

Devotional Meditations on the  
Book of Judges

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Note: this is a draft copy that still needs editing.

## #1 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 1:1-36

Under Joshua Israel largely remained faithful to the Lord. There were moments of failure, such as Achan's sin at Ai or the failure to drive out particular inhabitants in various areas. But for the most part, the era of Joshua was an era of faith and triumph. Redemptive-historically speaking, the era of Joshua stood in contrast to the era of Moses. Under Moses, the Israelites largely died in the wilderness. Under Joshua, they lived in the blessedness of the land.

These principles of these contrasting eras come to a more complicated expression in the book of Judges. The book follows a repeated pattern that contains the following elements:

1. First, disobedience, rebellion, and idolatry.
2. Second, God delivers them to their surrounding enemies in judgment.
3. Third, the Israelites cry to the Lord for help.
4. Fourth, God sends them a judge to deliver them.

Interestingly, the book contains the story of twelve judges who repeat this pattern throughout the narrative. There are twelve judges even as there are twelve tribes. The number is clearly representative of the "fullness" of God's people throughout the Scriptures.

However, it is not just a repetitive pattern that remains static. We can think of it as a pattern that takes the form of a downward spiral--like water flowing down the drain in a sink. Israel is caught in the downward spiral of sin and depravity. By the end of the book, we read some pretty horrific and stomach-turning stories that illustrate how far they have sunk. They begin the book by faithfully following the Lord. They end the book with every man doing what is right in his own eyes.

In this book, we therefore have a cycle of unfaithfulness followed by faithfulness. When left on their own they turn aside from God. Under the leadership of a judge, they return to the ways of the Lord.

These contrasting principles that characterize the cycles of the book are on clear display in Joshua 1. The chapter begins with the story of Israel's faithfulness in driving out the nations that remain to be conquered. In 1:5-7 we have a clear reminder that this was not the conquest of some innocent people under a cruel tyrant. It was, instead, an expression of the just judgment of God against ruthless depravity. Adoni-Bezek is mentioned in verse 6, as well as the fact that when captured they cut off his thumbs and big toes. That might sound "cruel and unusual." Some may call it unjust. But Adoni-Bezek did not think so. He recognized it as the just judgment of God upon him: "Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to pick up scraps under my table. As I have done, so God has repaid me" (1:7).

It is a favorite trope of the enemies of God to appeal to the era of the conquest as proof of the obvious "evil" of the Bible. Like unthinking dogs, the atheist barks at God decrying his injustice. Yet Adoni-Bezek knows better than them. He may be an enemy of God, but he recognizes the just judgment when he sees it and honestly acknowledges it. Ancient Adoni-bezek may hate the Lord, but he has better theology than modern man.

In it, we also hear the story of Caleb offering his daughter in marriage to anyone who captures Kiribati-sepher. The story might at first raise eyebrows as it at first glance seems to portray women as prizes to be exchanged by their fathers to others. But this is not the picture the text actually paints. Consider that this was an era in which personal safety was a paramount concern. The enemies of God's people were all around them. Raiding bands would frequently come to murder, pillage, and rape the inhabitants of homes and villages. A woman looking for a husband would highly value one who had proved himself capable and brave in battle. Likewise, a godly Israelite woman would also want a man of faith who trusted in the Lord. Any man who answered her father's call would definitely prove himself worthy in both respects. He fears the Lord and will fearlessly protect her. And as the text indicates, his daughter is more than a willing participant in the arrangement (nothing is done against her will). She willingly comes to Othniel the conqueror and even urges him to ask her father for a field. Marriage is not done against the will of the parties involved. Even in thujia cultural contexts where there are "arranged" marriages in Israel, the consent of both parties is required. Both gave their consent, and both received the blessing of God (1:15).

However, these moments of faithfulness are juxtaposed with elements of failure. Some tribes do not completely drive out the people of the land but subject them to forced labor. Rather than trusting in God and the greater inheritance he can provide, they sought to trust their own wisdom to improve their earthly life in the land. These remaining tribes became a snare and a trap for them, being the very thing that would lead them to go astray from the Lord and worship other gods.

And so Israel would move through a cycle of disobedience and failure to deliverance and faith. Judges would arise to give them temporary restoration, but it would always remain incomplete.

The ultimate failure of the judges points us forward to the one faithful deliverer God would send in the fullness of times: Jesus Christ. He is the just judge who will vanquish all his and our enemies under the righteous judgment of God. But he is also the deliverer who will save his people from their sins. In the fullness of time that deliverance would come not only to the rebellious tribes of Israel but to all nations of the earth. God will show love to his enemies, reconciling them through the death of his Son. He will rescue us from the downward spiral of sin and rebellion, and lead us instead through the whirlwind of the Spirit to the holiness and purity of heaven.

## #2 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 2:1-23

In the last devotional, we noted that the book of Judges marks a transition in Israel's history. The heights of victory and faithfulness attained under Joshua slowly begin to disintegrate in a downward spiral of unbelief and defeat. The book contains a repeated cycle of rebellion, judgment, repentance, and deliverance through twelve "judges" sent by the Lord. Slowly but surely, it becomes clear that these judges cannot bring permanent restoration, and we end the book with every man doing what is right in his own eyes.

Chapter 2 begins with a word from the Angel of the Lord. It is not a good one for Israel. God has taken note of their failure to drive out the nations in direct defiance of his covenant revelation. Through their unfaithfulness, God's promise of temporal victory is revoked. The people they kept to be their servants will now become to them a snare. This note of unfaithfulness is juxtaposed to a note of death. Joshua, the Servant of the Lord, has died. The spiritual vitality of the people has died with him. Soon the generation that he led also died, and there arose a generation that did not know the Lord or the work he had done (2:10).

The juxtaposition of Israel's sin with Joshua's death is a sobering reminder of the inextricable link that is basic to the spiritual reality of man. Sin leads to death. There is an inevitable and inexorable movement from the one to the other. Redemption does not negate this link but simply ensures (through a substitute) that the connection is completed and God's justice is satisfied.

The chapter then turns to a basic summary of the "cycle" that is characteristic of the rest of the book. It is important to remind ourselves that although the OT Israelites lived before the coming of Christ, those who believed were saved through him by virtue of God's promise. Individual Israelites under these "judges" saw in them a type of Christ to come and experience salvation through faith and evidence in true repentance before God.

But as a nation, this redemptive-historical pattern sent another message. Redemption was promised to them through a coming deliverer, but the final deliverer had not yet come. Thus, the OT types were a two-sided coin. On one side they revealed Christ who was grasped by faith ahead of time. On the other side, they contained a stark and sobering reminder that he had not yet fully come.

In God's wisdom, he has permitted man to fall. This was true of Adam and Eve the Garden. It was also true in the redemptive context of Israel under Moses and later under the judges.

What was his purpose? So that in the fullness of time, he might show the greatness of his grace in our salvation. As the Apostle Paul states in Romans 11:32: "For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all." Sin reigns in death, but grace reigns more powerfully in life through Jesus Christ. He is the one whom God has appointed the final judge of both the living and the dead. He himself has passed through that judgment. Although perfectly faithful, he bore the sins of the unfaithful to bring us to God.

He puts an end to all the repeated cycles of the OT types. The repeated blood sacrifices cease in his once for all shedding of blood. Through his eternal deliverance, he secures for us a salvation from which we can never fall.

### #3A - Devotional Meditations on Judges 3:1-31

Judges 3 begins with a glimpse into the secret purpose of God behind. In Judges 1-2 we read of Israel's unfaithfulness to the Lord. In direct violation of his revealed will, Israel failed to drive out the nations in the land of Canaan. There is absolutely no doubt that Israel bore 100% responsibility for their actions. God declared it. Israel acknowledged it with their response of weeping and grieving over God's judgment (2:4-5).

In Chapter 2, the reality of human responsibility is affirmed. The Bible everywhere makes it clear that we are accountable for our actions. At the same time, it also affirms that nothing happens outside an unchanging, comprehensive, and irrevocable divine plan.

Without missing a beat and with no sense of any contradiction, Judges 3 tells the divine side of this story. Man meant things for evil, but God meant them for good.

And what was this purpose? First, God left these nations to test the people of Israel. Although the inheritance of Canaan was a type and picture of heaven, by God's design he was pleased to leave something "incomplete" within it. This is true of all the types of the OT. They simultaneously reveal Christ and give spiritual access to him through faith, while at the same time showing that the true reality had not yet arrived. This ensured that they would never make too much of the temporary blessedness God bestowed upon them and keep them always longing for the better country of heaven above.

Secondly, God also left these nations so that the people of Israel might know how to wage war. Military commanders understand that no matter how many bullets, bombs, tanks, and guns you have, there is no replacement for war readiness in the actual experience of your soldiers. The ancient world is not like our modern one. Most countries have relatively stable borders and the invasion of one country by another is a fairly rare occurrence that can only be done with a large consensus among major nations with clear justification. In the ancient world, competing empires were constantly in conflict with one another. The land of Israel was a good land, strategically positioned in such a way as to make it highly desirable for those with imperial ambitions. Israel had to know how to defend itself. It is also noteworthy that in this respect we also see the compatibility between the sovereign power of God and his use of secondary causes. God is free to defeat their enemies directly by his own sovereign power (see Jericho). But he also works through his people indirectly as they walk by faith. The active call to fight in

faith is compatible with the idea that God's power is to sole source of their victory. Passive trust bears fruit in an "active" obedience.

We will deal with the story of the first three judges in our next devotional. But this chapter is a wonderful practical reminder to us that while we need to properly mourn our sin and disobedience in true repentance, we cannot forget that God has a plan even for our sins. To be sure, careful discernment is needed to navigate the conflicting emotions of deep regret in regard to our personal responsibility but unswerving confidence in the goodness of the divine plan.

Perhaps Paul's statements about a worldly sorrow that leads to death and a godly sorrow that leads to repentance can be helpful here (2 Cor. 7:10). Worldly sorrow and regret have the appearance of godliness. The sadness is focused primarily on the misery of the punishment or consequences of the sin rather than on the heinousness of our sinful hearts before God. Worldly regret also masks a sense of trust in oneself. It remains focused on the idea that we could have done it differently and wishes that it could somehow go back and change things. We recognize that we did what was wrong, but that we actually had the ability to do what was right.

A Christian must recognize that their sins are contrary to God's holy nature, an offense against him, and worthy of his judgment. This is central to true repentance. But this must be done while still trusting that God has a purpose for his allowing us to fall. Bare minimum it keeps us humble before him, always trusting his strength not our own. It also keenly reminds us of his omnipotent power to bring divine good out of human evil.

This idea is central to our Christian faith. At the heart of our salvation is the fact that although Christ was ruthlessly murdered by sinful men, God raised our righteous Savior from the dead. They meant it for evil, crucifying him in lawlessness. But God meant it for good, that many might be saved through his blood. What is true redemptive-historically in the cross and resurrection of Christ is true for us personally in moments of failure and faithlessness. At all times we must trust him. When we fall, we humble ourselves. After that, we must rise in faith trusting that he will work all things for the good of those who love him.



### #3B - Devotional Meditations on Judges 3:1-31

In our last meditation, we looked at the first part of this passage in which the twin realities of divine sovereignty and human responsibility were clearly set before us. Israel was clearly accountable for their sinful actions in disobeying God's direct commandments. Yet God had a greater purpose in ordaining this to come to pass. God is able to bring divine good out of human evil.

In the second part of the chapter, we read the stories of the first three judges: Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar.

Othniel was introduced to us back in chapter 1. By faith, he answered the call of Caleb to capture Kiriath-sepher and won his daughter's hand in marriage. In one respect, his actions reflected what God called all the Israelites to believe and to do. But given the rank unfaithfulness of the people, his faith and obedience made him unique among the people. Like Joshua and Caleb before him, his simple acts of faith distinguished him from the vast majority of the rest of the nation. Note well that the thing that distinguishes a Christian as exceptional is not their inherent giftedness but their faith. There is nothing in this that we can boast about. If we "stand out" from the rest of God's people, it's not so much because we have positively attained to something high and great, but because others have fallen so low. It is not because of their righteousness but because of the great wickedness of the rest that they shine like a light in the world.

Indeed, it was not through his own power or might that he came as a deliverer of Israel, but through the power of the Holy Spirit that came upon him (3:10). The Spirit that came upon Moses and Joshua now abides on Othniel. Their deliverance comes through the means of a human judge, but its ultimate source is the power of God.

After Othniel comes Ehud. Previously Israel had been dominated by Cushan-rishathaim of Mesopotamia. Now it is Eglon king of Moab who comes against God's people. The Moabites were old enemies of Israel. But their exaltation over Israel did not come from their own wills but from God's. As verse 12 indicates, it is the Lord who strengthened Eglon to chastise Israel for their sin. Just as God gives strength to the deliverer for Israel's salvation, he also gives strength to their oppressor for their chastisement. God is the sovereign Lord who works through and above human means.

In this story, we read a few memorable details of Ehud's deliverance of Israel from the hand of Eglon. Ehud was left-handed. While there is nothing inherently "wrong" about this, human cultures have typically regarded left-handedness as an anomaly. It would clearly place them at a disadvantage. Roughly 10% of the world's population is left-handed. If the world was not so dominated by "right-handers" that number would probably be higher. Although on one level it might be a disadvantage, in others it can be a great advantage. In baseball, lefties are highly prized as pitchers and hitters. The same would be true in hand-to-hand combat. They possess the element of surprise. They know that their opponents are most likely right-handed, but their enemy would not normally expect them to be left-handed.

This element of surprise inherent in his constitution was perfectly executed in his deliverance of the Israelites. He stealthily presented himself as a servant to pay tribute to Eglon. Eglon's men checked him for a sword in the place it would normally be: on his left side. A right-handed person would reach across his body to the opposite side to draw his weapon. Some object that Eglon's men would not have been so stupid as to only check one side of his body. But this is exactly the point of the narrative: Eglon had grown proud, fat, lazy, and presumptive in his position of power. Pride goes before a fall.

This "surprise" deliverance which has been set up with actions then takes expression in words. As Ehud approaches Eglon he declares: "I have a secret message from God for you" (3:19, 20). Taking out his "hidden" sword he thrusts it through his belly. Eglon is so fat that his belly closes over the blade and his innards spill on the floor. The details of the story simultaneously evoke a reaction of disgust and laughter as God exposes the weakness and inevitable destruction of his and our enemies. Not just Eglon, but 10,000 Moabite warriors fall at the hands of Ehud-led Israel.

The chapter concludes with a brief mention of the judgeship of Shamgar, son of Anath. We are simply told of his feat of valor in killing 600 Philistines with an oxgoad. An oxgoad is a wooden tool with a piece of iron at the end used for prodding oxen. Essentially, this detail shows us how God brought Israel a military victory through an agricultural device. In terms more familiar to us, we might say that he defeated 600 men with a garden hoe.

Here we have a fundamental point about our redemptive underscored and reiterated. Salvation comes through God's Spirit, not the might of man. It is the Lord's strength that gives the victory.

He is pleased to work through human weakness--whether the "left-handed news" of Ehud or the hoe of Shamgar.

Hidden in these details is a revelation of Christ's redemption for us. He is the final deliverer possessing the fullness of the Spirit which was poured out upon him without measure. Yet his victory did not come through earthly strength. When his servants took up swords to defend him, he healed the men they struck and told them to put their swords in their place. He was emptied of all earthly strength and won a "surprise" victory through what appeared to be a defeat. He was crucified in weakness but raised in the power of God.

Our lives in Christ follow the same pattern. When insulted we do not revile in return. When we are cursed, we bless. When struck on the cheek we turn the other to them. When hated by our enemies we show them love in return. These things seem like weakness and "defeat" on the earthly level. But as we trust in the Lord's power and love for us he will work victory--not just in the judgment but in the salvation of our enemies.

#### #4 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 4:1-31

In Chapter 3 we were introduced the basic pattern and themes of the era of the Judges. Additionally, we read about the first three Judges: Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar. One pattern we noted was God's ability to use both weak and sinful men to work his deliverance. This pattern will become very clear in other judges, most notably, Samson. But question marks, oddities, and various weaknesses characterize many of them. Othniel married his niece (!), Ehud was left-handed, and Shamgar vanquished his foes with an oxgoad. These are not things we would normally expect from God's "saviors." Incidentally, this is one very persuasive argument for the divine origin of Biblical revelation. No nation in their right mind would mention such gross failures and weaknesses in their past leaders. Other historical records of great kings conveniently omit their foibles, projecting strength and success even when such declarations are flat-out lies (sound familiar?).

In chapter 4 we are introduced to the judgeship of Deborah. Anyone familiar with ancient culture will immediately be struck by an obvious oddity of God's choice of her: she is female. To be sure, the Bible indicates that God created us male and female in his own image. The clear biological differences do not constitute the one inherently inferior or superior to the other. It is, however, quite rare in ancient history to find a female military leader. Ancient warfare consisted almost entirely of hand-to-hand combat and other forms of direct conflict in which size, speed, and strength were often determinative factors of life or death. Modern technology has changed this dynamic to some degree, but it remains the case that the vast majority of the world's armed forces consist of males.

Deborah, however, was not first and foremost a military leader. She was a prophetess. She was among those in the OT who had the gift of prophecy, but not the office of a prophet. Daniel was a similar figure as was Joseph. They could interpret dreams and receive divine revelation, but they had no formal office connected to their work. Both men and women are the recipients of the divine revelation in the Scripture. Not all men and not all women have the gift of a special office. But as members of Christ endowed with his Spirit they are anointed to speak God's word. That word has inherent authority no matter whom it comes from: from the mouths of babes to the mouth of a donkey.

Deborah's role in delivering Israel is also unique in a similar respect. The commissioning of other judges has thus far followed a clear pattern of language: "...and the Lord raised up for them a deliverer named X" (2:16, 2:18, 3:15, 9). When we come to Deborah, however, this declaration disappears from the narrative. She serves as an indirect agent of deliverance,

bringing the word and power of God to Barak who is to lead Israel to their deliverance. It is through her prophetic gift that the word and power of God to save them.

More than that, in the execution of God's judgment upon Sisera (Israel's oppressor) his downfall comes at the hand of Jael the wife of Heber. She plays the part of a submissive servant to Sisera the King. But while he is asleep she drives a tent peg into his head. Like Ehad before she uses the element of deception and surprise as an agent of God's judgment. In this way Deborah's word to Barak came to fulfillment: "...the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (4:9).

Those who use this narrative to support a feminist worldview are completely missing the point. Feminism takes an element of Christian truth but draws a number of incorrect conclusions from it. Feminism rightly sees that in our basic constitution as image bearers men and women are equal. We are created in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness after the image of our Creator. Men and women are equally capable of knowing and understanding divine revelation and speaking it as members of his spiritual body.

But this does not mean that God has opened all special offices to both men and women. Scripture is clear in both the OT and the NT that the special offices are open only to males. Women and men can both pray together and sing God's word together. They can mutually speak to one another to resolve conflict and offer mutual encouragement with God's word and its inherent authority. They share joint authority with their husbands over their children. But the authority of the offices is reserved only for ordained male leaders.

Feminism tends to view office through the lens of earthly power structures. Although they rightly decry abuse of authority, feminists tend to view positions of authority as inherently corrupt and prone to such abuses. In this they ironically share the same view of "office" that Jesus condemns among the Gentiles. Feminism has great difficulty distinguishing a corrupt abuse of authority from its proper godly use. We must have compassion on individuals who struggle with these things. Very often they have been subject to abusive authority figures in a traumatic way. Our instincts for self-protection are very strong. It is more than understandable that those who have been subject to such abuses would struggle with trusting human authority figures. But Christ sets forth a very different pattern from the abuses of the world: one that affirms the idea of authority but defines its proper use with a Christlike motivation of responsibility, love, and care.

Nothing in the story of Deborah indicates that church offices should be open to women. In fact, the reality of male-only office-bearers is the very thing that gives power and significance to the story. The men who had been appointed as leaders were not following God's revealed will for them. God's use of Deborah underscores a key point of the broader narrative. God will bring his victory through his power, not man's might. He will manifest his power in human weakness. Although equally an image bearer, the woman is the "weaker vessel" relative to the man (1 Pet. 3:7). In this, however, she is to be honored. For God is most pleased to manifest his might in our weakness. When we are weak, then we are strong.

Deborah's strength did not come from a formal office, her assertiveness, or a "take charge" mentality. Much less did she operate from a worldview that motivated her to rectify an inherent oppressiveness characteristic of world history in relations between men and women. She was a humble servant of God. The power she gave to Israel came from the fact that she was a conduit of God's word. Although she was weak, God's strength was given to Israel through her.

The Bible states that women cannot hold a special office, but that does not mean there are no ways for them to participate in the manifestation of God's power with the spoken word. Moses's wife rebuked him for failing to circumcise their son. Note the situation: a clear and obvious violation of God's word had occurred. A wife is to submit to her husband, but that does not trump the greater duty they have to both be in submission to God. In this case, Israel had abandoned the Lord and served other gods. They apparently neglected to respond to a previous revelation from the Lord to fight against their enemies (4:6). In such cases, both men and women have the right to speak about these issues. So in the church members ordinarily leave it to their appointed leaders to sort out matters that directly concern them. But if there is a violation of God's word both men and women have the right to complain against the session and if necessary appeal to the broader church.

In worship, too, women as well as men can speak the word of God. Worship consists of two parts: the part of God to the people and the part of the people to God. The former is led by an ordained officer who must be a man. But the latter is done by both men and women and includes prayer and congregational singing. In this latter act Scripture says that the word of God dwells in us richly as we teach and admonish one another in songs, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19-20 with Col. 3:16). In this aspect of worship men and women together speak the same divine truth to one another and submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:20).

This is how both men and women today participate in the same reality characteristic of Deborah's leading of Israel. In our weakness, God makes us strong. We empty ourselves and submit to the Lord, but by his word, he raises us up with his divine strength.

We see this same pattern in Jesus. His saving power was not through his physical stature or human might. He worked his wonders by the power and Spirit of God manifested through his word. His human flesh was crucified in weakness, but raised by the power and word of God. In this respect, Deborah prefigures the Lord Jesus Christ. His life was one of complete and total submission to the will of his father. His "lordship" flows out of his "servanthood." He leads as he serves.

Just as Jael struck the head of Sisera, so Jesus struck the head of the serpent. God turned his apparent defeat into a surprise victory over Satan, freeing us from his oppressive kingdom--not just for a single generation, but for all eternity. In him, we look forward to a day when we will no longer be married or given in marriage but will be like the angels of God. There we will come into the fulness of God's promise as fellow heirs of the grace of Christ.

## #5 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 5:1-32

The Song of Deborah is an inspired masterpiece of lyrical poetry. As much as I want to share with you the beauty of the Hebrew poetry, we simply do not have the space to do that in this devotional.

The Bible contains two basic kinds of revelation. The first is direct. God speaks to us through a declaration of his will and mighty acts. The story of Deborah and the book of Judges thus far has been of this kind. We have read a story of what God has done in history to save his people. In this sense, it is purely "objective"—declaring what happens outside of us for our redemption. A second kind of revelation is more indirect. In it, we read an inspired manifestation of the appropriate response of God's people to that revelation. The Psalms are filled with this kind of revelation. In it, we read how God's people sing, worship, celebrate, and appropriate God's grace in faith.

The Song of Deborah fits into this category. In it we not only rehearse God's mighty work of deliverance in the fall of Sisera, we also read how Deborah and Barak celebrate this deliverance in faith. In this, it echoes the Song of Miriam and Moses at the Exodus which celebrated God's mighty deliverance of Israel from Pharaoh (Exodus 15). Here in Judges Deborah and Barak mirror their joint celebration of God's mighty acts.

The Song begins with their celebration of the leaders in Israel. Those who had been passive and neglectful have now "taken the lead." Deborah is not advocating for the reversal of God's creation order in the relationship between men and women in the family and in the church. Instead, she worked to restore it. Through their faithful leadership, the people also offered themselves faithfully to God. As the kings and princes go, so goes the people.

As verses 4-5 indicate, this is not merely a matter of us mustering our human strength. Instead, their power and victory came from their turning in faith in God. It was his power from heaven that caused an upheaval in heaven, on earth, and through the mountains of the land. At the mighty march of God's footsteps, the creation trembled before its Maker.

After this introduction, the song paints a picture of empty highways and villages. Where have they all gone? They are hiding in their homes out of fear of the oppressors of Israel. Worship of



false gods has brought judgment. Survival—not economic progress—is now the key concern of the nation.

In verse 9 we see the reversal of this situation through the faithful activity of the commandments and the people of Israel. God had told them to drive out the foreign nations. In unbelief, they failed to do so. Now in response to God's chastisement, they have the opportunity for a "do-over" at which they wonderfully succeed. The "sleeping" faith of the rulers and the people has "awakened" through Deborah and Barak. Deborah brings the word of God while Barak manifests his triumphant activity. Deborah especially celebrates how the men of Israel have risen up as her protectors and defenders. The sons have taken up arms to defend their "mother" in Israel.

Verses 14-18 survey comprehensively survey the 12 tribes and their involvement in this great work of God. First, Ephraim, Benjamin, Zebulun, and Issachar are highlighted for their joint work with their kinsmen. By contrast, Reuben is especially highlighted for his apparent failure to be involved. Although there were "great searching of heart" they remained in the pastures. Rather than the clanging of the battle swords they sat to hear the whistling of sheep. Gilead also stayed put. Dan and Asher stayed by their boats near the coast. Later "Meroz" is also cursed for their failure to help in battle. By way of "inclusio," the song concludes this section by noting the faithfulness of Zebulun and Naphtali to fight the oppressor. This deliverance is to be celebrated, but it was not without its failures and imperfections among the tribes.

In the description of the battle, the song uses powerful metaphors to underscore that it was God's power (not man's) that gave them the victory. It is said that in this battle "from heaven the stars fought" and that the torrent of rivers swept the enemies away. The powers of heaven and the waters of the earth are unleashed only at the hand and will of God.

But this power is made manifest in an unexpected and "weak" way. The great deliverance did not come through the might of a man's arm wielding a sword. Instead of an epic "clash of Titans," Sisera fell at the hand of a woman. The MMA fighter was not taken down by the #1 contender in his weight class but by a tent peg of a tent-dwelling woman who lulled him to sleep. Verses 26-27 are written in a way that resembles a verbal "slow-motion" video with her hand rising, the peg being positioned, the mallet slowly coming down, and his head shattering beneath her as he slowly falls from her lap to the ground.

In contrast to the joy of Deborah as the mother of Israel, she then turns to allow us to hear the wailing of the mother of Sisera at the fall of her son. As the Egyptians wailed at the death of their firstborn, so now Sisera's mother weeps at his fall. The princesses of Moab answer her only to note the spoil and plunder that their enemies have walked away with.

The situation has now entirely reversed. Deborah, a woman of Israel, waited for the men to stop up in faith in God's strength. Their passivity meant suffering and judgment for her and the women of Israel. Now the royal women of Moab weep as their man of valor falls asleep at the wheel to their downfall.

The overall message of the song is to celebrate how God's power and victory come through human weakness. The men were spiritually weak in that they were failing to lead the people faithfully. In the vacuum of faith, unbelief quickly sprang up in the worship of false gods. The weak were made strong through the word of God that came through Deborah. The mother in Israel summoned her sons to battle and they heeded the call. God's instrument of defeat was "weak" as well. It was not a mighty male soldier with a sword, but a tent-dwelling woman with a peg that brought the downfall of Sisera.

Through God's grace the land had rest for forty years. One generation saw the grace and victory of God. But the subsequent narrative shows, this turned out only to be typical and temporary.

We see this pattern come to fulfillment in a final and eternal deliverance in the Lord Jesus Christ. Crucified in weakness, he was raised by the power of God. His weapon was not a sword or a spear, but a cross that he bore for our sakes. His sacrificial defeat was turned into victory by the power of God—greater than all the cosmic forces of heaven and earth. When God's leaders grow passive through discouragement or unfaithfulness, they can rise to active, faithful, service through the working of God's mighty power. God's people too can "awake" from times of lethargy to serve in his strength. Whatever the situation we must remember that when we are weak, then we are strong—for it is precisely in those times that God's power is most manifest in us.

## #6 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 6:1-40

As 5:31 notes there is a 40-year time gap between the era of Deborah and the start of chapter 5. As the inspired narrator said, Israel continues its cycle of rebellion and judgment, setting up their need for yet another deliverer.

So far we have seen kings from Mesopotamia, Moab, Philistia, and Hazor rise up to oppress Israel. Clearly, they are surrounded by their enemies. This time it is Midian who rises up as an oppressor for seven years. Together with the Amalekites, they would regularly raid the land to take its produce and livestock, leaving no sustenance for Israel. The details connect back to the curses of the covenant pronounced in Leviticus 26:15 and Deuteronomy 28:30-33. The narrator explicitly connects their disobedience to the violation of the covenant he made with them in the Exodus through a prophet whom God raises up (6:8-10).

Yet as we see time and time again, mercy triumphs over judgment in the grace of God. The angel of the LORD comes to Gideon, who is engaged in undercover agriculture for the survival his his people. This is a clue that Gideon is likely an unexpected choice for a military deliverer. He is not busy gathering and training the people for guerrilla warfare but busy preparing food. He is playing the role of a cook at a food bank not a commander in an army. Later he also notes his humble position as a member of a weak tribe (Manasseh) and his lowly status in his father's house (6:15). Yet by God's word he is addressed as a "mighty man of valor." Although these things are true by faith, his trust in God doesn't show itself to be very strong. He questions God's purpose in allowing them to undergo such oppression and resists God's direct call as he succumbs to self-doubt.

This fits the broader pattern we have seen in the narrative. The judges whom God raises up are weak and sinful men. His raising up of Deborah and Barak fit the same pattern. As a woman, Deborah is the weaker vessel, and the text explicitly notes the oddity of Jael striking the fatal blow to Sisera as opposed to a mighty soldier in direct battle (4:9). The other judges also manifest impurities and weakness in different ways. Othniel married his niece. Ehud was left-handed. Shamgar single-handedly vanquished his military foes with a tool used to lead livestock. These judges are not "heroes" in the classic sense of that term. They are chosen precisely for their weaknesses so that through them God's strength might be manifested.

The weakness of Gideon's faith is elaborated at length in the subsequent narrative. He begins by asking the Angel of the Lord for a sign of confirmation of the truth of the divine plan

revealed to him. God's revelation through his Angel carries its own authority and should have been sufficient. By God's grace, he grants him a sign: fire comes up from the rock and consumes the meat and cakes he prepares at the Angel's direction.

After this, we see the weakness of Gideon's faith in his obeying the LORD's command to destroy the altar of Baal and Asherah and build an altar on which to sacrifice to the LORD. He obeys but does it at night out of fear of his family and the men of the town. The fear of man affects the degree to which he acts in faith in the feat of God. It seems that the people also feared what the Midianites might do if they discovered the altars of their gods had been destroyed. It would be taken as a sign of rebellion and could have meant their certain destruction.

Their fear proves well-founded as the Midianites and Amalekites assemble in the Valley of Jezreel for another raid on the land. The Spirit of the Lord comes upon him, making his faith strong in its weakness as they prepare with several other tribes for battle.

Yet once again Gideon asks for a sign of confirmation. Even when clothed with God's strength human weakness still manifests itself. It takes two repetitions of God's miraculous sign with Gideon's fleece and the morning dew before he is confident enough to prepare for battle.

The broader pattern of the book is clearly reinforced. The dominant characteristic of God's deliverers is weakness, not strength. They are weak in stature, coming from lowly positions in lowly tribes. They are weak in righteousness, often beset by glaring shortcomings in their moral lives. They are even weak in faith, declaring with the man in the Gospels "I believe, help my unbelief!"

We will see a similar pattern when we move to the era of the kings. God will bring down mighty Saul by making weak he who is strong. But he will raise up lowly David: the youngest of his brothers and a boy in the midst of giants.

Time would fail us if we were to trace other examples of this through the prophets and apostles of the OT and NT. But we clearly see this pattern most fully in the Lord Jesus Christ. He eternally possessed the unchangeable power of the divine nature, but in the fullness of time assumed a human nature as a weak infant. Although manifesting the power of God in mighty miracles, he willingly assumed a place of weakness when he offered himself on the cross for our sins.

The same pattern is replicated in our lives. We are filled with sin. Although the Spirit is willing, our flesh is weak. Even our faith which is a gift of God giving access to God's divine power, is often weak and sluggish. Yet even with a "little" faith God can work "big" wonders.

What a wonderful reminder of how we must always humble ourselves before God, realizing the weakness of our sin and even our faith. For this reason, humility is one of the chief marks of a sincere Christian. Pride is the utter antithesis of Christ and the Gospel, yet how easily we can fall into thinking we are better than others. Yet God is filled with mercy, showing his power in our weakness--bringing victory out of defeat, courage out of fear, and even life out of death.

## #7 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 7:1-25

When nations write their own history, they have a tendency to glorify the great "heroes" of the past. This was true in ancient times just as much as the modern era. It is easy to read the OT and think that Israel is simply telling its own version of this kind of "hero" story. Indeed, sometimes we read a chapter like Hebrews 11 which and view it as a survey of the "heroes" of the faith.

The problem is that the Biblical view of a "hero" is very different from that of that of the non-Christian. The world views heroes primarily as those who are able to rise above the ordinary weaknesses of the "common man." They are geniuses with exceptional intellectual abilities. They are superhuman in their athletic speed, strength, and ability. They are exceptional in their self-discipline and industriousness. They are like "supermen" who rise above the ordinary in their intellectual, moral, and physical capabilities.

How different is the presentation of the Bible! The hero's of the "faith" are not set forth as exceptional in any earthly measure. Instead they stand out for their weaknesses. The Bible therefore flips the world's conception of a hero on its head.

We especially see this dynamic in the book of Judges. Each judge thus far in the narrative has been distinguished by particularly glaring weaknesses. Even Gideon manifests this pattern. He is the least of his family. He is from one of the weakest tribes. Although he believes in God and has God's divine strength in him, his faith is still very weak. Yet even through a weak faith, God manifests his great power to save.

This chapter continues the development of this theme. This time we see more clearly that the weakness of God's instrument of deliverance comes through God's direct purpose and working. The chapter begins with God declaring that the army of Gideon is too large. It consisted of 32,000 men. Again, God is turning the ways of the world on their head. Any military commander who argued that the army should be smaller rather than larger would quickly be subject to mutiny. Recruitment always needs to increase. One of the key measures of military success is the size of one's army. But not when God is fighting for you!

First God declares that anyone who is fearful and trembling should return home. This makes sense as such men would be the most unreliable. At this command 22,000 depart with only 10,000 remaining.

But this is still too many. God brings them to the water that they may have something to drink. Some drink by lapping up the water like a dog, but others drink while simply kneeling down. The former method is obviously unusual. Indeed, only 300 men lap up the water while the rest kneel. These phrases have been debated as to their precise meaning, but settling that debate is not necessary for understanding the divine purpose.

The end result is that God leaves the army far weaker than it was before. Only 300 men remain...out of 10,000!

What is God's ultimate purpose for shrinking the army of Israel to a rump of its former self? Judges 7:2 gives us the answer: "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'" Humans are very prideful and are eager to take the credit wherever we can get it. God especially work to arrange the circumstances of this battle so that Israel can never boast in their own might or strength. Salvation comes from the power of God, not man.

## #8 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 8:1-35

Judges 8 continues the story of Gideon and his 300 men. At the end of the last chapter, we saw him call the men of Ephraim to assist in the pursuit of the Midianites. They were to capture the waters of Midian as far as Beth-barah. Water sources were obviously important in the ancient world, so it made sense for them to be a focal point in the aftermath of the battle. The men of Gideon eventually catch up with the Oreb and Zeeb (the princes of Midian) and bring their heads back across the Jordan.

Still, the men of Ephraim are not happy. They question why Gideon did not initially call them to battle when he went against the Midianites. As readers of the story we already know the answer. God deliberately whittled down the army of Gideon from 32,000 down to 300 to show that the victory came from the hand of the LORD and not man. Gideon's response may be a little confusing at first since it is filled with some references with which we may not be all that familiar. The general point is this. Gideon did nothing "valiant" in battle compared to them. He just blew a trumpet, broke a jar, and raised a torch. The men of Ephraim--although late to the battle--did the real work of finishing them off by the edge of the sword. Gideon just started the process. Ephraim got the glory of completing it.

In this way, we see how God is pleased to graciously share his glory with us. All the power and might come from him, but he allows us to participate in the victory. For example, the book of Revelation reveals that Jesus has conquered and has sat on his throne. It also states that we too shall overcome and sit on his throne with him (Rev. 3:21). We are but mere instruments through which he consummates his victory, yet he shares the glory of triumph with us.

Oreb and Zeeb have been defeated, but two more remain to be captured: Zebah and Zalmunna. Gideon and his 300 men pursue them but are becoming exhausted. The Divine power that is with them has not changed the fact that in themselves they are but mere men. As they pass through Succoth he asks for food to strengthen his exhausted army. But they refuse. The same thing happens in the city of Penuel. To both Gideon makes clear that their failure to support God's army will mean certain judgment.

On the one hand, we can understand the human logic behind their refusal. Since God's power was with them, what need do they have of earthly bread? As persuasive as this sounds, it is a fallacious line of reasoning. God's power is at times manifested directly apart from any earthly means. But more often than not both his power and his love are shown by means of human



agents with full responsibility for the choices they make. Just as God's glorification of his grace is no excuse for our sin before God, so the presence of his power is no justification for neglecting to support God's servants.

When Gideon finally catches up with Zebah and Zalmunna in Karkor, he and his exhausted 300 men drive out their remaining army of 15,000. Their false sense of security quickly vanished as the judgment and power of God came upon them. The kings were captured and the deliverance over Midian was complete.

Yet some opponents remained to be dealt with. The men of Succoth and Penuel had failed to give aid and comfort to their brothers in battle. We have seen how important this theme is, with the northern tribes receiving their inheritance early but agreeing to fight to the end for the other tribes until they all received their inheritance. Succoth and Penuel are both chastised and judged for their sinful actions along with Zebah and Zalmunna.

The faith of Gideon and the mercy of God are thus mixed with a measure of unbelief and opposition to God within the nations. Cracks are forming in the unity of the kingdom of Israel. As God's story unfolds, these fissures will only grow larger as the Northern Kingdom later breaks off in idolatry and rebellion. Even in the book of Judges, the great deliverance of Gideon proves only to be temporary.

The time has not yet come for a human king to rule on behalf of God. Israel is a theocracy, which means that God himself rules the nation. Gideon makes this point clearly when the people try to make him a king. Their request for a king revealed their focus on their earthly conditions. Similarly, the people would try to force Jesus to be their earthly king after seeing all the miracles that he performed (John 6:15). He similarly refused, withdrawing alone to a mountain to commune with God the Father and put his focus on the kingdom of heaven.

Indeed see many patterns in the story of Gideon in the life of Jesus. Although he prayed that his church would be united (and all the elect are!), one member of his visible band of followers would betray him. Just as God's people did not support Gideon, so they would not support Jesus. Even his true friends would abandon him. In the church, we know there will be a mixture of both real friends and hidden foes (wolves in sheep's clothing). But Christ's true followers will remain with him, bringing aid and support to his body, the church. Opponents to the preaching of the Gospel to the nations will arise from within and from without, but Christ will have the

victory. He will rule the nations with a rod of iron, bringing victory--not through sword or spear, but a word of victory through the weakness of his cross.

## #9 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 9:1-57

Judges 9 stands in direct contrast to the previous chapter. In Judges 8 we read the story of the conquests of Gideon through the power of God. The people tried to make him king and grant his family a royal line of succession. Gideon refused, recognizing that this would be to supplant God's rule in his theocratic kingdom and would be tantamount to idolatry. Gideon lived many more years and had 70 sons including one named Abimelech.

In contrast to his father who refused the throne offered to him out of the fear of God, Abimelech conspired to seize the throne for himself. Abimelech was the son of Gideon through a concubine and was therefore relegated to a lower status than his other children. Although the land had forty years of rest during Gideon's lifetime after his death unfaithfulness returned. Ironically, the narrator tells us that the people of Israel did not remember the LORD and the family of Gideon for all the good he had done for Israel. This language recalls how a new Pharaoh arose in the days of their slavery in Egypt who did not remember Joseph. The forgetfulness of the pagan ruler is now replicated in God's own people.

Yet Abimelech's seizing of the throne requires more than simply the political intrigue and mudslinging characteristic of elections in modern representative democracies. The path of his march to power is paved with bloodshed. Abimelech appealed to the blood-bond he shared with this tribe to persuade them to make him king. He then murders his own brothers, shedding their blood to secure his sole place as ruler of Israel. With 70 pieces of silver, he hires worthless fellows who do the evil deed on his behalf. Only one brother survives--Jotham, the youngest brother.

Jotham then ascends Mt Gerizim. This location is significant as it was the mountain of "blessing" when the sanctions of God's covenant were recited to Israel under Moses (Deut. 27). The location reinforces the source of the message: the blessed word of God himself. The message focuses on the fact that Abimelech was made king in bad faith. Jotham was a "legitimate" son through one of one of Gideon's wives, while Abimelech was a son through a servant/concubine. The parable develops the unfittingness of this by comparing Gideon to a fig tree or a vine (which are fruitful) and Abimelech to a bramble (which is fruitless).

At this point the location of his speech bears upon the message he proclaims. With this mountain in view, God proclaimed either a blessing or curse to Israel. Now Jotham does the

same. If they acted in good faith in making Abimelech king, they should rejoice and be blessed. If not, fire shall come out and destroy Abimelech.

The prophetic message takes time to come to fulfillment. Jotham is forced to flee for his life, and he hides for three years in Beer. After that time his words come to fulfillment. An evil spirit arises between Abimelech and the leaders that appointed him. As they had dealt treacherously to bring him into power, so they dealt treacherously to remove him. The blood of his 70 brothers comes upon him.

It was through faithlessness that they rejected God and tried to make Gideon king. It was through faithlessness that Abimelech conspired to become king. Faithlessness and evil produce only more faithlessness. Sin begets sin, and sin gives birth only to death. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword. Evil will only beget evil in the hands of men. The details of the narrative are self-evident, but they clearly show that God's prophetic word comes to pass. A fire devours in judgment and Abimelech meets his downfall. As he killed his brothers on a stone, so now a stone crushes his own head. It is noteworthy that the stone was thrown by a woman and not a mighty warrior. This continues the narrative thread we saw in Deborah and Jael. God uses the weak to bring judgment on the strong.

These patterns in the narrative will be expressed again later in redemptive history. Athaliah will arise as an evil queen mother, murdering even her grandchildren so that she might seize power for herself. The families of the kings of Israel and Judah will be largely decimated when these nations are brought into exile in foreign lands. Yet God preserves his promised royal line--not from the house of Gideon, but from the house of David. In the fullness of time, the one and only true son of David will arise. He will be betrayed by his brothers and friends, and his enemies will seek to destroy him so that they might seize the kingdom for themselves. Although they will temporarily succeed in his crucifixion and death, God will have victory through his resurrection from the dead.

We as the church live in the dynamic of the same story. The evil one is constantly seeking to devour God's people, especially targeting those entrusted with the royal word of God. Although beset by treachery and violence, God will preserve our lives--even in hiding as he did for Jotham.

## #10 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 10:1-17

The Book of Judges is somewhat "uneven" in the space it allots to each judge. Some receive a fairly long expose, such as Deborah and Gideon. Others only have a brief mention with only a couple of verses summarizing their memorable act of deliverance. Thus Shamgar is commemorated in a single verse (3:31).

Still other judges receive even less detail. In this chapter, we read of Tola and Jair who successively judged Israel after Gideon. All we know of these two men is the fact that they existed, along with their ancestors, descendants, places of residence, and the length of their "judgeship." Of Tola, we also learn that he had 30 sons, 30 donkeys, and 30 cities. But we don't read the specifics of his mighty works of deliverance.

Both judgeships seem fairly "uneventful," and both end with a grand "thud": "And [the judge] died and was buried in X place" (10:2b, 5).

This very brief survey of two Judges is juxtaposed by a much longer description of Israel's further disobedience and rebellion. At first glance, it seems that Israel's sin is greater than the power and grace of God. Again they serve other gods. Again the Lord sells them into the hands of foreign oppressors. Again Israel is filled with distress and misery, which moves them to seek the Lord. But God is fed up--at least in his anthropomorphic form of revelation. Like a frustrated parent who constantly reminds their children to get their schoolwork done, only to see them fail the test again for lack of preparation, so the Lord throws his hands in the air and seems to give up: "Did I not save you from the Egyptians [and many other nations[\]]. Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. Go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress" (Judges 10:11-13).

Again, we might be puzzled as to how the unchangeable and eternal God can speak in this way. Did he not promise never to leave Israel or forsake them? Moreover, what logic is there in God bringing Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land only to destroy them? Does he build up only to tear down? Does he dig a hole only to fill it back up? Does he construct a ladder to heaven, only to pull it away?

In this chapter, we are confronted with the reality of what we call "anthropomorphism" in revelation. This refers to the fact that God often speaks of himself in the "form" (-morph) of a "man" (anthro-). In himself, God is eternal and does not change. But as he interacts with history, he reveals himself in a way that gives the appearance of change and attributes that are human in character. He does this to help us in his gracious condescension. Think of how you explain difficult adult concepts to little children. That is because little children lack the mental capacity for abstract thinking which comes later in adulthood. When I was a child I talked like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I set aside childish things (1 Cor. 13:11). Compared to God we are but infant children. So in the Bible, he condescends to our weakness and speaks of himself in "baby talk."

Both sections of the chapter reinforce its central point: the final deliverer has not come, and the final deliverance has not arrived. Although many judges arise through whom God's power is manifested, they are ultimately temporary. Just like Tola and Jair, all the other judges are dead and buried. Death therefore seems to have the victory over God's deliverance. Insofar as faithfulness is dependent upon a human judge, it lacks the permanence reflected in God's greater promise of eternal salvation.

Incidentally, we see a similar principle manifested in the priesthood. The sacrifices must be repeated not only because sin is repeated, but because the priests cannot continue in office as they are subject to death.

In Jesus Christ, we have one who holds his office forever. He is the final priest and final Judge (or King) who brings ultimate deliverance to God's people. The city of man will always look for a king from below to alleviate the miseries of this life. Jesus is the king from above who cures our miseries at their very source: a sinful unbelieving heart. In him, the never-ending cycle of sin, judgment, repentance, and deliverance comes to an end. He offers himself as a final sacrifice and defeats the evil one. Our oldest enemy is also our greatest one, who is vanquished with death, the last enemy to be destroyed.

Christ's exploits are so stupendous that we read far more than a brief verse about his arrival. Four Gospels unfold his mighty acts, and multiple letters proclaim his power to the church. As John tells us, if all of his great works had been written down, the world itself could not contain the books that would be written (John 21:25).

Rejection of him means certain destruction and death. There is no greater prophet, priest, or king. No judge shall arise after him. If we have no faith in Jesus we have only the other gods whom we serve who cannot save. But if we trust him we have membership in the kingdom of heaven and the promise of his irrevocable power and presence, for he is with us always, even to the end of the age.

## #11 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 11:1-40

After a couple of Judges who receive very little attention, we turn to another judge who receives a good deal of space: Jephthah.

The first thing we read about him suggests a strong difference from the previous judges. Unlike the weaker judges we saw before, Jephthah is a mighty warrior. But the very next phrase reveals his lowly origins in that he was the son of a prostitute. Still further, his might and power don't seem so impressive after we read that his brothers drive him out and bar him from any inheritance in his father's house as he is an illegitimate son. Given his strength, he is a clear threat to take it by force. In all this, we read echoes of the Joseph story albeit with a few different twists. Thus Jephthah fled his family and lived in Tob as a kind of vigilante with a band of worthless fellows. His military strength is canceled out by his immoral origins and exiled location.

But when the Ammonites arise to make war against Israel, Jephthah's brothers begin singing a different tune. The shift in musical key is jarring, but the threat of death outweighs the embarrassment of inconsistency. In exchange for headship over his father's house, Jephthah agrees to drive out the Ammonites. The LORD is witness to the agreement, even as he continues to work in his providence to use that which is sinful and weak to bring deliverance to his people.

But Ammon's beef with Israel has a long history to it. The king of Ammon declares that his making war against Israel is to win back the land that was taken from them in the Exodus. Jephthah makes clear that Israel did not take the land of Ammon. They were told by God not to harass Ammon as it had been given to the sons of Lot for a possession (Deut. 2:19). Israel did not take the Ammonite's land, but only that of some of the bordering nations who opposed them.

There is some debate as to the details of this border dispute. We do not need to settle every specific in this devotional. The point is that Israel possesses the land that God gave them in his sovereign power. Jephthah thus warns Ammon that just as Sihon was destroyed and Balak was defeated before them, so they will come to destruction if they do not cease their assault on Israel.



So far Jephthah's words reflect the words and works of God. The LORD is even a witness as a judge in the whole matter (11:27). But the next words that we hear seem mixed with much human imperfection. Jephthah makes what appears to be a rash vow, offering as a sacrifice to God whatever comes through the doors of his house if he is given victory over the Ammonites. Through the power of God's Spirit, he defeats the Ammonites and subdues them. When he returns home, his only child (a daughter) comes through the doors to meet him with a tambourine and dances. The music of celebration transforms into cries of agony because of the vow he had made. The precise meaning of the passage is debated. Some believe he actually sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering. Others appeal to the emphasis on her virginity and interpret the vow as being fulfilled in her remaining a virgin her whole life.

Whatever the proper meaning, the point is the same. Jephthah made a rash vow that was not proper before God. Such vows are sins and are not binding upon those who make them. Jephthah's failure to observe this principle is somewhat unclear. Given his love for his daughter, it seems he would have sought any possible excuse to be free from his vow. On the other hand, there is the prospect of embarrassment in making bold promises and failing to deliver. As many shrewd (Machiavellian) leaders have noted, it is sometimes better to appear cruel than weak. A similar thing occurs when Herod vows up to half his kingdom to his wife's daughter, and she asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter (Matt. 14:8-9).

Taken together the overall point of the narrative is very clear: God uses that which is sinful and weak to work his deliverance. This can create theoretical confusion in our minds. We ask abstract questions like: "How can a good God allow such great evil?" When we consider the practical purpose of these works things become clearer. In using that which is human, weak, and sinful to do his will God glorifies his power and grace while humbling man's pride.

In redemptive historical terms, these realities reminded Israel that the true and final deliverer had not yet come. When Jesus arrived in the fullness of time he shared in our weakness by living in a real human nature in a sinful world. Paul even says that he came in the "likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3). Although he never sinned, he possessed a human nature that bore the miseries and effects of sin vicariously in our place. In this weakness he was crucified, but he was raised by the power and Spirit of God. Ascending into heaven, he has taken possession of the land of heaven above and secured it for his fellow heirs. His vow and promise to us were neither sinful nor rash. In it, he promised not to sacrifice them in exchange for victory, but to sacrifice himself as an offering for sin.

In that place, God himself reigns. There are no raids against it from the forces of evil. There are no border disputes. It belongs to God and to his people and that eternally.

## #12 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 12:1-31

Jephthah's victory over Ammon was immediately mixed with elements of personal defeat. His rash vow turned out to involve the "sacrifice" of his daughter. Songs of victory changed into laments of agony. The pleasure of triumph became the pain of loss.

Things are simply not turning out well for Jephthah. In chapter 12 we read of further troubles with the men of Ephraim. Although he accomplished a great victory for the nation, he is not being given a ticker-tape parade. The men of Ephraim had been called to arms and came to Jephthah. They complain that they were not included in the call to battle against Ammon. You may remember how something similar was said in the days of Gideon. Ephraim also complained against him for taking all the glory of battle for himself and not including them in the fight.

This tribe seems to always be late to the party and blames it on the fact that they didn't seem to get an invitation. The problem (as Jephthah points out) is they did not answer the call.

Interestingly, this creates a very interesting narrative contrast between Jephthah and the two tribes. Jephthah keeps his word even to his hurt, but they betray it and are filled with lies. Jephthah risked his life in battle against the Ammonites, and "sacrificed" his daughter to keep his word (also rashly and sinfully promised). Gilead drove out Jephthah due to his illegitimate birth and declared that he would be barred from the inheritance. Only later they change their word and ask him to deliver them. Now Ephraim hears a call to battle that they refuse to answer, only to turn around and blame Jephthah for their own faithlessness. "Gaslighting" has been around since ancient times.

The resulting battle is a very ugly picture. Rather than fighting together against their common enemies, they turn against one another. The true source of a nation's or people's downfall is not from an outside enemy but from within. The devil has the easiest time destroying his enemies when he gets them to fight one another.

The bitterness of this conflict is so great that it has lasting effects. Instead of forgiveness, healing, and grace, they are motivated by petty vindictiveness. The fight starts over fortune and glory, but it ends with murder over how they pronounce words.

Jephthah's judgeship is filled with the true presence and power of God, but it is mixed on all sides with great weakness and imperfection.

Three more judges round out the chapter, who all receive a very brief treatment. In an, Elon, and Abdon take up a mere 7 verses. The only details we read concern their places of birth and death, the length of their judgeship, their sons and daughters, and the number of donkeys they had. Not all leaders are of the same caliber. Some by faith do mighty things or in unbelief. Others of us only get a brief mention. Although the latter is a humbling thing (who does not wish to be remembered as exceptional?) they also are written in the book of the triumph of faith.

The message of this chapter is clear. Men are weak and sinful. God works through them to do his will. But in this life, they are highly limited and filled with many weaknesses and imperfections. This should shape our view of others in our lives. How often do they fall short of what we want them to be for us? We are filled with disappointment in our marriages, families, workplaces, churches, and in our nations. People are not what we hoped they would be. People who should be joined in unity often devolve into division and civil war over petty things.

God gives us these reminders for a reason. There is only one Savior and one name under heaven by which we may be saved. Our hearts are so inclined to idolatry and to put our trust in princes that only bitter disappointment is sufficient to remind us that our hope can only be in him.

Thanks be to God for our perfect Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the promise-keeper, in whom all the promises of God are yes and amen. He brings unity to his church through his truth and Spirit. In him, we have a common confession expressed in all languages of the earth. He is our eternal king, subduing us to himself and protecting us from all our enemies. God gives us other humans to come alongside us to help us in our moments of weakness and sin, but they are but weak instruments in his powerful hand.

"Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day, his plans perish. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God" (Psalm 145:3-7)

## #13 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 13:1-25

As we have seen, several Judges receive scant attention. The last chapter ended with a short, punctuated survey of the judgeships of Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. Relatively short in length, not much is said about their exploits or conquests. Similarly, in Judges 3:31 we read one verse about Shamgar, and that he saved Israel by killing 600 Philistines with an oxgoad (i.e. a wooden stick with a piece of metal on the end).

By contrast, in Judges 13 we come to one of the longest sections of the book: the Judgeship of Samson. Even a quick first reading of the narrative justifies the attention given to this judge. There are few more memorable stories in all of ancient literature let alone the Bible.

Chapter 13 is unique thus far in that it contains a birth narrative for judge Samson. Birth narratives have appeared previously in the Scriptures, most notably with the Patriarchs Isaac and Jacob. Moses also receives an extended treatment regarding the special circumstances of his birth. Insofar as he is born as a deliverer of Israel it recalls the birth of Moses. Insofar as God gives his mother power to give birth in her barrenness he recalls the patriarch Isaac as the child of promise. Clearly, this child is special in redemptive history.

The exceptional character of Samson is also underscored by the fact that he is set aside as a Nazareth from birth. Numbers 6 contains the provisions for the Nazarites, in which an Israelite would dedicate themselves to God in a special way. As a sign of this unique dedication, they would drink no wine or strong drink, eat nothing unclean, and not cut their hair during the time of the vow. Since Samson is a Nazarite from the womb, his uniqueness and special character are doubly underscored (the Nazarite vow was typically temporary for a specified time).

Another distinctive aspect of the narrative is the hidden identity of the angel of the Lord. While his appearance also reinforces the special character of Samson, the glory of this angel is hidden. When he first appears to Manoah's wife his angelic glory is obvious (13:6). But when he appears to her husband Manoah thinks he is a man in need of hospitality and food (13:15). He does not know that he is the angel of the Lord due to his human-like, subdued appearance. However, when he sacrifices according to the angel's command, the angel goes up in a flame toward heaven from the altar. This confirms his identity as an angel of God.

What is the purpose of these scenes? As we read through the narrative, Samson will become famous for his great strength and power. Yet we also see great weaknesses revealed in his character. God will be pleased to work providentially to remove his natural strength. This will make clear that the power with which he is endowed is not from his natural ability but the Spirit of God.

The story of the angel's appearance reinforces this. The angelic power of a heavenly being is hidden in his appearance to Manoah. It is by faith in the words of his message that God's promise is effectual. So also the true source of Samson's saving might is hidden from human eyes. It also comes through the power of the word and ordinance of God in the Nazarite vow. Thus, when he cuts his hair, his power is extinguished.

The circumstances of his birth reinforce the same point. His mother was barren. Her womb was without power to bring new life. But by God's mighty hand, her womb is opened. Out of her good-as-dead body comes a savior to deliver them from death and oppression.

In the fullness of times, these patterns would recapitulate themselves in the Lord Jesus Christ. He did not come into this world fully formed as a grown man but was conceived in a human mother's womb. Samson was conceived by a married woman whose womb was opened by the power of God. Jesus was born of a Virgin without the agency of a human father. The Spirit of God was stirring upon him as he grew into a young man. Jesus was born of the Spirit and received it without measure in his baptism. Samson was ceremonially set apart as "holy" from birth as a Nazarite. Free from all taint of our corrupt human nature, Jesus was truly holy and without sin from the time of his conception on.

Jesus had the fullness of the power of God because he was God. But he came into this world in the weakness of an infant human nature. His glory and power were hidden from the world. He was eventually crucified in weakness but raised by the power of God.

As Christians, we have this hidden power in us through our union with the Lord Jesus Christ. Outwardly we are wasting away. We appear to be no different from the rest of the world. But inwardly we are renewed day by day through the power of God's Spirit.

How foolish it is, then, for Christians to use the tools of the powers of this age to fight the battles of God. With many of them, we will find a lot of agreement on the positions to which they hold. But their focus is misplaced. They see the power of heaven as a tool to change the shape of our life on earth. While the preaching of the Gospel will indirectly do a great deal to improve the earthly conditions or those who come under its influence, its purpose is not primarily the transformation of the earth but the translation of its recipients to heaven. Jesus, after all, did not simply rise from the dead but ascended into heaven where he is preparing a place for us.

Our weapons are not carnal but spiritual. They have no outward glory that makes them impressive to our earthly eyes. It is through the foolishness and weakness of preaching that God works his eternal saving might. The agents through which he brings the message are also weak and sinful men in need of the very grace that they proclaim. Even as the angel hides his glory from Manoah, so God "hides" the glory of his message from our earthly eyes. He entrusts his message to jars of clay, that the all surpassing power may be seen to be from God and not from man.

## #14 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 14:1-20

Samson's birth narrative indicated that he would be a holy child. Set apart from birth as a Nazarite, he would be specially consecrated to God to be a savior for Israel from the hand of the Philistines. What a shock for us as readers to discover that as a man he married one of them! His parents were certainly surprised and even pleaded with him to marry an Israelite. This is what God had commanded in the law, but Samson married the girl who was "right in [his] eyes" (14:3).

The ethics of this passage are debated by interpreters, but this phrase is a clue to properly understanding it. Some see verse 4 as a divine permission given to Samson to marry the Philistine since a military-strategic goal was in view. Others seem more correct and argue that this activity fits the a broader pattern in Judges of God using human weakness and sin for his greater divine purpose (see Judges 3:1-2). Samson's statement (cited above) in 14:3 that the woman was "right in [his] eyes" also echoes the book's summary of Israel's rebellion in which every man does what is right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25). God meant it for good, but Samson desires to satisfy his earthly desires. He is not looking at her with eyes of faith but the eyes of the flesh.

Still, God's power is at work. There is, of course, the age-old question of how a good God can allow and control evil. The Bible's answer is to simply state that he does, and appeal to the fact that he has a holiness and power that is far beyond what we can imagine as the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable God.

Within this human weakness, the plan and power of God are at work. Immediately after this story of his marriage to a Philistine woman, we read of the Spirit's power within his heart and body. It is so great that when the lion attacks him he tears it to pieces with his bare hands. After this he finds a swarm of bees in the lion's carcass, and scrapes out the honey with his hands, eating it as he goes. These may seem like incidental details, but they are important. As a Nazarite, Samson was not allowed to touch a dead carcass. Self-defense due to the attack of a lion may be an understandable exception to the rule, but not for eating honey. The narrative paints a picture of a man driven by the satisfaction of his fleshly appetites and not a hunger for God's holiness.

The next scene reinforces the same points. His feats of physical power are now contrasted with his ability to craft a riddle that no one can solve. Samson's clever wisdom is as unmatched as his



great strength. Yet Samson's Achilles heel is foreshadowed in this scene through the manipulative tactics of his Philistine wife. (We will see these patterns come to greater manifestation in the scene with Delilah).

His Philistine wife uses a form of emotional manipulation to get Samson to reveal the riddle's answer: "You don't love me, you only hate me!" Even non-Christian psychologists recognize this as a common form of manipulation in romantic relationships. One person positions themselves as the "victim" of the other person's neglect and then makes them "prove" their love by making them do something for them.

Samson's wife is clearly the "weaker vessel," not just generally but especially given Samson's great might. Yet the weaker subdues the stronger through persistent manipulation. Samson finally gives in and tells her the answer to placate her and end his marital misery. Yet when she betrays their trust he grows angry and acts out violently. He pays the Philistines the thirty garments by killing thirty in the town of Ashkelon and in hot anger returns to his father's house. Again, the picture is not a noble one. The vices of men and women are on full display. To top it all off, Samson essentially divorces his Philistine wife and she is given to his best man.

If many Christians saw the content of this story in the summary of a movie showing at the theater, they would probably think twice about going. It would certainly be deemed highly inappropriate for children. Yet Samson's antics are on full display in the pages of God's holy word.

In Samson, we see a strange mixture of heaven's power in earthly weakness. The true holiness of the Spirit is clearly in him, yet the corruption of the flesh remains and is very clear for all to see. We would like to think that Samson is an "extreme" example of this contrast--and there are many ways in which that is true. But each of us must recognize that we are all far more like Samson than we are unlike him.

Through Christ's resurrection and the Spirit, we are set apart from the world--even more so than the Nazarite! Christ has taken our human flesh into heaven. We have been raised with him and seated there with him. Yet in our hearts, the filth and corruption of the flesh remain. While its power and rule have been broken, its presence still lurks in the shadows.

Insofar as the Christian still has the remnants of the flesh within them, he is like a kitchen sink that has been cleaned and sanitized but still has gunk lining the pipes in the drain. The clog has been opened, but the filth still sticks to the PVC. Some of us manage to keep it from visible sight, but we wouldn't dare reach our hands down there even to check the garbage disposal.

By God's divine power, he keeps his holy water pure in us even though our pipes are filthy. He works through corrupt means to bring his pure word to us for our salvation. And so Jesus came as the final deliverer, born of sinful man and yet without any sin at all. Holy at his birth, he remained holy until his death in which he bore all the fruits of our corruption and evil. Having sent us his Holy Spirit, he washes and cleanses us to be his holy bride as we prepare for the marriage supper of the Lamb.

## #15 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 15:1-20

The last time we saw Samson he was not in a good mood. Having been manipulated and humiliated by his wife (who revealed the secret of his riddle to her people), he left Ashkelon and went back to his father's house. Having simmered down a bit he decides to go back to his wife to make up. Instead of bringing flowers, he takes a young goat to make peace and once again enjoy the blessings of marriage. There is something intensely bone-headed about his entire approach to marital reconciliation (on multiple levels) which should be obvious.

However, when he arrives in Ashkelon to execute his plan, he discovers that his wife's father has given her to his best man thinking he had discarded her. He offers him her more beautiful younger sister, but Samson takes his words as an insult added to injury and continues his angry rampage. Having killed 30 men of Ashkelon earlier, he now catches 300 foxes and through them torches their standing grain. His burning anger results in literal fire to their food supply. When the Philistines find out about the situation, they retaliate by burning his father-in-law and ex-wife with fire. Although moments ago he had been angry with them, he takes their execution as a slight to himself and strikes them hip and thigh with a great blow. Samson is a man who gets angry and gets even no matter what the situation.

The situation quickly escalates to a national level when the Philistines assemble and encamp against Judah to raid Lehi. The Judahites fear their Philistine overlords and are content to live as their servants. They determined to hand Samson over to them in order to save their own lives. Samson consents to be bound provided the Judahites will not attack him themselves. Clearly, he has a secret plot to execute.

When he meets the Philistines, the Spirit of the Lord rushes upon him and the ropes that bind him are burning with fire--note the theme of fire throughout the narrative! With the jawbone of a donkey, he strikes down 1,000 Philistine men. After this, he is parched and prays to the Lord for water. God splits open the ground and water comes forth to refresh his body.

In this passage, we again see the same strange mixture of divine power and human sin. The one is pure and holy, the other is unholy. Samson's anger is like a fire that produces fire and destruction. But God's Spirit is the water that douses the flames of our corruption. It is quite interesting that in a passage filled with Samson's fiery rage, God sends his Spirit to strengthen Samson and bring water for his thirst. The fires of sin are quenched with the living water of God.

Samson's motives are far from pure and holy. They are transparently and obviously sinful. His marriage to the Philistine is clearly based on how it can satisfy his lusts, and his saving activity is driven by his desire for vengeance. Yet God sovereignly uses his imperfect motives to execute his perfect plan.

This passage is a clear reminder that we must always be looking beyond the human level when assessing our lives--whether personally, within our families, or even within society. God is at work, executing his saving plan even when motives are mixed, impure, or even flat-out sinful.

In the history of the Christian church, we have seen how this applies to other church leaders beyond Samson. David was a man after God's own heart, yet committed murder and adultery. Peter denied his Lord and later compromised the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Paul was a persecutor of the church. Likewise, we hear sad stories of great preachers and beloved pastors falling into grievous sins such as adultery or embezzlement of church funds. In such instances, these ministers should be disciplined and removed from office according to the command of Jesus. Yet we still confess that the efficacy of their ministry is not dependent upon their piety or intentions but on the power of God. And so Paul rejoices that whether in pretense or in truth Christ is preached. This fact is no excuse for our sin. The unrepentant sinner will come to God's judgment: raised up and used for God's purposes to magnify his power and purity. But the repentant will be forgiven to the glory of God's mercy and grace. At the same time, all of us are subject to the remnants of corruption. Church leaders are no exception. While they must faithfully manifest qualifications for office, they will not be perfect. We should not look to them as "experts" who have mastered life--they are not our human saviors who can fix all our problems for us. Instead, they are fellow saints who struggle with us in our common battle against the flesh. They are here to help us see how by turning to Jesus we can be forgiven and grow in grace through union and communion with him.

So it is with all sinful human beings. But not so with Jesus. In him God's perfect saving plan and perfect moral character perfectly align. He comes to his bride not to satisfy his own desires, but to love her and give himself up for her in sacrificial love. When he stands against his enemies he loves them, even praying for their repentance and God's forgiveness. Through him, we receive the Spirit of fire--not to destroy but to purify. And in him, we receive the water of life. When we drink of it by faith we shall never be thirsty again. Strengthened and sustained we can walk with him in patience, holiness, and self-control as we await the coming of the great and final judge who will rescue us from every evil deed and bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom.

## #16 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 16:1-31

Samson truly has a way with Philistine women. In direct violation of God's word and the protestations of his parents, he saw a beautiful woman from this pagan people and took her as his wife. Things did not turn out well for Samson. Through manipulation and deceit, she humiliated him before her people. The subsequent events up the entire nation in jeopardy. By God's grace and the power of God's Spirit, the Lord intervened through sinful human means to deliver his people.

Now in Gaza, Samson sees another attractive Philistine woman who is clearly capitalizing on her physical desirability: she is a prostitute. Samson's gratification of his sinful desires follows a straight line. He sees her. He goes into her. There is no circuitous struggle, no wrestling of conscience, and no hesitation. Desire conceives and it gives birth to sin. Once again, the strong man is compromised through the seductive power of the weaker vessel. The Philistines undoubtedly remember Samson's weakness for women and take advantage of the situation. Laying in wait until midnight they plot an ambush to kill Samson. But when the clock strikes twelve he pulls up the gates of the city with his bare hands from their anchors in the ground and carries them on his shoulders to Hebron. It's hard to imagine a more stark contrast between physical strength and moral weakness.

In verse 4 we have yet another episode with a Philistine woman and the famous scene between Samson and Delilah. She takes prostitution to another level as she is conscripted as a secret agent in the Philistine military "covert operations" division. Each of the lords of the Philistines gives her 1100 pieces of silver to seduce him and discover the secret of his great strength. She gladly trades sex for money. She knows the power of her seduction and eagerly profits from it.

Most of us are familiar with the unfolding scenes of the narrative. Ironically, they pretty clearly reveal that Samson is aware of possible plots against him, and thus keeps misdirecting Delilah as to the source of his strength. First, he says that bowstrings will weaken him. After that, it is new ropes. Next it is his hair, which is in the ballpark but not due to its style. As a Nazarite, it is its length that is determinative for his consecrated status.

Like his first wife, Delilah resorts to the power of manipulation to steer Samson where she would lead. Over and over again she states: "You don't really love me..." While Samson's heart was not pure with the selfless sacrificial love reflective of Christ, he definitely had plenty of affection for her in his heart. It is clearly not healthy for one partner in a relationship to force

their spouse to prove their love over and over again. Saying "If you love me you would do X," is often a form of manipulation in which we essentially declare a verdict or judgment upon our spouse's motives in order to force them to do what we want. To be sure, there may be times when a person's pattern of abusive behavior may call us to legitimately question their love (which is a whole different question). While both men and women can fall into operating this way, it is much more common among wives than husbands. Sometimes wives fall into this pattern without realizing it because of a sense of weakness and vulnerability. Other times it is self-conscious and high-handed sinful. Clearly, the latter is the case with Delilah!

Through her repetitive attempts at deceitful manipulation, his soul becomes so vexed that he reveals the secret of his great strength: his status as a Nazarite before God.

Having learned the secret of his great strength, she goes in for the kill. She lulls Samson to sleep while he rests on her lap, only to shave his hair while he slumbers.

At that very moment, the text tells us that the Lord had left him (Judges 16:20). Zapped of his divine power, the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes, and bound him with shackles. Humiliated and weakened, he is made to grind at the mill in the prison.

But this is not the end of Samson's story. Sinful and weak though he may be, Samson is still a Nazarite to God and a member of his people. The Philistines make a huge mistake. Their lords decide to hold a great feast for Dagon their god to praise him for giving Samson into their hand. But Dagon had nothing to do with Samson's downfall. He had nothing to do with the Philistine's exaltation over Israel. Just as God was working through sinful Samson to save his people, so he was working through the sinful Philistines to chastise them. All glory belongs to one true God!

Adding insult to injury, the Philistines bring Samson to the feast to entertain them in his humiliated condition. Little did they know that the entertainment would be memorialized in Scripture for the people of Yahweh.

Standing between the pillars of the house, Samson prayed to the Lord. Having been forced to humiliation by God's providential working, he now humbles himself in prayer. The Lord answers his prayer and for one last moment, he recovers his great strength and pushes down the pillars of the house. The fall of the house meant the destruction of all who were in it. Thus God saved his people through Samson's final feat of might and strength. In his death, he brought greater victory than in his life.

Much of Samson's life provides a reverse negative of God's coming Savior. Jesus is the righteous one, and Samson is corrupt in his unrighteousness. But in this last scene, we see a positive picture of Christ's saving work. Humbled and near death, Jesus consummated our salvation by sacrificing himself on the cross. The power of his death was greater than anything he wrought in his earthly life. Just as Samson sacrificed himself to save his people, so Jesus is our perfect sacrifice to destroy our true enemies: the world, the devil, and our sin. Through him we are humbled. Entrance into the kingdom of heaven is a process of death and resurrection. Our sin is exposed for all to see as we repent before God. Through faith we are united to the one who died and rose again. Those who refuse will come to judgment and bow the knee by force. But those who humble themselves in faith will be exalted by the power of God.

## #17 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 17:1-13

At this point in the narrative we have finished the story of the twelve judges of Israel. All of them reveal God's saving power expressed through increasingly weak and sinful human agents. We began with Othniel, the younger brother of Caleb. Heroically obedient in faith, he conquers Kiriath-Sepher to partially complete the conquest. But we ended with Samson. Although externally holier than any other judge as a Nazarite, internally and morally he was highly compromised. In this he is an embodiment of the life of the nation. Israel is truly in a downward spiral. The glory days of Moses and Joshua are a distant memory.

This chapter begins the final section of the book. It is a kind of unholy epilogue cataloguing their descent to the bottom of the sink of corruption. It is punctuated by a repeated refrain that underscores its central point. We read it first in 17:6, and again at the conclusion of the book in 21:25. The first part is repeated in 18:1 and 19:1. The refrain is this: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

This reality is first illustrated in the story of Micah and the Levite. Recall that in the story of Samson we read a contrast between his holy office as a Nazarite and his unholy life as a sinner. Similarly we read here of a Levite with a holy office, but an unholy utilization of his person. This passage develops the stark contrast between the holy things in Israel and their corruption through their spiritual unholiness.

The story begins with a holy confession on the part of Micah. He acknowledges that he stole 1100 pieces of silver, and thus was the proper object of his mother's curse. His mother rejoices at his confession, which is proper for situation. There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than 99 righteous persons who do not need repentance.

All seems good and well. Perhaps in this family we have a pure remnant in the midst of impure Israel. Yet right after this we read that they plan to make images with the restored silver. Images were forbidden by God in the second commandment. To add to his disobedience, he then ordains one of his own sons to be a priest--complete with his own personal family shrine, household gods, and priestly attire. Such things were also forbidden by God, as the priesthood had fallen only to the tribe of Levi.



What a strange mixture of moral purity in the confession and repentance of Micah with the ritual impurity of this "Lone Ranger" approach to God with a private family priest!

While the approach seems to be suitable for the time being, later a young man from Bethlehem sojourns in the area. He turns out to be a Levite. Micah senses an opportunity to improve his current situation. Instead of an Ephraimite he could have a real Levite to serve as his private family priest! After they agree on a salary of ten pieces of silver and a housing allowance, the Levite dwells with him to serve as his priest. Micah is convinced that now he will have even greater blessing from the Lord.

Of course, none of this will meet with God's blessing as it is all contrary to his word. The Bible does not allow for private priests as they are to serve all the people of God. Association with the holy things does not bring blessing from the Lord.

The whole episode is bizarre to modern readers. It would be even more bizarre to an ancient Israelite familiar with the law of God. The inconsistencies of the passage abound and leave us scratching our heads. Yet all too often similar inconsistencies characterize our own lives. We give certain aspects of our spiritual lives a lot of focus even while we are blind to other ones. This has been true throughout church history. For example, when I was in seminary I read the major works of Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm is perhaps most famous for his articulation of the idea of Christ's substitutionary atonement. The infinite God pays the infinite debt of sin through the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ. But from the same writer we read several prayers that he penned making petition to the Virgin Mary!

Inconsistencies like these are very easily to spot and condemn in others. We are not so eager to do the same to ourselves.

We are consecrated as saints to God. Often we connect the dots in important areas of our lives. Other times we are blindly ignorant of them. We are inconsistent.

Like Israel, we need a king to subdue our sinful hearts and wills and bring them into alignment with the will of our Heavenly Father. In Jesus we have such a king. He holds a holy office and lived a holy life. He lived a life of perfect submission to his Father's authority. By grace he sends his Spirit that we may no longer seek to do only what is right in our own eyes but before the eyes of God.

## #18 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 18:1-31

The book of Judges has an ugly ending. In chapter 17 we saw some bizarre inconsistencies with Micah and his personal Levite. On the one hand, there does seem to be some measure of repentance in his confession of theft--he took 1100 pieces of silver from his mother! Yet the celebration of his "coming to life" takes the form of idolatry in the making of a carved image. Moreover, he ordains someone from his own house as a personal priest and later buys his own Levite in a misguided attempt to procure a blessing from the Lord.

In chapter 19 these bizarre inconsistencies grow into a national conflict. Sin spreads like gangrene. A little leaven leaven's the whole lump. Sin will not stay isolated in one person or one family. Without God's power to subdue and restrain the infection will spread to the body. In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man does what is right in his own eyes.

The chapter begins with the people of Dan. The scene is a bit odd as it presents the Danites as not yet having received their inheritance. If this chapter takes place chronologically after Samson, this is a bit of a puzzle. One possibility is that there could be a time jump backwards in history. Chronologically the passage would thus be out of temporal order. This is no threat to the infallibility of the Bible. We know various places in the OT and NT where things are "dischronologized." Since the Bible is not intending to give us a chronological order in these sections, there is no inconsistency. It follows a logical order to reinforce a key point rather than a strictly temporal one.

It could also be the case the Danites had been dispossessed of their inheritance through the remnants of the foreign nations among them. The apparent inheritance "confusion" of the Danite's situation would fit right into the spiritual confusion of the era.

Whatever the case, the unfolding narrative is an expose of how backward and corrupt Israel had become in their thinking and acting. Rather than driving out the foreign nations as God had commanded, the Danites determined to dispossess their own brothers and take the land as their own. In a twisted way, they reenact Israel's initial spying out the land, only to find a the Levite in the house of Micah. Naturally puzzled as to the whole arrangement, they ask for an explanation. The information clearly reveals that his employment by Micah is a sinful one, yet they then treat him as a private seer to inquire of God as to the success of their mission. His

positive answer only compounds the strangeness of the whole situation. Sin is piling upon sin as it seems the nation is devolving into a form of spiritual anarchy: every man does what is right in his own eyes.

After this, the five men come to the city of Laish in the area of the Sidonians. It seemed an ideal place. It had plenty of wealth and resources, far from the greater Populations of the Sidonians. It was independent and self-sufficient. Returning to their brothers they give a good report about the land. What an ironic contrast to the earlier report of the spies in the days of Joshua. At that time most of them gave a bad report about the land that God had truly promised them. Now they unanimously give a good report about a land that God had not given them. Things are truly backward.

On the way to capture the city, 600 fighting men of Dan pass by the house of Micah and the Levite, noting that he has an ephod, household gods, and images. They decide to take them for themselves (as they were quite valuable). Additionally, they persuade the Levite to leave Micah's house and become a priest to their tribe and clan in Israel. They came to dispossess the pagan city of Laish, but ended up dispossessing the house of their brother.

After this they go to Laish and capture the town, burning it with fire. There they set up the images as their own worship center, and establish the house of Jonathan (Moses's son) as their priesthood.

There is not a single element of the passage that reflects faith and obedience to God. Each act in the narrative is a twisted perversion of what God had actually called them to. He gave the nation a priesthood, not a single family. He established the tribe of Levi as the priesthood, and the family of Aaron as the high priest--not the descendants of Jonathan. He ordained that he should be worshiped--in Jerusalem, not in Laish. God's people were to approach him through his word, not through images made with human hands.

Truly, in those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

The situation will only get more bizarre and perverse. Such is the trajectory of the sinful human heart outside of the reign of God's Spirit from within. The external helps God gave Israel could not and did not heal their corruption. They could not even restrain them. The sinful human

heart twists and distorts the very things God gave them to help them avoid sin into things that give them opportunity for more sin.

The problem was not racial, national, or ethnic. It was not an external "system" that was the root of their problem. It was the sinfulness of the human heart. Paul tells us in Romans 7 that sin is so sinful that it can take a good and holy thing (the law of God) and twist it to work evil and unholiness. Sin produced death in us through what is good in order that sin might be shown to be sin.

Such is the human heart of every sinner, whether from the Danites, Ephraimites, or the Sidonians. Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ, the king of kings! By his royal power, he subdues our sinful hearts that we may no longer do what seems right in our sinful eyes, but that which is right in the eyes of God.

## #19 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 19:1-30

The previous chapters have presented us with some bizarre inconsistencies. On the one hand, we read of Micah's confession of theft to his mother (a good thing!). But on the other hand their celebration of his repentance consists of the fabricating of metal idols and the ordination of private family priest. The first is in keeping with God's moral law, while the second is a blatant violation of God's ritual law. The latter is only further compounded when he hires a Levite to take on the role of his household priest. While he clearly knows he needs a priest and must worship God, he is doing these things his own way, not God's. He does what is right in his own eyes and what is evil in the eyes of the Lord.

Things get stranger in the next passage, where the tribe of Dan inexplicably is still looking for an inheritance likely years after the era of settlement. They end up dispossessing the city of Laish--far away from God's originally allotted area for them. Along the way they also dispossess their own Israelite brother. Things almost escalate into a regional war. Eventually restraint keeps such a conflict at bay. The Danites establish the land as their own, ordaining their own parallel priesthood from the family of Jonathan and setting up Micah's carved image for worship.

Things are quickly devolving in a downward spiral of evil. Chapter 19 brings us further down into this pit of corruption with the story of an anonymous Levite and his concubine. Again the narrator chooses to highlight someone with a holy office (a Levite) with a very unholy life. This pattern had begun with Samson--a Nazarite to God. But it also reflected the nation as a whole. They were a holy nation set apart to the Lord. Ritually we see that they still carry within them the consciousness of this reality. But they are quite limited and blind to its full application to their lives.

The story begins with this holy Levite taking to himself a concubine from Bethlehem. A concubine was a woman who lived in a man's house but did not have the same rights as a wife. There was a legal recognition of her status, but it is obviously not in keeping with God's creational design for marriage (one man and one woman in lifelong union). It is clearly not in keeping with the typical holiness of the priesthood.

Very soon we discover that the concubine was unfaithful to him. Unholiness begets more unholiness. So the Levite sends her back to her father's house. But after four months he decides

he wants to bring her back. The scene recalls Samson's vacillations with his Philistine wife in Judges 14. Clearly the motivating factor here is not purity before God, but the shifting emotions and desires connected to lust, anger, and jealousy. When the Levite returns to retrieve his concubine, his father-in-law greets him with joy--with absolutely no discussion of the incident of infidelity and its aftermath. They seem happy just to eat, drink, and be merry. It's like the story of the prodigal son, but without the key moment of humble repentance and forgiveness.

Although the father and the concubine urge him to stay another night, the man determines to continue on his journey. After some disputes about where and when to stop and rest, they eventually make it to Gibeah. But when they arrive it was apparently too late and no one would take them into their house to spend the night. They rest in the middle of the town square.

Until an old man of Ephraim comes in from a late day of work. He discerns that he is a Levite and does his duty to provide for his needs and takes him into his home. He warns him not to spend the night in the town square. Apparently he knows of a danger about which the Levite is ignorant.

We soon discover what that danger is. While they are eating in the man's house, a band of worthless fellows surround the house and demand that the Levite be given to them so that they might rape him (!). The scene clearly recalls the great wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, yet on an even more corrupt level. These are Israelites demanding to do unholy, abominable things to a holy officer of Israel.

Like Sodom and Gomorrah, the proposed "solution" to their proposed evil is but another form of abominable corruption. Instead of the Levite the old man offers his concubine, whom they proceed to rape senselessly until he dies. His reaction is even more wickedly bizarre. Rather than mourn her and give her a proper burial, he divides her body into 12 pieces and sends them to the 12 tribes of Israel.

The concluding verse highlights the unprecedented and bizarre nature of this episode. Nothing like it had ever happened since the Exodus from Egypt. The narrator even steps out of his telling of the story to directly address the reader: "Consider it, take counsel, and speak" (19:30).

Such is the evil fruit of the wickedness of the human heart when left to go its own way. If the passage provokes a reaction of severe disgust within you, then you are getting the point! Left to itself the human heart is caught in a downward spiral of corruption and increasing perversity. This downward spiral of idolatry and sexual immorality is well catalogued by the apostle Paul in Romans 1. It is noteworthy that he mentions how the wicked become "inventers of doing evil" (Romans 1:30).

Thanks be to God for his restraining grace. But thank be to him all the more for Jesus our holy Savior. Although Jesus was born under a cloud of suspicion regarding the sexual purity of his mother, what was conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:19-20).

## #20 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 20:1-48

What began as an act of bazaar unfaithfulness in a single household quickly escalated into a regional conflict. Sin does not like to stay hidden in the corner, where we often think we can keep it tucked out of sight. It spreads like a cancer. It desires to infect the whole body. Apart from God's restraining and saving grace, that is exactly what it does.

the news of the abominable sin of the men in Gibeah in Benjamin spread very quickly. And the concubine had been cut up into 12 pieces and sent throughout Israel so it's not hard to understand why. The response of shocking outrage doesn't surprise us. However, it is noteworthy that we often hear of heinous acts of evil on the evening news and similarly respond with shock and outrage. Yet how often this is simply a projection of our own suppressed sense of sinfulness before the Almighty God. We loudly condemn acts of evil committed by a few, but quietly excuse our own. We speak and act as if evil has been concentrated only in the hands of the extremely corrupt and wicked, when the truth is that sin and evil have spread to all mankind.

The Israelites muster 400,000 men to assemble for battle against Benjamin. Benjamin and Gibeah manage 26,700. Since the people of Benjamin would not give up the evil man of Gibeah, the tribes of Israel are determined to destroy them with the edge of the sword. How far the mighty have fallen! Israel was brought into the land to dispossess the foreign nations, and now one of its tribes is committing acts of evil more heinous than they ever did. There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Wickedness and sin will be judged. God is no respecter of persons.

On the human side, there is no righteousness to be found. But on the divine side, the text is clear that the Lord is directing this army at his righteous command. There is bloodshed and losses on both sides. Initially 22,000 men of the Israelite army fall by the edge of the sword. But taking courage, they reform the battle line and attack again at God's direction. On the second day, 18,000 men of the Israelite army perish in battle. At God's command, they go up a third time in and decimate the army of Benjamin. 25,100 men perish, leaving only a handful remaining.

The text contains some more details regarding the execution of the various military strategies. But the main point is clear. This Israelite "Civil War" results in severe bloodshed and loss on



both sides. By God's providential working, the ugliness and death that lies on the inside of their evil hearts is brought out into the open for all to see.

God is merciful and patient. His kindness is intended to lead us to repentance. Yet how quickly the false logic of our sinfulness turns his grace into an approbation of our evil. When we are able to recognize sin as sin it is typically only in others. We judge others while we excuse ourselves when we are all condemned before a righteous God.

There is nothing in the Israelites that would commend them to God. On every front they are experiencing his chastisement and judgment. To be sure, he raised an army from among the Israelites to chastise Benjamin. But the fact that God uses someone as an instrument of his judgment is no proof of their righteousness. Indeed, God used wicked pagans from the surrounding nations to chastise Israel throughout the entire era of the Judges. Having raised them up for his purposes, he then consigns them to judgment for their own sins. Ironically, Israel itself gets enveloped in this same pattern.

All have sinned. There is no one righteous, not even one. Thanks be to God for God promised King! By his Spirit he reigns in our hearts that we might follow God's will and not our own. While the devil divides to conquer the church, Christ unites us in the holiness and purity of his word of truth. Christ came as our brother not to war against us in judgment, but to lay down his life as a sacrifice for our sins.

## #21 - Devotional Meditations on Judges 21:1-25

In this chapter, we witness the aftermath of Israel's downward spiral of rebellion and corruption. The holy nation had become as wicked as the pagan peoples the Lord had driven out--even more so! In Gibeah of Benjamin, there is such great wickedness that they nearly re-enact the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah. The nation is left divided and devouring itself in a bloody civil war. Previously the Lord had raised up foreign kings to chastise and punish Israel. Now the Lord raises Israel against itself, leaving great losses on both sides.

Chapter 21 reveals a deeper problem for Benjamin's future. The men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah to never give one of their daughters in marriage to a Benjaminite. This functionally cut out Benjamin from their union and fellowship with the other tribes.

The proposed "solution" to this problem continues the pattern of bizarre mixtures of good and bad. On the one hand, the people have compassion for Benjamin. Rather than revoking their sinful oath, they instead plot another course of action. (Note the parallel to the rash vow of Jephthah from earlier in the book of Judges).

They find an Israelite city where no one had come up to fight in the recent Civil War: Jabesh-Gilead. They devote it to destruction, killing all the men, married women, and children. But they find 400 virgins whom they take as possible wives for the Benjaminites. The scene is twisted and brutal. While the Lord had clearly worked in his providence to use these events for his purposes of judgment, there is no indication of his giving his divine approbation to this event. Note well that the motivation for this brutality is a mixture of compassion and vengeance. We will live in a day in which compassion is seen as a paramount virtue. Yet by itself, it can lead to great evil when not properly calibrated to God and his word.

The 400 women are not enough for the tribe of Benjamin, so they come up with another plan. Every year a feast to the Lord is held at Bethel. This feast, of course, is in violation of God's word and was mixed with idolatry and pagan practices. Special emphasis is placed on the participation of young women who would dance in the feasts. The syncretistic worship of the people at Shiloh involved images of the pagan gods of fertility. Clearly, this is not a passage that justifies "liturgical dance." The men decide to wait in ambush and snatch a dancing girl to take as his wife.

It goes without saying that none of this is in keeping with God's word for marriage. Marriage cannot be forced. It requires the willing consent of both parties. This was true even in Biblical times where "arranged" marriages were the norm. Still, more obviously, women are not objects to be captured or hunted like animals but fellow image bearers and heirs with men of the grace of life.

The logic justifying this practice is as baffling as the acts themselves. The text anticipates that these women's fathers or brothers will complain about their sinful acts. They will argue for its necessity based on the alleged irrevocability of the oath they took. But the oath was neither proper nor God-honoring. As such, it was not binding upon those who took it. Rather than acknowledge its rashness, they invent ways of getting around the technicalities of their oath and thus pile sin upon sin.

In the days of Jesus, we see a similar pattern of improper oath-taking. The Pharisees and Scribes invent all kinds of strange rules and exceptions to their oaths and vows. Jesus tells them not to swear by heaven, earth, or Jerusalem, but only in the name of God. Their vows must be lawful and they must be kept.

In contrast to the sinful words and vows of Israel, God's promises remain true and steadfast. Even though his people had devolved into corruption, evil, and bloodshed, his gracious promises remained with them. In those days there was no king in Israel, but God would one day bring them his promised king. After Judges comes Ruth, which tells the story of the survival of the ancestors of King David. Out of famine and death God would bring new life in Obed. He would father Jesse, who would father King David. From his loins, Jesus would come. Pure, sinless, and undefiled, he would live a life of perfect righteousness. His death would come because of a sinful promise and plot to put him to death (John 11:53, 57). Yet out of their sinful plots, God would bring grace and righteousness. Through his death, he would atone for his people's sins. Despite his people's corruption and sinfulness his promises would remain true.

His word remains true for us today. By his Spirit, he makes us members of his kingdom. To enter that kingdom we must surrender ourselves to Christ and bow our knees to him. We must no longer do what is right in our own eyes, but what is right in the eyes of God. Sin must no longer reign in our mortal bodies. It must be crucified and put to death that righteousness might reign leading to eternal life in the kingdom of Jesus Christ.