by her racy exploits.

5) Delilah was the original Mata Hari, serving as a spy for the Philistines to get the secret of Samson's great strength for them. It is an age-old truth that greed compromises integrity, and Delilah, while pretending to love Samson, was using him for personal gain. It is better character to use things to bless people than to use people for the gathering of material things. The combination of Samson's lust and Delilah's greed was a deadly one for him.

6) The thought of 1100 pieces of silver from each of the lords of the Philistines was too much for Delilah to resist. So, she began the process of wearing him down with questions about the source of his superhuman strength. For a man with clear thinking, that should have been enough to send him looking for another lady, since this one wants to know how I can be overcome.

7) Instead of asking why she wanted to know such a thing, Samson toyed with her by giving a false answer. He said that if he were bound with seven new, undried bowstrings, he would be rendered as weak as any other man.

8), 9) The Philistine lords provided her with the bowstrings, and she bound him with them, presumably while he was asleep. Then she shouted, "*Samson, the Philistines are here!*" He rose up and broke the bonds as if they were flax in the fire. Had he remained bound in weakness, no doubt the Philistines would have come out of hiding and apprehended him.

10), 11), 12) Delilah cries on his shoulder, accusing him of mocking her! He should have told her off for trying to have him captured, but he listened to her whining. Once again, she said, "Please..." And the man of strength fell for her wiles, giving her a second false answer as to how he could be subdued. The purported secret was said this time to be binding him with brand new, unused ropes. Delilah then binds him with new ropes and shouted again, "*The Philistines are upon you, Samson!*" Samson flexed his arms and broke the new ropes like a man would snap a thread. She is undone a second time, but this wily woman would not give up, so precious was the prize she sought!

13), 14), 15) Once again she accuses him of mocking her, to which he might have responded that her actions were not so good, either. But the man is weak putty in the hands of a wicked potter. He caves in to her tears and moaning, telling her a third lie. He suggests that if they weave the seven locks of his hair and fasten them to a loom, he will lose his strength. So, once again, the evil woman tries his recipe for subduing him and shouts, "*The Philistines are upon you, Samson!*" And once again, he arises to toss off the loom and all in a single movement! He is yet strong.

16) The preceding verses tell us of three efforts Delilah made to gain Samson's secret. Each time he toyed with her, telling her some fantasy about how he could be weakened. She was surely becoming a nag on the subject to the point that Samson was about worried to death. As surely as constant asking in a good thing can bring good results (see Luke 18:1ff), so incessant nagging in an evil pursuit can bring about catastrophic results.

17) How blind is Samson's lust/love? Three times Delilah has betrayed herself in bringing the Philistines upon him as she acted upon what he had told her would sap his strength! Where was his mind when she kept up the ruse to destroy him? How could God's man allow his carnal affection to become so strong that it clouded his judgment and allowed him to tell her the whole truth about his secret of strength? The weakness of the flesh is so clear.

18) How she was certain of this we cannot know, but Delilah was convinced this was at long last the answer she sought. Her victim had bared his soul to her, and now the money came flowing in from the Philistine lords. She had her wealth, and they would have their foe. She made good on her promise, and they made good on theirs. Comes to mind the phrase, "Honor among thieves."

SAMSON SUBDUED

19) How many men have fallen from grace in the lap of a wicked woman?! Here another takes the plunge, Samson having his Nazirite hair shorn from him as he lay asleep in Delilah's lap. Godly Jael had subdued wicked Sisera to sleep and death in her tent. Now Wicked Delilah subdues backslidden and carnal Samson to sleep and disaster in her tent. The tools of good can also be misused for evil purposes. Satan is a great counterfeiter.

20) It is sad that spiritual lethargy can lead one into a state where he doesn't even know that God is not at his side anymore. Samson had come to such a place. For at least the fourth time, Delilah had arranged for a Philistine attack on Samson; this time was the charm. Thinking that things were as they had been, the strong man awoke to beat off his attackers. But things had changed; the real source of his strength, the presence of God, was gone!

21) The punishment of Samson for his indiscretion is short in its description, but severe in its devastation. He who loved to look upon beautiful women had his eyes gouged out. He who enjoyed his freedom now was made a prisoner. He whose superhuman strength had been used to fight the enemies of God was now reduced to an ox's work - turning a millstone to grind grain into flour - and that to feed the enemies of his people and his God. Sin is a hard taskmaster and a fearful paymaster. His wages will not be denied, and Samson pays dearly now

SAMSON SETTLES THE SCORE

22) A mistake isn't the end of a man's opportunity. A sin does not have to finish him off. Messed up is not necessarily washed up. All we are told is that Samson's hair grew back; we are left to assume that he repented of his sin and got back in fellowship with God. The sign of his Nazirite vow returned, and with it his great strength.

23), 24) How mistaken they were. No false god could have reduced Samson to mere humanity, removing from him the great strength that had plagued the Philistines for 20 years. Though they knew it not (and knew Him not), they should have been praising Yahweh, for it was His absence from Samson that made him weak. As vile men are wont to do, they gave God's credit to another, praising their fish god, Dagon, for their boon.

25) A large host of Philistines came to their temple to make sport of their recent captive and former tormentor. Samson was brought into the temple where they could mock and jeer him, perhaps hoping for some feat of superhuman strength, or else taunting his weakness. They had him placed between the two pillars that structurally supported the temple. Was their being merry a result of being drunk?

26) Samson's eyes have been gouged out, but he is thinking clearly. He asks the young man who is his guide to place his hands on the support pillars.

27) It is not recorded what Samson had been doing that the Philistines found entertaining. Some authors suggest he was dancing for them. All five of the Philistine lords had come to the temple, and they were joined there by several thousand others. Three thousand people were said to be on the roof alone - it must have been quite a building indeed!

28) Samson had not forgotten how to pray, he had only chosen to play instead. The precious bosom of God had been exchanged for the poisonous lap of Delilah, but now, reduced to servitude, he was in a position to think about his true Master. Made blind by the enemies of God, he now could see spiritual things more clearly. And so he asks God to strengthen him just once more, and that so that he might get revenge for what the Philistines did to him in his eyes.

29), 30) Gaza is where the Ethiopian Eunuch was introduced to Jesus by Philip the evangelist. It was the site of a great victory by Joshua (Joshua 10:41). Here giants abode, but Judah captured and possessed it. Hezekiah defeated the Philistines here (2 Kings 18:8). Jeremiah (47) prophesied Gaza's desolation, as did Amos (1) and Zephaniah (2). Even today, Gaza is a thorn in Israel's side. In early 2025, it has been reduced to rubble by Israel subsequent to the October 7, 2023, massacre of Israelis by Hamas. We do not therefore find it strange that here Samson would die a martyr to the cause of righteousness. So, with one last burst of God-given strength, this famed warrior, now blind and in shackles, felled the pillars that held up the roof of the temple of Dagon. The great crowd had gathered for two ignoble purposes - to sacrifice to Dagon, and to scorn Samson (and his God). God and Samson had the last laugh as the building collapsed, killing thousands of blasphemers at once. 31) The path of lust and sensuality had placed a blotch on Samson's career as a judge in Israel. Yet in the end, God honored his request for strength to destroy Dagon's temple and devastate the Philistines. His family honored him by retrieving his remains for burial in the family tomb between Zorah and Eshtaol. Samson had not been content to stay in the territory of Israel in his life, but he was placed there to rest in his death. Let us learn some valuable lessons from his carnality and his surrender to lust and lasciviousness.

CHAPTER 17

We now leave the history of the men and the woman called "judges." From this point forward we look at some historical events that betray the wickedness of people in this time. This first story is a clear illustration of the truth of the key verses of the book (contained in this chapter!), Judges 17:6, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." We also find these same words in Judges 21:25. The violation of God's law through Moses in this chapter alone are astounding! We will note some of them as we work through the chapter. The name "Micah" can mean "who is like Yahweh." Certainly that was not the case here - rather than living a godly life, Micah was typical of the lawlessness of that age, every man doing "what is right in his own eyes."

THE PRIVATE SANCTUARY OF MICAH A COUNTERFEIT GOD

- 1) The hill country of Ephraim is right in the middle of Israel. In this region lived a family with a man named Micah. In America we pronounce that with a long "i" sound, but in Israel, he is called "Mee-cuh." He was the middle of three generations living, with a living mother above him and several sons beneath him.
- 2) The author is catching us up on some recent history about Micah having pilfered 1,100 pieces of silver from his mother, and she, not knowing her son had done it, uttered a curse, no doubt on the person who stole her property. So, the first mentioned law violation is of the 8th commandment, *"You shall not steal."* Micah comes clean here, telling his mom that the money is with him; he took it. The curse now turns into a blessing, and she praises her son who has confessed and will make restitution of the lost property. She invokes Yahweh's name in the blessing. Here is a second law violation, taking God's name in vain. I say that because she uses this holiest of names, "Yahweh," in the same conversation where she promises to assist her son in committing idolatry.
- 3), 4) Now comes acting contrary to the second commandment - they actually pay for and procure a pair of idols for religious purposes. God had said, Exodus 20:4, *"You shall not make for yourself a carved image..."* Will they violate the entire decalogue before they finish? Mom gets her money back, and she dedicates it to Yahweh for making idols - how much more wrong could she get it? Then she takes 18% (200 pieces) of the silver to the silversmith and has him make a carved image and a precious metals image for her son. Those images were placed in Micah's house.

5) Micah was developing quite a religious shrine: he had a molten image, a carved image, some household gods, and an ephod. He didn't need the Tabernacle and the sons of Aaron; he was operating fine on his own, or so I imagine he thought. To add to the wrongs, he consecrated, or perhaps we might say, "ordained" one of his sons as priest. God's law said this in Exodus 29:44, *"Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests."* This young man was not from the family of Aaron, nor was he even from the tribe of Levi! This was so wrong; could they not see? Additionally, private sanctuaries were implicitly prohibited in passages like Deuteronomy 16:5-6, *"You may not offer the Passover sacrifice within any of your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, but at the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell in it, there you shall offer the Passover sacrifice, in the evening at sunset, at the time you came out of Egypt."*

6) Here is the key statement of the book of Judges - *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* Anarchy led to apostasy. God has ordered the race of man so that we need leadership. His preferred form of government is a theocracy, when we are ruled by God. In the kingdom, we will have a human Ruler Who is also Divine - the Lord Jesus Christ. He will be a benevolent Dictator, and things among people will be better than ever! Moses led well, and Joshua led well, but now there was no acknowledged and accepted leader, and things in Israel were a mess!

A CASH-ON-DELIVERY PRIEST

7), 8) The Levites lived in towns all over Israel, 48 of them, including the six cities of refuge. This particular Levite lived in Bethlehem, which was not one of the Levitical cities - again people violating God's directions. Was this the same Levite named Jonathan who is mentioned by that name in Judges 18:30? So, this young Levite sets out on an adventure to find a place - did that mean he was looking for religious employment? I hope it did. His journey brought him to the hill country of Ephraim and to the very house of Micah.

9), 10) Micah discovers that the man is a Levite, and he knows enough to comprehend that having a Levite as priest is closer to correct (but still wrong) than having his own Ephraimite son as a priest. So Micah makes an offer of employment in his little shrine and home and to his family. He sets forth terms of compensation, and the Levite comes into his home. The living for the sons of Levi was to come from the tithes of the children of Israel, not from a salary offered by some rogue religionist. Numbers 18:24, *"For the tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the LORD, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance."* Once again, we see men not living by the precepts set forth by Yahweh.

11), 12) The young Levite accepted Micah's terms of employment and moved in with the family, actually becoming a part of the family, like one of Micah's sons. Micah had no authority to do what he did next, but clearly it seemed *"right in his own eyes."* He ordained the young man as his priest. The man was not a true priest at all; he was a hireling to work within the framework of Micah's patchwork quilt of a religious system - a little bit of Yahweh, a piece of idolatry, and make-believe priest, an ephod, and so forth. Nothing about this obeyed or honored Yahweh. Rather it was rebellion against His Word's clear teaching, and therefore it was appalling to Him! I fear there is a great deal in American "church life" that follows that same pattern.

13) What was the goal of Micah's religion? It seemed to be for Yahweh to prosper him. It was a *quid pro quo* setup from the beginning. An idol shrine, a hireling roving priest, and so many violations of God's law - how could he ever expect even to please Yahweh, much less be prospered by Him? May we be careful to trust God, love God, serve God, because He is God, not because we hope to get something from Him.

CHAPTER 18

This second part of the first story illustrating wickedness (idolatry) in the time of the judges continues by adding the intrigue related to the relocation of the tribe of Dan. That tribe's original parcel of land was on the Mediterranean coast, squeezed between that sea and the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, and West Manasseh (the half tribe on the west of the Jordan River). They had problems there, and decided they wanted a better allotment for their tribal home, so they ended up in the far north of Israel between Naphtali on their west, East Manasseh on their east, and Syria on their north. A visit to Tel Dan became a part of our Israel tours in 2017. The events of this chapter include that migration and Dan's treatment of Micah by stealing his "priest" and "gods."

THE "PRIEST" SELLS OUT FOR MORE THE SEARCH OF THE DANITES

- 1) The Danite tribe was struggling against the Amorites to take hold of the parcel of land allotted to them under Joshua and Eleazar. They were unable to do this on their own, and help was not coming to them from Israel as a whole likely because of the lack of leadership in the land - there was no one like Joshua to muster troops and come to Dan's aid. Judges 1:34 had indicated that the Amorites were crowding the Danites out of the valley and into the hill country. Their situation made them seek another location to make a home for themselves.
- 2) God had given Dan the land He chose for them, but their failure to occupy it led to their sin of choosing to go elsewhere. Five men are dispatched on a seeking mission, and they moved first into the land of their next-door neighbors, the Ephraimites, and lodged there at Micah's house.
- 3) Some of the men recognized the voice of the Levite, and they called him into question as to why he was there and what he was doing. They who were seeking a new land for themselves seem to think it strange that this man had done the same as an individual that they were seeking to do as a tribe. I expect most of us are quick to call out a sin in someone else that we are guilty of ourselves.
- 4) The Levite's response was brief and to the point. He told them that Micah had hired him, and he was serving as Micah's priest. It was a simple matter of economics, not about a spiritual call.
- 5) These five Danite investigators asked the "priest" (not really) to inquire of God for them about the success or failure of their mission. Like on some other occasions, they had failed to seek divine guidance before they began - they had it all out of order. We should not set out in a direction and ask God to bless it, but rather to seek His will for that beforehand.
- 6) The "priest" told them to go forward on their mission because their journey was "*under the eye of Yahweh*." Solomon would write, Proverbs 15:3, "*The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.*" So while their journey was under the eye of the LORD, that did not mean it had His approval. They did succeed in their quest for a new land, but it was an issue of strength of numbers, not of help from the Lord. Dan would become a center of idolatry.
- 7) The five men of Dan made their way to a place called "Laish." It was in the far north, not far from what became known in New Testament days as Caesarea Philippi, today called Banias. They observed that the people there were wealthy, not lacking in anything, and best of all, they were "unsuspecting," having a "live and let live" mentality. They had no idea that the Danites would take their land and their wealth from them, making them easy targets. Their isolation from others would also work to the advantage of Dan, meaning no one would come to their aid when attacked.
- 8), 9), 10) The spies returned home from their investigative mission and were asked for a report. They urged their tribesmen to get up and let's go! These reasons were set forth for proceeding to take Laish: 1. It is a good land, very spacious, and with no lack of anything we need. 2. The people have no idea we're coming; they are clueless. 3. God has given it to us. That last one was presumption, and I cannot see that it is true, but they seemed to believe it.

THE SHIFTING OF THE DANITES

- 11), 12), 13) The men of Dan were pleased with the report and recommendation, so they packed up

and headed toward what they planned to be their new home. Here only 600 armed men are mentioned, but later we see that the whole contingent was along as well. Moving “lock, stock, and barrel” means slow travel, so they didn’t get very far on day one, encamping near Kiriath Jearim, which is on the west of Jerusalem, and in sight of the holy city. The place where they encamped received the name meaning “Camp of Dan.” On day two they came into Ephraim and to the house of Micah, a familiar place to the five spies.

14) When they arrived there, the five men told others about what they had learned when here earlier. They shared about Micah having an ephod, household gods, a carved idol, and a metal idol. “*Consider what you will do*” simply suggested “let’s take these things with us.” The desire to have these things as part of their religious life gives the lie to their earlier statement that “God will give us the land.” They were more about “gods” than they were about “God.” It was fitting that later, under Jeroboam I, they became a center of idolatry and calf worship.

15) They approached the dwelling of the young Levite and inquired about Micah and about his own welfare. This was all a ruse to put their guard down, making the things they were about to do all the easier. Jacob was spot on about Dan in his Genesis 49 prophecy.

16), 17) While the priest was distracted at the gate with the 600 armed men, the five men who knew exactly where things were, slipped into the house and took the religious artifacts mentioned before. This was “breaking and entering” and theft, possibly amounting to grand larceny, based on the value of the things stolen.

18), 19), 20) At first the priest resisted with the words, “*What are you doing?*” These wandering bullies told him to be quiet, even to put his hand over his mouth. Then they suggested that he join them on their journey to their new home. They offered for him to become the priest to the entire tribe, certainly a thing better than being the priest for just one man. That appealed to him so much it made his heart glad. He stopped resisting them with words and helped them get all the idols and joined them on their journey. If a man is a hireling, and not called of God, those who offer him a better deal may easily steal him away.

21) As they left and headed further north, they put the children, livestock, and goods in front of them, keeping the armed men now at the rear. This was in the likely event that Micah would gather men together and pursue them to recover his belongings.

22), 23) Sure enough, Micah and his neighbors gathered and came in pursuit of the brigands. As they neared the small army, the Danites cried out to them, taunting them for coming after so many with so few. What do you hope to gain by pursuing us, was the implication.

24) Micah’s words were empty, but he uttered them anyway. He said that they had taken his gods and his priest, and they then asked why do you follow us. Why do you think? I want my stuff and my person back!

25), 26) The Danites told him they didn’t want to hear his voice anymore. If they did, some of them would do more than talk, they would take his life and the lives of his family. Micah knew it was pointless to pursue any relief, so he went back toward home, and they went on to the north. How it must have grieved the chronicler to write such a story of wrongdoing in the name of religion.

Property rights were written into the law of Moses and into the hearts of men, but that made no difference to these greedy, wicked Danites. What a blot on the history of their tribe this was. There will be judgment to come for the tribe whose name means “judge.”

THE SETTLEMENT OF THE DANITES

27) What a sad series of statements! “*They took what Micah had made, and the priest who belonged to him.*” Stated in such a “matter of fact” way, it is still robbery, a violation of one of the decalogue! And they stole false gods to keep and worship - more violations of the ten commandments! Then they came to this quiet, peaceful, unsuspecting people of Laish, and they killed every one of them! Again violating the command not to murder. These people had no moral compass, no sense of right and wrong. They cared only about themselves and what they could get.

I think they have a lot of kinsfolk in the 21st century! Jacob had predicted of Dan in Genesis 49:17, *“Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse’s heels so that his rider falls backward.”* If he only knew what his offspring had stooped to do!

28) Laish had no one to come and rescue them because they were so far from anyone who might come. So the people of Dan rebuilt the city they burned, and they lived in it. O, the shame of it, that the people of God could do such things, commit such travesties against unsuspecting, peaceful people. What lessons would their children learn from their behavior?

29) As would likely be custom in those times, they changed the name of the place (Laish) to Dan, in honor of the father of their tribe. There was no honor in what they had done, so the honor to their ancestor seems hollow and hypocritical.

30), 31) Here we discover the name of the young Levite who came with them from Micah’s house - it was Jonathan. There was a God-appointed place of worship at Shiloh, the Tabernacle. But these wicked Danites forsook that and worshiped the carved image stolen from the house of Micah. *“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”* Violated. *“You shall not make for yourselves a carved image.”* Violated. They cannot expect the blessings of God with that kind of disobedience. Nor can we, if we live in disobedience to Him.

CHAPTER 19

The record of the 13 judges concluded with chapter 16. The remaining chapters are two sad sagas of the type of things happening in everyday life in Israel during the time of the judges. The first account, recorded in chapters 17 and 18, was about Micah and the children of Dan. This next one concerns an unnamed Levite and his concubine, what happened to them in Gibeah of Benjamin, and how Israel responded to the atrocities committed there. The scourge of idolatry is the concern of the first account; the gross sins of immorality are recorded in this next section, the remaining chapters of Judges. The present chapter opens that story as we are introduced to the Levite, his concubine, her father, and an old man in Gibeah, plus of course, the wicked men of Gibeah whose actions prompted the trouble that followed. This whole section shows to what depths man can sink when he leaves God out of his life. In such a case, one has said, “Man becomes a devil, and earth becomes a hell.” I think this unknown speaker was not far wrong, for here we see one awful demonstration of the depravity of the human heart.

THE RAPE OF THE LEVITE’S CONCUBINE DESERPTION OF THE CONCUBINE

1), 2) The institution of marriage was weakened along with other moral standards during this period of anarchy-induced apostasy. Even religious servants like this Levite were sexually gratifying themselves outside the bonds of matrimony. This Levite’s concubine left him and returned to her father’s house, no reason being given for the action (though it is said that she was unfaithful to him). The Levite was said to be “sojourning” in the hill country of Ephraim. He should have been living (not sojourning) in a Levitical city and serving the Lord by serving His people. He clearly was not doing so. Micah’s Levite put his religious services for sale, and he left one for the higher bid of another. This Levite had a concubine - a sexual partner, or inferior wife, who lacked the rights of a superior wife. One was a reprobate, and the other was a scoundrel!

DESIRE OF THE LEVITE

3) This man seems to be missing his “other wife,” and he sets out to bring her back to him. He and a servant with a couple of donkeys trek from Ephraim’s hill country to Bethlehem in order to persuade her to return with them. She brought him into the house, and her dad met the Levite with gladness of heart. Did her father desire her happiness with this man, or was his gladness the thought of the expense of her care soon to be borne by another?

DETAINMENT BY HER FATHER

4) Good eastern hospitality prevails here, as the father-in-law urges the Levite to stay for a while, which he does. The detainment begins with a three-days' stay.

5) - 9) It is on the face confusing that the man who was so glad to see the Levite who had come for his daughter now delays him day after day. He does so by using the ancient eastern hospitality practice - "stay a while longer, and eat a bit more before you go." And this just kept going on and on until finally...

DEPARTURE OF THE FAMILY

10), 11), 12) The Levite said, "No." So the husband, the concubine, and the servant depart on day five and head toward home. By near nightfall the servant suggests they lodge with the Jebusites in the city of Jerusalem. The Levite refuses to lodge with Gentiles and presses on to a Jewish town, Gibeah in Benjamin. The Gentiles could not have behaved worse toward them than did the Jews.

13), 14) Having decided between either Ramah or Gibeah, the sunset happened as they were nearer the latter, and so it was at Gibeah they would lodge.

DELAY AT GIBEAH

15) The three rested in the city square on account of no one immediately offering them hospitality. This lack of kindness to these strangers was evidence of the moral decline that had taken hold of the men of Gibeah. More evidence of it would follow, much more, indeed! These New Testament verses impress us with the importance of doing this ourselves: Romans 12:13, "*Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*" Hebrews 13:2, "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*" 1 Peter 4:9, "*Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.*" I grew up in a home that was so very hospitable, and my wife and I often entertained travelers and other guests in our homes.

16), 17) A sojourner in Gibeah, an older man whose home was in Ephraim, came in from working in a field. He saw the strangers resting in the street and asked from where they had come and what was their destination. He was a guest in the town of Gibeah, yet he showed kindness where the residents of the town failed. Shame on them, and good for him!

18), 19) The Levite's response makes us know even worse about the men of Gibeah. He tells the old man his origin and his destination, adding that he also goes to the Tabernacle in Shiloh (was he going by there on the way, or was this a testimony of frequenting there as a habit of life?). He further states that he has all the provisions needed for his people and his animals, and that all he seeks is a place to lay their heads; he was not asking for much. He finally says that no one has taken them into their house - such a bad indication of the low moral estate of the people of Gibeah! Such visitors should have been treated better than this, but the worst is yet to unfold.

20), 21) This fellow-Ephraimite, living and working for now in Gibeah, shows them the kindness that others would not. He wishes them peace with the Hebrew greeting of "Shalom." Then he brings them into his dwelling and even feeds their donkeys. They washed the dust of this unwelcoming town off their feet, and then they share a meal together. What a testimony common courtesy can be for us in the church. Showing kindness costs little, and the returns may be eternal, as people see Jesus in us and desire to know Him with us.

DEED OF THE BENJAMITES

22) It is sad that we live in a culture that has normalized abnormal behavior. Homosexual activity was once ill-thought-of and hidden behind closed doors where it existed. Today it is accepted and even celebrated, while any who speak against it are marginalized and mocked as old-fashioned and out of date. God's Word makes it clear that this is an abomination, and righteous people should not

accept it as normal. We can love the sinner but not love and overlook the sin. These wicked men banged on the door asking to have the stranger brought out so they could have sex with him. Here are a few passages to consult if you are unsure of the Bible's position on this.

Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:24–27; 1 Timothy 1:10. And there are many more.

23), 24) This smacks of Sodom in Lot's day, but remember these are not pagan Sodomites, these are Israelites! The host spoke to the worthless rabble, begging them not to do such a thing. Holding eastern hospitality in higher regard than the protection of women, he offers his daughter and the Levite's concubine to them instead. I never read this without being appalled at the man who could do such a thing! To what low levels had the morality of the day sunk that a man could so easily dispose of his own virgin daughter? I remain incredulous at such a thing.

25) What a change of heart has happened here! The Levite sought out his wayward concubine, spoke tenderly to her, and was on his way to take her back to his happy home. Now, when his safety is imperilled, he shoves her out the door to a group of vile and worthless men to have their way with her! Was his sense of morality any better than theirs?

26) How many times this poor creature was raped that night only God knows. By morning light, she came to the man's door and fell dead on the threshold. There are few, if any, more abhorrent scenes in Scripture than this (except of course, Calvary). A day before this girl's father sent her off with this Levite, not imagining what was going to happen to his daughter. Shame on the Levite; shame on the men of Gibeah. Shame on any who would do such things as these!

27), 28) Where was protection? He shoved her out the door to her defilement and death. Where was tenderness? He spoke (it sounds so callous to me) to her to get up so they could go home. But there was no hearing in her to the speaking from him. Life was gone and hearing with it. His callousness was her catastrophe, his weakness, her total loss. Finally, he loads her remains on his donkey and makes off for home.

DISPATCH TO THE ISRAELITES

29) This is one place in Scripture that makes me glad the Bible is words without illustrations! I cannot conceive of a man doing what the Levite did next, dividing her with a knife into twelve pieces to be sent out throughout Israel. This was a message meaning vile murder. These portions of a human being arrived to stir the anger and disgust of a nation against the men who raped this poor creature to death. Some verbal or written message must have accompanied the flesh and bone that each tribe received.

30) His desired effect was achieved - the conscience of the nation was aroused, and the people could not believe what they saw. They were sure that no such despicable thing had ever happened in Israel since they were a nation. They called upon one another to consider the matter as individual tribes, then come together and take counsel, and at the last render a verdict - "Speak." A prophet would later write, Hosea 9:9, "*They have gone deep in depravity As in the days of Gibeah; He will remember their iniquity, He will punish their sins.*"

CHAPTER 20

The idolatry of chapters 17 and 18 are overshadowed now by the immorality of chapter 19. The tribes will gather now to determine a course of action to deal with the perpetrators of the most despicable acts of the men of Gibeah against the Levite's concubine. Actions have consequences, and when the men of Benjamin protect the men of Gibeah from their banquet of consequences, the nation has to deal with the tribe, and Benjamin is almost wiped off the page of history. It is a tragic consequence, but one brought upon themselves by tragic action.

REVENGE OF ISRAEL UPON BENJAMIN

ASSEMBLING OF ISRAEL

DETAILS OF THE CRIME

- 1) The messages accompanying the body parts sent throughout Israel from the Levite stir the nation to a gathering at Mizpah. This town, different from the one in Gilead, was about 9 miles north of Jerusalem, and it was about 5 miles south of Bethel. It was just north of the Benjamite border, and so they gathered close enough to Benjamin to take quick action once a decision was reached on what to do. The expression “Dan to Beersheva” encompasses all of inhabited Israel at the time, from Dan in the north to Beersheva in the south. So, everyone was present, except Benjamin.
- 2) Nearly a half million ready warriors were perched just outside the guilty party’s region, ready to act. The leaders of the people would certainly meet and take counsel on what course of action was appropriate. Then word would be spread, and action would follow.
- 3), 4), 5) The very orderly investigation begins with a simple question, *“Tell us, how did this evil happen?”* The widowed Levite shares some of his story, leaving out the part where he shoved the concubine out the door to save his own skin. He relates their arrival in Gibeah of Benjamin to stay overnight. He tells how the men, whom he calls leaders, surrounded the house with the intent of killing him. He further shared that they violated his concubine until she was dead. None of this was done without the knowledge of the Benjamites, for they had heard about the gathering at Mizpah. They apparently chose to boycott the meeting.
- 6) Having omitted any complicity on his part with the concubine falling into the hands of the villains, the Levite shares the whole story of his actions after her death - how he dismembered her corpse to send a message of the tragedy throughout the land, including sending one piece to Benjamin. I wonder if he got on a soapbox when he shouted that this was an abomination and outrage?
- 7) Sounding like a judge behind the bench, he calls upon the Israelites to reach a verdict, to come up with a plan of action to avenge this awful thing done in Israel.

DECREE OF THE CONGREGATION

- 8) There was a real unity among the people on this issue. The text says that *“they arose as one man.”* They were determined to stay together until this issue was resolved; no one would go home.
- 9) They determined to cast lots to see who would lead in the attack on Gibeah. This was one of the standard ways of determining the will of the Lord in such matters.
- 10) While 90% of the warriors prepared for the fight, the remaining 10% would be responsible for bringing supplies, *“provisions for the people.”* Fort Eustis, a local army installation in my area, is a transportation center. My best friend worked there for a number of years, and he told me their main job was getting “beans and bullets” to the troops. It is a need as old as warfare. The responsibilities thus divided, they were ready to repay Gibeah for this outrage. The law, in Deuteronomy 13:12-15, had prescribed such action against a city guilty of outrageous acts.
- 11) Again is stated the unity of the congregation in this matter. The fighting men gathered against Gibeah *“as one man.”* Unity is important for victory, even in the work of the church.

ANSWER OF BENJAMIN

REQUEST OF FORTIFICATION

- 12), 13) The bloodguiltiness of Benjamin had to be removed from Israel. David’s own nephew and commander of the joint chiefs of Israel’s army, Joab, had to be slain to remove such guilt from the house of David. Joab had slain Abner and Amasa in time of peace as though they had been at war (2 Kings 2:5). The principle from the law is stated in Deuteronomy 21:9, *“So you shall remove the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in the eyes of the LORD.”* The men of Israel had this sense of righteousness in this matter, and they would do right.

RESPONSE OF FORTIFICATION

- 14) The penalty in Israel for rape was death. Deuteronomy 22:25, *“But if in the field the man finds*

the girl who is engaged, and the man forces her and lies with her, then only the man who lies with her shall die." This was what we would call a gang rape, and even more egregious than rape by one man. The Benjamites should have investigated, found out who the villains were, and then turned them over for punishment. Why they chose rather to dig in their heels and protect their guilty tribesmen one cannot even guess. It was certainly sin, rebellion against the law of the Lord.

ATTACK BY ISRAEL

STRENGTH OF ISRAEL

15) The Benjamites were able to muster 26,700 troops out of their cities. This was not much an army to stand against 400,000 men of war.

16) Among these were 700 men who were left-handed, like Ehud of an earlier account. These men were expert marksmen with slings and stones, able to sling a stone at a thin hair and not miss. They would be formidable in close combat.

17) Again, the other tribes were able to muster 400,000 men of war. It looked from the start like this wouldn't last very long. But looks can be deceiving.

SUPERIORITY OF BENJAMIN

18) The Israelites sent people to Bethel to inquire of the Lord in preparation for the battle. Their question was as to who shall go first into the battle. God's answer - Judah goes first.

19), 20), 21) The battle lines were drawn, and the men of Benjamin came out and slew 22,000 men of Israel in the first encounter! How this must have devastated the larger army, to have those kinds of losses against such an outnumbered foe.

22), 23), 24) However much they felt the pain of those losses, the men of Israel plucked up their courage for a second advance against the Benjamites. They wept before the Lord for hours, and they asked again about advancing against Benjamin. Again, God said they should go. So, on the second day, the army of the other tribes advanced against the Benjamites in battle.

25) Once again, the unthinkable happened, the Benjamites slew 18,000 of the men of Israel. Now 10% of their fighting force has fallen dead on the ground around Gibeah. What is God doing? Will we ever know why He allowed this devastation at the hands of men defending evil?

SENSE OF ISRAEL

26) It is good to see God's people weeping and fasting over loss. The struggles of this life should bring us to the feet of Jesus for strength and comfort. Their offerings and sacrifices were a sign of grief at the great loss suffered.

27), 28) Having twice now suffered when attacking Benjamin, the congregation seek the Lord a third time. They ask if they should continue the effort against their brothers, or if they should cease. The evening answer is clear; they should go up one more time, at which the Lord promised to give Benjamin into their hands. They would not experience another mass of loss as they had these other two times. They showed good spiritual sense in this approach, and they would be blessed for it.

STRATEGY OF ISRAEL

29), 30) The great losses in the previous two attempts to take Gibeah had made the men of Israel humble and wiser for their misery. They repeated Joshua's strategy used at Ai, placing a contingent of men in ambush behind the city, while attacking with the main body of men from the other side.

31) The Benjamites on the other hand had been made overconfident by their successive victories and the slaughter of their enemy. So, they came out as before and advanced against the main body of the Israelite army. And, as happened before, the Israelites fled before them as the men of Benjamin began to strike and slay the Israelites, killing 30 men.

32) The Benjamites took as cowardice the fleeing of the men of Israel. What was really happening was the setting of a trap, an ambush against Gibeah. As the Israelites fled, the men of Gibeah followed in pursuit, setting themselves up for a catastrophe.

33), 34) The unfolding seems to have been like this - the men in ambush behind the city came out of hiding and attacked Gibeah, setting it on fire. The fleeing Israelite army saw the smoke and turned to face their pursuers. At the same time the 10,000 ambush warriors now attacked the Benjamites from behind, and being caught in a crossfire, Benjamin was in peril.

35), 36) With the help of the Lord, the strategy worked marvelously! Those who had fought so valiantly and victoriously on previous days were now in confusion, knowing only that they were being defeated. Of the 25,700 warriors from Benjamin, 25,100 died, leaving only 600 adult males in Benjamin. From the middle of verse 36, the author reviews the battle in a bit more detail.

37) Again, the ambushers came out of their place of stealth and attacked the now unprotected city of Gibeah. They slew all who were left in the city with their swords.

38), 39) There was a pre-arranged signal between the main body of Israelite warriors and the 10,000 in ambush position. When the latter set the city on fire, the smoke rising to heaven would alert the former to turn and face the Benjamites in fierce battle. Overconfident as they were, the Benjamites did not anticipate a change in strategy by their foes, a fatal mistake.

40) The smoke signal went up, and the Benjamites looked back to see their homes going up in flames. All hope would now be lost - for what are we fighting? We will have no homes to which to return, even if we do manage to win the battle.

41) The Israelite army now turning to face them, men in ambush behind them, the Benjamites are completely without hope or help. The approaching disaster is clear to them, and they are dismayed.

SLAUGHTER OF BENJAMIN

42) Hoping to escape in an uncontrolled, undisciplined retreat, the men of Gibeah and Benjamin flee toward the wilderness with the Israelite men in hot pursuit.

43), 44), 45), 46) In this phase of the battle, 18,000 men of Benjamin are slain. An additional 5,000 are slain on the highways while in retreat. In the last stages of the failed retreat, 2,000 more died, bringing the total to 25,000, almost the entire adult male population of the tribe of Benjamin.

47) The remaining 600 men fled to a place of refuge called the Rock of Rimmon. They survived there for four months.

48) The men of Israel now did a "mopping up" exercise, wreaking havoc on any who remained in Benjamite territory. They slew people and animals, and they burned cities to the ground. Joshua had recorded 26 cities in the Benjamite allotment, and one wonders if all of those were destroyed.

The wicked men of Gibeah sowed to the wind, and they reaped a whirlwind. They sowed to the flesh, and of the flesh they reaped corruption (and destruction). As I heard a teacher say many years ago, we must all feast at the banquet of consequences - the people of Benjamin surely did.

CHAPTER 21

The closing chapter of Judges sets forth things that are anomalous. There is heartbreak and weeping over the near desolation of one tribe in Israel, but they do not bat an eye at wiping out a whole town and saving only 400 virgins for the men of Benjamin to have as wives. In this chapter's serious issues, not once do they seek the Lord for direction (even though they do complain to Him in verse 3 about the conundrum they face). It was as if they were saying, "We can handle this on our own, Lord." There is good, and there is bad in this part of the record, but then that is pretty much how the story of God's people unfolds throughout history - good and bad. I suppose it true to say that the history of the church of Jesus Christ has been similar in character.

RESTORATION OF BENJAMIN IN ISRAEL

WEeping FOR BENJAMIN

1) This is one of those times when something is declared to have been said earlier, but it was not in

the record that it happened. See Jonah 1:10 for another case. (Is it then possible that God had told Adam and Eve not to “touch” the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? It was not in the record as having been said, but does that mean Eve “added to the words of God,” as we often hear? Just asking.) Sometimes an oath can be a rash one, like Jephthah’s vow, or now this one. Three options seem evident here: 1. Since males can’t have babies, Benjamin’s tribe will cease to exist. 2. They can take wives from the Canaanites, but that was forbidden in the law (Deuteronomy 7:3, *“Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons.”*) 3. Wives may be found for the men from among the Israelites, but in a way so as to not violate the vow not to “give them our daughters.”

2) The people (presumably the leaders) of Israel gathered at Bethel and wept bitterly before the Lord over this tragic discovery. This was an all-day mourning session - *“till evening.”*

3) What a question - *“Why has this happened?”* It happened because in their zeal to remove bloodguiltiness from Israel, they did not anticipate the probability that something like this could occur. Man is often shortsighted and therefore faces unintended consequences of actions.

4) The next morning, they stopped complaining and began worshiping with sacrifices and offerings. Perhaps this was what led to them having some clear thinking about what could be done. To get a glimpse of God in life keeps things in proper perspective for us, even in this season.

5), 6) Another problem existed which just now enters the discussion. It was that the military draft could not be ignored and the nation remain cohesive. As it turns out, dealing with this problem would provide a partial answer to the issue of wives for the Benjamites. It is now recorded that The men of Israel feel a deep compassion for their baby brother’s tribe, and they realize it is but a short distance to their being cut off as a tribe in Israel. This will never do, so a solution must be found.

WIVES FOR BENJAMIN

FROM THE DRAFT-DODGERS

7), 8), 9) Once again is mentioned the oath they took at Mizpah that none would give their daughters to marry the men of Benjamin. A survey was taken among the people regarding the call to arms from Mizpah, and it was to see if any group did not respond to the conscription. It was discovered that the town of Jabesh-Gilead was not represented in the mustering of the troops. You know by its name that the town was on the east of the Jordan River in what was called Gilead. It was about 10 miles east of the river and 20 miles south of the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). No reason is given as to why they did not send troops to help, but it is assumed from the following actions that the men of Israel felt they purposely withheld their fighting men. This could not be tolerated, or the authority of the nation would be weakened.

10), 11) There were selected from the army 12,000 of the bravest fighters, and they were instructed to cross the river, go to Jabesh, and there slay every man, woman, and child, except for the virgins of marriageable age. It is strange indeed that to solve a problem created by killing too many people they just killed more people! There is, however, a similar event during Saul’s reign for which this may have been a precedent. 1 Samuel 11:7, *“And he took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout the territory of Israel by the hand of messengers, saying, ‘Whoever does not come out after Saul and after Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen.’ Then the dread of the LORD fell on the people, and they came out as one man.”* Interestingly, this call to arms (200 to 300 years later) was to defend the people who had repopulated this very town, Jabesh-Gilead!

12) The warriors discovered 400 young virgins in the town, and they brought them, as instructed, to the camp at Shiloh, which was back across the Jordan River. These young ladies could become brides for the remnant of Benjamites without violation of an oath by anyone. The men of Jabesh-Gilead were not present when the oath was made. Where man brings chaos, God can bring order.

13), 14), 15) The Israelites in national unity sent words of peace to the 600 soldiers from Benjamin who had been hiding at the Rock of Rimmon for four months. Here is one of the nobler moments in

this tragic record of the period between Moses and Joshua and the monarchy. They made peace with men they were months ago trying to kill. They had compassion on them, and they presented them the 400 virgins as wives to begin again. But there were 200 men who still needed spouses. The text says that *“the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel.”* Several hundred years later, King David would be grieved at what he described as, *“the LORD had made a breach upon Uzzah”* (2 Samuel 6:8). In the unfathomable depths of the mind of God, things are necessary that we cannot understand. Yet we must trust Him, knowing that He always does what is right. So, from where will 200 more wives be discovered for these men?

FROM THE DANCERS

16), 17), 18) The problem persists that was brought about by the oath taken at Mizpah, *“Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin.”* And yet if the survivors of the war are to rebuild a tribe, there must be wives and babies. This is a dilemma, an almost unsolvable puzzle, but not impossible. The key to the solution is found in the wording, *“who **gives** a wife to Benjamin.”* Read on...

19) Shiloh, where the Tabernacle sat for a season, was just about in the center of Israel (then called Canaan). Perhaps its favorable location was why it was the place of an annual feast to the LORD which included a feature that could provide a solution to the dilemma.

20), 21), 22) The remaining 200 Benjamites were given the following instructions. They were to lie in ambush in the vineyards of Shiloh. When the virgins gathered for the festival came out to dance, the men could each kidnap a bride. So, the people were not **giving** them wives; they were **taking** wives for themselves. The people of Israel also promised to intercede with the fathers of these girls, explaining to them the necessity of allowing their daughters to be taken in this way. I grant you, it is simply a case of semantics, but it did seem to satisfy the need without violating the oath. There is a touch of “Jewish genius” seen here.

23) I am fascinated that the word here describing that they **“took”** the virgins each for a bride, is the same word used in the creation account when God had **“taken”** a part of Adam’s side to make Eve. And Adam named her “woman” (“ishah”) saying that was because she was **“taken”** out of the man (“ish”). Returning to Benjamin’s parcel was not difficult, since it was less than 10 miles from Shiloh to the border of Benjamin. There they rebuilt the destroyed towns and lived in them. The tribe of Jacob and Rachel’s baby boy paid an awful price for the vile actions of the men of Gibeah, as well as for the fact that they would not give them up for punishment. The wages of sin is death, and there were over 65,000 deaths from the one night of evil actions.

24) The army of Israel, now reduced in size by 40,000, returned to hearth and home. Life began to be normal again, but for so many families it would never be the same again. Let us never forget that actions have consequences, and sometimes feasting at the banquet of consequences is a meal we would rather not eat.

25) Our author repeats the words from 17:6, the key verse(s) of our book. Anarchy breeds apostasy. The absence of good leadership is disastrous for any people. It is true in the nation, the state, the city, the church, and the home. A business needs leadership, and so does a ministry.

Some practical lessons from the book of Judges are these:

1. Sin will be judged
2. Repentance will be rewarded
3. God’s people need a leader
4. War is devastating (Benjamin)
5. Actions have consequences
6. Sin can start with a look (Samson)
7. Sometimes two are better than one (Deborah and Barak)