
March 8 : Scriptures Judges 7-9

SUMMARY

Chapter 7 opens with the Lord preparing Gideon for battle against the Midianites camped in the Jezreel Valley. The Midianite army is nearby at the hill of Moreh, and the 32,000 Israelite warriors camp by the spring of Harod. This camp is in the same area where Barak's battle with Sisera began almost 40 years earlier. But Yehovah doesn't want Israel to brag that they won the battle by sheer numbers (7:2). The Lord wants to make sure Israel knows it was He who gave them the victory when it comes so He begins to pare down Gideon's fighting force. First, He uses the Torah's "Go home if you're scared" provision (7:3, from Deuteronomy 20:8). 22,000 warriors leave. With just 1/3 of the force remaining, the Lord says those are still too many to fight. Now comes the water test. Gideon leads them to the spring and tells all the men to drink. Yehovah sets the test that sifts the warriors. He has the soldiers do "laps." What did this test prove? Those who went to their knees to drink were not concerned about being alert, even when safe. The remaining 300 demonstrate military readiness. The Lord tells Gideon to attack the camp (7:9), *but* if Gideon is still a little afraid, the Lord allows another faith builder (7:10-11). Now it's time for a little nighttime reconnaissance to check the enemy's status. Gideon is going to hear what the Lord is already doing to undercut the Midianites' courage.

The Midianites have settled in the valley as thick as locusts with innumerable camels. How could Gideon offset such overwhelming odds? The Lord plans to use the fear factor. What is fear? Many use the acronym, F.E.A.R. – False Evidence Appearing Real. Faith strengthens, but fear weakens. The Lord has worked faith into Gideon. Now, He's going to work fear into the enemy. It only takes a little fear to work through a whole army like yeast in flour. The Lord inserts the false evidence into the Midianite camp through a dream. This dream and rumor reinforce the reputation that Gideon has begun to build. The rumor spreads, and so does the fear. The rising fear weakens the army's resolve and puts a "hair trigger" on the enemy warriors (7:13). Furthermore, this fear is spreading at night. Ever notice how the darkness magnifies things and how even the smallest thing looks huge by its shadow? When the light comes, and we see things for what they really are, we often laugh that we were scared at all. But the Midianites aren't laughing. They're shaking.

Gideon and his servant return to camp with a plan to magnify the appearance of Israelite numbers in the dark. Gideon calls for three 100-man companies with jars, torches, voices, and ram's horn battle trumpets (*shofarim*). Like previous judges, God uses weak people and strange weapons. When the "lights come on" at around 10:00 pm, the just fallen asleep soldiers awaken in a groggy and confused state. The entire Midianite army panics,

starts fighting each other in the dark, and makes a break for the border out of fear! They were probably falling over each other in the dark, thinking they would die at any moment. Gideon and his men set off in hot pursuit. Fighters from Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh join Gideon in the chase.

Gideon issues an urgent call to the Ephraimites, whose land was south of the battlefield. The Midianites flee southeast for the Jordan river fords along the Jezreel valley to the river and then cut east into the Midianites' territory. Since Ephraim was south, Gideon called on them to run directly east to the ford to cut off the enemy's escape. (Exciting, isn't it?) The Ephraimites succeed! They capture Oreb and Zeeb, Midianite princes, and lop off their heads.

And now, in chapter 8, the men of Ephraim confront Gideon. The Ephraimites are angry with him because they weren't involved in the original "call up" of the Israelite Defense Forces against Midian. Now think back. Of what tribe was Gideon? That's right, Manasseh, Ephraim's brother. You know, descendants of the firstborn Manasseh whose firstborn status was transferred to his brother, Ephraim, under Grandpa Jacob's hands (Genesis 48:13-19)? So is Ephraim upset because they think their designated firstborn status is being challenged? Do they believe Gideon is playing favorites with his own tribe? But Gideon deals with it diplomatically.

Gideon contrasts Ephraim capturing the "esteemed" princes with Manasseh "simply" routing the whole Midianite army. Yes, a bit of well-placed flattery works at times. Gideon's quite right, too. The Lord had him start the battle, and the Lord's work turned the battle. Gideon was only chasing down the enemy after being thrown into panic. The Ephraimite warriors blocked Midian's escape and captured the princes after Gideon's "initial harvest." In truth, Ephraim's "gleanings" really were more important than what Gideon and his 300-man force accomplished (although Gideon was the first person to step out in faith)! Gideon sells himself short to soothe Ephraim's feelings.

But the battle isn't finished. Gideon and 300 warriors cross the Jordan to pursue the still-running Midianite men. Gideon and his army are exhausted when they come across two cities and ask for refreshment so they can finish the battle. The leaders of both towns decline, likely because they're not confident that Gideon will win. If he doesn't, the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan will feel the Midianites' wrath when the enemy recovers. So Gideon promises to deal with them when he does succeed.

Gideon does indeed win the war. Boy, does he win! Out of the Midianites' 120,000 armed men, only 15,000 remain (8:10). Gideon's entourage falls upon them, captures the two

kings, and the panicked survivors run. With the two Midianite kings in tow, Gideon revisits the two unhelpful cities, executes his promised punishment, and kills the kings.

And now the not-so-good part of the Gideon account. As a reward for his service, Gideon refuses an offer of kingship but asks for gold, which he stupidly fashions into a priestly ephod (8:24-27). Why did Gideon do this? Perhaps it was a way to memorialize the Lord's victory by copying the ephod, the high priest's outer garment, to keep Israel on the high priest's heart and help him communicate with the Lord. Instead of looking to Gideon and his family, Gideon turns Israel toward a physical reminder of their True King. Gideon was well-intentioned, but human nature soon takes over. The Israelites start worshipping the garment.

Israel gets peace for forty years (roughly a generation). Gideon marries multiple women and has seventy sons (8:30). Although he refused to be Israel's king, it seems he acted like a typical middle eastern king with a harem. And as if many wives were not enough, he had a concubine in a neighboring town. Success seems to be going to his head. Gideon's concubine in Shechem bore him a son, whom Gideon named Abimelech, "my father is king." Is this an indication of Gideon's feeling about God or himself?

Israel stays faithful as long as the physical judge is around. But after Gideon dies, Israel again prostitutes itself (8:32-33). They pursue the Baals (Canaanite gods), but now there's a twist. Syncretism (mixing belief systems) creeps in, mixing Baal worship with Yehovah worship. The Israelites forgot the God who saved them, and they also forgot the man God used. They even start resenting Gideon's family, probably for their king-like attitudes and actions.

I'm not going to lie. Chapter 9 is an ugly chapter. Gideon's son, by a concubine (not nearly the status as an "official" wife), plots a coup against his brothers. Abimelech appears to be embracing his name (my father is king) as indicating his right to rule, even if it means assassinating all of his brothers. He plots with his family and Shechem, who are more than eager to back him. They help him hire killers, and just like that, they kill the competition, except for one son, Jotham (9:5).

Jotham escapes and stays out of reach as he tells (prophesies) a story about what happened and what will happen! In Jotham's parable, he brands Abimelech as the most worthless son in Gideon's family. "Finally, the trees approached the useless bramble which had nothing better to do. He was not only prompt to accept the honor but became quite arrogant about it and began to make idle boasts. The moral is obvious: Abimelech was a mere bramble among his brothers, amenable to becoming a tyrant because he was

fit for nothing else" (*The Book of Judges*, Accent Bible Curriculum). The olive, fig, and vine produce good fruit, and a bramble produces nothing. Brambles are pulled up and burned to make way for the productive trees and vines.

Jotham shouts, "If you have acted faithfully and honestly by making Abimelech your king, and dealt well with (my father) and his family and have done to him as he deserves (he only fought for you, risked his life, saved you from Midian, that's all. But in reality, you picked a slave girl's kid for your king and elevated him to be king just because you're related), then rejoice (9:19). But if you've acted faithlessly and dishonestly, then may you devour one another!" Jotham is making an appeal to God's justice. Jotham shouts it from Mount Gerizim, where earlier the invading Israelites gathered to affirm the Covenant with Yehovah in Joshua's day (Joshua 8). Since Abimelech has broken the covenant so terribly, the place of blessing will now ring with a curse for him and the Shechemites. This curse calls down fire as a sign of God's judgment.

And the curse works. Abimelech only leads for three years, and then things get ugly between him and his people. This strife is Yehovah's work (9:23). "You reap what you sow," right? Abimelech gained his "throne" by treachery, and the Lord will bring about its loss by treachery. The very folks who wanted Abimelech as king now turn on him. The seeds of rebellion and deceit sprout, break the surface and begin to mature. The Shechemites start a campaign of highway robbery. The malcontents of Shechem rob people on their way to Abimelech. Abimelech used empty and wild people to do his bidding, and now they're a thorn in his side. The crowd is fickle, aren't they? They tire of Abimelech as their "king," which turns into open revolt as they throw their lot in with a blowhard named Gaal. Since this occurred during the "trodding of the grapes," the following events took place in the fall (9:27-29). The ruler of Shechem, Zebul, hears the rumblings of the insurrection and dutifully reports to Abimelech. He gives the king intelligence and a strategy to get around the war preparations being made (9:31).

Long story short, the battle "heats up" between Abimelech and the Shechemites. Gee, precisely as Jotham prophesied. "Each of the troops also cut his own branch and followed Abimelech. They put the branches against the inner chamber and set it on fire; about a thousand men and women died, including all the men of the Tower of Shechem" (9:49). Having just burned the people of Shechem, Abimelech moves to Thebez and attempts the same fire maneuver. A woman drops an upper millstone, about the size of a small loaf of bread, from above. Bingo! Right on target. As Abimelech lay dying, he asks his armor-bearer to run him through because what man wants to die at the hands of a woman? Ask Sisera (4:21). Oops. Never mind. And in this way, the Lord brought justice to those who committed a great injustice against Gideon's family.

With Abimelech dead, the attacking Israelites leave. What began as a marvelous story of God using a weak and insecure man for a tremendous victory has ended in the ignominious death of a man “who did what was right in his own eyes,” only to bring destruction on many and himself.

INSIGHT

Maturing spiritually often involves being poked and prodded in our faith to build our trust in the Lord. He usually takes us from situation to situation to get us to grow. The Lord wants people who firmly trust Him and depend on Him alone. Like Gideon, a Christian disciple needs to know the Lord and that His power is with them, i.e., saved by Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit.

As we go through these maturity tasks, we need to see as our Heavenly Father God sees and not as we see. His word reveals who we are, not our feelings or circumstances. When He says you're a valiant warrior and just starting on your walk with Him, He speaks prophetically, and you just haven't been trained and brought to the battle yet. Trust Him!

March 9 : Scriptures Judges 10-12

SUMMARY

Chapter 10 opens with a quick synopsis of two judges – Tola and Jair. Tola was from the tribe of Issachar. He judged Israel as their 6th judge (2nd minor judge) for twenty-three years. Jair the Gileadite was Israel's 7th judge (3rd minor judge) who led Israel for twenty-two years.

After these two judges, the Israelites sink fast and hard into idolatry. They adopted the pagan gods, and they abandoned the One True God, Yehovah, "Then the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They worshiped Baal and Ashtoreth, the gods of Aram, Sidon, and Moab, and the gods of the Ammonites and the Philistines. The idolatry infection is spreading. Israel was supposed to conquer the Land, and now the native gods are conquering Israel. And it wasn't just the Canaanite gods of Baal and Ashtoreth they were pursuing. There were many other "lovers," the gods of the surrounding nations of Aram, Sidon, Moab, the Ammonites, and the Philistines.

Yehovah gave them over (10:7). The western tribes were oppressed for a year, and the eastern tribes (Reuben, Gad, Half-Manasseh) faced oppression for 18 years. Your Bible maps help again at this point: Moab was east of the Jordan next to the Dead Sea, and the Ammonites were east of the Jordan and north of Moab between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. The kingdom of Aram was east of the Jordan and north of the Ammonites, from below the Galilee and up to the north. In today's geography, the nation of Jordan covers Moab and Ammon, and Syria covers Aram.

In this chapter, the Ammonite push west and southwest into Israel's territory. The Israelites cry in their despair to Yehovah to save them. You know, the God they turned their backs on? Yehovah's reply is appropriate and even comes across as a bit snarky, "Hey, didn't I deliver these nations into your hands before, and you walked away from Me? And now you have the gall to come crying to Me for help? Whine to your adopted pagan, know-nothing gods you love so much. I'm not gonna help you!" When the Israelites cried to the Lord again, He responded because they didn't just talk; they acted. They threw away their oppressors' idols and sought the Lord alone (10:16).

Now in ch. 11, war comes to the tribe of Gad's doorstep, just southeast of the Sea of Galilee. The Gileadites need a leader for their troops, and the group of leaders says the one who steps forward will lead them all.

The soon-to-be judge, Jephthah, was of the Gileadite family, an offshoot of Manasseh. However, he was from the “wrong side of the tracks.” His father, Gilead, had messed around with a prostitute who became Jephthah’s mom (11:1). As you might guess, his half-brothers rejected him because he wasn’t a full brother. They drove him out (nice guys!), and Jephthah settled down in Tob. While there, he gathers a group of ne’er-do-wells around him, and they decide raiding is an excellent way to make a living (11:3). Now that the Ammonites have shown up and no one among his brothers (who are now the Gileadite elders) are willing to lead the charge, they remember their wild and woolly half-brother and ask him to take the leadership position. Jephthah agrees, but only if they keep their word to make him Gilead’s head honcho. The elders do so, and Jephthah strides to war.

Jephthah begins with a little tete a tete with the Ammonites to find out why the enemy has made their move into Israelite territory. Their reply is simple, “You stole our land! Now give it back” (11:13). Jephthah responds with a history lesson. “When we came to the land from Egypt, we went around Moab’s territory (including the Ammonite’s land, Deuteronomy 2:37). The territory you Ammonites want is land we won fair and square from the Amorites that lived here, not you. Don’t you take the land your god gives you? Well, we’ve been on this plot of land for three hundred years. Why are you making a fuss now? But just in case, if there’s war, we’ll let our God decide who gets it” (11:27).

It’s at that point God’s Spirit comes upon Jephthah. He makes a vow to the Lord, “If you in fact hand over the Ammonites to me, whoever comes out the doors of my house to greet me when I return safely from the Ammonites will belong to the Lord, and I will offer that person as a burnt offering” (11:30). Now I need to make something clear. The above translation from the Christian Standard Bible is not accurate. It’s not “whoever” but “whatever comes out of the doors of my house.” Why? Because a house is sometimes the abode of the family’s animals. Jephthah is willing to sacrifice whatever animal comes out of his house first as a whole burnt offering to thank God, even if it’s his best ox or whatever. Moving on...

Yes, I might add that Jephthah wins the war quite handily (11:33). Twenty cities, a great slaughter of troops, and much territory subdued. And what’s the first “whatever” that comes out of his door when Jephthah returns home? *His daughter!* Yes, I’ve had a lot of discussions and research about whether Jephthah sacrificed his daughter as an *olah*, a whole burnt offering, or not. I don’t think so because God prohibited human sacrifice in His Torah to Israel (Deuteronomy 12:31), and Jephthah just won a war based on Israel turning back to their God and His ways. Second, a way to fulfill his vow to give to the Lord entirely whatever came out his door is to surrender his daughter to the Lord’s

service. The fact that she “mourned her virginity” (11:37) would be a moot point if she were burned alive. It would be a valid point if it meant she would never marry, and *that* would be quite a surrender for Jephthah as he had no other children for a legacy. That would be the end of his family line and a loss of family land inheritance. At least that’s the way I see it.

In chapter 12, the Ephraimites get their robes in a twist. Again, with the Ephraimites! The men of Ephraim stomp over to Jephthah’s house, “Why have you crossed over to fight against the Ammonites but didn’t call us to go with you? We will burn your house with you in it!” (12:1). What’s the deal with them? In 12:4, the Ephraimites called the Gileadites renegades, a break-away clan from Ephraim and Manasseh. Was this a smart thing to say to a clan led by a “half-breed,” driven away from his Manasseh brothers? Didn’t the eastern Trans-Jordan tribes build an altar for just this reason, to remind Israel that they were as much a part of Israel as they were (Joshua 22)? Perhaps the Ephraimites felt that as a descendent of Manasseh, Jephthah was usurping the primacy that rightly belonged to them (Genesis 48:17-19)? There was no reasoning with the Ephraimites this time.

Jephthah replies with diplomacy first (12:2-3), but it soon breaks down into open civil war (12:4). He prevails, and the men of Ephraim flee to Jordan’s fords, but the judge gets there first to cut off the Ephraim fugitives. Jephthah uses the Ephraimites’ family speech pattern to identify which person was an Ephraimite or not (12:6). And so, another needless battle was settled. Jephthah lived another six years, died, and was buried in his family territory, Gilead.

We finish the chapter with three judges in brief succession. Ibzan of Bethlehem was Israel’s 9th judge (4th minor judge). He saw thirty sons married and married off thirty daughters. So many children possibly indicate that he was a man of wealth and position, and he had to be to support so many wives and children. Elon from Zebulun was Israel’s 10th judge (5th minor Judge) who led for ten years. Abdon from Ephraim was Israel’s 11th judge (6th minor judge) who ruled for eight years. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons (also a blessed man!).

INSIGHT

Jephthah’s rash vow reminds us again of the need to watch what we say, especially when making promises. I’m reminded of David’s Psalm 141 where he asks the Lord, “Lord, set up a guard for my mouth; keep watch at the door of my lips” (Psalm 141:3). This request is an excellent thing to include in our morning prayer that we would bless people with our lips, glorify Jesus, and not get ourselves into trouble for speaking foolishly!

And here's another thought. When God's people sin by willingly rejecting the Lord and turning to other gods, we forsake our only real protection, and the enemy can attack us and start binding up areas of our lives. Isn't this true of a Christian who dabbles or wallows in sin? What makes us think we're immune from spiritual attacks when we turn from God? Can attacks come at different areas of our lives simultaneously? These are just some things to think or talk about with your fellow Christians.

March 10 : Scriptures Judges 13-15

SUMMARY

We begin today's reading in ch. 13 with the conception and birth of the well-known judge, Samson. He was Israel's 12th judge, and he lived around 1100 B.C. To put things in perspective, the prophet/priest Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's king around fifty years after Samson had his run-ins with the Philistines.

The account begins with the usual, "The Israelites again did what was evil in the Lord's sight, so the Lord handed them over to their enemies" introduction. This time the Lord gave them over to the Philistines, and they dropped the hammer on the Israelites for forty years. Most U.S. citizens have no idea what it's like to be under another nation's thumb. Sadly, some who have immigrated from oppressed countries know this situation all too well.

In our reading, the Lord has decided it's time to bring forth a new judge who will "begin to save Israel from the power of the Philistines" (13:5). Yes, it says "begin" because the Philistines were a force to be reckoned with in Samson's day and would be a problem for Israel for decades to come. Their lowland territory and iron chariots made it easy for the Philistines to defend themselves and attack their neighbors. The nearby Israelite tribes that bore the brunt of their incursions were the Danites, Judahites, Simeonites, and Benjaminites. However, the Philistine army and chariots were able to strike into the heart of Israel by following the trade routes. We'll see that more clearly when we get to 1 Samuel.

Chapter 13 starts as the angel of the Lord appears to Manoah's wife to announce she will conceive a boy. This child is to be a Nazirite from before birth. As you may recall, a Nazirite is a person who has consecrated themselves to the Lord, setting themselves apart in a unique way to Yehovah and service to Him (Numbers 6:1-21). The hallmarks of the Nazirite (Hebrew, *Nazir*) are to abstain from wine/beer (and all grape products), not to touch dead bodies, and not cut their hair. Samson's Nazirite status brings him empowerment of great strength, which the Lord will use to stir up hatred between the Philistines and Israel for future conflicts. Yes, Yehovah is picking a fight between the two nations.

Samson is an interesting case. One on hand, the children of Israel had a problem with "doing what was right in their own eyes," which brought upon them God's anger, chastisement, and eventual deliverance. Samson will become their deliverer, but he too will struggle with doing things that are right in his own eyes, like who he wants to marry.

Spoiler alert! When he eventually loses his eyesight, he finally learns to see God's plan and fulfills his divine call. It's amazing to see a man so anointed by the Lord wrestle with his flesh so much. But isn't that the case with many of us who are born-again? We have the Holy Spirit in us and helping us, yet we fall into the same stubborn ways as Samson. Yes, there is a lot to learn from Samson, and most of it is what not to do.

Samson's mom tells Manoah about the divine encounter, and Manoah wants to meet the "angel of God" (13:8). When the couple meets the angel of the Lord in the field, the angel repeats his instructions. Like a true hospitality-giver, Manoah offers a meal to the stranger, and here's where things escalate. Rather than accepting a meal, the Lord's messenger tells Manoah to make it a whole burnt offering. After it's prepared, the angel ignites it and climbs the ascending smoke out of the astonished couple's sight. Amazing, right? Now Manoah is convinced the man was more than an angel, but God Himself (13:22)! Leave it to his wife to set him straight, "If the Lord had intended to kill us, he wouldn't have accepted the burnt offering and the grain offering from us, and he would not have shown us all these things or spoken to us like this" (13:23). And so, Samson is born. He is a Nazirite from birth, and as he matures, the Lord's Spirit begins to work in him.

Time passes. Chapter 14 opens with Samson as a man ready to get married, and things begin to go south. Rather than look for a wife among his Israelite kin, he "goes down to Timnah" and sees a young Philistine woman. What's wrong with this picture? Israelites are not to intermarry with the people of Canaan. The Philistines were seafaring people who settled on Canaan's coast and were present during Israel's Exodus. They were residents of Canaan and thus came under God's ban. Samson's father tries to dissuade his amorous son but to no avail. Samson sees. Samson wants. Here's our first clue of Samson's biggest weakness, his character. His desires move him, and he wants the Philistine woman. But the Lord is also at work in this as He's using it as an opportunity to start trouble with the ruling Philistines (14:4). So here's a tricky question to consider. If this situation was from the Lord, is it wrong? Or was the Lord using what was wrong for His purposes?

Samson and his parents go down to Timnah with a marriage proposal. As Samson walks alone *through a vineyard* (What? Grape products? Is he walking on the edge of disobedience?), a lion pounces, and Samson tears it up, killing it (touching a dead body). But mom and dad don't know about it. The engagement goes forward because "she seemed right to Samson" (14:7).

At the start of the wedding week (a usually high-alcohol affair), Samson heads down to Philistine town, Timnah, for the festivities. On the way, Samson turns aside to look at the lion carcass that by now had become a bee colony. He scoops honey out of the corpse (touching a dead thing) and enjoys a little treat (yuck!) on his way to the wedding (14:9). But along the way, Samson gets an idea. He'll ask a riddle to the thirty Philistine-provided groomsmen, and they each will have to give him a linen garment if they can't answer it. If they can, Samson will give them thirty linen garments. It's quite the bet, which shows you how confident Samson is. But halfway through the feast, the Philistine guys threaten Samson's Philistine wife and her father with death if she doesn't get Samson to reveal the answer. And boy, does she make the wedding week miserable (14:17)! Samson eventually gives in and tells her the truth (Wow! A hint of what's to come). She tells the guys, and the guys answer Samson, now making him liable to pay the linen garment bet.

Samson goes ballistic with rage at having been cheated! He goes to a nearby Philistine town, kills thirty men, takes their (bloody?) clothes, and drops them on the groomsmen. He goes home in anger, and his wife is given to another man. I mean, really! Who wants their daughter married to the "foreigner" who killed thirty of your countrymen?

After Samson cools down, he decides to go back to Timnah to reclaim his wife. Well, he can't. She's now married to another. Again, in anger, Samson sets fire to the Philistines' farmland rather creatively (15:4-5). I'm still trying to figure out how he caught all those foxes and rigged up the flaming tails bit. The Philistines burn Samson's former wife and her father to death in revenge. In retaliation, Samson tears the attackers apart, limb from limb (15:8). You have to guess by now that Samson has a bit of an anger problem, and the Philistines have revenge issues as Israel's harsh rulers. But after all, it's tribal warfare where this kind of conflict isn't uncommon.

Samson heads into Judah's territory to hide in a cave (15:8). The Philistines have had it with Samson, and they send a war party to fetch him from their vassals! The Philistines hotly pursue Samson and explain to the Judahites that they want the Danite tribe criminal. The Judahites convince Samson to turn himself in. For the record, this is the *only* Israelite force mentioned in Samson's story, and they've come to turn him in. How despicable! They were willing to turn their God-given leader over to their enemy. Samson agrees to be tied up as long as the 3,000 Judahite men don't harm him (15:12-13).

Knowing what happens next, I sometimes wonder if Samson knew he could easily break the ropes or if it was under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. When the men of Judah turn Samson over to the Philistine mob, the Spirit energizes him, and he picks up the fresh donkey jawbone and proceeds to smite the 1,000-man Philistine force with it. Like

previous judges (Ehud, Shamgar), Samson kills his enemies with an “impossible” weapon, a fresh donkey jawbone. As a side note, a fresh jawbone is as significant as new ropes – both are much more resistant to breakage. And another thing, is this a picture of Samson in the Lord’s hand, a donkey jaw wielded by the Spirit?

Samson using a donkey corpse’s jaw bone again gives me pause. If Samson is not to touch dead things, how is he allowed to use his God-given strength in a way that violates his Nazirite status? This observation is a fun point to debate if you’re leading a small group discussion.

After the wild fight, Samson needs some water (15:18). This prayer is the first time Samson acknowledges the Lord’s involvement. Do we sometimes take the Lord’s help for granted until we come to a situation we can’t handle? Samson can take on the Philistines, but he can’t create water, so the Lord opens water from a rock in the desert for Samson as He did through Moses for Israel years before. Sometimes the Lord allows impossible situations to help us realize Who’s really our Strength and Help.

And so ends the battles of revenge and retaliation!

INSIGHT

As we read through the Bible, it is noteworthy how many flawed people the Lord uses in powerful and even bizarre ways. All I can say is there is hope for us all. God doesn’t expect perfection in this life, although He does want us to strive for it. But despite our weakness, He still uses us if we’ll submit to Him and His plans for us. Even if we do fall short, He provides a reset, as we’ll see in the conclusion of Samson’s life.

March 11 : Scriptures Judges 16-18

SUMMARY

Chapter 16 of Judges opens up very much like ch. 14, the start of the Samson/Philistine conflicts. Chapter 4:1 says, "Samson went down to Timnah and saw a young Philistine woman there." Now here's 16:1, "Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute and went to bed with her." Some sources say he did this deliberately to show himself to the Philistines and thus provoke an international incident. Others see it as another sign of his real weakness; he saw, he wanted. Regardless, Samson is fishing in the wrong stream. "What, Samson? Like there are no attractive women in Israel or at least your tribe of Dan?" His flesh and lack of self-control are again leading Samson. Well, keep in mind the Lord is using Samson to pick a fight with the Philistines. See? The Lord can use people's wrong-headed desires to accomplish His will because He's a sovereign God. But I have to ponder how much better things turn out when we do things His way. It doesn't turn out so well for Samson, and things get really tough for him from here on out.

The Philistine people of Gaza hear that Samson is in town. After he goes into the Philistine prostitute's place of ill repute, they gather around the building and stand guard at the city gate (the access point into and out of the city) to kill Samson in the morning. Well, Samson decides to walk home around midnight, preempting their plans. Also, when he reaches the gate, he pulls out the entire structure – doors and gateposts – lifts them to his shoulders. He carries them all the way back to a mountain near Hebron. You have to admire Samson when he gets into his "beast" mode.

All kidding aside, this makes quite a statement to the Philistines. A city's gate is where the authorities sit to watch for trouble makers or make judgments, and it's the weakest part of the city wall. For Samson to rip out and destroy the city's gate is a declaration that the Philistines' strength and authority mean nothing to Israel's God, and there's nothing they can do to stop Him or his representative. In other words, Samson "owns" the Philistines. Samson's trick really impresses the Philistine leaders. They realize the only way to get at Samson was somehow getting around his strength or neutralizing it.

Samson spots the Philistine hottie famously known as Delilah. Once Samson's relationship with Delilah is known to the Philistine rulers, they see their opening. They've wised up, and they won't attack Samson directly until they know it's safe. So, for now, they go through Delilah. They only have one assignment for her, "Persuade him to tell you where his great strength comes from" (16:5). Then they'll take it from there.

So Delilah gets to work, and she doesn't mince words, "Okay, Mr. Strong Guy. What makes you so strong?" Subtle, huh? Samson tells her three things will weaken him: 1) If he's tied up with new, still wet leather bowstrings, he's helpless (16:7). While fresh, the bowstrings are much more resilient, flexible, and difficult to snap. When Delilah tests him, the bowstrings not only don't bind him but their not even a match for his strength level. Samson probably thinks Delilah is just playing games with him. 2) He tells Delilah that new ropes will do the trick (16:11). New ropes aren't dry or fatigued, so they have maximum tensile strength. And they have the same result as the bowstrings. 3) Samson tells her a ridiculous tale: if she weaves his hair into a weaving loom and fastens it with the peg, he'll be helpless (16:13). And the same result. Wow, even his hair is strong! But notice that Samson is getting close to the actual reason for his strength – his uncut hair.

As with his first wife (14:16-17), nagging does the trick (16:16-17). He tells her the truth. So, after Samson falls asleep, Delilah takes off the seven woven locks of his hair, one braid at a time. When alerted by Delilah that Samson was under a surprise Philistine attack, he doesn't realize he's already been surprised – his hair is gone, and so is the Lord, "But he did not know that the Lord had left him" (16:20). That's one of the saddest verses in scripture and indeed not the last time we'll read those words. Having been weakened, Samson is captured, blinded, and forced into labor.

But what Delilah knew, the leaders didn't know. She cut his hair, but she didn't tell the leaders the secret to Samson's strength, his Nazirite vow signified by his uncut hair. You may remember that if a Nazirite breaks their vow, that doesn't release them from the vow. It means they have to shave their head and start over for the designated initial time until they fulfill their obligation (Numbers 6:9-12). Since Samson was a Nazirite from birth, the moment his hair started growing back, he was reconsecrated, and his strength regrows along with his mane.

The Philistines celebrate their pagan god, Dagon's, triumph over Yehovah's representative, Samson, during their dinner party. Notice that their dinner declaration was one of the most foolish things they could say, "Dagon has delivered Samson into our hands" (16:24). Umm, no. It was Samson's foolishness. They decide to gloat over their captive but have no idea that their rejuvenated slave had his full strength back.

Samson has a young man lead him to the two main pillars characteristic of Philistine buildings, posts that held up the roof. With repentance and humility, blind Samson finally "looked" to his Source, received his strength anointing, and killed more Philistines at one time than at any other time in his life! In the process, Yehovah shames Dagon, the Philistine god, which won't be the last time, by the way. This prayer is Samson's second

recorded prayer (16:28). You could say that as the evening's entertainment, Samson brought down the house. Samson concludes his twenty-year rule in Israel with a bang! (Thank you very much. I'll be here all week. Be sure to tip your waitress!)

Chapter 17 begins a terrible time in Israel's history and plants devastating seeds for the nation's destruction and exile about four hundred years later. The story is simple. A son (Micah) steals money from his mom. When he hears her put a curse on the money, he confesses and returns it to her. She's so pleased with her son's "honesty" (regardless of motivation) she vows to make it into a carved image and cast a silver image. Yes, idolatry. Micah has an ephod (a knock-off of the High Priest's garment) and many other idols. That's right. He's covering all of his spiritual bases. Plus, Micah, a descendent of Ephraim, not Levi, makes one of his own sons a priest. But only men from Levi may serve as priests before Israel's God, and only one of Aaron's sons may serve as High Priest. It's an idolatrous mess! Why, you might ask? Verse 17:6 says it all, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever seemed right to him."

This situation was not supposed to be. The Lord established a priesthood (the Levites) who were to serve Him alone and keep the people focused on the Lord, away from the idolatry of Canaan. The Levites were supposed to know the Torah, teach the Torah, and facilitate the Israelites' worship of Yehovah. But now we see an Israelite man failing (doing whatever seemed right to him).

A young Levite from Bethlehem (in Judah) went looking for a place to live. There were duties in Israel that only a Levite may perform, so they were scattered throughout Israel. By King David's day, the Levites were required to make the Jerusalem trip five times a year to fulfill their family's service (2x/year) and to help with the Spring (2x – Passover/Shavuot) and Fall Feasts (1x – Tabernacles).

This young Levite pulled up stakes and was looking for a new place to live where he could find support since the Levites relied on their fellow Israelites' contributions. When he comes to Micah's home, Micah realizes the young man is an honest-to-goodness real Levitical priest, and Micah sees an opportunity to add the young man to his religious good luck charms collection. (Gee, most of us readers were hoping the Levite would set Micah straight!)

Micah says in effect, "Be a father to me and serve in this place with a title of honor." Having a Levitical priest would add even more credibility to Micah's idolatry, or so Micah thought. How do you think this appeal to esteem and pride affected the young mercenary Levite *who would be serving in an idolatrous Israelite household*? Apparently, it

was irresistible. Job security? Full provisions? Never being in want? But wasn't it the Levites' job to keep the people devoted to Yehovah alone? Yes!

The young Levite is swayed through the offer of material support, four oz. of silver per year, all clothing, and full provisions (17:10). That's a pretty sweet deal. The young Levite allows himself and his services to be bought for the sake of security, "Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in Micah's house. Then Micah said, 'Now I know that the Lord will be good to me because a Levite has become my priest'" (17:12-13). The compromised and superstitious Micah ties up his religious package with a bow by having his personal Yehovah representative living in his house. Gee, what a blessing that will be – except that such idolatry is a disease that spreads like cancer.

Chapter 18 opens with, "In those days, there was no king in Israel, and the Danite tribe was looking for territory to occupy. Up to that time they had captured no territory among the tribes of Israel" (18:1). "No king" means there's no central command structure in place. Therefore, after Joshua's death, the tribes were loosely affiliated, and the tribe of Dan decided to relocate because their assigned territory was too tough to conquer. In Gaza, to their south, were the Philistines along the coast, and they met stiff resistance from the Amorites in the lowlands (1:34). The Danites send out a five-man scouting party who head north. On the way, they stop near Micah's house in Ephraim, which is central Israel. They recognize the Levite's accent and get the low-down on how he came to live with Micah. The scouting party realizes they're talking to a legitimate Levite with a priestly ephod. The ephod's function was to relay God's directions to His people. The scouting party asks if their venture will be successful, and the Levite says it will be.

Far to the north, the scouting party finds Laish, an isolated and lightly guarded town. The scouts return home, and the Danites send out a fighting force to conquer Laish. Along the way to conquer Laish, the members of the scouting party remember the Levite at Micah's house and how he gave an "accurate" prophecy about their success. They convince the mercenary Levite to abandon Micah, take all the religious hardware, and head north to be the priest over a whole tribe rather than just one family (18:19-20). So now we know where the Levite's compromising heart lies! As a former pastor, I wonder how many pastors, like the young Levite, have abandoned their God-called "post" (a small congregation) for greater esteem and goodies in a larger congregation that the Lord hasn't necessarily called them to serve.

But Micah runs after the war party to reclaim “his” stuff. Right. Micah versus the warriors. Micah turns home, and the Danites move on to conquer unsuspecting Laish and settle down.

Sadly, this is one of the primary roots of Israel’s downfall into eventual exile due to idolatry. First, the Danites didn’t obey God by staying in their allotted land, and they disobeyed God and moved “out of their God-given lane” for ease and security. When we move out of the place where God has told us we should stay, whether it’s a marriage, a job, a congregation, or other situations, we can find ourselves spiritually adrift, separated from the Lord, and isolated. During those times that tempt us to move on without the Lord’s direction, it’s not the external enemy I worry about, but the enemy within. My thoughts and desires lead me to abandon the Lord and seek my way. As my daughter once quipped, “No good can come of that!”

Second, the Danites took along a spiritually compromised Levitical priest who mixed idolatry with worship of the One True God. This spiritual mixture is called *syncretism*, and the Lord forbids that. Yes, no good can come of that. So, the seeds were sown in the Danite region in the north of Israel that would erupt into full-scale idolatry a few centuries later, spreading like cancer through the entire Israelite nation. It will get so bad Yehovah will perform radical spiritual surgery to cut out idolatry from His people by ejecting His spiritually rotten people into Babylon for a generational purifying process.

I always have a question about this story. Was it really Yehovah speaking to the Levite? Yes, the Levite confirmed the Danites would be successful. But they should have asked if it was right that they relocate. Was the “word” only from the Levite’s mind,” or was it an idol demon directing the disobedient parties involved? The scouting party’s trip was successful, but the mixed idolatry procedure casts doubt on everything even though it had a positive outcome.

What’s most disturbing to me about this whole episode is that much of the problem could have been solved by *one person*, but life’s desires corrupted that person. If you guessed, “the Levite,” you’re right! Read again what it says at the end of the chapter, “The Danites set up the carved image for themselves. *Jonathan son of Gershom, son of Moses*, and his sons were priests for the Danite tribe until the time of the exile from the land. So *they set up for themselves Micah’s carved image that he had made*, and it was there as long as the house of God was in Shiloh” (18:30-31, italics author). *What? The Levite was Moses’ grandson? The grandson of THE Moses who received the Torah from God’s own fingertips and forged a covenant between Israel and their God at Mount Sinai? Sadly, yes.*

It took just two generations to start the corruption that would bring down the nation. Idolatry was established in the north (the new Danite territory) while God's Tabernacle *and His presence* were resting at Shiloh in central Israel. One simple act of idolatry, a weakness in Israel's commitment to Yehovah, will bring down the strong nation.

INSIGHT

Delilah means "weak or feeble." The weak Delilah brought down the strong Samson. But who is the strong person but the one who masters and controls their own desires? Satan loves to blind-side us at our weakest point. What are your weak points?

March 12 : Scriptures Judges 19-21

SUMMARY

And things just keep getting uglier and uglier. Chapter 19 begins a horrible episode in Israel's history. A Levite's wife abandons him and runs from her home in a remote part of Ephraim to her father's house in Bethlem of Judah (19:2). The Levite goes there, woos her back, and gets a late start home to Ephraim after a significant delay. As the evening starts to fall, the Levite, his servant, and the wife look for a place to stay. The Levite suggests overnighing in Jebus (today's Jerusalem), a city under Jebusite control. The Levite's servant warns that they won't be safe in a Canaanite town and that it would be better to find hospitality in a nearby Israelites town, Gibeah of Benjamin (19:13).

When they reach Gibeah, they wait in the town square for someone to offer them hospitality, as was the day's tradition (19:15). An old man, a fellow Ephraimite living among the Benjaminites, invites the travelers to his home. What follows is utterly shocking! In an act that replicates the terrible Sodom and Gomorrah event, the wicked men of the town gather at the old man's door and demand he hands over the Levite so they can rape his guest (19:22). Later, the Levite says he was convinced they would kill him (20:5). To protect himself and the homeowner, the Levite shoves his wife/concubine out the door to the ravenous wolves who abuse her to death (19:27-28, 20:5).

In the morning, the Levite put her body on his donkey, took the corpse home, and sent a grisly telegram to all the tribes of Israel, one concubine body part per tribe (19:29-30). The Levite's telegram drew the correct response – revulsion and flaming outrage from Dan (northernmost point) to Beersheva (the southernmost point). The Levite explains what happened, and all Israel gathers for war to punish Gibeah of Benjamin for the atrocity they committed (20:11). They call on the tribe of Benjamin to surrender the guilty parties from Gibeah, but tribal loyalties prevail (20:13-14). The Benjaminites assemble their force, including 700 sling stone sharpshooters (20:16). What's fascinating is the text points out they were "left-handed," i.e., not the "strong hand." And yet, these guys could pick off a hair at a distance. Remarkable!

The Israelites attack, led by Judah, and Benjamin repulses them (20:21). The Israelites return to their camp and cry before the Lord for their loss. Yehovah tells them to attack again, and the Israelites attack the second day but are repulsed again (20:25). The Israelites return to camp to cry, fast, and make offerings to the Lord. Then the Israelites ask the Lord what to do. Now here's something to notice. Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, was High Priest at the time, and the Ark of the Lord was present at Bethel, which means

they moved it from Shiloh to Bethel for this situation. This time, Yehovah told them to fight once again, and this time they would be victorious (20:28).

The Israelites launch their assault on Gibeah in a manner that may sound familiar to you, dear reader. It was the same strategy Joshua and Israel used against Ai a generation earlier (Joshua 8), and it worked again. Long story short, Israel won. Gibeah was destroyed, and Benjamin's army was annihilated and every living thing in the town, leaving only six hundred men in hiding. One dark act in a dark city led to a very dark day for Benjamin and the rest of Israel.

Chapter 21 starts with the revelation that Israel had taken a vow at Mizpah, "None of us will give his daughter to a Benjaminite in marriage" (21:1). Now, this is a bad thing. The tribe of Benjamin is in danger of dying out in the matter of a few decades unless they married pagan women, which they were forbidden to do. We also find out another oath had been taken at Mizpah simultaneously, "For a great oath had been taken that anyone who had not come to the Lord at Mizpah would certainly be put to death" (21:5). The leaders did this to "encourage" every Israelite to come to the battle against Gibeah. Only one family line did not respond to the military call-up, "no one from Jabesh-Gilead had come to the camp and the assembly" (21:8). Therefore, the leaders found a way around the two oaths, albeit not one we would pursue in our day – execute those who didn't show up for the battle (deserters?) and take their daughters for the remaining Benjaminite men (21:11-14). Except there weren't enough young women for marriage.

So another plan was hatched for the Israelites to find a bride for every Benjaminite man. The single Benjaminite men were to wait in hiding during a festival at the Lord's Tabernacle at Shiloh. When the unmarried women come out to dance, the men are to spring out from hiding, grab a woman, and, "Ta-da!" she'll be his wife (21:21). And if any father or brother objects, they'll be innocent because, "You didn't actually give the women to them, so you are not actually guilty of breaking your oath" (21:22). Well, technically, yes. But I wonder if the oath wasn't broken first by those who came up with the scheme to get Benjamite men Israelites women as wives.

And so, the Benjaminites return home with their brides, rebuild their cities, and settle down in their inheritance to rebuild their small diminished clan. Is this a happily ever after story? Not quite. The book of Judges leaves us with idolatry sprouting in the north (Dan) and tribal conflicts resonating between Benjamin and the rest of Israel. To top it all off, people weren't following the Lord as they should, for "everyone did whatever seemed right to him."

INSIGHT

The last two accounts in the book of Judges clearly show what happens when “everyone did whatever seemed right to him” (21:25). As I mentioned at the start of Judges, this attitude starts a vicious cycle from Sin to Slavery to Supplication to Salvation or Rebellion to Rebuke to Repent to Redeem (or Restore). This sin cycle is not limited to the book of Judges, and it often happens to us Christians. The book of Judges is a valuable reminder to “stay the course” with diligence and not give in to our base desires. For indeed, “no good can come of that!”

March 13 : Scriptures Ruth 1-4

SUMMARY

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." The book of Ruth is a most extraordinary and inspiring story of love and devotion. In a very short space, brushstrokes of covenant love (chesed), loyalty, self-sacrifice, compassion, and redemption fly across a canvass that ultimately reveals a portrait of Jesus Himself. Ruth's story clearly shows one of the Bible's great themes: the Lord's desire for all people to trust Him and find their life in Him, Jew or Gentile.

The Lord used the women Ruth and Esther to do mighty things on behalf of His people. They both are prime examples of how faith, devotion, and self-sacrificing love can work in concert with the Lord's divine plans, whether we see Him at work or not.

In both women's cases, little did they know that the Lord could do such remarkable things through two unsuspecting and humble servants; Ruth became the great-grandmother of Israel's finest king and one of the most important of Messiah Jesus' ancestors. Esther's action preserved the Jewish so that God's Messiah could come into the world to begin the process of worldwide redemption in His covenant love!

In the Messiah, the faithfulness of Ruth and Esther will find its most significant impact upon the world. The Jews and Gentiles will have their promised King, His salvation, and worldwide redemption from the Fall. So from such a "small" incident as the story of Ruth comes forth a magnificent climax of history!

And yet we can focus down to see a precious example of family faithfulness and a simple act of embracing Israel's God. It further reinforces the Bible's continual claim that the Lord rewards those who are faithful, who cling to Him and love Him with all their hearts, soul, mind, and strength.

The book of Ruth is set in two locations, Bethlehem, about six miles south of Jerusalem, and Moab, about fifty miles southeast of Bethlehem on the other side of the Jordan. Chapter 1 sets the stage during the Judges' time sometime between Jephthah's and Samson's leadership. A famine strikes the Bethlehem area, likely as God's discipline for disobeying His covenant as He promised to make the land fruitful if Israel obeyed (Deuteronomy 28:5, 17). Because of the famine, Elimelech and his wife Naomi travel with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to Moab, where food is (1:1). While there, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi with her two sons to support her. The sons marry Moabite women,

Orpah and Ruth (1:4), and about ten years later, Mahlon and Chilion die, leaving the three women to fend for themselves. Not only has Naomi lost her husband, but she has also lost her sons. Naomi's grief goes beyond emotional distress. Naomi and her daughter-in-law now face economic devastation without a husband or sons to support them, even the threat of attack. "Coincidentally," Naomi hears the Lord has answered His peoples' prayer and restored fruitfulness to her hometown area (1:6), and the three women set off for Bethlehem. Throughout Ruth, we see God's hand shaping events. But sometimes, His hand is misunderstood by Naomi.

As they reach the edge of Moab, Naomi gets honest with her daughters-in-law. There's no way for her to help them get remarried. According to Levirate laws, a kinsman-redeemer (usually a deceased man's brother) may step forward to marry his brother's widow to support her and produce children to maintain his brother's name and land inheritance. Naomi has no other sons to give Orpah and Ruth. She concludes they would be better off staying in Moab to find husbands. But after ten years, their love for each other has grown. The two women want to stay with Naomi to help her (1:10). But she waves them off. She has no more sons and their prospects are better in their home country, Moab. After many tears, Orpah departs, but Ruth remains (1:14-15). Why? Because of her single-hearted devotion to her mother-in-law. Ruth is willing to surrender all to stay with Naomi. She expresses her commitment in one of the most beautiful passages of scripture in the Bible (1:16-17). Naomi relents after such a moving ode, and the duo returns to Bethlehem. But Naomi is a changed person. She is steeped in tears and bitterness, having lost all. But isn't it fascinating that Ruth willingly gives up everything out of love for Naomi?

The final verse says, "They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest" (1:22). The barley harvest happens in late March to early April in Israel.

And the plot begins to grow! Chapter 2 introduces our hero, Boaz, "Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side. He was a prominent man of noble character from Elimelech's family. His name was Boaz" (2:1). Then the literary camera quickly pans back to Naomi and Ruth, now residing in Bethlehem. Ruth chooses gleaning, the Torah's way of providing for those in need (Leviticus 23:22). Lo and behold, she ends up in Boaz's portion of his family's field. What's more, Boaz is a relative of Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech (2:3)!

Immediately, Boaz notices Ruth and asks about her. He finds out Ruth is a Moabite woman and his relative, Naomi's, widowed daughter-in-law. Not only that, she's a dedicated worker! Ruth has worked all day to help Naomi, a sign of her outstanding

character and dedication (2:7). Noble Boaz springs into action. He goes to Ruth and asks her to stay in his fields and under his protection because of all Ruth has done for Naomi. Boaz even invites her to have lunch with him (2:14). How romantic!

After lunch, Boaz makes sure Ruth has plenty to glean in addition to leftovers from lunch, and Ruth brings home quite a lot of grain which piques Naomi's interest, "Where did you gather barley today, and where did you work? May the Lord bless the man who noticed you" (2:19). When Ruth tells her the man was Boaz, Naomi lights up as she makes the connection. Not only is wealthy Boaz a relative, but he's close enough to become a kinsman-redeemer for Naomi and Ruth (2:20)! Naomi realizes how good this is and tells Ruth to stay with Boaz's servant girls because she'll be safe under his watch. Ruth does so through the wheat harvest from late May to mid-June. If you're keeping track, Boaz and Ruth have three months to get to know each other.

And the plot thickens! (Don't you just love a romantic story?) I laugh when I reach chapter three because the women start scheming how to get Ruth hooked up with Boaz in the legitimate kinsman-redeemer way. Naomi: "OK, Ruth, here's the plan. Now that the grain has been harvested, it's time to thresh it. Boaz will be down at the threshing floor tonight, separating the grain from the chaff. Get yourself dolled up and go down to the threshing floor after dinner. When Boaz has had enough to eat and drink, and he's sleepy, find out where he's lying down. Go to him, uncover his feet, and lie down. He'll tell you what to do next."

Okay, for the uninitiated, Naomi is asking Ruth to propose marriage to Boaz. "Uncovering a man's feet" is a euphemism for a body part, a delicate way of describing a particular form of a woman proposing to a man, letting him know she's interested in him, *if you know what I mean*. If nothing happens, the proposal has been rejected. No harm, no foul. If the proposal is accepted, then it's up to the man to make the arrangements. In this case, it will be Boaz's job to make sure Ruth is free and clear of all other contenders for the kinsman-redeemer claim.

Ruth follows through, and boy, does she get a positive response from Boaz (3:10-13)! He's honored and blessed that Ruth would choose him for husband material even though there are much younger men, implying Ruth is much younger than Boaz. He tells her that the women in the area see Ruth as an honorable person, and she's just proven it by adopting the Israelite way of the kinsman-redeemer despite whatever desires she may have. Boaz acts nobly and informs her that he would be pleased to be her husband, but Boaz has to honor the kinsman-redeemer option that falls to a nearer male relation. In the

end, Boaz sends Ruth off with a generous gift indicating his acceptance (a considerable haul of food!), and Naomi knows he isn't going to waste any time settling the matter.

We're holding our collective breaths when ch. 4 begins. Boaz seeks out the only thing in his way – the closer kinsman-redeemer. Will he? Won't he? Oh, the suspense is terrible! Boaz goes to the town gate where the officials settle community matters and where it's most likely the needed men will pass by. Boaz pulls aside the kinsman-redeemer and gathers ten town elders to serve in their official judgeship capacity. He presents his case.

“Ya know, Naomi has returned to town as a widow, and her land is up for redemption to keep it in the family. Mr. Closer Relative, do you want to take it over to preserve the family inheritance?” The man agrees. (Oh no! Boaz is going to lose Ruth!) “Done, Mr. Closer Relative. Oh, and just one other thing. When you take possession of the land, you also get possession of the dead son's wife to produce sons in his name. What do you think?”

This situation is Mr. Closer Relative's deal-breaker. Why? Because if he produces an heir with Ruth under her husband's name and Mr. Closer Relative has no sons, then his land will move to the other side of the family. He's unwilling to risk it, so he relinquishes his kinsman-redeemer offer, which is his right under the Torah (4:6).

Boaz is now in the clear! He buys back the family property from whoever was holding it and seals the deal. Exchanging a sandal proves the deal is closed. He declares that he now officially owns Elimelech's family land and will produce family heirs with Ruth as his wife. Done and done. The townsfolk and elders witness the deal and bless the new owner and soon-to-be-husband (4:11-12).

Boaz and Ruth, sittin' in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Obed in the baby carriage! With her grandson on her lap, Naomi is blessed. The story that started with a sad situation has ended happily.

And then there's a genealogy tacked on. Curious. Genealogies are essential for the reasons we've seen in the book of Ruth, such as maintaining family inheritances, connections, and relationships. This genealogy is vital because it traces the lineage leading up to Israel's greatest king, David (4:22). We see that Ruth is Obed's mom, Jesse's grandmother, and David's great-grandmother. It also means Yehovah used a Moabite woman as a key figure in His prophetic plan for Israel and our salvation through David's descendant, Jesus. But there's a fascinating fact buried in this genealogy!

INSIGHT

The exciting fact buried in David's genealogy isn't found looking forward, but looking *backward*, and it helps answer the question, "Why would Boaz marry Ruth?" After all, she was a Moabite, a foreign woman. While the Israelites were allowed to marry non-Israelite women, Israel's history wasn't so great with the Moabites as you *Cruisin' Through The Bible* readers already know. Why would Boaz marry a Gentile, a non-Israelite woman associated with an enemy nation? In another genealogy, the answer is here: "Salmon fathered Boaz by Rahab, Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth, Obed fathered Jesse" (Matthew 1:5).

Did you catch it? Boaz's father was Salmon, *who married Rahab, the same Gentile, a non-Israelite woman of an enemy nation who lived in Jericho when the Israelites conquered it. The same Rahab who hid Israel's spies, was spared by Joshua, and who "still lives in Israel today" because she married Salmon, Boaz's father (6:25).* Boaz learned the value of a faithful, honorable woman regardless of nationality because that was what his mom, Rahab, was. And when Ruth married Boaz, Rahab became her mother-in-law (if Rahab was alive, we don't know). Like father, like son.

So, Jesus has two wonderfully beautiful God-fearing Gentile women in His family line – Rahab and Ruth – two testimonies of God's love for all people and a foretaste of His salvation plan for the whole world.

March 14 : Scriptures 1 Samuel 1-4

SUMMARY

Welcome to the book of 1st Samuel. Samuel was originally one book (scroll) but separated into two because of its length. 1 & 2 Samuel are remarkable books encompassing a pivotal point in Israel's history. They cover the era when the Judges drew to a close, and the age of the monarchy began. Israel's monarchy rose about 1050 B.C. – 970 B.C.

1 Samuel paints a vivid picture of several people, great and small, and examines their lives in light of what it means to be a person after the Lord's heart, i.e., dedicated to loving the Lord and serving Him alone.

More than any other person in ancient Israel, except for Moses, the judge and prophet Samuel were instrumental in establishing Israel as a nation. He was the Lord's choice to bridge from the era of the judges to the era of Israel's kings. Samuel's ministry carried the Covenant through this significant transition and set forth the standard of kingly conduct by establishing the Torah's demands upon Israel's kings in both letter and spirit.

Samuel worked to maintain God's theocracy no matter what form of human leadership represented it, bad or good. In a way, Samuel followed the fine tradition of Moses and Joshua. He was a perfect choice for this transition because of his commitment to the Lord and whole-hearted obedience to see Yahweh's will carried out by all the Israelites. Samuel served not only as a prophet of the stature of Moses and Aaron but also as Israel's last judge and deliverer.

When the leadership function passed from judges to kings, the role of the prophet also began to change. In the centuries leading up to the monarchy, prophets often took the lead role in Israel. When the kings were instituted, prophets were soon needed to make sure the hereditary nature of kingship was kept on track with the Lord's Word. The books of Kings and Chronicles show that this was a constant struggle with human nature, which ultimately dragged Israel into Exile. But before that happened, the Lord brought forth King David, a shining example of a godly man after God's heart, and a vision of the Messianic Kingdom yet to come.

Chapter 1 introduces some crucial people – Elkanah (an Ephraimite), his primary wife Hannah, who had no children, and his secondary wife Penninah, who had kids. There's already tension in the family because of Hannah's barrenness. For a wife to be childless, especially for a primary (or first) wife, it brought shame and personal humiliation for not being able to provide an heir for the man who loved her. But Elkanah was a good man

and would take his family on a pilgrimage every year to Shiloh, where the Lord and His Tabernacle were. Our last two characters, Hophni and Phinehas, sons of the High Priest Eli, were the Lord's priests (1:1-3).

At the beginning of the book, this trip was not a pleasant trip for Hannah. The Lord had prevented her from conceiving a child (1:6) and her competition, Penninah, provoked her terribly for being childless. While Elkanah *loved* Hannah and graciously tried to comfort her, Hannah found no comfort.

After the family celebrates their peace offering at the Tabernacle, Hannah gets up to cry over her situation. In her desperation, she makes a powerful and desperate vow to Yehovah. If He would just give her a child, she would make him a Nazirite from birth and give him to the Lord's service for life (1:11). Now that's a desperate prayer! (Keep in mind, this event closely follows another Nazirite from birth, Samson.)

Sadly, the High Priest mistakes her for being drunk, inadvertently accusing her and laying more humiliation on her. Hannah explains her situation, and the High Priest does something remarkable but not very noticeable. He says to her, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant the request you've made of him" (1:17). Why is this remarkable? Because the High Priest is the anointed one who speaks for God, and even though Eli is a pretty negligent High Priest, the words he says are from the Lord because they come to pass. Hannah goes her way in faith and later gives birth to Samuel, the son she "requested from the Lord" (1:20). True to her word, Hannah brings her three-year-old Samuel to Eli to be raised in the Lord's presence and for His service.

Now keep in mind Samuel is of the tribe of Ephraim, not Levi, and he's not a Levitical priest, nor is he of Aaron's line. Yet, Samuel is vowed to the Lord. The Lord will bless both Samuel and his parents for such a sacrifice. It's like the old pattern before the Lord gave the priesthood to the Levites when Israel's firstborn sons belonged to Him. And so, Samuel will take his place among the Lord's priests.

Chapter 2 starts with Hannah's Song of Thanksgiving and Praise. Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55 has some striking parallels to Hannah's. Both women exalt the Lord for what He does for the humble and how He works against the proud. Without getting into details, Hannah sings about praise to God alone (2:1-2), a warning to the proud (2:3), how quickly situations in life reverse (2:4-5), and that Yehovah is the god of reversals (2:6-9), and that He will have His way and will lift up His king (2:10, a foreshadowing of future kings Saul and David).

And speaking of Yehovah opposing the proud, High Priest Eli's family, specifically his boys, are a hot mess and in a lot of trouble with the Lord! While Samuel is like a son to Eli, the High Priests' two sons shouldn't be because they're so wicked. Samuel will be a son who hears and honors the Lord, unlike Hophni and Phinehas.

Although they were next in line for the High Priesthood, these two scoundrels had no respect for the Lord (2:12). They grossly violated the sacrificial protocol spelled out in the Torah. The priests were to receive assigned portions from each sacrifice (Leviticus 7:31). The priest's portion was the breast and the right thigh (Leviticus 7:34). The random selection from the boiling pot of meat that we see in 2:13-14 is not proscribed in the Torah but was apparently a custom that developed within the priesthood, trusting one's portion as determined by the Lord. But that wasn't good enough for the two renegade priests. Hophni and Phinehas wanted raw meat to roast. The meat also had some fat on it for the Lord alone, which was supposed to be burned on the altar (Leviticus 3:16). By demanding the raw meat with the fat, these two guys treated the Lord's offering with profound disrespect 2:17. They were stealing from the Lord.

In a grand juxtaposition, the literary camera pans back to Samuel. This little boy served in the Lord's presence, even wearing a priest's linen ephod (2:18), which Samuel's mom, Hannah, would replace every year. For being such a great mom, the Lord even honored a decrepit High Priest's prayer and granted Hannah children to "compensate" her for willfully surrendering Samuel. Hannah even had more children than her rival, thus proving her song earlier in this chapter.

Samuel grows up in the Lord's presence. Now we turn back to the two wicked sons! Their weak father warns them that what they're doing – skimming off the Lord's offering and sleeping with the women who served the Tabernacle – is very dangerous. God could step in if a person offends another person, "but if a person sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?" (2:25). But the Lord lets us in on a bit of a secret. He's somehow part of the boys ignoring their father because he intends to kill them. Eli's warning is too little, too late! Then notice how the text suddenly turns back to the little lad Samuel as a contrast to the wicked, corrupt Hophni and Phinehas (2:26)?

Now comes the indictment and judgment from the Lord. An unnamed priest visits High Priest Eli to pronounce Yehovah's judgment on him, his sons, and the rest of Eli's family for taking their God-given offices for granted, abusing their trust, and despising the Lord. Here's the consequence: Although the Lord gave the priesthood to the Levites and promised not to take it away from them, that didn't guarantee the Lord wouldn't cut off any rotten branch of the Levitical family, and that's what's going to happen (2:31-33). No

person in Eli's family will reach old age. They're all going to die prematurely, their lives will be distressful and bring grief to Eli, and every descendant will die violently, starting with Hophni and Phinehas. Their same-day deaths will confirm the Lord's curse on Eli's family has begun (2:34). But the Lord will raise up a man who will be a faithful priest, a man after God's heart and mind (2:35).

This "man after God's heart" theme is strong in 1 Samuel. Samuel was that type of person, but Hophni and Phinehas weren't. David will be, but his predecessor Saul won't. As you read through the Bible, look for other examples of those who have hearts for the Lord and those who don't.

Now this event in ch. 3 is one of my favorites – the Lord calling Samuel and teaching the young boy to hear His voice. The setup is simple, "The boy Samuel served the Lord in Eli's presence. In those days the word of the Lord was rare and prophetic visions were not widespread" (1 Samuel 1:1). Why was the Lord's word rare? Because those who should have been listening to Him weren't! Eli was elderly and nearly blind, and his two sons were too busy with the barbecue grills and the girls. So, the Lord goes looking for an "open ear."

The verses describe Samuel as sleeping *in* the Holy Place (3:3) where the Ark of the Lord was. Obviously, he wasn't behind the curtain in the Ark's presence because that would have violated God's command that no one can come into the Lord's physical presence except the High Priest on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:2). But any priest could enter the Holy Place as needed, even if it was to sleep. The fact that Samuel has to run out to talk to High Priest Eli gives us an exciting insight. Samuel hears because he's "close to the Lord." Eli doesn't because he's too far away, physically and spiritually. The old man has grown deaf to the Lord and blind to the world.

Twice the Lord calls to Samuel, and twice Samuel runs to Eli, thinking the old priest called him. At least Eli has enough spiritual sense to eventually realize it was the Lord who was calling to the boy. Yes, Samuel was still a boy, and the Lord was about to download a terrible prophecy on him for his boss, adoptive dad, and mentor. Eli teaches the boy how to answer the Lord and wait to hear what happens (3:9).

I believe the Lord still speaks to people directly today, as a prophetic gift (1 Corinthians 12:7-11; 14:1-40) and as functioning prophets (Ephesians 4:11). Jesus said that His sheep hear His voice (John 10:27), so why would He stop talking to us through His active Holy Spirit and leave us guessing what He wants. Yes, no prophetic word should contradict God's established word or turn us away from Him (Jeremiah 23:16). Those are God's

parameters in the Torah (Deuteronomy 13:1-4). But fear of “mistakes” should not keep us from listening to the Lord and speaking His word if he whispers (or yells) in our ears. Like Eli and all of Israel, everyone needs to hear the Lord’s word. Okay, back to our reading.

In the morning, Eli asks what young Samuel heard, and it was just what the earlier prophet had prophesied against Eli and his family. Yehovah has passed the sentence, and now Eli awaits “execution day.”

Over the next few years, Samuel not only grows physically but spiritually. I’m in awe because it says whatever the Lord spoke through Samuel happened. *None* of Samuel’s prophetic words “fell to the ground.” Every word was accurate and came to pass. Therefore, Samuel’s reputation as God’s prophet grew as he matured until all Israel knew of him (3:20).

“And Samuel’s words came to all Israel” (4:1). With these words, ch. 4 opens on judgment day for Israel and Eli. The Israelites and the Philistines face off for battle (4:1), and the enemy immediately kills four thousand Israelites (4:2). Nope, not a good day for the Israelites. But if the Lord is with the Israelites, why did they lose? The elders’ reason is that they don’t have the Lord’s Ark. Oh, dopey them! Surely if they had the Lord’s throne, the Lord would be with them, and He’ll whomp on the enemy, right? Wrong.

This war episode with the Ark’s capture and its return has an overarching theme, and it fits Eli and his sons as well. *The Lord will not be used nor abused. He will not be treated lightly or with contempt. He is no one’s servant or lucky charm. He is the Sovereign God of the Universe, and the earth’s people are nothing before Him.* Israel has lost that understanding and treats Yehovah and His Ark with great disrespect, just as Hophni and Phinehas have been disrespecting Yehovah.

And speaking of the two guys, they’re with the Ark to oversee its care. But thank you, no, Yehovah doesn’t need any help, and he’s more than capable of taking care of Himself and His people (when they aren’t being disobedient or taking Him for granted). When the Ark enters their camp, the Israelites warriors think they have the battle won (4:5), and the Philistines buckle down for a fight (4:9).

Surprise, Israel loses. They scatter and run home. The enemy captures the Ark. Hophni and Phinehas are slain on the same day, just like the prophet said. That’s what they get for “cursing God” (4:13) through their rampant disrespect. A runner from the battle arrives at Shiloh to tell Eli the news of the lost battle, that his sons are dead, and the Ark

is in enemy hands (4:17). Sadly, the elderly and now blind High Priest reacts over one loss – the Ark. Evidently, he's already given up on his sons. The news stuns him, and he falls over and dies.

When news of her husband's death reaches Phinehas' wife, her shock sends her into fatal labor. Even though she has a boy (usually a proud moment), she names the boy *Ichabod* (Hebrew – “no glory”) because with the Ark gone, the Lord has surely left Israel. Now think of this absurdity – Israel's God has been taken captive. Really? The same God that stomped on Egypt? Do the Philistines really think they've triumphed over Yehovah as if he's just another local pagan god? Wait until you see what Yehovah does to the Philistines!

INSIGHT

Hophni and Phinehas lost God's glory (and their lives) because they treated the Lord flippantly, with disrespect, disregard, and contempt. Eli and his priestly family lost their access to God's glory for refusing to confront sin and stop it. The Israelites lost God's glory because they took God for granted rather than humbly worshiping Him as His servants. But that couldn't happen today in our churches, could it?

How many church leaders and staff members have skimmed from the offering plate, embezzled funds, or spent church resources on personal items like cars, vacations, and other questionable (or sinful) perks? How many church leaders have fallen into sexual sin with congregation members or other staff members' spouses? How many worship leaders and music teams start thinking their worship is all about them and their excellent musical skills, then use those skills to manipulate people into emotional states rather than let the Holy Spirit move through people in genuine worship? How many conference speakers have faked spiritual gifts or abused genuine ones to help fill the offering plate just a little more or boost their ego as they strive for peoples' acclaim more than Jesus' approval? And on and on I could go, but no doubt you already have your own examples.

The answer is, sadly, “Too many.” Too many Christians have succumbed to the flesh just like Hophni and Phinehas did, and too few leaders dare to confront and rebuke like Eli should have done. In the past few years, significant Christian leaders have been publicly exposed and deposed for their ungodly behavior.

Throughout church history, when groups and entire denominations depart from God or take Him for granted, God's glory moves on, leaving them with the name *Ichabod* – “No glory” stamped on the doors of their churches and denominational headquarters. That's one reason why the Lord allows us to be defeated to prove that we can do nothing

without Him and prove to the world that He is the One True God, and when He acts, nothing can stop Him.

I think we need many Samuels to come forth in our day with the word of the Lord that will shake the heavens, the earth, and every child of God's soul and see God's glory return to His people.