

Foundations

JUDGES

Adult Bible Study
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Preparation for study should include reading the biblical text, reading the corresponding lesson in *Companion* and *Foundations* or *Horizons*, and answering the questions at the end of each lesson. Doing so will give the reader a thorough overview of the lesson and provide a solid basis for spiritual growth.

Judges

The study of Joshua set the stage for this study of Judges, one of the most disturbing books in the Bible, disturbing because it reveals life apart from God. The theme of Judges is well expressed three times in the statement "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 18:1; 21:25).

Individuals called judges stepped forward in times of crisis, provided temporary leadership, and then usually stepped back into obscurity. They were raised up by God for a certain time and a certain need and then relieved when the problem passed. It was a time of rebellion, apostasy, domination, distress, and appeal. That cycle is repeated throughout the book of Judges. This is a painful study of a people and time when God was so easily forgotten.

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Conquering the Land

Judges 1:1-15

¹ Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass that the children of Israel asked the LORD, saying, "Who shall be first to go up for us against the Canaanites to fight against them?"

² And the LORD said, "Judah shall go up. Indeed I have delivered the land into his hand."

³ So Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come up with me to my allotted territory, that we may fight against the Canaanites; and I will likewise go with you to your allotted territory." And Simeon went with him.

⁴ Then Judah went up, and the LORD delivered the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand; and they killed ten thousand men at Bezek.

⁵ And they found Adoni-Bezek in Bezek, and fought against him; and they defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites.

⁶ Then Adoni-Bezek fled, and they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and big toes.

⁷ And Adoni-Bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to gather scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me." Then they brought him to Jerusalem, and there he died.

⁸ Now the children of Judah fought against Jerusalem and took it; they struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire.

⁹ And afterward the children of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites who dwelt in the mountains, in the South, and in the lowland.

¹⁰ Then Judah went against the Canaanites who dwelt in Hebron. (Now the name of Hebron was formerly Kirjath Arba.) And they killed Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmi.

¹¹ From there they went against the inhabitants of Debir. (The name of Debir was formerly Kirjath Sepher.)

¹² Then Caleb said, "Whoever attacks Kirjath Sepher and takes it, to him I will give my daughter Achsah as wife."

¹³ And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, took it; so he gave him his daughter Achsah as wife.

¹⁴ Now it happened, when she came to him, that she urged him to ask her father for a field. And she dismounted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, "What do you wish?"

¹⁵ So she said to him, "Give me a blessing; since you have given me land in the South, give me also springs of water." And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs.

Introduction

Israel's entrance into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua was marked by great military success. When the Israelites followed God's instructions, they were victorious (cf. Joshua 6). At the beginning of the book of Joshua, God promised, "Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them" (1:6). Near the end of the book, we learn God kept His word: "So the LORD gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it. ... Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house

of Israel. All came to pass" (21:43, 45). God's faithfulness is beyond question.

Before Joshua's death, he challenged the nation to obey God (Joshua 24:15). In response, the people declared, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods ... for He is our God" (vv. 16, 18). After Joshua questioned their dedication, they declared, "The LORD our God we will serve, and His voice we will obey!" (v. 24). To their credit, the individuals who made this promise to Joshua "served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had known all the works of the LORD which He had done for Israel" (v. 31). Nevertheless, there arose a generation of people who were not as dedicated to God. Although the Israelites initially followed God, their downward spiral into apostasy is cataloged throughout the book of Judges. Whereas the book of Joshua depicts God's faithfulness and the faithful response of His people, the book of Judges contrasts God's faithfulness with His people's increasing unfaithfulness.

Students of Judges will notice a cycle of disobedience, punishment, and relief repeated over and over throughout the book. It will also become clear that the more time passed, the more wicked the nation became. With each successive cycle, Israel moved farther from God. Daniel I. Block summarized the thrust of the book of Judges as follows: "It represents a call to return to the God of the covenant, whom the people have abandoned in favor of the virile and exciting fertility gods of the land. The theme of the

book is the Canaanization of Israelite society during the period of settlement. ... This is an appeal to the covenant people to abandon all forms of paganism and return to Yahweh" (*Judges, Ruth*, 58).

Israel's problems began when they did not completely remove the pagan nations or their idolatrous practices from the land. Despite early successes (such as those recorded in our lesson text—Judges 1:1-15), many of the former inhabitants of Canaan were not defeated by Israel (see vv. 27-36). The presence of these Canaanite tribes in the land ultimately proved problematic for God's people—a fact the Angel of the Lord declared when He said, "They shall be thorns in your side, and their gods shall be a snare to you" (2:3). Rather than influencing the pagan nations for good, the Israelites were eventually and completely corrupted. The book of Judges stands as a warning to those who think God's people cannot be negatively affected by the world.

Canaan (*Judges 1:1-7*)

The book of Judges picks up where Joshua leaves off. Israel had entered the Promised Land and conquered many of the major tribal strongholds. Nevertheless, work remained to be done. This is clearly seen in the book's opening statement: "Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass that the children of Israel asked the LORD, saying, 'Who shall be first to go up for us against the Canaanites to fight

against them?'" (Judges 1:1). Having been previously charged by Joshua regarding the task at hand (see Joshua 23:4-5), the people intended to fulfill their responsibility and sought to do so by asking the Lord for direction. In response, the Lord declared, "Judah shall go up. Indeed I have delivered the land into his hand" (Judges 1:2). According to Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "The Lord's choice of Judah should come as no surprise, for Judah's leadership was well-established in Israel's ancient traditions. In his blessing of his sons prior to his death, Jacob portrayed Judah as a powerful warrior and a leader among his brothers (Genesis 49:8-12)" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 120).

The men of Judah did not shrink from this assignment. They did, however, encourage the men of Simeon to join them in their efforts. Reporting this, Judges 1:3 states, "So Judah said to Simeon his brother, 'Come up with me to my allotted territory, that we may fight against the Canaanites; and I will likewise go with you to your allotted territory.' And Simeon went with him." The alliance between Judah and Simeon is not surprising, given their background. Explaining, Arthur E. Cundall noted, "The tribes of Judah and Simeon were blood-brothers (Genesis 29:33-35) and are uniformly depicted as acting in the closest relationship. The inheritance of Simeon was within the borders of Judah (Joshua 19:1) and it appears certain that Simeon soon lost its tribal identity, being absorbed in the more powerful tribe" (*Judges and Ruth*, 53-54).

Acting as one, the two tribes “went up” against their enemies and prevailed. Even so, the victory belonged to the Lord, who “delivered the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand” (Judges 1:4). The unity of the two tribes seems to be featured intentionally in this account. This is likely true, as Dale Ralph Davis noted, because “throughout the book [the author] depicts Israel’s unity as progressively deteriorating—and with it Israel’s fortunes” (*Judges*, 20). Together, Judah and Simeon were able to conquer and disable Adoni-Bezek, a fierce tribal leader who had conquered, by his own accounting, “seventy kings” (v. 7). Importantly, Adoni-Bezek’s testimony shows Israel’s enemies were not innocent victims. Instead, the Canaanites were extremely wicked and deserving of punishment (cf. Deuteronomy 9:4-5; 18:9-14). Adoni-Bezek received the same punishment he had inflicted on so many (Judges 1:6-7).

Jerusalem (*Judges 1:8-10*)

After defeating the Canaanites and Perizzites at Bezek, the men of Judah turned their attention to Jerusalem, which was situated between the inheritances of Judah and Benjamin. Reporting their success, Judges 1:8 states, “Now the children of Israel fought against Jerusalem and took it; they struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire.” What seemed to be a total victory, however, did not last. As Kenneth C. Way observed, “Apparently the

Judahite razing of Jerusalem is short lived, and the Jebusites quickly assume control (1:21; 3:5; 19:10-12). The site would not become Israelite until David’s conquest (2 Samuel 5:6-9). This pattern of initial gain with subsequent loss may also be observed for the region of Philistia (cf. Judges 1:18-19; 3:3)” (*Judges and Ruth*, 16).

Following this victory, they turned their campaign to the south and fought against the inhabitants “in the lowland” (Judges 1:9). Afterward, “Judah went against the Canaanites who dwelt in Hebron” (v. 10). Of special interest are the names of three of these individuals: “Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai.” According to Joshua 15:14, these three were the “sons of Anak.” This same Anak is mentioned in Numbers 13:33 as the father of giants. Chisholm explained, “These same Anakites had terrified the Israelite spies during their surveillance of the land (see Numbers 13:22, 33). At that time Caleb remained unafraid and advised Moses to invade the land (v. 30). Because of his unwavering faith, the Lord rewarded Caleb and promised him the portion of the land occupied by the Anakites (14:24; Joshua 14:6-15). When the time came for action, Caleb aggressively and fearlessly seized what the Lord guaranteed him” (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 124). Caleb is credited in the text for leading the assault against the sons of Anak (Judges 1:20).

Debir

(Judges 1:11-15)

The text follows the efforts of Judah to Debir (Judges 1:11). Rather than focusing on the location, the text focuses on the circumstances behind Debir's capture. Caleb promised to give the hand of his daughter, Achsah, in marriage to the brave Israelite who could take the city (v. 12). Othniel, a relative of Caleb, responded to the challenge and was given Achsah as wife (v. 13). Although this practice of betrothal seems foreign to our culture, Achsah did not protest the arrangement. Instead, she complained about the dowry. Reporting this, Judges 1:14-15 states, "Now it happened, when she came to him, that she urged him to ask her father for a field. And she dismounted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, 'What do you wish?' So she said to him, 'Give me a blessing; since you have given me land in the South, give me also springs of water.' And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs."

Evidently, the land provided initially by Caleb was desert land, much like the land in the south. Because of Achsah's initiative, something more suitable and productive was secured. K. Lawson Younger Jr. believed Achsah's actions stood in contrast to the wicked behavior of women reported elsewhere in Judges. For example, he wrote, "The contrast between Achsah and Delilah could not be more stark! Achsah was the wife of Othniel (who will be described later in the book as the ideal judge). She took the initiative

to procure greater blessing for her husband and progeny through her request for more land and springs. In contrast, Delilah was the consort of Samson (the worst of the judges). She used her initiative to bring down her man, all for filthily gained money" (*The NIV Application Commentary: Judges/Ruth*, 68).

Application

- The events recorded in Judges 1:1-15 are primarily positive in nature. Israel was victorious because they consulted God and followed His plan. Nevertheless, the positive beginning of Judges is short lived. Because the nation did not drive the Canaanites from the land completely, it was always tempted by the religious practices of the remaining pagans. Although we would like to think we could easily avoid such temptation, experience teaches us this is not the case. All too often, those we attempt to reform taint us. This is why Paul asked the Corinthians, "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6). Christians should learn from Israel's mistake.

Questions

1. Whose death is mentioned in Judges 1:1?

2. What tribe was to lead Israel into battle (Judges 1:2)?
3. What additional tribe joined the tribe selected by the Lord (Judges 1:3)?
4. How many kings had Adoni-Bezek reportedly maimed (Judges 1:7)?
5. What is significant about Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai (Judges 1:10)?
6. Who promised to give his daughter to the one who took Debir (Judges 1:12)?
7. What did Achsah ask her father for (Judges 1:15)?

Discussion

1. Why were the Israelites justified in attacking the Canaanites?
2. What steps can Christians take to avoid being tainted by the worldly culture surrounding them?
3. What lessons can we learn from Caleb? What lessons can we learn from Achsah?

Times of Transition

Judges 2:7-19

⁷ So the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD which He had done for Israel.

⁸ Now Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died when he was one hundred and ten years old.

⁹ And they buried him within the border of his inheritance at Timnath Heres, in the mountains of Ephraim, on the north side of Mount Gaash.

¹⁰ When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord nor the work which He had done for Israel.

¹¹ Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals;

¹² and they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger.

¹³ They forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.

¹⁴ And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel. So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies.

¹⁵ Wherever they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for calamity, as the LORD had said, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were greatly distressed.

¹⁶ Nevertheless, the LORD raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them.

¹⁷ Yet they would not listen to their judges, but they played the harlot with other gods, and bowed down to them. They turned quickly from the way in which their fathers walked, in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do so.

¹⁸ And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them.

¹⁹ And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods, to serve them and bow down to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way.

Introduction

It is not always easy to transition from one leader to the next. This is especially true when the former leader is successful. Israel made such a transition from Moses to Joshua. Importantly, the change in leadership was eased by Moses' own efforts. Before his death, "Moses called Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, 'Be strong and of good courage, for you must go with this people to the land which the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall cause them to inherit it. And the LORD, He is the One who goes before you. He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed'" (Deuteronomy 31:7-8).

That Joshua had God's approval as Israel's new leader was clearly established after Moses' death. God echoed Moses' aforementioned declaration and assured Joshua, "No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them" (Joshua 1:5-6). To Joshua's credit, he believed the Lord's promise and faithfully led Israel to do as God directed. His influence is summarized well by Joshua 24:31: "Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had known all the works of the LORD which He had done for Israel."

But unlike Moses, Joshua did not pass Israel's leadership on to a successor before his death. In the void he and his generation left behind, "another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10). Given this truth, it is little wonder the nation of Israel found itself in a cycle of rebellion, spiraling farther and farther away from God. This is what we find recorded in Judges. If anything, it reminds us of the need to continually equip the next generation with knowledge about God. This is why Peter wrote, "Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you. ... Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease" (2 Peter 1:13, 15). It is also why Paul charged Timothy, "And the things

that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). God's people must be diligent to prepare tomorrow's leaders today. The truth must be passed on to every succeeding generation. Otherwise, we run the risk of repeating the mistakes recorded throughout the book of Judges.

Death of Joshua

(Judges 2:7-10)

Although the death of Joshua is reported in Judges 1:1, its impact is described more fully in Judges 2:7-10. This event, in many ways, was a major factor in Israel's moral and religious decline. Joshua's influence had been so great that "the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua" (v. 7). As long as Joshua, Caleb, and other godly men from that generation lived, fidelity to the Lord was the norm. When those individuals passed, their influence passed along with them.

With that said, the author of Judges did not report Israel's change after Joshua's death to tarnish his reputation. Joshua's faithfulness to God is beyond dispute. After his death, the people "buried him within the border of his inheritance at Timnath Heres, in the mountains of Ephraim, on the north side of Mount Gaash" (Judges 2:9). This detailed description of the location of Joshua's grave does more than mark the spot. Barry G. Webb explained, "The statement that Joshua was buried within the border of his inheritance

is an allusion to Joshua 19:49-50, which tells how the Israelites of his generation, as a way of honoring him, had given him a portion of land in the territory of Ephraim ... as his personal inheritance. It also tells how Joshua, when he was free to do so, 'built up the town and settled there' (NIV). In this way too, Joshua had been an example to the rest of Israel; Joshua had 'gone to his inheritance' and 'taken possession' of it, as he later told all his fellow Israelites to do (Judges 2:6)" (*The Book of Judges*, 138).

Ultimately, the description of Joshua's death and burial reminds the reader of God's faithfulness. God not only promised Joshua and Caleb that they would enter the Promised Land (cf. Numbers 14:24, 30), but He also provided them with an inheritance. Chisholm observed, "Joshua's epitaph reminds us that faithful service to God is rewarded by God's rich blessing" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 155).

Israel's decline began because the nation failed to remember the Lord after their leader was gone. Reporting this, Judges 2:10 states, "When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel." From our perspective, it is difficult to conceive how such a thing could have happened. Did parents completely forsake their responsibility to teach their children (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-7)? Did the priests fail to train the nation (cf. Leviticus 10:11)? Besides whatever else we might say, thoughts of the Lord and His provisions were far from the minds of the Israelites.

Unfaithful Israel

(Judges 2:11-15)

Not surprisingly, the generation of Israelites who arose not knowing God "did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals" (Judges 2:11). Far from unexpected, the Angel of the Lord predicted this apostasy when rebuking the people for not driving the Canaanites from the land. He stated, "'And you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars.' But you have not obeyed My voice. Why have you done this? Therefore I also said, 'I will not drive them out before you; but they shall be thorns in your side, and their gods shall be a snare to you'" (vv. 2-3). Rather than heeding the Lord's instructions and avoiding the pagan practices of the Canaanites, the people "forsook the LORD God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger" (v. 12).

Israel's rebellion involved replacing the Lord with "Baal and the Astartes" (Judges 2:13 NRSV). According to Younger, the term "Baal" can be used as a title meaning "divine lord, master." He also noted that "Astartes" was "a fertility goddess" sometimes "associated with war" (*The NIV Application Commentary: Judges/Ruth*, 89). When these meanings of "Baal" and "Astartes" are considered, we see that Israel had replaced the true Lord who fought their

battles for them with a god pretending to be lord and a goddess offering false hope. How sad when individuals exchange the truth for lies!

Because of their idolatry, “the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel. So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies” (Judges 2:14). The true God thwarted Israel’s efforts. Regarding this, Dale Ralph Davis observed, “When the Lord gave Israel over to her enemies, he was only executing what he had already threatened to do should she prove faithless (see Leviticus 26:17 and Deuteronomy 28:25 in context). Yahweh’s hot anger shows his faithfulness to his word. It is faithful anger” (*Judges*, 38). Consequently, the Israelites “were greatly distressed” (Judges 2:15).

Judges Named

(*Judges* 2:16-19)

At this juncture, the author of Judges introduced and summarized God’s response to Israel’s rebellion. He wrote, “Nevertheless, the LORD raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them” (Judges 2:16). The judges sent by God would lead Israel to victory over their oppressors. This process repeated itself several times throughout the book: Israel rebelled against God, was punished, cried out for deliverance, and was led to victory by a divinely appointed individual.

Judges 2:18 declares, “And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them.”

Lest one think the Israelites would eventually learn from their mistakes, the text emphasizes their obstinacy. According to Judges 2:19, “It came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods, to serve them and bow down to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way.” Block explained the role played by the judges in the following manner: “The rulers raised by God represented stop-gap measures in an apparently irresistible, irreversible, and inevitable process of Canaanization. Instead of effecting fundamental repairs on this deteriorating dike, they plugged holes with their fingers. As soon as the finger was removed, the water gushed through with increasing force” (*Judges, Ruth*, 132). When all hope seemed lost, Israel sought and accepted God’s help; when deliverance came, the nation forgot the Lord and did as it pleased.

Applications

- Christians would do well to study the problems Israel encountered in the void of spiritual leadership. As long as Joshua or the elders of his time lived, the nation served God; when that generation passed, the

people did as they pleased. The need to equip the next generation of leaders in the church must not be ignored. Tomorrow's elders, deacons, and preachers must be trained today.

- We must never underestimate the power of culture to corrupt. Davis wrote, "The Israelites maintained no distinctive separation from the paganism surrounding them. ... They did not drive out the Canaanites who remained after Joshua's conquest ... they [befriended] the Canaanites, to Israel's destruction. Israel failed to properly combat a godless culture" (*Judges*, 34). As we consider Israel's failure, we would do well to consider whether we are doing differently.

Questions

1. How did the people respond to Joshua and the elders who outlived him (*Judges* 2:7)?
2. Where was Joshua buried (*Judges* 2:9)?
3. What happened after Joshua's death (*Judges* 2:10)?

4. What did the Israelites do to provoke God to anger (*Judges* 2:12)?
5. How did God punish Israel for their sin (*Judges* 2:14)?
6. How did God deliver Israel from their enemies (*Judges* 2:16)?
7. What did Israel do in response to God's favor (*Judges* 2:19)?

Discussion

1. What steps can congregations take to prepare for leadership transitions?

2. What can Christians do to remain separate from their culture?
3. What can we do to avoid the cycle of disobedience Israel was caught in throughout the book of Judges?
4. What can we learn from Israel's willingness to call upon God when in distress? Why do individuals turn to God in times of trial but not in times of success?

God Tests Israel

Judges 3:1-11

- ¹ Now these are the nations which the LORD left, that He might test Israel by them, that is, all who had not known any of the wars in Canaan
- ² (this was only so that the generations of the children of Israel might be taught to know war, at least those who had not formerly known it),
- ³ namely, five lords of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites who dwelt in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal Hermon to the entrance of Hamath.
- ⁴ And they were left, that He might test Israel by them, to know whether they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.
- ⁵ Thus the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.
- ⁶ And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons; and they served their gods.
- ⁷ So the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs.
- ⁸ Therefore the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the children of Israel served Cushan-Rishathaim eight years.
- ⁹ When the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel,

who delivered them: Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.

¹⁰ The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD delivered Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-Rishathaim.

¹¹ So the land had rest for forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

Introduction

God sometimes uses the circumstances men face to test their behavior. Declaring this, the psalmist wrote, "The LORD is in His holy temple, the LORD's throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men. The LORD tests the righteous, but the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates" (11:4-5). Stressing the same point, the wise man observed, "The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the hearts" (Proverbs 17:3). God allows our actions to speak for themselves. Those who truly love the Lord maintain faithfulness to Him despite the difficulties they encounter.

Arguably, the most famous instance of divine testing recorded in Scripture occurred when God instructed Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:1). On that occasion, the Lord ordered, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall tell you" (v. 2). Although Abraham had

shown himself loyal to God in the past, he had not demonstrated his love for God to be greater than his love for Isaac, something the test required him to do. Because he did not hesitate to obey God's command, the Lord responded, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (v. 12). Abraham passed the test and proved his faithfulness.

The Lord's tests were not always limited to individuals but were sometimes administered to Israel as a whole. This was especially true throughout the period of the wilderness wandering. Moses noted this when he addressed the nation as they waited to enter the Promised Land. He stated, "Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers. And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not" (Deuteronomy 8:1-2). Essentially, the period of wilderness wandering was a test. Would the people obey God? Or would they reject His guidance and protection? Those who yielded their will to His passed the test and were allowed entrance into Canaan; those who rebelled failed and perished in the wilderness.

Interestingly, a similar test awaited the nation during the period of Judges. Because of their

stubbornness, the Lord declared, “I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, so that through them I may test Israel, whether they will keep the ways of the LORD, to walk in them as their fathers kept them, or not” (2:21-22). God intended for His people to show their true colors. Would they remain faithful to Him and avoid being tainted by the pagans surrounding them? Or would they join the Canaanites and reject God? The choice was Israel’s to make. Our lesson text—Judges 3:1-11—examines this test in greater detail.

Their Obedience

(Judges 3:1-5)

Our lesson text begins by announcing the reason some of the pagan nations were left in the Promised Land. According to Judges 3:1, they were left so that God “might test Israel by them, that is, all who had not known any of the wars in Canaan.” For those not involved in the military conquests led by Joshua, dwelling in ease would hardly provide opportunities to demonstrate true allegiance to the Lord. Those who face little conflict rarely learn to rely upon anything other than their own abilities. In such cases, God is often minimized or completely forgotten. Knowing this, the Lord left certain tribal groups in Canaan to serve as obstacles and to challenge His people. Explaining, the author of Judges wrote, “This was only so that the generations of the children of

Israel might be taught to know war, at least those who had not formerly known it” (v. 2).

But did God want the nation to learn about war, or was something else at stake? Block believed the latter was the case and observed, “When Yahweh expresses his determination that the present generation of Israelites should learn war, his concern is not primarily that they should learn how to conduct war but that they learn the nature and significance of this war. They have entered the land as Yahweh’s covenant people with the mandate to drive out the Canaanites and to claim it as a gift to them. The continued presence of the Canaanites represents a test whether or not they will accept Yahweh as their sovereign and their responsibilities in fulfilling his agenda” (*Judges, Ruth*, 137). The point seems to be more about their need to clean the Promised Land than about techniques to be used in fighting one’s enemies.

The real question was whether Israel would faithfully carry out God’s orders given to them by Moses before they ever entered the land (Judges 3:4). One example of such orders is found in Deuteronomy 20:16-18. On that occasion, Moses charged, “But of the cities of these peoples which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD has commanded you, lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations, which they have

done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God.” In short, Israel was to destroy their enemies completely so as to avoid being corrupted by them. Sadly, such did not occur. Instead, “the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites” (Judges 3:5). Rather than removing the nations from the land, Israel settled among them.

Their Separation

(Judges 3:6-8)

Those who reject one command of God find it easier to reject other commands as well. In Israel's case, the rejection of God's command to drive the nations from the land opened the door to rejecting His will regarding intermarriage with the pagans. Once they lived among the Canaanite tribes, it was only a short step to accepting their practices and religion, and this is exactly what Israel did. Reporting this, Judges 3:6 states, “And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons; and they served their gods.” This verse summarizes Israel's problem throughout the book of Judges. God was rejected; paganism was embraced. Israel's distinctiveness was lost. Chisholm noted, “Israel had settled down in the midst of the Canaanites and allowed the pagan altars to stand. Rather than conducting divinely sanctioned war and wiping out the remaining nations, Israel rejected the Lord's plan and prostituted themselves to the gods of the

nations. A key factor in this decline ... was Israel's willingness to intermarry with the native population, for close alliances of this type pollute the covenant community and inevitably lead to compromise and sin” (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 162).

Not surprisingly, the closer Israel became to the nations surrounding them, the farther they moved from God. In fact, “the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and the Asherahs” (Judges 3:7). Their rebellion provoked the Lord to anger. Consequently, God “sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the children of Israel served Cushan-Rishathaim eight years” (v. 8). Rather than bringing Israel's demise, God's actions were intended to provoke the nation to change. Explaining, Davis wrote, “In Yahweh's anger, is hope for Israel, for his anger shows that he will not allow Israel to serve Baal unmolested. Yahweh's wrath is the heat of his jealous love by which he refuses to let go of his people; he refuses to allow his people to remain comfortable in sin. ... It shows that the covenant God who has bound himself to his people will not allow them to become cozy in their infidelity. ‘Steadfast love’ pursues them in their iniquity and is not above inflicting misery in order to awaken them” (*Judges*, 49).

Othniel Named

(Judges 3:9-11)

At this point, the account provides us with a brief glimpse of how God would deliver His people throughout this dark period. Having already revealed Israel would pass through a cycle of rebellion, punishment, cries for deliverance, and divine help (cf. Judges 2:11-19), our lesson text records the first instance of God sending a deliverer or judge for Israel. The author of Judges wrote, "When the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel, who delivered them: Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother" (3:9).

Although Othniel is introduced earlier in Judges as a man of great courage and might (cf. Judges 1:12-13), our current passage says very little about how he rescued the Israelites. It merely reports, "The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD delivered Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-Rishathaim" (3:10). Regardless, we know God was with Othniel. The victory and deliverance belonged to the Lord. Commenting on Othniel, Kenneth C. Way noted, "Othniel is therefore portrayed without any obvious character flaws. ... In the arrangement of the book of Judges the Othniel cycle is placed first, not only because he epitomizes the role of deliverer but also because he represents the tribe of Judah, which was chosen to

'go up first' (1:1-2) and to lead the nation following Joshua's death" (Judges and Ruth, 31).

Applications

- Although we do not generally view trials and difficulties in a positive light, they serve to help us grow and develop as faithful servants of God. The Israelites could have shown their allegiance to God by driving the pagans from the land. Instead, they joined with their neighbors and were oppressed. Let us never forget the admonition of James: "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience" (James 1:2-3).
- The book of Judges reminds us of God's faithfulness to His people. Rather than ignoring or forgetting those who turned from Him, God provided the resistance necessary to bring His people to their senses. He then gave them a deliverer. God does indeed care for His children (1 Peter 5:7).

Questions

1. Why did God leave some of the pagan nations in the Promised Land (Judges 3:1)?
2. What did God want the Israelites to know (Judges 3:2)?

3. What commandments were the Israelites supposed to obey (Judges 3:4)?
4. What did the Israelites do with the pagan nations (Judges 3:6)?
5. How did God respond to Israel's rebellion (Judges 3:8)?
6. Whom did God send to deliver Israel (Judges 3:9)?
7. How long did Israel enjoy rest after their deliverance (Judges 3:11)?

Discussion

1. What can we do to maintain the proper perspective when facing trials in life?
2. What can we learn about God from this text?
3. What can God's people do to avoid being wrongly influenced by culture?

Deborah and Barak

Judges 4:1-16

¹ When Ehud was dead, the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD.

² So the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who dwelt in Harosheth Hagoyim.

³ And the children of Israel cried out to the LORD; for Jabin had nine hundred chariots of iron, and for twenty years he had harshly oppressed the children of Israel.

⁴ Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time.

⁵ And she would sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim. And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.

⁶ Then she sent and called for Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "Has not the LORD God of Israel commanded, 'Go and deploy troops at Mount Tabor; take with you ten thousand men of the sons of Naphtali and of the sons of Zebulun;

⁷ 'and against you I will deploy Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude at the River Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hand?'"

⁸ And Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go!"

⁹ So she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless there will be no glory for you in the journey you are taking, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.

¹⁰ And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; he went up with ten thousand men under his command, and Deborah went up with him.

¹¹ Now Heber the Kenite, of the children of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, had separated himself from the Kenites and pitched his tent near the terebinth tree at Zaanaim, which is beside Kedesh.

¹² And they reported to Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor.

¹³ So Sisera gathered together all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth Hagoyim to the River Kishon.

¹⁴ Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him.

¹⁵ And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot.

¹⁶ But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth Hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.

Introduction

Israel's cycle of rebellion, punishment, and divine deliverance is recorded numerous times throughout the book of Judges. Aware of the nation's stubbornness, God repeatedly extended His mercy and "raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them" (Judges 2:16). Some of the individuals God chose to help His people are unsurprising. For example, His choice of Othniel (3:9-11),

who formerly demonstrated courage and strength (cf. 1:12-13), makes sense. Other times, however, God used individuals we might never have expected to provide deliverance for Israel. Our lesson text records such an instance.

After Ehud helped free Israel from the oppression of the Moabites (Judges 3:12-29), a long period of peace followed (v. 30). Nevertheless, the people eventually returned to their rebellious ways and “did evil in the sight of the LORD” (4:1). As had occurred in the past, a period of harsh persecution followed. This time God did not move a military commander to lead the assault on Israel’s enemy. In fact, the military commander was actually reluctant to fight. Instead, God used a woman named Deborah to exhort the men of Naphtali and Zebulun to withstand their foe. Although the women of Israel did not fight in the army, Deborah also accompanied the military leader she exhorted, Barak, to the battlefield. She did not do this because she sought to usurp his position; she went because Barak would not go otherwise (vv. 8-9). Barak had physical ability; Deborah had courage. Together, they helped Israel escape the oppression of the Canaanites.

After the battle, Deborah and Barak sang a song to commemorate the victory (cf. Judges 5). The song, which retells the story of the struggle, reveals the difficult conditions Israel faced prior to their deliverance and lauds the efforts of those who helped the nation escape oppression. Deborah’s role is highlighted in verse 7: “Village life ceased, it ceased

in Israel, until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel.” Regarding Deborah’s position as “mother,” Block wrote, “The expression evokes affectionate maternal images, as if Deborah is the agent through whom Yahweh expresses his protective care over a people in a stressful and bewildering period” (*Judges, Ruth*, 226). The powerful image of a mother caring for and protecting her children is one that resonates even today.

Interestingly, Deborah’s song also sheds light on the lack of unity in Israel at the time. Rather than coming to the aid of their brethren, several of the tribes failed to respond (Judges 5:15-17). Even so, the men of Zebulun and Naphtali fought courageously and are praised in verse 18: “Zebulun is a people who jeopardized their lives to the point of death, Naphtali also, on the heights of the battlefield.” The end result of Deborah’s encouragement, Barak’s military prowess, and the efforts of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali was victory. This victory, which began at the insistence of Deborah, was aided by the cunning actions of another woman—Jael (vv. 24-27). The song ends with praise for the God who enabled His people to overcome: “Thus let all Your enemies perish, O LORD! But let those who love Him be like the sun when it comes out in full strength” (v. 31). Let’s turn our attention to the events that prompted the song found in Judges 5.

Prophetess and Judge

(Judges 4:1-5)

Israel's oppression came because of their own rebellion and wickedness. After Ehud's death, they turned from God (Judges 4:1). Consequently, "the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who dwelt in Harosheth Hagoyim" (v. 2). This is not the first time the name Jabin is found in the biblical record. In Joshua 11, "Jabin king of Hazor" rallied the kings of the north to fight against Israel. On that occasion, Joshua "took Hazor, and struck its king with the sword" (v. 10). He also "struck all the people who were in it with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying them. There was none left breathing. Then he burned Hazor with fire" (v. 11). This has left some to question how another Jabin could reside in Hazor and afflict Israel as early as the period of the judges. Cundall answered, "The name of Jabin may be a hereditary title adopted by the successive kings of Hazor. Hazor itself, burnt by fire by Joshua's army almost a century before but presumably not occupied by the Israelites, had been rebuilt by the Canaanites and had regained its old dominance" (*Judges and Ruth*, 82).

Israel's enemy was formidable, possessing "nine hundred chariots of iron" (Judges 4:3). Thus, for twenty years the Israelites suffered at the hands of the Canaanites. Eventually, Israel cried out to God for help (v. 3). In response, God used a most unusual

individual to prompt their deliverance. It is at this point that Deborah enters the story. Described as both a prophetess and judge (v. 4), she was known to "sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim. And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment" (v. 5). Scholars debate Deborah's exact role prior to this crisis. Was she a national leader? Or did she merely function in resolving civil disputes?

Perhaps a better question is raised by Chisholm: "Why was a woman judging? Were not any men available to accomplish this typically male task? Had the Calebs, the Othniels, and Ehuds all disappeared? While the text does not necessarily condemn this state of affairs, the situation is definitely less than ideal and, as we shall see, indicative of a problem that becomes more apparent as the chapter and book unfold" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 224). Regardless, Deborah's position as a prophetess allowed her to receive and transmit God's instructions. Her position as a judge anticipated the eventual settlement of Israel's troubles.

Barak Summoned

(Judges 4:6-11)

Revealing her knowledge of God's plan to deliver His people, Deborah "sent and called for Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, 'Has not the LORD God of Israel commanded, "Go and deploy troops at Mount Tabor; take with you

ten thousand men of the sons of Naphtali and of the sons of Zebulun” (Judges 4:6). Whether Barak was surprised by Deborah’s invitation is not stated in the text. He was, however, reluctant. In response, he declared, “If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go!” (v. 8). Despite divine assurance of victory, Barak, whose name means “lightning,” was slow to respond. Addressing his hesitancy, Deborah stated, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless there will be no glory for you in the journey you are taking, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (v. 9). Kenneth C. Way wrote concerning Barak, “Barak should have been the military ‘hero’ in this story, but alas, he is no Ehud, and he is certainly no Othniel. So, along with Barak’s reluctant service, God unexpectedly employs the contributions of two women (and one of them is a foreigner!). In the end, however, none of the participants can claim the victory for themselves. The divine King is clearly the commander in chief (4:6, 14), and the victory belongs to him alone (4:7, 9, 14, 15, 23)” (*Judges and Ruth*, 45–46).

With the assurance of Deborah’s presence, Barak went about the task of assembling an army. From the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, he assembled the number of men prescribed by the Lord (Judges 4:10). Then, he led the troops toward their enemy. Before the battle is described, another individual is introduced into the record. We learn “Heber the Kenite, of the children of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, had separated himself from the Kenites and pitched

his tent near the terebinth tree at Zaanaim, which is beside Kedesh” (v. 11). That Heber had “separated himself” from his people—individuals who had settled among the tribe of Judah—leads the reader to wonder about his loyalty. When the text later reveals “there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite” (v. 17), our questions multiply. What role will Heber play in the narrative? As it turns out, he is only mentioned to explain why Sisera, Jabin’s commander, would approach his tent. Heber’s wife, Jael, is the one who plays an important role (cf. Judges 4:17-24). Like Deborah before her, Jael did what the men in the story did not.

Sisera Attacked

(Judges 4:12-16)

Upon hearing of the location of Barak and his army, “Sisera gathered together all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who were with him” (Judges 4:13). Whereas the general would normally be the one to seize such an opportunity to attack, it was Deborah who again pushed Barak to action. She urged, “Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?” (v. 14). The text does not say whether Deborah’s push was necessary because Barak feared the iron chariots of his foe, but it does seem to contrast Deborah’s faith in God’s care with Barak’s initial hesitancy.

Lest we conclude Barak was inept, his actions prove otherwise (cf. Hebrews 11:32). He needed Deborah's encouragement, but he was capable when engaged. Noting this, Chisholm observed, "This time Barak responded like a lightning bolt and swept down into the valley with his soldiers. The Lord, in fulfillment of his ancient promise (Exodus 23:27), routed the enemy (Judges 4:15), just as he had done in the days of Moses and Joshua. ... At this point we are not told specifically how the Lord accomplished this, but chapter 5 gives a clue. Barak's hurricane of steel put the Canaanites to the sword, chasing them all the way to Sisera's home in Harosheth-Haggoyim and permitting no survivors to escape" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 230). Both Deborah and Barak played important roles in the victory. Jael's role, which is recorded in Judges 4:17-24 and again in Judges 5:24-27, was also significant. Ultimately, "God subdued Jabin king of Canaan in the presence of the children of Israel" (4:23).

Application

- Deborah and Jael remind us God often uses unlikely individuals to accomplish His will. Deborah's example also reveals the power of properly placed encouragement. Regardless of whether she was capable of leading Israel's troops into battle, she certainly motivated Barak to do so.

Questions

1. What pagan king oppressed Israel in this account (Judges 4:2)?
2. What military detail is given to establish the strength of the Canaanites (Judges 4:3)?
3. How does the text describe Deborah (Judges 4:4-5)?
4. What two tribes came together to fight against Israel's enemy (Judges 4:6)?
5. What demand did Barak make of Deborah (Judges 4:8)?
6. What did Deborah say to encourage Barak to attack the enemy (Judges 4:14)?

7. Who is given credit for routing the army of Sisera (Judges 4:15)?

Discussion

1. What can we learn from Deborah about faith?
2. How can Christians learn to be better encouragers?
3. What is the main lesson to be learned from Deborah and Barak?

The Death of Sisera

Judges 4:17-22; 5:28-31

¹⁷ However, Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite.

¹⁸ And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; do not fear." And when he had turned aside with her into the tent, she covered him with a blanket.

¹⁹ Then he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." So she opened a jug of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him.

²⁰ And he said to her, "Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there any man here?' you shall say, 'No.'"

²¹ Then Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.

²² And then, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, "Come, I will show you the man whom you seek." And when he went into her tent, there lay Sisera, dead with the peg in his temple.

Judges 5:28-31

²⁸ "The mother of Sisera looked through the window,
And cried out through the lattice,
'Why is his chariot so long in coming?
'Why tarries the clatter of his chariots?'

²⁹ "Her wisest ladies answered her,
Yes, she answered herself,

³⁰ 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoil:
 'To every man a girl or two;
 'For Sisera, plunder of dyed garments,
 'Plunder of garments embroidered and dyed,
 'Two pieces of dyed embroidery for the neck of the looter?'
³¹ "Thus let all Your enemies perish, O LORD!
 "But let those who love Him be like the sun
 When it comes out in full strength."

Introduction

Because of Deborah's encouragement, Barak led the men of Zebulun and Naphtali in battle against the Canaanites. Although Canaan's forces under the leadership of Sisera were formidable, the men of Israel prevailed with the Lord's help. Describing this, the author of Judges wrote, "And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot" (4:15). The victory was impressive and total, for "all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left" (v. 16).

It is easy to focus exclusively on the role played by Israel's deliverers. To do so, however, is a mistake. Individuals like Deborah and Barak played important parts in freeing God's people, but they did only what God enabled them to do. The text leaves no doubt about Israel's true hero. According to Judges 4:23-24, "God subdued Jabin king of Canaan in the presence of the children of Israel. And the hand of the children of Israel grew stronger and stronger against

Jabin king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan." What Israel could not do on its own, it did with the help of God. As long as the nation was faithful to Him, it overpowered its enemies. Deborah celebrated this truth at the end of her song: "Thus let all Your enemies perish, O LORD! But let those who love Him be like the sun when it comes out in full strength" (5:31).

God's power is especially seen in His ability to help His people in unexpected ways. In our lesson text—Judges 4:17-22—God used Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, to put the fleeing Sisera at ease and subsequently take his life. No doubt Sisera believed Heber and his wife would offer him a place of refuge because they were at peace (v. 17). Instead, Jael acted with courage and cunning. Because of her actions, Deborah sang, "Most blessed among women is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; blessed is she among women in tents" (5:24). The contrast between Sisera and Jael could not be sharper: Sisera was the powerful commander of Jabin's army; Jael was an unsuspecting tent dweller. For the second time in the narrative, a woman moved to center stage. As Deborah predicted, the Lord did indeed "sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (4:9). God was clearly at work.

Sisera Seeks Refuge

(Judges 4:17-20)

While the Lord's army routed the Canaanites, Sisera ran for his life (Judges 4:15). Because Barak

and his army focused on the main body of enemy troops, the Canaanite commander's retreat seemingly escaped notice. Our lesson text heightens the suspense by identifying the location to which Sisera fled. It states, "However, Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite" (v. 17). It seemed as if Sisera, unlike his army, would live to fight another day. The supposed "peace" (NKJV), or "alliance" according to other translations, between Jabin and Heber was certainly in his favor. Explaining, Block wrote, "The expression ... 'friendly relations,' denotes much more than the absence of hostilities. In contexts like this it functions as a covenant term. The fact that Sisera thought he would be safe in Heber's camp suggests the alliance had been formalized in some sort of treaty. ... By all political and ethical standards Sisera should have found security here. But his dream of safety would turn into the worst possible nightmare" (*Judges, Ruth*, 206).

Upon his arrival at Jael's tent, Sisera was welcomed. In fact, "Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, 'Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; do not fear.' And when he had turned aside with her into the tent, she covered him with a blanket" (Judges 4:18). Given Jael's welcome, Sisera felt safe and let down his guard. Covered by her blanket, his escape from Israel seemed likely.

Adding to Sisera's feeling of ease, Jael provided milk for his refreshment (Judges 4:19). Sisera then

asked her to stand guard at the opening of the tent and lie about his whereabouts, if asked. He instructed Jael, "Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there any man here?' you shall say, 'No'" (v. 20). Everything about Jael's actions indicated she was helping Sisera escape from Israel. In reality, quite the opposite was true. Cundall observed, "Sisera was not to know the woman sheltering him was a member of a tribe which had strong ties with the Israelites and that he was, in fact, in the tent of an enemy" (*Judges and Ruth*, 90). Exhausted from his retreat, Sisera slept.

Jael Kills Sisera

(*Judges 4:21-22*)

Once Sisera was asleep, Jael sprung into action. She "took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died" (Judges 4:21). Her behavior is not explained in the passage; it is merely described. Why did she violate the covenant between her husband and Jabin? We are left to speculate. Perhaps it was because of the Kenites' close association to Israel (cf. 4:11; 1:16). Regardless, she, like Deborah, stands in contrast to Barak. Making this point, Kenneth C. Way noted, "Jael, on the other hand, displays no inhibitions. She is providentially presented with an opportunity, and she decisively acts. She seemingly has much to lose and little to

gain by killing Jabin's general. Her marginalized social status (by ethnicity and gender) and her husband's friendly relationship with Jabin, as well as the prospects of reward for protecting this fugitive, are all strong deterrents, yet she opts—for whatever reason—to risk everything by grasping the mallet" (*Judges and Ruth*, 47).

After killing Sisera, Jael found Barak and revealed her actions. Reporting this, Judges 4:22 states, "And then, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, 'Come, I will show you the man whom you seek.' And when he went into her tent, there lay Sisera, dead with the peg in his temple." She had done without hesitation what Barak initially refused to do. Interestingly, the language used to describe this encounter may also exalt Jael over Barak. According to Chisholm, "There may be another hint of irony in verse 22 in the non-sexual use of the expression 'and he went to her.' ... In the other eight uses of this expression ... in the Old Testament, sexual contact is always in view (Genesis 29:33; 30:4; 38:1, 18; Judges 16:1; Ruth 4:13; 2 Samuel 12:24; Ezekiel 23:44). But here in the case of Barak it has no such force, perhaps mirroring the fact that a woman has usurped Barak's role as the story's hero (cf. 4:9). ... He 'goes in to' a woman, but not to express his manhood. On the contrary, he finds that a woman has accomplished what he, a man, should have done" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 233).

Sisera Mourned

(*Judges 5:28-31*)

Deborah's summary of Sisera's death both praises Jael and mockingly mourns Sisera. Singing Jael's praises, she proclaimed, "Most blessed among women is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; blessed is she among women in the tents. He asked for water, she gave milk; she brought out cream in a lordly bowl. She stretched her hand to the tent peg, her right hand to the workmen's hammer; she pounded Sisera, she pierced his head, she split and struck through his temple. At her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; at her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell dead" (Judges 5:24-27). This simple account of Jael's actions shows they were appropriate. Sisera was an enemy of God and His people. He had "harshly oppressed the children of Israel" (4:3) and was guilty of plundering both women and goods (5:30). Ultimately, God used Jael to accomplish His will. Because Heber the Kenite moved away from his people (4:11), Jael was in the right place to act. So Davis wrote, "Not even Heber's U-Haul was outside Yahweh's plan; and a God like that surely ought to be adored" (*Judges*, 77).

Having praised Jael for her actions, Deborah's song looks at Sisera's death through the eyes of his mother. Rather than being sympathetic, it shows how truly vile Sisera was, for even his mother expected his delay was due to his villainy. Actually, the song depicts the utter wickedness of the Canaanites as a

whole and shows why they deserved to be defeated by Israel, for when Sisera's mother wondered about his delay, she hoped it was because he was bringing home the spoils of war, including the women of his conquered foe (Judges 5:30). Regarding this, Webb wrote, "So these women are doubly dehumanized; they are not only property to be divided up by men like bits of cloth, but they are also 'wombs,' valued only for their erotic and reproductive potential. The fact that it is other women who see this as normal, and as something they hope is happening, is as telling a comment on Canaanite culture as the vignette about Adoni-bezek in 1:4-7" (*The Book of Judges*, 217). Even so, the reader of Deborah's song knows what Sisera's mother did not: Sisera would never return. God's people prevailed against the Canaanites because of two unlikely heroes—Deborah and Jael. The song concludes with Deborah expressing hope that all of God's enemies would perish (5:31).

Applications

- Although Sisera attempted to run from God and His people, he was unsuccessful. God was clearly the strength behind Israel's victory over the Canaanites. He does not allow man to escape His grasp. Regardless of whether our situation is identical to Sisera's, it is certain we cannot outrun the hand of God. Paul put it simply: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

- Deborah praised Jael in a very unique manner. She sang, "Most blessed among women is Jael" (Judges 5:24). This praise is heaped on Jael because she seemingly acted without regard for her own best interests. Interestingly, similar language is used to describe Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:28, 42). Although they are an unlikely pair, both women played a role in the deliverance of God's people. Additionally, both Jael and Mary displayed undeniable courage.

Questions

1. Why did Sisera flee to the tent of Jael (Judges 4:17)?
2. What did Jael give to Sisera (Judges 4:18-19)?
3. What request did Sisera make of Jael (Judges 4:20)?
4. What did Jael use to kill Sisera (Judges 4:21)?

5. Who is credited with subduing Jabin and the Canaanites (Judges 4:23)?

6. How did Deborah describe Jael (Judges 5:24)?

7. Who supposedly looked for Sisera's return (Judges 5:28)?

Discussion

1. What does this passage teach us about God's sovereignty?

2. How is Jael contrasted with Barak?

3. What does Deborah's song teach us about the Canaanites (Judges 5:28-30)?

The Midianites and Gideon

Judges 6:1-6, 11-21

¹ Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years,

² and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of the Midianites, the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains.

³ So it was, whenever Israel had sown, Midianites would come up; also Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them.

⁴ Then they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey.

⁵ For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, coming in as numerous as locusts; both they and their camels were without number; and they would enter the land to destroy it.

⁶ So Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites, and the children of Israel cried out to the LORD.

Judges 6:11-21

¹¹ Now the Angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth tree which was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon threshed wheat in the winepress, in order to hide it from the Midianites.

¹² And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him, and said to him, "The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!"

¹³ Gideon said to Him, "O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites."

¹⁴ Then the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?"

¹⁵ So he said to Him, "O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house."

¹⁶ And the LORD said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man."

¹⁷ Then he said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who talk with me."

¹⁸ "Do not depart from here, I pray, until I come to You and bring out my offering and set it before You." And He said, "I will wait until you come back."

¹⁹ So Gideon went in and prepared a young goat, and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot; and he brought them out to Him under the terebinth tree and presented them.

²⁰ The Angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so.

²¹ Then the Angel of the LORD put out the end of the staff that was in His hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire rose out of the rock and

consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. And the Angel of the Lord departed out of his sight.

Introduction

After God delivered Israel from Canaanite oppression by the hands of Deborah, Barak, and Jael, "the land had rest for forty years" (Judges 5:31). Thus, a generation of Israelites lived without enemy oppression. Sadly, true reformation did not occur during this period of peace, for when that generation passed, "the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD" (6:1). Israel's downward spiral of rebellion continued (see 3:7-8, 12; 4:1-2), and God punished His people by handing them over to another enemy. In this instance, "the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years" (6:1).

Midian was the son of Abraham by his wife Keturah (Genesis 25:1-2). The Midianites, therefore, were distant relatives of the Israelites. This, however, does not mean the relationship between the two groups was always friendly. Midianite traders sold Joseph into slavery (37:28, 36). They were also involved in a scheme designed to turn the hearts of Israel away from God (Numbers 25:17-18). Eventually, Moses led the Israelites in battle against the Midianites "to take vengeance for the LORD on Midian" (31:3).

The encroachment of Midian on Israel in our lesson text involved not only terrorizing the Israelites but also raiding the land and removing available food. Midianites looted Israel's harvests and scattered its inhabitants. Block described Israel's pitiable

condition: "Seven years of Midianite terror had a devastating effect on the Israelite economy and emotion. Like locusts, their innumerable hosts devoured every green plant in sight, leaving the land devastated, with nothing left over for the Israelite flocks and herds. Fearing the brutality of the invaders, as soon as they appeared on the horizon, the Israelites fled for the hills, transforming natural geological features into defensive strongholds" (*Judges, Ruth*, 253).

With Israel in this vulnerable position, God selected another deliverer for His people. Not surprisingly, the man God chose, like the rest of Israel, was actually hiding from the Midianites when first contacted. Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress when the Angel of the Lord said to him, "The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!" (*Judges* 6:12). No doubt Gideon wondered how someone who was hiding could ever be considered mighty or courageous! Even more perplexing was the thought that he was God's chosen instrument to deliver the nation. Unsure of this calling, Gideon asked for a sign of confirmation (v. 17). Rather than becoming frustrated with Gideon's reluctance, the Lord did as Gideon requested and provided a sign (v. 21). Armed with the knowledge that he was God's instrument, Gideon began to do as the Lord directed, even if his actions occurred under the cover of darkness (see vv. 25-27).

Domination of the Midianites

(*Judges* 6:1-6)

Although it is easy to criticize Gideon for his fear, he was not the only Israelite who hid from the Midianites. The oppression Israel faced during this seven-year period was punishment for their wickedness (*Judges* 6:1). As had been the case throughout their history, Israel's faithfulness to God departed with one generation, and another generation arose who either did not know God or did not live as if they did. Consequently, "the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of the Midianites, the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains" (v. 2). In other words, the Israelites were forced to run to the hills for their own protection.

Additionally, God's people had to concern themselves with securing enough food to eat, for their enemies—the Midianites, Amalekites, and people of the East—worked to "destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey" (*Judges* 6:4). In fact, the invading armies were compared to "locusts" because they were so numerous and destructive to Israel's crops (v. 5). Utter desolation was left in their wake. Interestingly, the author of *Judges* left several clues in the text to remind his readers why God's people were being punished. Chisholm highlighted three primary points of irony: "The same phrase used in 3:10 to describe Othniel's victory over

Cushan-Rishathaim ... is used in 6:2 of Midian's subjugation of Israel. The comparison of the Midianite hordes to locusts, while emphasizing their numerical strength and capacity to destroy, may echo the covenantal curse of Deuteronomy 28:38. Finally, the appearance of the Amalekites is ironic for Moses had instructed Israel to annihilate the Amalekites because of the way they had treated God's people (Deuteronomy 25:17-19, cf. Exodus 17:8-16). Once more (see Judges 3:13) Israel's failure in this regard was coming back to haunt them" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 270).

In the midst of this great difficulty, "the children of Israel cried out to the LORD" (Judges 6:6). Rather than delivering His people immediately, God first sent a prophet to inform them why they were suffering. Despite His constant care and gracious provisions, the people failed to obey God's voice (vv. 8-10). Israel's punishment was deserved. Until the children of Israel realized why they were suffering, they would never truly appreciate God's deliverance.

Gideon Chosen

(Judges 6:11-16)

As had occurred in other instances during the period of the Judges (cf. Judges 3:9, 15), God selected an individual to help His people. In this case, Israel's future deliverer was threshing wheat in a winepress to avoid the attention of the Midianites (6:11). Gideon is introduced as the son of Joash the Abiezrite—a

clan of Manasseh (Joshua 17:2). Although the text does not mention the fact initially, Gideon claimed his clan was "the weakest in Manasseh" (Judges 6:15). Whether or not this was an accurate assessment of his clan's physical prowess, certainly spiritual weaknesses were present among his people, for Gideon's father was an idolater (v. 25).

Despite Gideon's background, "the Angel of the LORD appeared to him, and said to him, 'The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!'" (Judges 6:12). According to Younger, "There is great irony in this statement by the angel of Yahweh. (1) Gideon is hiding from the Midianites, threshing wheat in a winepress. (2) Gideon's name ... means 'hacker.' ... But Gideon is characterized by fearfulness and reluctance, although Yahweh's words are correct (i.e., he will be a great warrior at the end; see 8:4-21)" (*The NIV Application Commentary: Judges/Ruth*, 173).

In response to the Angel, Gideon asked, "O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites" (Judges 6:13). Importantly, God had not forsaken His people; the people had forsaken God! Gideon was actually going to be the instrument through which God demonstrated His continued faithfulness. The people were being punished because of their disobedience, but God was offering them another change. Thus, God charged Gideon, "Go in this might of

yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?" (v. 14).

The Sign (Judges 6:17-21)

Despite God's affirmation that Gideon was His chosen deliverer for Israel, Gideon remained skeptical. Wanting to remove any doubts about his role, he requested, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who talk with me" (Judges 6:17). To Gideon, it did not make sense for God to call the youngest man from the weakest clan in Manasseh to deliver Israel (v. 15). Gideon needed additional confirmation. As Davis noted, "There must be no mistake, no illusion. He must know it is God's word or at least that it comes with God's authority" (*Judges*, 96).

Gideon received the confirmation he sought after he brought an offering to the Angel of the Lord. Following the instructions provided, Gideon placed the offering, which consisted of a young goat and unleavened bread, on the rock before the Angel of the Lord (Judges 6:19-20). Reporting what occurred next, Judges 6:21 states, "Then the Angel of the LORD put out the end of the staff that was in His hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire rose out of the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. And the Angel of the LORD departed out of his sight." Gideon could no longer question whether God intended for him to deliver

Israel. His subsequent reaction, recorded in Judges 6:22-24, is especially telling: "Now Gideon perceived that He was the Angel of the LORD. So Gideon said, 'Alas, O Lord GOD! For I have seen the Angel of the LORD face to face.' Then the LORD said to him, 'Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die.' So Gideon built an altar there to the LORD, and called it The-LORD-Is-Peace." Those who stand before the true God can't help but worship. No wonder Gideon went on to "hack" his father's false altar and idol into pieces (vv. 25-27)!

Applications

- It is easy to blame our problems on others. Israel likely wanted to blame their pitiable condition on the oppressive Midianites. Gideon attempted to blame God for not acting on behalf of his people. Nevertheless, the difficulties Israel faced were the result of their own wickedness. When they departed from God, they were punished. They had no one to blame but themselves. God made this clear when He declared, "I am the LORD your God; do not fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell.' But you have not obeyed My voice" (Judges 6:10).

- Although it is easy to criticize Gideon for his lack of courage, the text does not do so. He was chosen because God saw something in him that he did not see in himself. Even when hiding, he was a "mighty man of valor." How thankful we should be for the God who looks beneath the surface and knows our potential!

Questions

1. How long did the Midianites oppress Israel (Judges 6:1)?
2. Where did the Israelites hide from their enemies (Judges 6:2)?
3. What other groups joined the Midianites in troubling Israel (Judges 6:3)?
4. What were the Midianites doing to the Israelites (Judges 6:4-6)?
5. What was Gideon doing when first confronted by the Angel of the Lord (Judges 6:11)?

6. Why did Gideon think himself unworthy (Judges 6:15)?

7. What did Gideon request (Judges 6:17)?

Discussion

1. What can we learn from this passage about how God views His children?
2. Why do we sometimes refuse to accept blame for our actions? What steps can we take to avoid blaming others for our own failures?
3. What can Christians do today when they are uncertain about the direction they should go in their lives?

Preparing for War

Judges 7:1-21

¹ Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the well of Harod, so that the camp of the Midianites was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley.

² And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'

³ Now therefore, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever is fearful and afraid, let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead.'" And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained.

⁴ But the LORD said to Gideon, "The people are still too many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. Then it will be, that of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' the same shall go with you; and of whomever I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' the same shall not go."

⁵ So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, "Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself; likewise everyone who gets down on his knees to drink."

⁶ And the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people got down on their knees to drink water.

⁷ Then the LORD said to Gideon, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the

Midianites into your hand. Let all the other people go, every man to his place."

⁸ So the people took provisions and their trumpets in their hands. And he sent away all the rest of Israel, every man to his tent, and retained those three hundred men. Now the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

⁹ It happened on the same night that the LORD said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand.

¹⁰ But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant,

¹¹ and you shall hear what they say; and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp." Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outpost of the armed men who were in the camp.

¹² Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude.

¹³ And when Gideon had come, there was a man telling a dream to his companion. He said, "I have had a dream: To my surprise, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to a tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent collapsed."

¹⁴ Then his companion answered and said, "This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp."

¹⁵ And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel, and said, "Arise, for the LORD has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand."

¹⁶ Then he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers.

¹⁷ And he said to them, "Look at me and do likewise; watch, and when I come to the edge of the camp you shall do as I do:

¹⁸ When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp, and say, 'The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!'"

¹⁹ So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that were in their hands.

²⁰ Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers—they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing—and they cried, "The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!"

²¹ And every man stood in his place all around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled.

Introduction

After Gideon was convinced he was to lead Israel in opposing the Midianites, the Lord instructed him, "Take your father's young bull, the second bull of seven years old, and tear down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the wooden image that is beside it; and build an altar to the LORD your God on top of this rock in the proper arrangement, and take the second bull and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the image which you shall cut down"

(Judges 6:25-26). Gideon did as the Lord commanded. Nevertheless, "because he feared his father's household and the men of the city too much to do it by day, he did it by night" (v. 27).

Whether Gideon thought his actions would remain a secret, the men of the city quickly learned who had torn down the altar to Baal. In an effort to retaliate, they said to Joash, Gideon's father, "Bring out your son, that he may die, because he has torn down the altar of Baal, and because he has cut down the wooden image that was beside it" (Judges 6:30). Rather than doing as they asked, Joash responded, "Would you plead for Baal? Would you save him? Let the one who would plead for him be put to death by morning! If he is a god, let him plead for himself, because his altar has been torn down!" (v. 31). Placated by Joash's reasoning, the men of the city spared Gideon. The Israelites, with Gideon's help, began to turn from their idolatrous ways.

At this point in the story, the text turns its attention back to the problem God initially called Gideon to help resolve—the oppression of the Midianites (cf. Judges 6:14). As they had done previously during harvesttime (vv. 3-5), "all the Midianites and Amalekites, and the people of the East, gathered together; and they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel" (v. 33). On this occasion, however, God's people were ready to respond, for "the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites gathered behind him" (v. 34).

As God had done with Othniel (cf. Judges 3:10), He empowered Gideon to lead His people. This explains why Gideon, despite his lowly position in his clan (6:15) and his own self-doubts (vv. 36-40), was able to draw a large number of followers. God was the one who would save His people; Gideon was His instrument. Daniel I. Block explained, "As we have noted earlier and will witness repeatedly hereafter, if anything positive happens to Israel in the Book of Judges, the credit must go to God. As in the cases of Jephthah in 11:29, and especially Saul in 1 Samuel 11:6-8, the same Spirit which possesses the divinely called deliverer compels the recipients of the summons to respond to his call" (*Judges, Ruth*, 272). Our lesson text, Judges 7:1-21, describes how Gideon followed the Lord's instructions and led Israel to victory.

Selecting the Men

(Judges 7:1-8)

Our narrative begins with Gideon, who is also called Jerubbaal (cf. Judges 6:32), leading his men to camp beside the well of Harod near the Midianite army (7:1). Chisholm found this location to be ironic, for the name "Harod" sounds like the Hebrew word for "tremble" or "be terrified." He observed, "The very name hints at the emotional state of Gideon's army (see v. 3, where the adjective is used), but it also foreshadows what divinely energized Gideon will do to the Midianites" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 281).

Although the Midianite force was quite large (cf. Judges 7:12), God did not want Gideon leading a sizable army from Israel against them in battle. Explaining, the Lord said, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me'" (v. 2). God wanted His people to know He was delivering them from their oppressors. Consequently, He instructed Gideon to send home the soldiers who were "fearful and afraid" (v. 3 NKJV) or "anyone who trembles with fear" (NIV84). Of the original force mustered with Gideon, twenty-two thousand departed. Gideon was left with ten thousand men.

Whether Gideon, who had asked God for reassurance on more than one occasion, was anxious about sending such a large force away from his army is not stated in the text. What we do know is the Lord wanted Gideon's army to be even smaller. Making this clear, He stated, "The people are still too many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there" (Judges 7:4). God's test required Gideon to divide the men on the basis of how they drank from the stream. Those who lapped the water with their tongues were to be placed in one group; those who got down on their knees to drink were to be put in another (v. 5). When the test was performed, only three hundred men were in the former group (v. 6). God then informed Gideon, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the other people

go, every man to his place” (v. 7). Importantly, the text does not explain why God chose the men who lapped water rather than those who knelt to drink. To argue that the former group displayed vigilance while the latter displayed carelessness may seem reasonable. Even so, Davis is correct when he noted, “The fact is that any virtue or noble qualification the lappers are said to show must be read into the text; the text itself does not hint of any virtue in lapping or of any implicit vice in kneeling to drink water” (*Judges*, 103). God simply wanted Gideon’s force to be small enough that He would be credited for Israel’s deliverance (cf. v. 2).

The Dream

(*Judges* 7:9-15)

After Israel’s force was whittled to three hundred men, God instructed Gideon, “Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand” (*Judges* 7:9). This command should have been sufficient to move Gideon to act. Even so, God understood Gideon’s reluctance and provided further assurance. He added, “But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant, and you shall hear what they say; and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp” (vv. 10-11). It should be noted that God did not rebuke Gideon for his fearfulness. Concerning this, Webb wrote, “Fearfulness, for most people, is not a weakness that can be conquered once and for all, but

something that must be resisted and overcome again and again. Nor is it something that afflicts lesser mortals only; the permission given to Gideon to take Purah, his assistant, with him is reminiscent of the permission Moses was given to take Aaron (*Exodus* 4:10-17). It is a reminder that the one indispensable requirement for a leader of God’s people is not fearlessness, but obedience” (*The Book of Judges*, 244).

Gideon’s fear was likely based on the size of the Midianite coalition (*Judges* 7:12). He did not, however, refuse God’s offer of assurance. When he and his servant arrived at the enemy camp, they overheard a Midianite recounting a troubling dream to his companion. Reporting this, *Judges* 7:13-14 states, “He said, ‘I have had a dream: To my surprise, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to a tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent collapsed.’ Then his companion answered and said, ‘This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp.’”

Gideon received the confirmation he needed. Israel would prevail against Midian. Immediately, he worshipped (*Judges* 7:15). Kenneth C. Way remarked, “The symbolic dream, which applies negatively to the Midianites and positively to the Israelites, is surprisingly more convincing to Gideon (v. 15) than the direct statements of Yahweh in 6:16; 7:2, 7, 9” (*Judges and Ruth*, 67). After worshipping God, Gideon “returned to the camp of Israel, and said, ‘Arise, for

the LORD has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand” (v. 15).

The Strategy

(Judges 7:16-21)

Armed with the knowledge of certain victory, it remained for Gideon to organize his troops and advance upon the enemy encampment. Preparing the small army for battle, Gideon “divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man’s hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers” (Judges 7:16). Because these items seemed ill-suited for warfare, Gideon then explained the strategy: “Look at me and do likewise; watch, and when I come to the edge of the camp you shall do as I do: When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp, and say, ‘The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!’” (vv. 17-18).

The plan unfolded as Gideon described. Arriving at the enemy camp “at the beginning of the middle watch” (Judges 7:19), the Israelites followed orders. Reporting the event, Judges 7:20 states, “Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers—they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing—and they cried, ‘The sword of the LORD and Gideon!’” Their approach was both unexpected and startling to the Midianites. As a result, “the whole army ran and cried out and fled” (v. 21). Israel’s victory was

utter and complete. Additionally, it was not unlike others in their history. Noting this, Chisholm wrote, “The prominence of the trumpets cannot be missed. ... The blowing of trumpets also reminds one of the Lord’s great victory over Jericho, when the Israelites blew trumpets outside the city’s walls as a prelude to God’s miraculous intervention (cf. Joshua 6). The parallelism is probably not coincidental—the Lord was renewing his mighty deeds in Gideon’s day, in response to the reluctant hero’s earlier question (cf. Judges 6:13)” (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 286).

Applications

- Although Gideon was hesitant to lead God’s people against the Midianites, he did not use his fear as a permanent excuse. Instead, Gideon took confidence in the evidences God provided and acted obediently.
- God’s use of Gideon’s small army illustrates His wonderful power. Let us never place more confidence in our own abilities than we do in our mighty God. He is truly the one in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Questions

1. By what other name was Gideon known (Judges 7:1)?
2. What was the first test used to turn men back from Gideon's army (Judges 7:3)?
3. How many men were in Gideon's final force (Judges 7:7)?
4. What was Gideon's servant's name (Judges 7:10)?
5. What assured Gideon that victory was certain (Judges 7:13-14)?
6. What did Gideon and his troops do when they approached the enemy camp (Judges 7:16-20)?

7. How did the Midianites react to the commotion caused by Gideon's army (Judges 7:21)?

Discussion

1. What can Christians do to combat the problem of fear?
2. What does this passage teach us about God?
3. What similarities exist between this event and others in the Old Testament that feature an unlikely victory?
4. What are the main lessons to be learned from this text?

Jephthah's Vow

Judges 11:29-40

²⁹ Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced toward the people of Ammon.

³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands,

³¹ "then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

³² So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD delivered them into his hands.

³³ And he defeated them from Aroer as far as Minnith—twenty cities—and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel.

³⁴ When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter.

³⁵ And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it."

³⁶ So she said to him, "My father, if you have given your word to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone

out of your mouth, because the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon."

³⁷ Then she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I."

³⁸ So he said, "Go." And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains.

³⁹ And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel

⁴⁰ that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Introduction

As we have seen throughout our study of Judges, Israel vacillated between faithfulness to God and rebellion against Him. Under the guidance of certain leaders, the nation would seek to do God's will. When those leaders died, allegiance to God quickly disappeared. For example, the text of Judges 8:33-34 states, "So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with their Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god. Thus the children of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side." Sadly, this cycle repeats itself several times throughout the book.

When Jephthah enters the narrative, Israel was being punished for rebellion against God. They

worshipped not only the Baals but also “the Ash-toreths, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the people of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the LORD and did not serve Him” (Judges 10:6). Not surprisingly, God was angered by Israel’s behavior and “sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the people of Ammon” (v. 7). In response to the punishment they faced, “the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, ‘We have sinned against You, because we have both forsaken our God and served the Baals!’” (v. 10). God, however, did not immediately stop those who oppressed Israel. Instead, He instructed them to call upon their idols for deliverance (v. 14). Knowing that such was pointless, the Israelites “put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD. And His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel” (v. 16).

Jephthah is introduced in Judges 11:1: “Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, but he was the son of a harlot; and Gilead begot Jephthah.” Like Jair before him, who “judged Israel twenty-two years” (10:3), Jephthah was from Gilead, located in the Transjordan region. Regarding Jephthah, Cundall wrote, “He was the son of Gilead, whose name is identified with the grandson of Manasseh who was the founder of the clan, but his mother was a harlot ... who may have been a non-Israelite. Living in his father’s house, Jephthah was deprived of his family rights by his illegitimacy” (*Judges and Ruth*, 137). Because of this, he was driven from home (11:2) and

“fled from his brothers” (v. 3). During this period, “worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him” (v. 3). Nevertheless, the people of Gilead sought his help when “Ammon made war against Israel” (v. 5).

Despite Jephthah’s shortcomings, he did worship the Lord. In fact, he drew a sharp contrast between the God of Israel and the gods of the Ammonites when he declared, “May the LORD, the Judge, render judgment this day between the children of Israel and the people of Ammon” (Judges 11:27). Even so, Jephthah is best remembered for rashly vowing to offer as a sacrifice whatever met him first when he returned from battle. Whether he actually offered his daughter, who was the first to greet him, as a burnt offering or dedicated her in service to God is hotly debated.

Regardless, Kenneth C. Way’s summary of Jephthah’s time as judge is worthy of consideration: “If Jephthah is one part deliverer of Israel, he is also two parts destroyer of Israel. Both steps backward in this pericope are induced by unnecessary words that reflect and lead to increased Canaanization for Israel. The first step backward is Jephthah’s rash vow. This is a manipulative attempt to control God and ensure that he will act in accordance with Jephthah’s wishes. ... The second step backward is in 12:1-6. Again Jephthah’s open mouth—his rash and unnecessary words (vv. 2-3)—leads to disaster” (*Judges and Ruth*, 103–104). With this in mind, we would do well to remember the words of Ecclesiastes 5:2: “Do not be

rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few."

Making His Vow

(Judges 11:29-33)

After Jephthah's attempted diplomacy was rejected by the Ammonites (Judges 11:28), "the Spirit of the LORD came upon" him (v. 29). This is not the first time such occurred in the book of Judges (cf. 3:10; 6:34), nor will it be the last (cf. 13:25; 14:6). As in the previous instances, the Lord empowered an individual to act for His people. He once again heard His children and extended His mercy to them. So Chisholm observed, "At this point everything looks fine. It appears that the Lord had responded to Jephthah's appeal for justice and was ready to vindicate his people's claim to the land. However, as in Gideon's case, empowerment by the Spirit does not automatically ensure faith or negate the human will. Jephthah was not completely confident of victory" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 350).

In hopes of ensuring victory over Israel's enemies, "Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, 'If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering'" (Judges 11:30-31). Although there are similarities

between Jephthah's need for assurance and the need earlier expressed by Gideon (cf. 6:36-40), there is also a chief difference. Gideon sought a sign whereas Jephthah made a vow. If painted in the very best possible light, the vow of Jephthah was reckless; if viewed in the most literal sense stated in the text, it was abominable. Did Jephthah actually expect to be met by one of the animals the law of Moses allowed to be sacrificed when he returned from battle? Was he mixing his religious beliefs with the practices of the Canaanites and indicating a willingness to offer a human sacrifice? Or did he not fully consider the implications of his promise? Whatever the case, his vow was completely unnecessary and rash.

Fighting with the strength of the Lord, "Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD delivered them into his hands" (Judges 11:32). Israel's victory was complete. In fact, the text described it as "a very great slaughter" (v. 33). Jephthah led Israel to victory. The Lord did what He promised. Would Jephthah?

Facing the Reality

(Judges 11:34-38)

The jubilation Jephthah felt from Israel's victory over Ammon was only temporary, for as he returned home, "there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter" (Judges 11:34). At that point, Jephthah realized his

great mistake. After tearing his clothes, he said to her, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it" (v. 35). Block noted the selfishness of Jephthah's response: "Even in his response to the appearance of his daughter he could not get beyond his own personal welfare. ... Far from displaying any hint of tenderness toward his daughter, the tone in his double barrel reaction is accusatory. ... The irony of the scene is patent. The man who had tried to manipulate Yahweh to guarantee his 'peace' ... is doomed by the one whose life he was willing to sacrifice for his own well-being" (*Judges, Ruth*, 373).

In a tone of resignation, Jephthah's daughter encouraged her father to do as he had promised to the Lord (Judges 11:36). She did, however, make a request of Jephthah: "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I" (v. 37). Those who argue Jephthah did not kill his daughter point to this request for support. James Burton Coffman, for example, wrote, "This cannot mean, 'Let me bewail my untimely death.' It was her dedication to the tabernacle as a life-long servant, during which she would not be permitted to marry. That is what she bewailed, not her death" (*Judges & Ruth*, 183). Regardless, Jephthah granted his daughter the two-month reprieve (v. 38).

Tragedy

(*Judges 11:39-40*)

When Jephthah's daughter returned, "he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man" (Judges 11:39). Herein lies the controversy surrounding Jephthah: Did he actually kill his daughter? Or did he offer her as a perpetual virgin to serve in the tabernacle? Arguments can be made for both suggestions. Block mentioned several facts deserving consideration: "Did he expect an animal or a person? Several considerations argue for the former. First, in the Old Testament the phrase 'to present as a whole burnt offering,' normally refers to a nonhuman sacrifice. Second, the Old Testament displays an intense abhorrence of human sacrifice. Accordingly, 'whatever comes out of the door[s] of my house' should be interpreted broadly to mean anything in Jephthah's possession that comes out to meet him. ... But this interpretation not only leaves unexplained Jephthah's extreme grief at being greeted by his daughter (v. 34) but also contradicts custom and, more seriously, overestimates the virtue of Jephthah" (*Judges, Ruth*, 367). Was Jephthah untainted by the pagan religions of the region? Was his character beyond dispute? His early associations and actions suggest otherwise (cf. v. 3).

After Jephthah fulfilled his vow (whether by sacrifice or through the dedication of his daughter), "the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite" (Judges 11:40). If Jephthah's daughter was living,

this certainly seems strange. Given the downward spiral of morality from the beginning of Judges till its ending, it is possible Jephthah did indeed kill his daughter. It is also possible he dedicated her to perpetual service to God. The account of Judges 11 in no way condones Jephthah's behavior; it merely reports what occurred. Once people reject God or allow His truths to be tainted, there is no end to the depths of sin.

Application

- If Jephthah's example teaches us nothing else, it teaches us to be careful about what we say. This is especially true when we make promises to God. How many times have we bargained with God in hopes of receiving a blessing? How many promises have been made with strong resolve only to be forgotten later? The psalmist wrote, "Make vows to the LORD your God, and pay them; let all who are around Him bring presents to Him who ought to be feared" (76:11). This does not mean what Jephthah did was right, for it was not. Jesus made it clear that our words matter. He stated, "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37).

Questions

1. Where was Jephthah from (Judges 11:1)?
2. Who was Israel's main enemy in this text (Judges 11:30)?
3. How do we know God was with Jephthah (Judges 11:29)?
4. What did Jephthah vow (Judges 11:30-31)?
5. Who first met Jephthah when he returned from battle (Judges 11:34)?
6. What did Jephthah's daughter ask her father to grant her (Judges 11:37)?

7. What did the daughters of Israel do each year (Judges 11:40)?

Discussion

1. How was Jephthah similar to Gideon? How were they different?
2. What can we learn from Jephthah's vow?
3. How do you think Jephthah fulfilled his vow?
4. What can we do to keep from repeating the mistakes of Jephthah?

Samson and the Philistines

Judges 15:1-20

- ¹ After a while, in the time of wheat harvest, it happened that Samson visited his wife with a young goat. And he said, "Let me go in to my wife, into her room." But her father would not permit him to go in.
- ² Her father said, "I really thought that you thoroughly hated her; therefore I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister better than she? Please, take her instead."
- ³ And Samson said to them, "This time I shall be blameless regarding the Philistines if I harm them!"
- ⁴ Then Samson went and caught three hundred foxes; and he took torches, turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails.
- ⁵ When he had set the torches on fire, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up both the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves.
- ⁶ Then the Philistines said, "Who has done this?" And they answered, "Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken his wife and given her to his companion." So the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire.
- ⁷ Samson said to them, "Since you would do a thing like this, I will surely take revenge on you, and after that I will cease."

⁸ So he attacked them hip and thigh with a great slaughter; then he went down and dwelt in the cleft of the rock of Etam.

⁹ Now the Philistines went up, encamped in Judah, and deployed themselves against Lehi.

¹⁰ And the men of Judah said, "Why have you come up against us?" So they answered, "We have come up to arrest Samson, to do to him as he has done to us."

¹¹ Then three thousand men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines rule over us? What is this you have done to us?" And he said to them, "As they did to me, so I have done to them."

¹² But they said to him, "We have come down to arrest you, that we may deliver you into the hand of the Philistines." Then Samson said to them, "Swear to me that you will not kill me yourselves."

¹³ So they spoke to him, saying, "No, but we will tie you securely and deliver you into their hand; but we will surely not kill you." And they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.

¹⁴ When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting against him. Then the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him; and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds broke loose from his hands.

¹⁵ He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached out his hand and took it, and killed a thousand men with it.

¹⁶ Then Samson said:

"With the jawbone of a donkey,

"Heaps upon heaps,

"With the jawbone of a donkey

"I have slain a thousand men!"

¹⁷ And so it was, when he had finished speaking, that he threw the jawbone from his hand, and called that place Ramath Lehi.

¹⁸ Then he became very thirsty; so he cried out to the Lord and said, "You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant; and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?"

¹⁹ So God split the hollow place that is in Lehi, and water came out, and he drank; and his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore he called its name En Hakkore, which is in Lehi to this day.

²⁰ And he judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines.

Introduction

Few characters in Scripture are known as well as Samson—the strong man of the Bible. Samson's notoriety, however, outpaces his morality. Rather than being godly and just, Samson was prideful, lustful, and vengeful. Nevertheless, God used him to "begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines" (Judges 13:5). Before Samson was born, the Angel of the Lord appeared to his mother and gave her instructions about the child she would bear. After she reported this to her husband, Manoah, he prayed, "O my Lord, please let the Man of God whom You sent come to us again and teach us what we shall do for the child who will be born" (v. 8). Unlike fearful Gideon (whose father worshipped Baal) or the outcast Jephthah (whose mother was a harlot), the deliverer God brought forth from the tribe of Dan did not arise from less than ideal circumstances. Samson's

conscientious parents are painted in a positive light (vv. 6-23), as is his birth and early development. Describing this, the text declares, “So the woman bore a son and called his name Samson; and the child grew, and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to move upon him” (vv. 24-25).

Although Samson’s behavior was often less than ideal, God used him to accomplish His will. For example, when Samson chose to take a wife from the Philistines, his parents objected and asked, “Is there no woman among the daughters of your brethren, or among all my people, that you must go and get a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?” (Judges 14:3). No doubt they understood Samson’s request violated God’s plan (cf. Deuteronomy 7:1-5). Regardless, Samson would not be denied. Instead, he demanded, “Get her for me, for she pleases me well” (Judges 14:3). According to Block, “Samson is insensitive and disrespectful toward his parents and their grief over the matter and totally calloused toward the theological implications of his demand, let alone the implications of his mission” (*Judges, Ruth*, 426). Interestingly, God was at work behind the scenes. Reporting this, Judges 14:4 reveals, “But his father and mother did not know that it was of the LORD—that He was seeking an occasion to move against the Philistines. For at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.”

The Lord’s plan came to fruition after Samson’s chosen wife was given to another man (Judges 14:20). Upon learning this truth, Samson openly declared,

“This time I shall be blameless regarding the Philistines if I harm them!” (15:3). Our lesson text goes on to recount his seemingly unbelievable actions done in retaliation against the Philistines. As we read them, we are mesmerized. Even so, we must remember his strength came from the Lord. Samson was truly powerful, but he was also deeply flawed.

His Wife Given to Another

(*Judges 15:1-8*)

After Samson identified the Philistine he wanted to marry, he hosted a feast (Judges 14:10-11). Thirty men of the Philistines attended, and Samson made a wager with them based on whether they could answer a riddle (vv. 12-14). When it became clear to the men they would lose the bet, they threatened Samson’s proposed wife and pressed her to tell the answer: “Entice your husband, that he may explain the riddle to us, or else we will burn you and your father’s house with fire” (v. 15). She did as instructed, and the men answered the riddle (v. 18). To pay off the wager, Samson “went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty of their men, took their apparel, and gave the changes of clothing to those who had explained the riddle” (v. 19). Rather than returning to his wife, Samson went in anger to his father’s house. While he was away, “Samson’s wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man” (v. 20). Younger explained, “Thus, while Samson is at home sulking, his wife is given to his companion who attended him

at his wedding (v. 20). In other words, his father-in-law sees an opportunity to marry his daughter to one of his own people. ... Such a move is stimulated by Samson's return to his father's house, which leads his father-in-law to assume that Samson is displeased with his daughter and has divorced her" (*The NIV Application Commentary: Judges/Ruth*, 305).

Unaware his wife was given to another man, Samson eventually "visited his wife with a young goat. And he said, 'Let me go in to my wife, into her room.' But her father would not permit him to go in" (Judges 15:1). Samson intended to consummate the marriage. Her father refused and explained, "I really thought that you thoroughly hated her; therefore I gave her to your companion" (v. 2). As Cundall noted, "There could, in any case, be no question of an annulment of the marriage that had subsequently been contracted" (*Judges and Ruth*, 162). Samson's proposed wife was the wife of another man. Consequently, his anger was hot. In his mind, vengeance against the Philistines was now warranted. So he said, "This time I shall be blameless regarding the Philistines if I harm them!" (v. 3).

What followed is one of the most unique—if not devious—forms of retaliation recorded in Scripture. According to Judges 15:4-5, "Samson went and caught three hundred foxes; and he took torches, turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails. When he had set the torches on fire, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up both the shocks and the standing grain, as

well as the vineyards and olive groves." As we have seen in our study of Judges, destroying the crops of one's enemy was a common tactic (cf. 6:3-6). What was not common, however, was Samson's method. Concerning this, Block observed, "How Samson accomplished this is a greater mystery. But it fits into the picture of a man who kills a lion singlehandedly, kills thirty Philistines, breaks brand new ropes that bind him, slays a thousand Philistines with a jawbone, and brings a house down over thousands of reveling Philistines. Samson's actions are all guerilla tactics. All his achievements are personal, and all are provoked by his own misbehavior" (*Judges, Ruth*, 441).

Obviously troubled by what occurred, the Philistines tried to appease Samson by burning his proposed wife and her father (Judges 15:6). Instead of easing the situation, Samson was infuriated. In response, "he attacked them hip and thigh with a great slaughter; then he went down and dwelt in the cleft of the rock of Etam" (v. 8).

The Philistines Seek Revenge

(*Judges 15:9-13*)

Rather than allowing the events to pass without response, the Philistines advanced against the Israelite city of Lehi (Judges 15:9). Located in Judah, the men of Lehi willingly placed themselves under Philistine rule. Therefore, when confronted by the large enemy force, they asked, "Why have you come up

against us?" (v. 10). The Philistines responded, "We have come up to arrest Samson, to do to him as he has done to us" (v. 10). Shockingly, the men of Israel actually helped their oppressors instead of offering resistance.

Upon finding Samson, the force of three thousand men said, "Do you not know that the Philistines rule over us? What is this you have done to us?" (Judges 15:11). They then added, "We have come down to arrest you, that we may deliver you into the hand of the Philistines" (v. 12). Stressing the resignation present in the men of Judah, Dale Ralph Davis wrote, "Sad, sad words. Here is a people who have acquiesced to bondage, who can no longer imagine anything beyond the status quo, who see deliverance as a threat to peace, who look upon Yahweh's enemies as their rightful lords. Israel is a people who can forsake Yahweh instantly but who would not think of being faithless to the Philistines!" (*Judges*, 179).

Samson did not fight with the men of Judah. He allowed himself to be captured with one stipulation: they had to promise not to kill him (Judges 15:12). They agreed to his terms and "bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock" (v. 13). Samson's own people then delivered him to the Philistines.

Samson's Great Slaughter

(*Judges 15:14-20*)

If the Philistines expected their new prisoner to be easy prey, they were greatly mistaken. When they advanced toward Samson, "the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him; and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds broke loose from his hands" (Judges 15:14). Freed from his bonds, Samson "found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached out his hand and took it, and killed a thousand men with it" (v. 15). He then surveyed the carnage and proclaimed, "With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey I have slain a thousand men!" (v. 16). Careful students will notice Samson did not initially stop to praise God for his deliverance. Instead, he bragged about his performance and the heaps of dead Philistines surrounding him.

Following the battle, Samson "became very thirsty; so he cried out to the LORD and said, 'You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant; and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?'" (Judges 15:18-19). Although this prayer can be seen as an acknowledgment of God's involvement in Samson's actions, it seems only Samson's need to quench his thirst prompted the prayer. Additionally, Kenneth C. Way notes, "The self-centered manner in which Samson speaks to God in this prayer (and also in 16:28) reveals much about his spiritual deficiencies. Yet

God still graciously works through him and grants his requests (15:19)” (*Judges and Ruth*, 132). How thankful we should be that God cares for us in spite of our shortcomings! Samson’s problem was solved when “God split the hollow place that is in Lehi, and water came out, and he drank; and his spirit returned, and he revived” (v. 19).

Applications

- Although Samson’s exploits are impressive, we must not forget God empowered him to act. With God’s power, Samson did unbelievable things. As we seek to do great things for God, let us not focus so much on our own ability or ingenuity that we fail to trust God to give the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6).
- Too often, our prayers are selfish like Samson’s (Judges 15:18). We turn to God when in need and hardly give Him the credit He deserves. Rather than acting selfishly, let us echo the words of Psalm 145:3: “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; and His greatness is unsearchable.”

Questions

1. Why did Samson leave angry from the feast of his marriage (Judges 14:19-20)?

2. Why was Samson’s promised wife given to another man (Judges 15:2)?
3. What unusual tactic did Samson use to destroy the crops of the Philistines (Judges 15:4-5)?
4. Who arrested Samson and brought him to the Philistines (Judges 15:11-12)?
5. What did Samson make his captors promise (Judges 15:12)?
6. What did Samson use to kill one thousand Philistines (Judges 15:15)?
7. What did God do for Samson at Lehi (Judges 15:19)?

Discussion

1. What does this passage teach us about God's providence?
2. What can Christians do to avoid becoming acclimated to our pagan culture?
3. What steps can we take to combat selfishness?
4. What can Christians learn from Samson's behavior in this text?

Samson and Delilah

Judges 16:1-20

¹ Now Samson went to Gaza and saw a harlot there, and went in to her.

² When the Gazites were told, "Samson has come here!" they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the gate of the city. They were quiet all night, saying, "In the morning, when it is daylight, we will kill him."

³ And Samson lay low till midnight; then he arose at midnight, took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two gateposts, pulled them up, bar and all, put them on his shoulders, and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.

⁴ Afterward it happened that he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.

⁵ And the lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, "Entice him, and find out where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to afflict him; and every one of us will give you eleven hundred pieces of silver."

⁶ So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me where your great strength lies, and with what you may be bound to afflict you."

⁷ And Samson said to her, "If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings, not yet dried, then I shall become weak, and be like any other man."

⁸ So the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh bowstrings, not yet dried, and she bound him with them.

⁹ Now men were lying in wait, staying with her in the room. And she said to him, "The Philistines are upon you,

Samson!” But he broke the bowstrings as a strand of yarn breaks when it touches fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.

¹⁰ Then Delilah said to Samson, “Look, you have mocked me and told me lies. Now, please tell me what you may be bound with.”

¹¹ So he said to her, “If they bind me securely with new ropes that have never been used, then I shall become weak, and be like any other man.”

¹² Therefore Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And men were lying in wait, staying in the room. But he broke them off his arms like a thread.

¹³ Delilah said to Samson, “Until now you have mocked me and told me lies. Tell me what you may be bound with.” And he said to her, “If you weave the seven locks of my head into the web of the loom”—

¹⁴ So she wove it tightly with the batten of the loom, and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he awoke from his sleep, and pulled out the batten and the web from the loom.

¹⁵ Then she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and have not told me where your great strength lies.”

¹⁶ And it came to pass, when she pestered him daily with her words and pressed him, so that his soul was vexed to death,

¹⁷ that he told her all his heart, and said to her, “No razor has ever come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother’s womb. If I am shaven, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man.”

¹⁸ When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called for the lords of the Philistines, saying, “Come up once more, for he has told me all his heart.” So the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hand.

¹⁹ Then she lulled him to sleep on her knees, and called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him.

²⁰ And she said, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” So he awoke from his sleep, and said, “I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!” But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him.

Introduction

If one were to make a list of famous Bible couples, Samson and Delilah would probably be on it. Interestingly, their relationship, which is only briefly described in Scripture, is neither romantic nor exemplary. It is best remembered for Delilah’s greed-induced attempt to discover the source of Samson’s strength, and it ends with Samson, freshly shorn and weakened, being taken captive by the Philistines.

The account of Samson and Delilah depicts some of the worst qualities found in individuals: lust, greed, selfishness, and pride. Nothing in the passage hints that the couple was married. To Samson, Delilah was seemingly just another conquest. To Delilah, Samson was a means to financial gain. Samson is described in the text as an individual driven by his desires rather than his wits; Delilah is depicted as coldly resourceful, if not cunning. Motivated by her desire for the Philistines’ silver (cf. Judges 16:5),

Delilah was willing to repeatedly turn Samson over to his enemies in hopes of securing a reward. When Samson was not immediately forthcoming about the source of his strength, Delilah feigned disappointment and used her charms to become all the more persuasive. Her selfishness is undeniably clear in her final rebuke of Samson: "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and have not told me where your great strength lies" (v. 15).

Samson was as prideful as Delilah was selfish. Surely he recognized Delilah was attempting to deliver him to the Philistines, yet he eventually revealed the actual source of his strength. If he thought his strength had no end, he was mistaken. Tragically, Samson, who judged God's people for twenty years (cf. Judges 15:20), was taken captive. When treacherous Delilah "lulled him to sleep on her knees, and called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head" (16:19), his strength departed. Samson was unable to resist his captors because "he did not know that the LORD had departed from him" (v. 20). Daniel I. Block summarized Samson's problem and wrote, "Even as Delilah's efforts as an agent of the Philistines to destroy Samson intensify, he does not grasp the significance of what is transpiring around him. Infatuated with her and his own extraordinary talents, he is blinded to the reality she represents. In this man we witness a classic example of 'all brawn and no brain'" (*Judges, Ruth*, 452). Sin truly took Samson farther than he

wanted to go, kept him longer than he wanted to stay, and cost him more than he wanted to pay.

Find Out Where His Strength Lies

(*Judges 16:1-5*)

Samson's lustful behavior is on display as Judges 16 begins. Following his slaughter of the Philistines at Lehi, he "went to Gaza and saw a harlot there, and went in to her" (v. 1). To understand the thrust of this statement, we must understand Gaza was located in the heart of Philistia. In fact, it was, according to Cundall, "the southernmost of the five principle [*sic*] Philistine cities" (*Judges and Ruth*, 167). Traveling to Gaza would have required Samson to travel the length of the Philistine territory. As Younger noted, "This speaks to intent. This is not a slip-up, a case of falling into sin. This is a deliberate rebellious act on Samson's part" (*The NIV Application Commentary: Judges/Ruth*, 314). His lustful passions, which initially entangled him with the Philistines, were still at work.

Not surprisingly, the people of Gaza learned about Samson's presence in their city. In response, "they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the gate of the city. They were quiet all night, saying, 'In the morning, when it is daylight, we will kill him'" (Judges 16:2). Regardless of whether they believed their plan would actually work, it did not. Somehow, Samson was alerted to the ambush. Rather than waiting till morning, "he arose at midnight, took hold of

the doors of the gate of the city and the two gateposts, pulled them up, bar and all, put them on his shoulders, and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron" (v. 3). Samson not only rendered their trap useless but also made it so that no one could be easily trapped in Gaza (a great irony since Samson would eventually be brought to Gaza as a prisoner). That he carried the doors of the city almost forty miles away fits with his previous exploits. That the city to which Samson carried the doors was part of Judah's territory is also significant. Regarding the doors of Gaza and their placement, Webb wrote, "They are a war trophy, the proof of a victory. They announce that Samson has opened a new round of conflict with the Philistines, and say to the people of Hebron, the leading city of Judah, that this time there will be no craven capitulation; no binding of Samson to hand him over. ... The people of Hebron stare at him across the valley with a mixture of awe and dread. There will never be peace with the Philistines while this man lives" (*The Book of Judges*, 395).

Samson's appetite for female companionship was not quenched by his time with the harlot in Gaza. In fact, the text reports "that he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah" (Judges 16:4). Nothing is said about Delilah's feelings for Samson. What is revealed, however, is the Philistines' attempt to use Delilah's relationship to Samson to learn his weakness. According to verse 5, "The lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, 'Entice him, and find out where his great strength

lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to afflict him; and every one of us will give you eleven hundred pieces of silver.'" Delilah's subsequent actions show her love for money was much greater than whatever feelings she had for Samson.

Delilah's Attempts

(*Judges 16:6-17*)

Delilah did not hide what she was attempting to do. Instead, she openly asked Samson, "Please tell me where your great strength lies, and with what you may be bound to afflict you" (Judges 16:6). In response, Samson lied and said, "If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings, not yet dried, then I shall become weak, and be like any other man" (v. 7). Unaware of Samson's deception, the Philistines supplied Delilah with the bowstrings, and "she bound him with them" (v. 8). Unfortunately, the text leaves numerous questions unanswered. For example, how was Delilah able to bind Samson without his resistance? Did she do so after he was asleep? Did she drug him? And if so, why didn't the Philistines kill him at that point? We are left to speculate. What is clear is Samson's ability to break the bonds placed on him. When warned by Delilah of the Philistines' presence, Samson "broke the bowstrings as a strand of yarn breaks when it touches fire. So the secret of his strength was not known" (v. 9). Interestingly, the text says nothing about Samson's response to his

would-be captors. Perhaps they remained hidden, watching to see if his bonds would hold.

Rather than giving up, Delilah confronted Samson a second time about the source of his strength, and Samson told another lie. He said, "If they bind me securely with new ropes that have never been used, then I shall become weak, and be like any other man" (Judges 16:11). Delilah did as Samson suggested, but when she alerted him to the presence of the Philistines, "he broke them off his arms like a thread" (v. 12). Amazingly, this same process happened a third time as well. Delilah asked Samson to reveal the source of his strength; Samson lied; Delilah followed Samson's instructions; and before he could be captured, Samson easily freed himself from his bonds (vv. 13-14). We are left to wonder whether Samson was extremely gullible, arrogant, or more. Did he view Delilah's actions as playful? Or did he really believe himself invincible?

Whatever the case, Delilah's persistence paid off—both literally and figuratively (Judges 16:16-17). Samson eventually "told her all his heart, and said to her, 'No razor has ever come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaven, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man'" (v. 17). Regarding Samson's behavior, Chisholm observed, "He was probably both naïve and arrogant, but there is a more basic, elemental explanation for Samson's apparent stupidity. His sexual addiction blinded him to reality, causing him to overlook the

obvious as he insanely pursued sexual gratification. He told Delilah the secret of his strength, as if to say, 'Your happiness and my sexual satisfaction are more important than my divine calling.' To keep Delilah he was willing to become as weak as all other men" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 425).

Samson Captured

(Judges 16:18-20)

Delilah could tell Samson's last answer was different from the others. Conveying this to the Philistines, she instructed them, "Come up once more, for he has told me all his heart." They did as she instructed and "brought the money in their hand" (Judges 16:18). Perhaps revealing how she had subdued Samson on the previous occasions, "she lulled him to sleep on her knees" (v. 19). But unlike the other attempts to weaken Samson, someone other than Delilah did as Samson suggested. Reporting this, Judges 16:19 reveals that Delilah "called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him."

As had been the case previously, Delilah awoke Samson with the startling "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" (Judges 16:20). But on this occasion, things were different. Samson believed he would respond as before, but he could not. His strength was gone. He could not resist the Philistines. Dale Ralph Davis pointedly wrote, "Samson is a paradigm of Israel: one raised up out of nothing, richly gifted,

who panders around with other loves and yet, apparently, always expects to 'have' Yahweh. So Israel has received grace on top of grace yet persistently carries on her affairs with Baal (see 2:11ff.), utterly ignorant of her true condition (cf. Hosea 7:9), blithely assuming that all is well (Jeremiah 2:34b-35a) and that Yahweh is always at her disposal (v. 27b). ... How tragic when God's professing people cannot see that they are 'wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked' (Revelation 3:17)" (*Judges*, 186-7).

Application

- Despite Samson's obvious gifts, he was plagued by personal weakness. In his case, lust and arrogance blinded him to the possibility that his strength could be taken away in a moment. Christians must be careful to avoid this same ending. Paul's admonition to the Corinthians should be remembered: "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Corinthians 6:12).

Questions

1. In what Philistine city did Samson find a harlot (Judges 16:1)?

2. What did Samson do to that city (Judges 16:3)?

3. Why did Samson go near Hebron (Judges 16:3)?

4. What did the Philistines offer Delilah for her help (Judges 16:5)?

5. What three things did Samson initially say would make him weak (Judges 16:7, 11, 13)?

6. What ultimately caused Samson to lose his strength (Judges 16:17)?

7. What did Samson not realize until it was too late (Judges 16:20)?

Discussion

1. Why do you think Samson continued to answer Delilah's attempts to discover his weakness?
2. What can the church do to help individuals recover from addictions?
3. What was Samson's greatest mistake in this account?
4. What lessons can we learn from this text?

The Death of Samson

Judges 16:21-31

²¹ Then the Philistines took him and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza. They bound him with bronze fetters, and he became a grinder in the prison.

²² However, the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaven.

²³ Now the lords of the Philistines gathered together to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, and to rejoice. And they said:

"Our god has delivered into our hands

"Samson our enemy!"

²⁴ When the people saw him, they praised their god; for they said:

"Our god has delivered into our hands our enemy,

"The destroyer of our land,

"And the one who multiplied our dead."

²⁵ So it happened, when their hearts were merry, that they said, "Call for Samson, that he may perform for us." So they called for Samson from the prison, and he performed for them. And they stationed him between the pillars.

²⁶ Then Samson said to the lad who held him by the hand, "Let me feel the pillars which support the temple, so that I can lean on them."

²⁷ Now the temple was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there—about three thousand men and women on the roof watching while Samson performed.

²⁸ Then Samson called to the LORD, saying, "O Lord God, remember me, I pray! Strengthen me, I pray, just this once,

O God, that I may with one blow take vengeance on the Philistines for my two eyes!"

²⁹ And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars which supported the temple, and he braced himself against them, one on his right and the other on his left.

³⁰ Then Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" And he pushed with all his might, and the temple fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead that he killed at his death were more than he had killed in his life.

³¹ And his brothers and all his father's household came down and took him, and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. He had judged Israel twenty years.

Introduction

The author of Hebrews stressed the ubiquity of death when he observed, "It is appointed for men to die once" (9:27). Making a similar point, Solomon wrote, "One event happens to the righteous and the wicked; to the good, the clean, and the unclean; to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner; he who takes an oath as he who fears an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead" (Ecclesiastes 9:2-3). Strength and health are desirable, but they are temporary treasures. Even "the strong men bow down" eventually (12:3). Regardless of whether we think about death or prepare for it, we cannot escape it. Life is truly

like "a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away" (James 4:14).

Whether Samson seriously considered his own mortality after he slaughtered the Philistines is questionable (cf. Judges 15:18). Regardless, he was certainly aware of such before he destroyed the Philistine temple. On that occasion, he declared, "Let me die with the Philistines!" (16:30). He then "pushed with all his might, and the temple fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead that he killed at his death were more than he had killed in his life" (v. 30). Up to that point, there was no enemy too powerful or obstacle too large for Samson to overcome. Death, however, was a different matter.

That Samson considered himself superior to other men is clearly seen in his own words. When pressed by Delilah for the source of his strength, Samson initially answered falsely. After his first two responses, he added, "Then I shall become weak, and be like any other man" (Judges 16:7, 11). Interestingly, he said the same thing after he revealed the true secret to his strength (v. 17). Perhaps Samson's recklessness was due to his own self-image. He did not need an army like other men; he was an army of one. He was strong, not weak. What he did not realize was even the strongest man cannot escape death forever.

Samson's story, if not the most gruesome in Judges, is arguably the most tragic. His exploits were legendary, and his fame grew to heights unmatched by others. Even so, his fall was great. No doubt the Spirit of the Lord worked mightily through Samson

(cf. Judges 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14), but when the Lord departed from him (16:20), the result was truly pitiable. Blinded and weakened, Samson became a common slave (v. 21) and laughingstock (v. 25). His life began with great potential and ended leaving much to be desired.

Bound in Gaza

(Judges 16:21-22)

When the Lord departed from Samson, his superhuman strength left as well. The one who had formerly killed his enemies at will was now at their mercy. After capturing Samson, “the Philistines took him and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza. They bound him with bronze fetters, and he became a grinder in the prison” (Judges 16:21). All seemed lost. Nevertheless, even in that dark moment, a strand of hope emerged, for “the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaven” (v. 22). Commenting on this, Chisholm wrote, “One might assume Samson’s loss of strength meant that God had abandoned him for good, but the narrator hints this may not be the case when he observes that Samson’s hair began to grow again (v. 22). If God were through with Samson, why would the narrator tell us this? Perhaps we (and the Philistines!) have jumped to conclusions and Samson still has a future. After all, without his eyesight, Samson’s Achilles heel—an eye for women (see 14:1; 16:1)—had been eliminated. Furthermore, the location of Samson’s

prison—Gaza—reminds us of the time when he uprooted and carted off Gaza’s gate, suggesting that this city was not secure as long as he was around” (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 427–8).

Even with that small comfort reported, the scene was still bleak. Samson was in the hands of Israel’s enemy. Those who had previously failed to capture him did even more. Having blinded him, they assumed they had no reason to fear. By making him grind at the mill, they furthered his humiliation. According to Younger, such “was considered a slave or female occupation (cf. Exodus 11:5; Judges 9:53)” (*The NIV Application Commentary: Judges/Ruth*, 321). Israel’s champion was now the Philistine’s trophy. Those who wanted to come to Gaza and gawk were welcome.

The Philistines Rejoice

(Judges 16:23-27)

With Samson in custody, “the lords of the Philistines gathered together to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, and to rejoice. And they said: ‘Our god has delivered into our hands Samson our enemy!’” (Judges 16:23). Regarding the Philistine god, Kenneth C. Way wrote, “The grain deity Dagon, also spelled Dagan, had numerous temples in Philistine cities like Gaza, Ashdod, and possibly Beth Shan (cf. 1 Samuel 5:1-2; 31:10; 1 Chronicles 10:10). ... In this context it is appropriate to focus on Dagon because Samson specifically has burned the

grain fields (15:4-5) and thereby 'laid waste' Dagon's domain (16:24)" (*Judges and Ruth*, 139).

Evidently, Samson was put on display so that those who passed by could look at him and mock. His capture was the top news story of the day. The Philistines could think of no other explanation but that this was the work of their god. Thus, they said, "Our god has delivered into our hands our enemy, the destroyer of our land, and the one who multiplied our dead" (Judges 16:24). It was a sight to behold! As they celebrated and likely became drunk, they called for Samson to be brought before them to "perform" (v. 25 NKJV), "entertain" (ESV), or "amuse" (NASB). Webb explained, "He was called from the prison where he was shackled (v. 21), which was presumably close by, and entertained them as they had demanded he should. The text is mercifully reticent about the details, but the biting sarcasm of the single word, entertained ... says it all. What did he do? And under what cruel goadings? ... Samson 'entertains' his audience (whom he cannot see) by appearing before them as a pathetic, laughable, caricature of his former self. The Philistines' desire to 'bind' Samson had always been so that they could 'torment' him (16:5, 6, 19), and now that desire is given full reign" (*The Book of Judges*, 411).

Ironically, a single lad brought the fierce warrior of Israel, who once had terrified the entire Philistine army, before the crowd (Judges 16:26). An armed guard was no longer necessary. Samson was broken. At this point in the story, Samson, who had not

spoken since he divulged the secret of his strength to Delilah, made a request of the lad: "Let me feel the pillars which support the temple, so that I can lean on them" (v. 26). The request, which seemed innocent on its face, was granted. But Samson's plan was far from benign. He did not ask merely to touch a pillar; he asked to "feel the pillars which support the temple" (v. 26). No doubt he was aware of the structure of the temple, even if he could not see. He also knew by the roar of the crowd that a very large group had gathered on that occasion. As it turned out, he was correct. Reporting this, Judges 16:27 states, "Now the temple was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there—about three thousand men and women on the roof watching while Samson performed."

Samson's Prayer and Death

(*Judges 16:28-31*)

For the second time in the biblical record, Samson prayed to God (cf. Judges 15:18). With his hands placed firmly on the pillars supporting the pagan temple, he pleaded, "O Lord God, remember me, I pray! Strengthen me, I pray, just this once, O God, that I may with one blow take vengeance on the Philistines for my two eyes!" (16:28). This time, his prayer did not contain sarcasm. He was completely dependent upon God. Unless God empowered Samson, he could do nothing.

What happened next reveals God did indeed hear and answer Samson's prayer. Having placed his hands on the middle pillars in the pagan temple, Samson "braced himself against them, one on his right and the other on his left. Then Samson said, 'Let me die with the Philistines!' And he pushed with all his might, and the temple fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead that he killed at his death were more than he had killed in his life" (Judges 16:29-30). To win his greatest victory, Samson sacrificed his own life. Although this might seem noble, we should not be quick to exonerate Samson. Explaining, Chisholm observed, "Despite this great victory, the story is clouded by a tragic element. Even at the end of his life, Samson still did not understand his role as Israel's deliverer. His concern was merely personal vengeance, which motivated him so strongly that he was willing to surrender his own life to achieve it" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 432). Regardless, we cannot discount the hand of God at work. God used Samson as His instrument to punish the Philistines.

Samson's story closes in a similar fashion to how it began—with his family in the spotlight (cf. Judges 13). On this occasion, they came to Gaza to retrieve his body and give him a proper burial (16:31). This mission would have been dangerous, yet Samson's family did not hesitate to care for their own. Samson was clearly flawed, but he was also loved.

Applications

- Although all hope seemed lost when Samson was in the hands of the Philistines, God was not done with him. The text provides a glimmer of hope when it mentions the regrowth of Samson's hair (Judges 16:22). Something that could be dismissed as insignificant actually pointed to the mighty hand of God at work. Let us never overlook the "small" reminders of God's concern and love for us. He continues to care for His children, even when things seem as if they are at their worst.

- Samson's fall reminds us of the truth of 1 Corinthians 10:12. In that passage, the apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." We must not allow pride and arrogance to convince us to trust in our own abilities more than we trust in God's care. Perhaps the writer of Proverbs put it best: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (16:18).

Questions

1. What did the Philistines do to Samson when they captured him (Judges 16:21)?
2. Where did they take Samson (Judges 16:21)?

3. What did the author tell us about Samson that gives us some hope (Judges 16:22)?
4. Whom did the Philistines credit for Samson's capture (Judges 16:23)?
5. What did the people want Samson to do for them (Judges 16:25)?
6. What did Samson ask his guide to allow him to do (Judges 16:26)?
7. How many individuals were present in the Philistine temple (Judges 16:27)?
8. For what did Samson pray (Judges 16:28)?

9. Who came and retrieved Samson's body (Judges 16:31)?

Discussion

1. What can Christians do to avoid falling victim to the temptations of pride and arrogance?
2. What does God's continued use of Samson teach us about His sovereignty?
3. What can we learn from Samson's family?

Micah Mirrors All Israel

Judges 17:1-13

¹ Now there was a man from the mountains of Ephraim, whose name was Micah.

² And he said to his mother, "The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you, and on which you put a curse, even saying it in my ears—here is the silver with me; I took it." And his mother said, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my son!"

³ So when he had returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, his mother said, "I had wholly dedicated the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son, to make a carved image and a molded image; now therefore, I will return it to you."

⁴ Thus he returned the silver to his mother. Then his mother took two hundred shekels of silver and gave them to the silversmith, and he made it into a carved image and a molded image; and they were in the house of Micah.

⁵ The man Micah had a shrine, and made an ephod and household idols; and he consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest.

⁶ In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

⁷ Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah; he was a Levite, and was staying there.

⁸ The man departed from the city of Bethlehem in Judah to stay wherever he could find a place. Then he came to

the mountains of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, as he journeyed.

⁹ And Micah said to him, "Where do you come from?" So he said to him, "I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am on my way to find a place to stay."

¹⁰ Micah said to him, "Dwell with me, and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten shekels of silver per year, a suit of clothes, and your sustenance." So the Levite went in.

¹¹ Then the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man became like one of his sons to him.

¹² So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and lived in the house of Micah.

¹³ Then Micah said, "Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest!"

Introduction

The moral decline of Israel is on display in Judges 17–21. Prior to chapter 17, the narrative focuses on God's use of various individuals to deliver His people from their enemies. Afterward, the scene shifts to Israel's internal struggles. Although the physical protection given to the children of Israel should have caused them to grow more faithful to God, it did not. Instead, the Israelites pushed God from their minds—a fact reported in both Judges 17:6 and 21:25. Those verses powerfully summarize Israel's behavior by stating, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

Israel's lack of a king is mentioned not only in the two passages cited above (i.e., Judges 17:6; 21:25) but

also in others (cf. 18:1; 19:1). The implication seems to be that Israel needed, but did not have, a strong leader to hold them accountable to God. Men like Jephthah and Samson may have been deliverers, but they were hardly spiritual leaders and role models. In reality, Israel needed both. Anticipating such an individual, Moses wrote, “Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes” (Deuteronomy 17:18-19).

The event recorded in Judges 17 provides a glimpse of how the Israelites had pushed God from their minds. Micah, who is described as “a man from the mountains of Ephraim” (v. 1), is introduced as a thief whose conscience eventually got the best of him (v. 2). Nevertheless, his story is not about repentance; it is about religious depravity, for Micah did not seek God’s favor or forgiveness. Instead, he established his own shrine (v. 5), appointed his son as priest (v. 5), and hired a Levite to officiate in his homemade temple (vv. 11-12).

Micah’s plunge into paganism mirrored the behavior of all Israel. Rather than heeding the admonition of Joshua to avoid mentioning foreign gods or bowing to them (cf. Joshua 23:6-8), the Israelites accepted and promoted idolatry. The final section of Judges (chaps. 17–21) depicts this wicked behavior in

a manner designed to shock its readers. Concerning this section, Davis wrote, “Here is Israel wallowing in her own religious and moral mess. Here the problem is not the enemy without but the cancer within. Here, so the writer says, Israel has hit bottom. Hard. Yet not without hope” (*Judges*, 195).

Micah and His Mother

(*Judges* 17:1-3)

Our lesson text begins by introducing Micah, whose name means “Who is like Yahweh?” (*Judges* 17:1). Very quickly, however, we learn Micah had not lived up to his name, for he had stolen a large sum of silver from his mother and was returning it to her. This change of heart evidently did not come because of religious conviction. Instead, he was seemingly afraid of the curse she placed upon it. Revealing this, verse 2 states, “And he said to his mother, ‘The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you, and on which you put a curse, even saying it in my ears—here is the silver with me; I took it.’ And his mother said, ‘May you be blessed by the LORD, my son!’” Explaining the curse and subsequent blessing, Cundall observed, “The power of a curse was considered to be very real in the ancient world. . . . The curse could, however, be countermanded by the blessings of the one who had pronounced it and this is the purpose of the blessing uttered by Micah’s mother; the restoration of the money led to the revoking of the malediction” (*Judges and Ruth*, 177).

After Micah returned the stolen silver, his mother revealed her plans for it. She declared, “I had wholly dedicated the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son, to make a carved image and a molded image; now therefore, I will return it to you” (Judges 17:3). Whether or not she thought her stated intention to dedicate the silver to God demonstrated her faithfulness, her willingness to use some of the silver to construct an idol proved otherwise. She hardly seemed bothered by the law of Moses’ ban on carved or molded idols (cf. Deuteronomy 27:15).

Micah and His Shrine

(Judges 17:4-6)

Micah’s mother then “took two hundred shekels of silver and gave them to the silversmith, and he made it into a carved image and a molded image; and they were in the house of Micah” (Judges 17:4). The two hundred shekels of silver used were much less than what was originally promised (v. 3), but this is just one of the puzzling things about her actions. Pondering this text, Webb asked, “Why would Micah’s mother consecrate silver to Yahweh, to be made into an idol? And having consecrated all eleven hundred pieces of silver for this purpose, why did she give only two hundred of them to the silversmith? What happened to the other nine hundred? This strange conjunction of devotion to Yahweh and idolatry, and a disconnection between word and act, gives the episode a satirical quality” (*The Book of Judges*, 424).

Importantly, the text does not focus on why Micah’s mother acted as she did. Instead, it turns its attention to what Micah did with the idol he received. Reporting this, Judges 17:5 declares, “The man Micah had a shrine, and made an ephod and household idols; and he consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest.” Micah’s actions were an affront to the one true God because the Israelites were supposed to worship only in the place identified by God. Moses made this point specifically in Deuteronomy 12:5-6 when he commanded, “But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go. There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.”

Instead of worshipping in the place prescribed by God, Micah created his own place of worship and filled it with items of his own making—“an ephod and household idols” (Judges 17:5). According to Block, “The items crafted by Micah represent a direct challenge to the ephod of Israel’s officially authorized priests (cf. Exodus 28) and the Urim and Thummim which Yahweh had sanctioned for oracular purposes (v. 30)” (*Judges, Ruth*, 482). His installation of his son as a priest also violated God’s plan, for Micah was not from the tribe of Levi (cf. Judges 17:1). In all of these things, Micah rejected God’s authority in favor of his own. In other words, he “did what was right in his own eyes” (v. 6; cf. Deuteronomy 12:8).

Kenneth C. Way summarized the report: “Israel was instructed to destroy the Canaanite worship places, to seek out the one place that Yahweh chooses, and to refrain from employing renegade shrines to Yahweh (like the one created by Micah!). What is depicted in the present story is Micah, his mother, and the Levite all doing what seems ‘right in their own eyes’ instead of seeking out what is ‘right in the eyes of the Lord’” (*Judges and Ruth*, 147).

Micah and His Levite

(*Judges 17:7-13*)

At this juncture, the narrative introduces a new character: “Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah; he was a Levite, and was staying there” (*Judges 17:7*). Two things about this man should immediately raise suspicion. First, the text mentions his youth. It is possible he had not yet reached the prescribed age for priests to serve (cf. *Numbers 4:30; 8:24*). Second, it mentions his home as Bethlehem of Judah, a place not traditionally associated with the Levites. Regardless, having left Bethlehem, this man was looking “to stay wherever he could find a place” (*Judges 17:8*). In other words, he was not part of a larger Levite community. This is also problematic (cf. *Deuteronomy 18:6-8*). Chisholm stressed this point: “According to Deuteronomy, a Levite was allowed to move from anywhere in Israel to the cult site chosen by the Lord and to serve there with other Levites. But

the Levite in *Judges 17* was wandering with no clear goal in mind, apparently hoping he could find some place to make a living. He took a job at a shrine, but not with the Levitical community at the central cult site in Shiloh (see *Judges 18:31*). He became a rogue priest engaging in heterodox Yahwism at a private shrine” (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 454). When he encountered Micah and his homemade shrine, the Levite found an opportunity for both lodging and work.

Although Micah had already traveled down the road of apostasy, this Levite appeared more than ready to join him in his journey. For his part, Micah was quick to offer the Levite a job as his personal priest (*Judges 17:10*), and “the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man became like one of his sons to him” (v. 11). As he had formerly done to his own son (see v. 5), “Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and lived in the house of Micah” (v. 12). As far as Micah was concerned, having a Levite to officiate at his household shrine provided legitimacy (v. 13); as far as God was concerned, it was an abomination. As Younger noted, “The perversion of idolatry leads to all manner of sexual and social perversion; nothing is left unscathed. Perversion of the relationship with God represented by idolatry leaves no other relationship whole either, whether between individuals, groups of individuals, races, or nations. Because humans are unwilling to acknowledge God as God, that same God then allows his creatures to reap the

results of their idolatrous actions” (*The NIV Application Commentary: Judges/Ruth*, 335).

Applications

- Micah’s actions reveal what takes place when individuals dismiss the principle of authority. If there is no objective basis for action, anything goes. Under such conditions, individuals will do whatever they like. Micah perverted God’s plan for worship under the law of Moses; those who change the worship prescribed in the New Testament to better suit their tastes are hardly different.

- Whether or not we have a problem bowing down to graven or molded images, the problem of idolatry remains. Individuals continue to place things before God in their lives, such as wealth, popularity, pleasure, or athletic achievement. This is both self-destructive and wrong. John’s admonition remains relevant: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen” (1 John 5:21).

Questions

1. What had Micah taken from his mother (Judges 17:2)?

2. What did Micah’s mother do after he confessed his crime (Judges 17:2)?

3. What did Micah’s mother promise to create for him (Judges 17:3)?

4. What did Micah have in his house (Judges 17:5)?

5. What did the Israelites use as the basis for their behavior (Judges 17:6)?

6. What two individuals did Micah consecrate to serve as priests (Judges 17:5, 12)?

7. What did Micah wrongly assume after he secured the Levite (Judges 17:13)?

Discussion

1. Why did the Israelites turn their backs on God's plan?
2. In what way(s) did Micah's actions mirror all of Israel?
3. What steps can the church take to avoid apostasy?
4. What idols do we struggle with today? How can we combat these struggles?

A Levite and His Concubine

Judges 19:1-21

¹ And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite staying in the remote mountains of Ephraim. He took for himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.

² But his concubine played the harlot against him, and went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there four whole months.

³ Then her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back, having his servant and a couple of donkeys with him. So she brought him into her father's house; and when the father of the young woman saw him, he was glad to meet him.

⁴ Now his father-in-law, the young woman's father, detained him; and he stayed with him three days. So they ate and drank and lodged there.

⁵ Then it came to pass on the fourth day that they arose early in the morning, and he stood to depart; but the young woman's father said to his son-in-law, "Refresh your heart with a morsel of bread, and afterward go your way."

⁶ So they sat down, and the two of them ate and drank together. Then the young woman's father said to the man, "Please be content to stay all night, and let your heart be merry."

⁷ And when the man stood to depart, his father-in-law urged him; so he lodged there again.

⁸ Then he arose early in the morning on the fifth day to depart, but the young woman's father said, "Please refresh your heart." So they delayed until afternoon; and both of them ate.

⁹ And when the man stood to depart—he and his concubine and his servant—his father-in-law, the young woman's father, said to him, "Look, the day is now drawing toward evening; please spend the night. See, the day is coming to an end; lodge here, that your heart may be merry. Tomorrow go your way early, so that you may get home."

¹⁰ However, the man was not willing to spend that night; so he rose and departed, and came opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). With him were the two saddled donkeys; his concubine was also with him.

¹¹ They were near Jebus, and the day was far spent; and the servant said to his master, "Come, please, and let us turn aside into this city of the Jebusites and lodge in it."

¹² But his master said to him, "We will not turn aside here into a city of foreigners, who are not of the children of Israel; we will go on to Gibeah."

¹³ So he said to his servant, "Come, let us draw near to one of these places, and spend the night in Gibeah or in Ramah."

¹⁴ And they passed by and went their way; and the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin.

¹⁵ They turned aside there to go in to lodge in Gibeah. And when he went in, he sat down in the open square of the city, for no one would take them into his house to spend the night.

¹⁶ Just then an old man came in from his work in the field at evening, who also was from the mountains of Ephraim;

he was staying in Gibeah, whereas the men of the place were Benjamites.

¹⁷ And when he raised his eyes, he saw the traveler in the open square of the city; and the old man said, "Where are you going, and where do you come from?"

¹⁸ So he said to him, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah toward the remote mountains of Ephraim; I am from there. I went to Bethlehem in Judah; now I am going to the house of the LORD. But there is no one who will take me into his house,

¹⁹ "although we have both straw and fodder for our donkeys, and bread and wine for myself, for your female servant, and for the young man who is with your servant; there is no lack of anything."

²⁰ And the old man said, "Peace be with you! However, let all your needs be my responsibility; only do not spend the night in the open square."

²¹ So he brought him into his house, and gave fodder to the donkeys. And they washed their feet, and ate and drank.

Introduction

How far had the people of Israel gone from God? One needs only to read the entirety of Judges 19 to find out. The chapter begins with a Levite pursuing his departed concubine and ends with her rape, death, and dismemberment. Sadly, such did not occur at the hands of pagans but rather God's own people. Without an authoritative figure to hold the Israelites accountable, chaos reigned. The behavior depicted in Judges 19:22-30 calls to mind the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Genesis 19). But in this case, angels offered no protection. Unthinkable sin

was committed in the midst of the Promised Land. The children of Israel were not innocent.

Our lesson text focuses on an unnamed Levite's attempt to locate and reclaim his departed concubine. If we read only Judges 19:1-21, we are left with the impression he was upright. Such, however, was far from the case. In fact, Kenneth C. Way believed "this nameless Levite may be the most despicable individual of the entire book, even more so than the opportunistic Jonathan from chapters 17-18! This Levite is apparently a man of status with multiple wives, a servant, and a number of [donkeys]. But he is also callously self-absorbed and is involved in raping, murdering, and dismembering his reclaimed concubine (19:25-29; 20:4-5)" (*Judges and Ruth*, 160).

This text serves to remind us what happens when man, with no regard for God, chooses his own path. Actions previously associated with only pagans are ascribed to Israelites (cf. Judges 5:30; 19:25; 20:4-5). It is little wonder the prophet Hosea, years afterward, referred to this event as the beginning of Israel's moral decline. He wrote, "O Israel, you have sinned from the days of Gibeah; there they stood. The battle in Gibeah against the children of iniquity did not overtake them" (10:9; cf. 9:9). Rather than removing the pagans from the land, the Israelites embraced both the pagans and their morality. God did not rescue them from the consequences of their actions. He allowed them to reap what they had sown.

A Faithless Concubine

(Judges 19:1-3)

The account begins by introducing us to a Levite "staying in the remote mountains of Ephraim." This man "took for himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah" (Judges 19:1). Nothing is said regarding why he lived in this region. We do, however, learn "his concubine played the harlot against him, and went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there four whole months" (v. 2). Interestingly, there is debate about the concubine's offense. The English Standard Version declares she was "unfaithful to him" (v. 2). Cundall also noted, "The reason for her return given in many ancient versions, 'because she was angry with him' (followed by the RSV), is more plausible than that supplied in the AV and the RV that she played the harlot against him. The penalty against the adulteress was death (Leviticus 20:10), but a heated argument would allow the Levite to seek a reconciliation when the passions of temper had subsided" (*Judges and Ruth*, 186).

Whatever the case, the Levite "arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back" (Judges 19:3). He did not wish to be separated from his concubine any longer than the four months that had already passed. At this point, we are led to believe the story will have a happy ending. The Levite made a considerable effort to reconnect with his concubine; the concubine readily welcomed him and "brought him into her father's house." Even the

father of the concubine “was glad to meet him” (v. 3). Concerning this, Block observed, “In the account of the encounter with his father-in-law and the reconciliation, every one of the characters is painted in a positive light. Taking with him a servant and a pair of donkeys, the Levite’s aim is to persuade his concubine to return with him. The former do not figure in the narrative until later, but their presence must have impressed the father-in-law and the young woman with the Levite’s seriousness” (*Judges, Ruth*, 524).

Repeated Delays (*Judges 19:4-10*)

Although the Levite came to Bethlehem with the intention of retrieving his concubine and returning to the mountains of Ephraim, he did not leave immediately. The text reports, “Now his father-in-law, the young woman’s father, detained him; and he stayed with him three days. So they ate and drank and lodged there” (*Judges 19:4*). Webb asked, “Is it just customary courtesy, we wonder, or is something more intended? The use of the term son-in-law ... indicates full acceptance of his daughter’s relationship with the Levite as formal and approved. At the very least he seems to want to give the relationship between his daughter and the Levite a better chance of success in the long term by building a stronger personal relationship with his guest” (*The Book of Judges*, 457).

Whether or not this was the case, when the fourth day came, the Levite intended to depart. But this did not occur, for “the young woman’s father said to his son-in-law, ‘Refresh your heart with a morsel of bread, and afterward go your way.’ So they sat down, and the two of them ate and drank together. Then the young woman’s father said to the man, ‘Please be content to stay all night, and let your heart be merry’” (*Judges 19:5-6*). At his insistence, the Levite stayed the fourth night as well (v. 7).

On the next day, as the Levite was preparing to depart, his father-in-law again attempted to prolong his stay. That afternoon he urged, “Look, the day is now drawing toward evening; please spend the night. See, the day is coming to an end; lodge here, that your heart may be merry. Tomorrow go your way early, so that you may get home” (*Judges 19:9*). Having previously given in, the Levite was determined to leave and “was not willing to spend that night; so he rose and departed, and came to opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). With him were the two saddled donkeys; his concubine was also with him” (v. 10).

From our perspective, it is reasonable to ask what the author was trying to accomplish in this section. Chisholm answered, “This folksy, realistic introduction to the story stresses the father’s hospitable attitude. He simply would not allow the Levite to leave until he was adequately fed and rested. His hospitality will serve as a literary foil to the treatment the Levite receives in Gibeah, for it places the heinous deed of the men of Gibeah against the backdrop of

the societal ideal. ... Of course, irony is also present, for the father's hospitality led to a delayed departure that caused the travelers to turn into Gibeah as night fell" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 490).

Seeking Safety

(*Judges 19:11-21*)

With their late start, it was not possible to make the trip from Bethlehem to the mountains of Ephraim without stopping for the night. Because they were in the proximity of Jebus, the servant suggested, "Come, please, and let us turn aside into this city of the Jebusites and lodge in it" (*Judges 19:11*). Without hesitation, the Levite responded, "We will not turn aside here into a city of foreigners, who are not of the children of Israel; we will go on to Gibeah" (v. 12). He evidently believed the pagan city would be dangerous whereas the city in Benjamin would be welcoming. With that said, Block correctly notes, "But his response leaves the reader wondering why, when the Israelites generally had been living comfortably among the Canaanites, this little band could not spend the night in the Canaanite city. Significantly, not a word is said about the divine prohibition of any communication with Canaanites or the mandate to conquer them. Israel had given up on the holy war long ago" (*Judges, Ruth*, 529).

The Levite pressed his plan and urged his servant along (*Judges 19:13*). As night drew near, they approached Gibeah (v. 14). Following the custom

of the day, the company "turned aside there to go in to lodge in Gibeah. And when he went in, he sat down in the open square of the city, for no one would take them into his house to spend the night" (v. 15). Regarding their rejection, Younger wrote, "This crude impertinence of the citizens of Gibeah is an ominous harbinger of the far worse abuse of the travelers that follows. The last clause of verse 15 would have been shocking anywhere in the ancient Near East, but it is especially shocking in Israel. The social disintegration has infected the very heart of the community of God's people. Thus the people of Gibeah abuse in general the Levite and his party passively (by refusing basic hospitality) before the rapists abuse them actively (19:15, 22)" (*The NIV Application Commentary: Judges/Ruth*, 355).

To their relief, "an old man came in from his work in the field at evening, who also was from the mountains of Ephraim" (*Judges 19:16*). Upon seeing the travelers, he inquired of their plans (v. 17). The Levite responded, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah toward the remote mountains of Ephraim; I am from there. I went to Bethlehem in Judah; now I am going to the house of the LORD. But there is no one who will take me into his house" (v. 18). It is possible he referenced "the house of the Lord," as Way noted, "in order to procure some hospitable lodging for that night" (*Judges and Ruth*, 160). Regardless, the old man took them in and extended kindness to them. In fact, "he brought him into his house, and gave fodder to the donkeys. And they washed their

feet, and ate and drank” (v. 21). His hospitality was genuine and comforting, but the men of Gibeah had other ideas (vv. 22-30).

Applications

- The inhospitable reception the Levite and his company received in Gibeah is supposed to show how far Israel had departed from God’s plan. God’s people were expected to care for one another. Instead, the people of Gibeah sought to abuse their visitors. The individuals who had rejected God’s morality had lost all sense of brotherhood. Lustful pleasure became their focus. Consequently, they viewed the Levite and his company as a means to that end.

- Although the Levite chose to stay among his own people rather than in Jebus, there hardly seemed to be a difference between the pagans of the land and the perverted Israelites. Christians today must make an effort to avoid becoming like people of the world. Making this point, Peter urged, “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

Questions

1. Where did the Levite and his concubine live (Judges 19:1)?

2. Where did the concubine go (Judges 19:2)?

3. What did the concubine’s father do when the Levite came to his house (Judges 19:3-4)?

4. Where did the Levite’s servant try to convince him to spend the night (Judges 19:11)?

5. Where did the Levite decide to travel to instead (Judges 19:12)?

6. Who offered the Levite and his company a place to stay (Judges 19:16, 20)?

7. To where did the Levite say he was traveling (Judges 19:18)?

Discussion

1. Why do you think the Levite's father-in-law attempted to delay his departure?
2. What does this text teach us about hospitality?
3. What steps can God's people take to maintain a sense of brotherhood?

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