



God's Grace  
in  
Dark Times

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PETER THOMAS

## **PART 1**

### **Introduction**

The book of Judges is not well known despite some famous people that are featured in it such as Gideon and Samson. The book tends to get relegated to Sunday School when in fact there is precious truth to be had for Christians of all ages. The book also has a reputation for being depressing – and while there is a very clear spiritual and moral decline in the book, it only serves to bring out the goodness and grace of God more clearly – hence I've called this series 'God's Grace in Dark Times'.

### **Background**

According to Jewish tradition, the book of Judges was written by Samuel and this means it was written within the lifetime of events (eg 1:21 'to this day...').

The role of a 'judge' (Shophet) was very different from our contemporary idea of a judge in a courtroom with a wig on! The role of a Judge at this time in Israel's history was that of a deliverer or saviour so the book of Judges could just as well be called 'the book of Saviours'. The judges combined a military role (usually initially) with a governing role (lasting up to 40 years).

Note the parallel description of Messiah/Christ in Is 9:6-7 '... he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign over David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever'. So, the judges were really anticipating and modelling the saving and lordship role of Christ in our lives – note Jephthah's recognition of this in 11:27 'Let the LORD, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites'.

### **Themes**

The book of Judges repeatedly stresses the fact that 'in those days there was no king in Israel'. This phrase is used four times in the book (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) and alongside this is the inevitable consequence, that: 'everyone did that which was right in their own eyes' (21:25).

Nothing has changed! If we as people reject or even just ignore the fact that Christ is King – actually King of Kings forever, we will end up in the same distress as the tribes of Israel found themselves in in the days of the Judges. Humanity ignores God at its peril!

Throughout the book there is a recurring cycle of:

- Rebellion (10:6 'the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD')
- Retribution (10:7-14 'He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites')
- Repentance (10:15-16 'We have sinned... but please rescue us now')
- Restoration (11:32-33 'the LORD gave them (the Ammonites) into his hands')

- Rest (12:7 'Jephthah judged/led Israel for six years')

This is not just repetitive but leads to a progressive decline and deterioration in the spiritual and moral well-being of the nation. The Israelites should have known better because the consequences of rebellion had been spelt out in Deut 26:16-28:15 'The LORD your God commands you this day to follow these decrees and laws; carefully observe them with all your heart and with all your soul... However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you'.

As Christians, we can't just live indifferently to sin in our lives and assume that when we repent there are no consequences. Of course there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1) but there is always a danger that we have 'fallen away from grace' (Gal 5:4) which does not mean we can lose our salvation but that we are no longer enjoying the 'freedom' for which 'Christ has set us free' and have been 'burdened again by a yoke of slavery' (Gal 5:1). That's exactly what happened during the time of the judges – the LORD would raise up a deliverer who would defeat their enemies and provide rest only for the people to fall away again into sin and so slavery and then cry out to the Lord again.

Sadly, another theme in the book is the lack of unity (they were supposed to be an 'amphictyony' – a united group of tribes) but ended up fighting each other instead of for each other – and some of them broke the covenant of not intermarrying outside of Israel (3:6-7).

As well as these issues, they also failed to 'judge' the resident people of the land who God was disciplining because they had broken his moral laws and were guilty of gross sins and atrocities. Every human being has been given a conscience by God (a knowledge of good and evil – Rom 2:14-15). If people overrule their consciences, there are moral consequences, and their humanity is damaged. It is the ultimate in 'self-harm'. A loving God is not indifferent to the suffering sin causes in fact he addresses it patiently but persistently. The supreme example of this is Noah's flood. At that time 'every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time' (Gen 6:5). The reason was that Satanic presence had violated the human condition to the point that there was no longer 'knowledge of good and evil' only evil! This is the true definition of depravity. A good loving God does not leave humanity in such a depraved condition with all the horrendous consequences morally – so as a supreme act of mercy, God brings humanity to an end. It was not an act of punishment – it was an act of mercy! Otherwise, there would literally be 'hell on earth' forever. There was also the provision of grace through Noah and the on-going provision of salvation.

That was the extreme but necessary response by God to rampant evil – but he continues to address evil today – primarily through his people who being saved are his 'salt and light'. Only heaven will reveal how the lives, witness and prayers of God's people have held back the 'powers of this dark world... (and) the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph 6:12).

In this time of the judges, the nation of Israel was vulnerable to accommodating other gods and idols (this is syncretism lit. 'to join hands with'). There was a strong influence and temptation from the Canaanite inhabitants to join in their fertility and sacrifice rites through Baal and

Ashteroth worship. These were not just harmless culturally diverse belief systems, they were thoroughly evil, including the sacrifice of babies to the Molech 'god' (Deut 12:31; 2 Kings 23:10; Jer 19:5). Dark times indeed!

(if this fact is challenged please research the 'sardonic smile' featured in Carthage 400 BC)

A recurring theme in the book was that there was a lack of consistent moral and spiritual leadership in Israel. God was not limited by this, but it demonstrates the human and social consequences of being in spiritual decline as we see in our world today.

### **Key Lessons**

- All humanity is in need of a Judge (deliverer) – we have been given one who is perfect!
- Judges is a strong warning not to compromise in any way with the world but to be fully obedient to God's call for us to be his representatives (ambassadors) to the world
- There are wonderful consequences when we are faithful to the Lord despite the cultural challenges around us (see Heb 11:6, 32-33)
- Judges reminds us of God's true character – that He is righteous, gracious and sovereign

As we begin to work through this neglected book, I trust we will discover that despite the troubled times we live in and the days ahead becoming darker, God's provision through Christ is always wonderfully more than sufficient... hence we can be sure of:

God's Grace in Dark Times

## PART 2

Othniel and initial success Ch 1:1-3:11

The story of the book of Judges starts well with the initial success of the first Judge – Othniel – his name means ‘lion of God’ or ‘strength of God’.

As we noted in the introduction article on the book of Judges, there are serious consequences if we do ‘what is right in our own eyes’ and ignore God’s patient but persistent revelation of his presence with us and purposes for us.

The book of Judges starts very promisingly – ‘they asked the LORD who is to go up first...?’ (v1). Asking the Lord should always be our starting point for any task we take on. The way they did it was probably by the ‘Urim and Thummin’ (Ex 28:30; Lev 8:8) which was part of the ephod worn by the High Priest. Urim and Thummin mean literally ‘lights’ and ‘perfection’ which are expressions of God’s person and character. He guides us in our day too, as our High Priest and as one who is light and perfection (see John 8:12 and Phil 3:12). What a wonderful thing that what was external to Israel in the form of Priest and ephod is now internal for us in Jesus our High Priest, full of light and eternally perfect!

A second reason for this initial success in establishing a settled presence in the land was their obedience and willingness to fight. Contrary to many current ‘politically correct’ beliefs that Israel is an aggressor and ‘occupies’ other people’s land, Israel has the legal right to its land historically and based on international law (the San Remo Resolution and Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations adopted on April 25th 1920). More importantly, it also has the divine right based on God’s promise to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants.

The prime reason they would have to ‘fight against the Canaanites’ (v1) was to cleanse the land of all the evil practices the Canaanites were perpetrating – particularly child sacrifice (see first Judges article). While we are not called to physically fight for justice today, we are called to expose ‘the fruitless deeds of darkness’ (Eph 5:11) which we do by being the light of Christ in our communities. Of course, we know from Paul’s teaching that ‘our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms’ (Eph 6:12).

Judah was identified as the tribe to lead the fight which is a fulfilment of their prophetic role ‘Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies... you are a lion’s cub Judah’ (Gen 49:8-9). God also assured Judah that ‘I have delivered the land into his hand’ (KJV). God has already won the battle as he has over the ultimate enemy – death. In 2 Cor 1:10, this deliverance is promised in all three tenses: past, present, and future!

Judah invites Simeon to ‘come up with us’ (v3). Simeon’s territory was within Judah, so this was appropriate. It is also an example of cooperation and fellowship that is all too rare between denominations today. Rather than say ‘come and join us...’ many churches say, ‘keep off our patch’!

As promised, 'when Judah attacked, the LORD gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands' (v4) and when their leader Adoni-Bezek (lit Lord Bezek) was caught 'they cut off his thumbs and big toes' (v6). This may sound a bit barbaric but was the standard way of incapacitating an enemy so he couldn't hold a sword or run away. In fact, he (Adoni-Bezek) accepted it as a just punishment (he had done the same to seventy kings) and he even accepted it as God paying him back for what he had done to them (v7). The Old Testament's provision of 'an eye for an eye...' was not a requirement but was to make it clear that no punishment was to exceed the deed done in the first place. Jesus addressed this in Matt 5:38-39 with the new covenant call 'you have heard that it was said "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth" but I tell you... if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also'. This is not possible in our own humanity but as Christians we have Christ's nature in us and he 'was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth' (Is 53:7). Remember he could have destroyed all his enemies with one cry (Matt 26:53 'do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?').

After defeating Adoni-Bezek, the men of Judah had other successes (1:9-10) and Hebron was given to Caleb, and he drove from it the three sons of Anak' (1:20). These were the giants the children of Israel had once run away from! (see Num 13:26-33).

It was not all plain sailing though, as the Benjamites failed to dislodge the Jebusites from Jerusalem (1:21); Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth-Shan... Megiddo' (1:27); nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites from Gezer, 'they continued to live among them' (1:29); neither did Zebulun drive out the Canaanites living in Kitron (1:30); nor did Asher drive out those living in Accor... Rehob (1:31) and it even gets worse when we read that 'the Amorites confined the Danites to the hill country' (1:34).

Partial obedience is still disobedience (Dr Alan Redpath)

Sadly, this was to be Israel's experience for many years. As they failed to fulfil the mandate to cleanse the land and be a 'blessing' to all nations as was their calling under the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:1-3), they would fall into compromise, forget God, and follow other gods, serve and worship them (2:11-12).

There is one glimpse of hope though and that is when Othniel captured Kiriath Sepher, Caleb gave his daughter Acsah to him in marriage (1:12-13). Acsah then requested of her father Caleb that he give her 'springs of water'. He actually gave her 'the upper and lower springs' (1:15). The significance of this is that she was clearly intending to stay permanently in the land (Num 34:2; Deut 30:5-10). Othniel and Achsah were taking God's promise seriously – they were committing for the long term.

While the LORD was angry with the people for their repeated rebelliousness, he never abandoned them. Instead, he raised up judges and 'saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived' (2:18).

The first of these was Othniel who had married Acsah and Ch 3:7-10 summarises what would become the pattern throughout this period in Israel's history. The first stage was that 'the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD...' (v7). As a consequence, the Lord's anger 'burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim' (modern Iraq). They were subject to his regime for eight years. 'But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel... who saved them' (v9). It is important to note that Othniel did not do this in his own strength, rather, 'the Spirit of the LORD came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war' (v10).

Significantly, the text says 'The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel' (v10) – so there is no doubt who provided the victory! As a result, 'the land had peace (rest) for forty years' (v11).

While these old stories seem far removed from our fast-moving world today, the truth is that God is the same 'yesterday, today and forever'. As we see our world heading into crisis after crisis because we choose to live indifferently to, or even blatantly against, what he has revealed to us in his word, we can be sure that if we cry out to him, he will step in, and we can be sure of:

God's Grace in Dark Times

## **PART 3**

### **Ehud and Eglon of Moab Ch 3:12-30**

This is a very graphic story in the book of Judges and not recommended for Sunday School!

Despite the success of Othniel's time as Judge and the forty years of rest that Israel experienced, we read that 'Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD' (v12). If there is such a thing as a lesson from history, it is that each generation is accountable for its attitude to God and to his gracious provision for a fulfilled life.

We are currently experiencing a generational cultural shift away from even the foundational tenets of Christian tradition and we're seeing the fruit of that in the deterioration in people's behaviour and lifestyle. This is summed up in the repeated statement in the book of Judges that 'everyone did that which is right in their own eyes' (17:6; 21:25). The rampant individualism we see today in our Western societies has not led to more freedom – it has led to more confusion and fear. The New Testament equivalent is Jesus saying the people 'were like sheep without a shepherd' (Matt 9:36; Mark 6:34) – scattered relationally and fearful collectively.

At this time, the enemy is identified as Eglon king of Moab who persuaded 'the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him'. It is significant who these people were because they were relentlessly opposed to the ways of the Lord. The Moabites were descendants of Lot by his older daughter's incestuous relationship with him (Gen 19:30-38) and the Ammonites were descendants of the younger daughter's incestuous relationship with him (Gen 19:38). The Amalekites were constantly bitter enemies of Israel (Ex 17:8-13; Deut 25:17-19) and re-appear repeatedly in Israel's history. The Amalekites were the first ones to attack the Israelites upon their exodus from Egypt and the last mention of the Amalekites is found in the book of Esther where Haman the Agagite a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag, connives to have all the Jews in Persia annihilated by order of King Xerxes.

The Israelites were subject to Eglon (King of the Moabites) for 18 years until they cried out to the Lord and He 'gave them a deliverer who was:

A Chosen man – despite limitations. As with all the Judges, there are good reasons for them not to be chosen by the Lord to serve his purposes. But God loves to choose the unlikely to help us realise that he can use anyone who is truly available to him regardless of flaws or limitations.

In this case, God chooses a man who is left-handed (v15). This would not be an issue for us today but throughout history and in many varied cultures being left-handed was despised and even considered having been tainted by the devil. The Latin word for being left-handed is sinister (in contrast the Latin word for being right-handed was dexterous). Ironically, Ehud was a Benjamite which literally means 'son of my right hand' (Gen 35:18). It is important for us to remember that God's choice is often not our choice. A classic example was God's choice of David. Even the Godly Samuel was surprised that God did not choose the more impressive sons of Jesse (1 Samuel 16:6-13) and chose the unwanted misfit David. Paul confirms this in 1 Cor 1:27 'God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak



things of the world to shame the strong'. This should be a great encouragement for us because we all qualify! But Ehud was also:

A Careful man – he prepared in secret for the right moment. Samuel tells us that 'Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a cubit long' (v16) that he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing so it would be unlikely to be noticed (and of course, he chose the right thigh because he was left-handed). This naturally reminds us of the verse in Hebrews (4:12) which describes the word of the Lord as 'alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword'. The application for us is obvious – our greatest weapon against the evil in this world is the word of God. Not just the intellectual knowledge of the word of God but when it is 'alive and active' in us. So just as Othniel was a clear foreshadow of Christ (as 'the lion of Judah') Ehud is a clear picture of Christ as 'the Word' who 'was life' and 'became flesh' (John 1:4,14).

We are also told that 'Eglon king of Moab, was a very fat man' (v17). Even his name means 'circle' or 'calf'. This is not politically correct to say these days, but maybe he was the original 'fat cow'! As well as being somewhat humorous, given what happens to him, he is also a symbol of the world's self-centredness, Prov 23:20–21 'Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty' and Phil 3:17-18 'For many... walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

However, Ehud was also:

A Courageous man – he faced Eglon alone. After having paid Israel's tribute to Eglon as a humiliating way of maintaining peace (v18), Ehud dismissed all his entourage and on reaching the border of Israel at Gilgal, he turned around and went back to face Eglon alone. His motivation seems to have been instilled when he saw 'the stone images' at Gilgal. Gilgal was the place where the 'reproach of Egypt had been rolled away' through the circumcision and Passover ceremony as the Children of Israel entered the Promised Land (Josh 4:19-5:10). He was clearly reminded of God's faithfulness in leading them into Canaan and the mandate to cleanse the land (see Deut 7:1-6). How concerned are we that the Lord's reputation is mocked and tarnished in today's culture? Like Daniel who 'determined not to defile himself' with the king's food (Daniel 1:8), there will be opportunities for us to make a stand against the gross moral and spiritual corruption in our world today.

Ehud told Eglon: 'Your majesty, I have a secret message for you'. Presumably flattered or at least intrigued by this Eglon dismissed all his entourage. Ehud 'drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly' (v21). The king was so fat that 'even the handle sank in after the blade, and his bowels discharged'. As I said at the beginning this is not Sunday School material – but graphically exposes what is the true nature of the 'flesh'!

Ehud shut and locked the doors to the king's upper room and there follows the humorous but pathetic response of the king's servants who assumed Eglon was relieving himself and 'waited to the point of embarrassment' (v25). I believe many will be embarrassed at the final judgement when they realise they had put their trust in the exposed and broken figure of Satan. The LORD says 'I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God... I threw you to the earth; I made a

spectacle of you before kings... I reduced you to ashes on the ground in the sight of all who were watching' (Ezekiel 28:16-19). As someone once told me:

...when Satan reminds you of your past... you remind him of his future!

Having removed the powerful king Eglon from his persecution of Israel Ehud also proved himself to be:

A Committed man – he pursued until the enemy was fully driven out. He could have rested on his laurels but instead, 'blew the trumpet' – this was a national matter and cried out 'follow me... for the Lord has given Moab into your hands' (v28). In other words, the LORD has already defeated the enemy so don't hesitate to drive him out. Paul declares the same truth in the New Testament regarding sin 'do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness' (Rom 6:11-14). The purpose of salvation is more than forgiveness of sin – it is the presence of righteousness!

The wonderful conclusion was that 'that day, Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years' (v30) – the longest in the time of the Judges!

How wonderful to know that as we face a growing encroachment on the many blessings of our Christian heritage, we shouldn't despair but know that there is always:

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## **PART 4**

As with the other Judges we've seen before (and the others to follow), Deborah is a surprising choice to be called by God to be the Judge over Israel. But Deborah was clearly a leader in Israel and revealed that women can be chosen by God to lead His people. She was a woman of faith and she flowed in the prophetic realm getting divine insight in solving disputes and in hearing from God what to do and how to do it.

### **An Unlikely Judge – 4:1-5**

Deborah is a unique character in the Bible. She is the only woman to be a Judge of Israel. Her story takes place between the years 1209 and 1169 B.C. She was a prophetess and Judge of Israel but also a spiritual leader. How she came to be chosen for this position is not recorded but it is evident in her story that her leadership was honoured. As Judge, she was also the leader of the army of Israel.

Women in leadership has been a hotly debated item, especially in the church in recent decades. Women in the New Testament church were involved in the prophetic ministry of the church and helped in leading the church. It is made clear in Acts 2:17-18 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women. I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy'.

Several women helped lead in the spread of Gospel and in the leadership of the church – such as Priscilla, Chloe, Lydia, Apphia, Nympha (the mother of John Mark), Phoebe called a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea (Romans 16:1). Women flowed and functioned in the prophetic ministry of the church – Philip had four daughters who were recognized as prophetesses in the church (Acts 21:8-9). Paul speaks about Junias, as being 'outstanding among the apostles' (Romans 16:7).

The first thing that becomes obvious about the story of Deborah is how much it is like the story of Christ. Over and over again in the Old Testament, we see the Israelites ending up oppressed as a consequence of their own actions 'Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord... they cried to the LORD for help' (Judges 4:1-3). And over and over again, we see God send a deliverer to rescue the Israelites. God seems to enjoy sending deliverers that the people would not expect. They certainly couldn't have expected a woman to deliver them from the Canaanites. Jesus was not the Messiah that the Pharisees expected either, yet both deliverers got the job done! Deborah was raised up by God to be a Judge and she was given the prophetic gift to lead her people to victory but it did not happen until the nation called and cried out to the Lord for deliverance. The cry for help by the oppressed gets God's attention.

During the time of Deborah's rule, the nation of Israel had been under domination by the Canaanites for twenty years (v3). They had suffered terrible atrocities and finally began to cry out to God for deliverance from this enemy. When people do what it says in 2 Chronicles 7:14 'If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal

their land'. So we must cry out today for our nation, for our families, for our communities and for our churches - if we want forgiveness and healing to come!

Jabin ruled the Canaanites, and the captain of their army was Sisera. The Canaanite army had 900 iron chariots and many more warriors to boot. Poor Israel had only 10,000 warriors, they were badly outnumbered. But God tells Deborah to instruct Barak, her general, to take their 10,000 soldiers to the river Kishon and onto Mount Tabor. There, God would send Sisera and his 900 iron chariots and the Canaanite soldiers. God tells Deborah that the Israelites will win the battle. (Judges 4:6-7)

### **An Unwilling Leader – 4:6-10**

Deborah speaks the words of God to Barak the leader of the army and instructs him to lead the 10,000 soldiers up to Mt Tabor. But his faith in God is lacking because Barak says he'll obey this command only if Deborah accompanies him. She agrees remarkably. This General is given a prophecy that his army will win but he won't go to battle without Deborah. We can discern two things from this: firstly, that Barak had incredible faith in Deborah, if not in God, and that Deborah was a courageous and faithful woman. Secondly, this woman was not only going to serve on the front lines but lead the battle! In this way, she is clearly a picture of Christ who leads us into battle.

When God asks us to do things that seem outrageous or impossible, how willing are we to go ahead and do them? Deborah teaches us that with God all things are possible. No person is useless or not good enough to serve God. And, when we are willing to obey Him, God can work through us to achieve incredible victories, even against terrible odds.

Deborah doesn't take any credit for her actions or for the victory their army was to enjoy. In Judges 4:8, she tells Barak that the honour will not be for him but for God. Her humility is a lesson to us. Too often, we are quick to grab the glory of our successes instead of thanking God for them. Jesus taught, 'For whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18:4 KJV) The Israelites defeated the Canaanites, killing them all. In Judges 5 we get a hint as to how they won the victory - their chariots got stuck in the mud of the river valley, it even alludes to this in Deborah's song in Judges 5:4, 20-21. God immobilised their chariots and the Israelites pounced on them as God handed them into their hands.

### **An Unseemly Death – 4:11-22**

The only one to escape was Sisera, their leader. Sisera fled and hid in the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. He believed he was safe there because the king of the Canaanites was at peace with the Kenites. But Jael was no friend of the Canaanites or of Sisera. She slays Sisera, driving a tent stake through his head as he sleeps. This makes the point that there is nowhere to hide from God when we choose to fight against Him. Furthermore, God's enemies often fight against themselves.

God is the one who gave them their victory - it was not by human hands but by the power of God. This story tells us how God conquers evil and sin; it cannot be hidden from Him. He is

all-seeing, all-knowing and all-powerful. We cannot hide our sins from Him, but if we confess them, He is faithful to forgive them and remove them. 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' (1 John 1:9 KJV).

### **An Uninhibited Celebration – 5:1-30**

In Chapter Five of Judges, Deborah sings to the Lord with a grateful heart and gives thanks and praise to God for delivering the Israelites from the Canaanites. Even though she could certainly have bragging rights considering her position for the times and the success of the battle, Deborah instead gives all the glory to God. She also thanks Him specifically for what He has done for the nation in this song. It was recorded in the annals of the history of Israel so that we today could receive comfort and courage to face the battles of today.

She recounts the miracles God has performed in the battle, the supernatural move of nature, the mud, the rain, and the hand of God in it all. Music has been woven throughout all created order. Throughout the Scriptures, creation is referenced and exhorted to give praise to God in song. Likewise, God's people are to sing 'psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord' (Eph. 5:19). For all of eternity, we will be singing songs to the Lord. How often do we even remember to mutter 'Thank you' let alone enumerate the things that God has done for us and thank Him for each one of them? Though everything about the times and the culture was against Deborah serving as the leader of the nation, she did. Though her army was vastly outnumbered, they won. Deborah didn't allow the circumstances around her to overwhelm her or interfere with her belief in God's promises to her.

Deborah's courage and humility a not just a role model for all of us but actually how the Christian life works – God never asks us to 'do our best for Jesus' or even ask 'what would Jesus do' – he asks us to recognize that Jesus himself is 'the way, truth and life' in us if we have truly received him. He asks us to let him be the life in and through us – using our unique personality and circumstances to express his perfect character and righteousness. That is worth celebrating!

### **Conclusion**

Deborah kept her eyes focused on God and not the circumstances around her. She gave God the glory for the victory, and she thanked Him specifically for what He did for her and her country. She reminds us that we all have the potential to do great things for God if we will only listen, trust and obey.

The cry of the people as they humbled themselves and repented reached the ears of God, so he raised up Deborah to lead them into victory against their oppressors. Then to honour this victory Deborah wrote a prophetic song giving God the glory for all to sing and remember this great victory.

Deborah trusted God even with overwhelming odds against her and her faith propelled her into becoming a mighty woman of faith – a hero for the nation of Israel. Her trusting God brought 40 years of peace to the land.

Another wonderful example of:

God's Grace in Dark Times

## **PART 5**

### **Gideon and the Midianites - Ch 6:1 – 7:15**

The Israelites continued their downward cycle of rebellion after the Lord had raised up each Judge and given them victory over their enemies. Last time it was Deborah who with Barak had defeated the Canaanites. This time it was the Midianites and Amalekites who marauded across the Jordan at harvest time and devastated their crops leaving the Israelites cowering and starving (6:1-5). For seven years 'the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country... they ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel... they invaded the land to ravage it'.

Midian means 'strife' and they lived up to their name! They were descendants of Abraham (through Ketura – Gen 25:2) and had taken Joseph into slavery to Egypt (Gen 37:36). Once again, the Israelites 'cried out to the LORD for help' (v6) and he raised up a Judge (Deliverer). This time it was Gideon.

### **The Calling of Gideon 6:7-24 – God can call anyone!**

Gideon's call was preceded by an unnamed prophet who reminds the nation of God's amazing provision in liberating them from slavery in Egypt and giving them the land of Canaan as their inheritance but that they had not listened (v7-10). Remember Jesus' ministry was preceded by the prophet John the Baptist, who gave a similar message of the need for repentance (Luke 3:3-9) and that the kingdom was near at hand (Matt 3:2). He called them to be baptised in the Jordan (not believer's baptism of course, but a reminder of the initial crossing of the Jordan when they first entered the land). John was inviting the Jews of his day to symbolically acknowledge their failure to keep the covenant made with Abraham to cleanse and occupy the land (Deut 7:1-6) and basically to repent and start again!

Gideon's call is one of the best known in the Old Testament because he seems such an unlikely hero. Gideon 'was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites' (v11) and he responds to the statement from the angel of the LORD that 'the LORD is with you mighty warrior' with the protest that 'how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family' (v15). This was dubious at best because it turns out that his father was a prominent figure in the community with an altar to Baal, an Asherah pole and at least 10 servants (v25-27). It is important to remember that initial doubt does not automatically disqualify us from being used by the Lord. Even some of the disciples who were commissioned by the Lord Jesus in Matt 28:16-20 'doubted' (v17).

God often chooses to use the weak... the foolish... to ensure that we don't take any glory for ourselves. Hudson Taylor, the pioneer missionary to China, when asked why he had been so successful in his missionary work in China replied, 'it seems to be that God searched the entire world looking for the weakest man, and when He found me, He said 'you'll do!'.

After Gideon had prepared his offering to put before the angel of the LORD and it was consumed by the fire that 'flared from the rock', he realised he had been in the presence of the

angel of the LORD (we see this as a 'Christophany' – an appearance of Christ, the son of God in the Old Testament) and Gideon assumed he would die for having seen him 'face to face' (v22). However, the LORD said to him 'Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die' (v23). The message for us is that we have to be right before the Lord personally before we can be effective for others (note Gideon's offering was consumed in his place – so consistent with the purposes of all the sacrifices required in the OT).

### **The LORD's first test for Gideon 6:25-32 – your ministry starts at home!**

The first test that Gideon was called to do was to 'tear down the altar to Baal and the Asherah pole beside it' and 'offer the second bull as a burnt offering' (v25-26) according to the covenant sacrificial system. (We assume he was called to sacrifice the second bull because the first bull would have been dedicated to the pagan gods and so disqualified from being a pure sacrifice). Gideon did as the Lord had told him but did it at night in fear of his family and the townspeople. Surprisingly, his father defended Gideon's actions and pointed out that if the Baal gods were worthy, they could defend themselves! Hence Gideon was named 'Jerub-Baal' which means 'let Baal contend with him'. The message for us is that we need to be willing to stand for the Lord in our home situation before we can expect to do so somewhere else (home is always the hardest place to be a witness).

### **Gideon's first testing of the LORD 6:33-40 – make sure God is guiding you!**

When the Spirit of the LORD came on Gideon (v34) he called his own tribe Manasseh and three other tribes (Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali – tribes around Galilee) into battle. So, Gideon was already committed to go into battle before he asked for the famous fleece sign. We often forget this detail and blame Gideon for being hesitant and wanting a sign for personal assurance. The sign he asked for was not for his personal assurance but so that everyone would realise that this battle was part of the covenant plan to bless the nation of Israel in the land. Gideon said 'if you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised' (v36). The fleece was a symbol of Israel and being wet with dew was a sign of blessing from the LORD (Deut 33:13; Ps 133:3).

According to Biblehub.com:

Dew is the symbol of divine grace, of the silently formed moisture'

If Israel was faithful to their covenant commitment. God would bless them and leave the nations around them 'dry'. On the other hand, if Israel was unfaithful to the covenant, they would be dry, and God would bless the other nations around them in the symbolism of dew. This is exactly what the terms of the covenant were.

God is patient and will keep on confirming that we are in His will if we seek that sincerely. Gideon was asking for national confirmation not personal guidance.

### **The LORD's second test for Gideon 7:1-8 – don't trust in your own resources!**

This second test was the well-known requirement from God that Gideon reduce the size of his army. We know from Judges 8:10 that the Midianites had 135,000 men in their army and from Judges 7:3 that Gideon had 35,000 men in his army – so approximately a quarter. His army was



seriously outnumbered and yet God told him 'You have too many men...' (v2) and told Gideon to let any men turn back who 'trembled with fear' (v3). God did not want them to think that after the battle, they had achieved the victory in their own strength. 22,000 men left the camp but even with 10,000 men – now outnumbered more than ten to one, God said there were still too many! The application for us is not to rely on our own resources in our battle with the devil and the world. We need to make sure our confidence is not in our own resources but in his presence and sufficiency.

The LORD told Gideon to separate those men who 'lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps, from those who kneel down to drink' (v5). We are not told specifically why this was important but presume it is because those who lapped like a dog had no awareness of their vulnerability to an enemy whereas those who knelt down and drank from cupped hands would be alert for an enemy at the same time. It is interesting to note they 'took over the provisions and trumpets of the others' (v8). This anticipates how the ultimate victory would be achieved – through the jars (holding the provisions) and the trumpets.

### **The assurance for Gideon 7:8-14 – the enemy is already defeated!**

God knows our hearts and fears and while Gideon was already committed to the call to go into battle (6:35) he provided assurance through the secret visit to the Midianite camp. Gideon and Purah (his servant) slipped down to the edge of the Midianite camp and overheard one of their men telling his friend his dream. His dream was that a round loaf of Barley (the poorest form of bread available) had tumbled down into the Midianite camp with such force that it overturned the tent. The conclusion was that they were about to be defeated. It is important to realise that our enemy is not as confident in their hearts as it might appear on the surface (for example, the arrogance of the media in our times can cover the deeper insecurity they feel in their hearts). We have been told over so many years that the church is dying and irrelevant, but they seem obsessed with attacking it all the same. It is also important to realise that God cares for them too and will be giving revelation to them even as they oppose his people and purposes (v14).

The picture of Gideon and his three hundred going into battle against the vast horde of Midianites is very much the picture most people have of our situation in the Western culture today. Those who truly love and serve the Lord are in a clear minority, but we should not be discouraged or despair. We should always remember we have:

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## PART 6

### Gideon and the Midianites - Ch 7:16 – 8:32 (Part 2)

We continue to study into Gideon's Judgeship with a great start but a disappointing finish. As has been said many times, 'it is not how you start that counts but how you finish'. Many heroic Bible characters such as Noah, Moses and David also had serious failures after significant victories which is sad and disappointing but reminds us that God is not limited by our human frailty. This does not justify sin or lack of faith but always helps us realise who is actually responsible for any victory and so who should receive all the glory.

The victory through Gideon 7:15-25 – we need to be participants in the battle not spectators!

Gideon was encouraged by hearing the dream in the Midianite camp (v13-15) and prepared his men for battle with their trumpets, empty jars with torches inside. Note the symbolism (typology) and application of the 'weapons' (v16):

- The trumpets – we should declare the truth boldly
- The empty jars – we should be simply vessels willing to be broken
- The torches – Christ's light can only shine through us when we are 'out of the way' – broken (see 2 Cor 4:6-7)

Gideon and his 300 men still had to go down and surround the Midianite camp (v19). We are called to be fully involved in the battles we are called to fight but it is always the LORD's presence that assures victory and this should be acknowledged as was the case here: 'they shouted "the sword of the LORD and of Gideon"' (v20). It is significant that the LORD's name is mentioned ahead of Gideon's name, not the other way round. We can sometimes be guilty of asking God to bless our efforts for him instead of acknowledging that he is the initiator of any blessing that really counts. In this case the victory clearly belonged to the LORD not Gideon. Charles Spurgeon says the following concerning this shout: 'Remember that the true war-cry of the Church is Gideon's watchword, 'The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon!' God must do it, it is his own work. But we are not to be idle... If we only cry, 'The sword of the Lord!' we shall be guilty of an idle presumption; and if we shout, 'The sword of Gideon!' alone, we shall manifest idolatrous reliance on an arm of flesh. (see: [jesusplusnothing.com](http://jesusplusnothing.com))

The text tells us (v19) that they smashed their jars, shone their torches, blew their trumpets and shouted at the beginning of the middle watch. This would have been 10pm at the changing of the guard when most of the Midianites would have been asleep. We have all experienced the alarm and confusion when suddenly woken up while fast asleep! As a result 'the LORD caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords' (v22). We can see examples of this in our current cultural 'battle' for the Gospel and truth with incredible contradictions and hypocrisy from our political and media leaders. We can also see examples of it in the Muslim world with Shiites and Sunnis opposed to each other just as much as against Christians and Jews. There is no harmony in the enemy camp!

With the vast Midianite army in full flight, Gideon sent messengers throughout the hill country calling the people to come down and be part of the battle (v23-24). This is an important reminder that Christian activity should be shared and not be limited to just a selected few who perform while the majority sit back and watch. In this case, Naphtali, Asher and all Manasseh were called out and joined in the pursuit of the Midianites. They slew key leaders, Oreb and Zeeb, whose names mean 'raven' and 'wolf' respectively - both notorious scavengers as Satan himself is. But he will come to a similarly shameful end. As has been said 'when Satan reminds you of your past... you remind him of his future!'

The Challenges to Gideon 8:1-21 – expect opposition – even from within the camp!

It would have been wonderful for Gideon's story to have ended there but as sadly so often in our Christian activity there is division and dissension. Our greatest opposition can come from within our own ranks (eg jealousy, resentment, power struggles). Have you noticed that often the people who are most critical of what other Christians are doing in ministry are often not actually involved themselves? As Stuart Briscoe used to say, 'if a job is worth doing – it is worth doing badly!' In other words, it is too important not to be done at all and in the process we will often learn how to do it well.

In v4 we read that Gideon and his three hundred men 'were exhausted yet keeping up the pursuit'. They certainly didn't rest on their laurels; they were committed to finishing the task. Sometimes we can be rebuked by well-meaning people for being tired in ministry. If we're tired because we're being foolish or proud then that rebuke is necessary but we need to remember tiredness is not a sin – otherwise Jesus sinned often because he was often tired (he even slept through a storm!). If we are truly in the will of God we may be tired but we will have an inner rest and probably sleep and rest physically better because we know we are doing his will. As Stuart Briscoe also once said: 'it is better to burn out than rust out!'

However, Gideon's main challenge was not the Midianites or his weariness but opposition from within the camp. The Ephraimites 'challenged him vigorously' (v1). They resented the fact that they had not been invited to be involved in what was turning out to be a brilliant victory and they clearly wanted to be part of the action and share in the glory. We need to be ready to be let down by colleagues and may need to exercise discipline in due course (but always make sure this is not just vengeful). Note Gideon's wise response to the Ephraimites. He acknowledged their success in defeating Oreb and Zeeb and played down his own achievements.

Gideon was also let down by the people of Sukkoth and Peniel who refused to support him and his men with basic bread. They were probably afraid of likely reprisals from the Midianites if they did but this was a blow to Gideon and he promised to return and punish them – which he did. He fulfilled his promise and punished them with 'desert thorns and briers', killing 'the men of the town' (i.e. the leaders who had refused to help) and tearing down their towers. The likelihood is that these 'towers' were for fortification but also for idol worship.

Gideon also had two Midianite kings Zeba and Zalmunna executed for killing his own brothers at Tabor. He initially asked his own eldest son Jether to do the execution but he was still young and too afraid (v30). This sounds unnecessarily vengeful for Gideon to require their execution

but in fact he was being faithful to the commandment of God 'whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image' (Gen 9:6). Furthermore, Zeba and Zalmunna accepted the justice of their penalty and Gideon did the deed.

The Failure of Gideon 8:22-35 – all is not well that doesn't end well

Probably the greatest test for any leader will be pride - remember the famous three G's that are the dangers for male leaders – 'the gold, the glory and the girls'! Despite Gideon's remarkable bravery and obedience to God's call to lead the people of Israel out of the oppression of the Midianites, he succumbs to pride. The Israelites said to Gideon 'Rule over us – you, your son and your grandson – because you have saved us from the hands of the Midianites' (v22). While it is understandable that the nation should be grateful for Gideon's role in liberating the land from the scourge of the Midianites, they totally missed the truth that it was actually the LORD himself who had liberated them.

Gideon's initial response 'I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you' (v23) was correct but sadly he went on to ask for 'an earring from your share of the plunder' – he may not have succumbed to the temptation for 'glory' but he asked for the 'gold'! The text tells us that 'it was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings' (v24). (There is no contradiction or error in referring to the Ishmaelites here because as Gen 37:27-28 tells us the company of people to whom Joseph's brothers sold him were referred to as both Ishmaelites and Midianites). The NIV note tells us that 'seventeen hundred shekels' amounts to 20 kilograms of gold (over A\$2m in today's prices)!

Gideon made a portion of this booty into an ephod (v27) which was the exclusive right of the High Priest to wear (Ex 28:4-14) and by this act, Gideon was claiming a spiritual status that was not his right to claim. 'All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it (there), and it became a snare to Gideon and his family' (v27). Having brought precious unity to the nation (the true sanctuary for worship was at Shiloh) he now caused disunity and which more seriously led to idolatry.

Gideon had seventy sons from many wives (v30) which was a sign of great wealth and prestige. In addition to these sons he had a son by a concubine who he named 'Abimelek' which means 'my father is king' – so having initially refused to rule over the nation, he ended up basically calling himself king in violation of the LORD who was truly the King of Israel.

Despite these final failures of Gideon personally, 'during Gideon's lifetime, the land had peace for forty years' (v28) and Gideon is listed along with many others as those who were examples of faith in the Old Testament (Heb 11:32).

## Conclusion

While the majority of Gideon's life and ministry was a great testimony to the Lord – it is sad that it didn't finish well. We can never rest on our accolades and think we are immune from failure just because of past favour and success in life and ministry. As we said at the beginning, how we finish is maybe the most important part of our lives (note: Daniel 'remained there' until the first year of King Cyrus which was approx. 70 years of ministry and until the nation of Judah was

granted leave to return to the Promised land). But remember failure is never final and when we are conscious of having failed we should always remember we have:

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## **PART 7**

### **Abimelech – the False Judge Ch 9:1–56**

As with every other leadership role that God provided for Israel, there always emerged false versions – so false Prophets; false Kings; false Priests; false Teachers. God created perfect angels, but one turned into a devil. Jesus called twelve disciples and taught, loved and equipped them all equally and yet even one of them turned out to be utterly false.

Here we have a false Judge with all the sad and destructive consequences you would expect.

### **The background to Abimelech – 8:33-35**

We never sin in isolation; our failures can have consequences for the next generation. As we saw in the last article, Gideon had failed at the end despite his many successes – he had collected the gold earrings; he made the ephod which people worshipped and while he declined the invitation to become king, he named his son Abimelech ('my father is king') so that there would be no doubt that in effect he was a king. In addition to this, Abimelech was born to a concubine when Gideon already had 'many wives' and seventy sons - he lived the lifestyle of a king!

### **Abimelech's beginning 9:1-6**

As mentioned above, there is no sense of the Lord calling Abimelech to be a Judge – he totally manipulated his brothers out of their rights and murdered all of them except one (Jotham). He did this to remove them from being a threat to his ambition to be a king. Just as Gideon (Jerub-Baal) had falsely taken the role of priest, Abimelech falsely claims the status of king. True leadership is when it is God-given and God-initiated.

Abimelech accepted money from the pagan temple and used it to hire 'reckless adventurers' (v4) to support him. This is in direct contrast to Jesus who called his followers to 'leave everything' and follow him (Luke 5:11). As Jesus said in John 10:11-12 'the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it.'

Ironically, they crowned Abimelech king beside 'the great tree at the pillar in Shechem'. This tree was where Abram had built an altar to the LORD following his promise 'to your offspring I will give this land' (Gen 12:6-8). Satan loves to desecrate and pollute any vestige of God's presence. We can see this happening today with the attempts to remove Scripture teaching, cancel prayer in parliament and 'cancel' culture generally.

### **The message from Jotham 9:7-21**

Jotham (which means 'Jehovah is upright') calls out to the people of Shechem from Mount Gerizim. The significance of this location is that it was one of the two mountains where Moses had said the children of Israel should confirm the covenant God had made with them in giving

them the land. (Deut 27-28). Six tribes were to declare the blessings from mount Gerizim and six tribes were to pronounce the curses from mount Ebal, if they were to break the covenant. Shechem is in the pass between these two mountains. Jotham was in effect reminding the people that they had broken their covenant commitments and so forfeited the promised blessings and would suffer the curses as just retribution. God is not mocked.

Jotham uses a striking parable to illustrate the consequences of their choice of Abimelech as king (this is actually the first parable in the Bible). He describes three trees who were invited to be king – an olive tree, a fig tree and a vine – each of them produced valuable commodities: oil, fruit and wine. These are clear symbols of God's blessing (and all three point to Christ himself who is the source of all blessing). But these trees refused to serve and be a blessing to others. 'Finally, all the trees said to the thornbush "come and be our king"' (v14). Thorns of course appeared as a consequence of the fall (Genesis 3:17-18 'cursed is the ground because of you... it will produce thorns and thistles for you') and Jesus wore a crown of thorns on the cross as a picture of his willingness to carry and pay for all the consequences of sin. Jotham's imagery of Abimelech being a thornbush is scathing and ironic – it can offer no shade and they would often catch fire in the heat of summer and end up burning all the trees around them. As Jotham prophesied, both Abimelech and his followers would destroy one another.

### **God's message to Abimelech 9:22-57**

After three years of apparent success (are the three years a Satanic parody of Christ's public ministry?), Abimelech's 'kingdom' began to disintegrate. The citizens of Shechem 'acted treacherously' against Abimelech and a rival appeared in the form of Gaal son of Ebed. This is the inevitable consequence of people doing 'that which is right in their own eyes' (Judges 21:25). Sadly, many ordinary people suffer at the hands of false leaders. In this case Abimelech attacked Shechem and killed its people. He also burnt to death a thousand men and women in its tower. In the act of doing the same in a neighbouring town – Thebez – a woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and fatally wounded him. To avoid the disgrace of being killed by a woman Abimelech called on his armour-bearer to draw his sword and finish him off (v54). This humiliating death was remembered generations later (2 Sam 11:21)

We have seen in history so many evil kings and dictators who have had temporary fame and glory but whose end has been utter ignominy and shame. Hitler ended up committing suicide in a bunker; Saddam Hussein was found cringing in a well on a remote farm; Gaddafi's body ended up in a shopping mall freezer.

### **Conclusion**

There is nothing about Abimelech that is God ordained or God honouring – he was self-appointed and was self-serving. 'God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done' (v56) by allowing him to be killed ignominiously. God also dealt justly with all the others who were wicked, 'God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness' (v57).

Note that there is little information about the next two Judges – Tola and Jair – but that during their leadership Israel had ‘rest’ for a considerable time (23yrs and 22yrs) – being anonymous or small in the eyes of the world does not mean we are not important in God’s purposes.

I really found this article on Abimelech the hardest to write so far in the Judges series because there is so little that is positive or uplifting but it is important to reckon with the fact that when humanity chooses to live in a Godless way as even Christian heritage nations like Australia are choosing to do, then we are beckoning the anti-Christ. As John says in 1 John 4:3 ‘every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world’. Abimelech is an Old Testament type of the anti-Christ and Jesus warned us that in the last days ‘there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect’ (Matt 24:24 KJV). That is why more than ever we need...

### **God’s Grace in Dark Times**



## **PART 8**

### **Jephthah the Gileadite - Ch 10:6 – 12:7**

The Israelites continued the downward cycle of rebellion after the Lord had raised up each judge and given them victory over their enemies. The deterioration now is that they are not just being oppressed and defeated by enemies but are openly and blatantly worshipping the idols and the gods of other nations in direct contravention of their covenant promises. The main nation oppressing Israel at this time in the book of Judges were the Ammonites who were the descendants of Lot through incest with his younger daughter (Gen 19:37-38). Sin always has consequences!

These 'gods' are listed in 10:1-6 'they served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines... and forsook the LORD and no longer served him' – so they were oppressed 18 years and God was angry!

We might be shocked at the Israelites capacity to serve so many gods, but our own culture has just as many idols, if not more... they just have more modern sounding names: money, power, sex, social status, pleasure, self-image, science-so called etc. Rom 1:18-32 makes it clear that when we substitute anything in place of the Lord as Creator-Redeemer and so 'suppress the truth' and eventually 'exchange the truth about God for a lie' his wrath will be revealed (v18). Ironically, we become helpless slaves and miserably oppressed by the very things we have worshipped.

### **The cry of the people 10:10-16**

God will not just be 'used' when people get themselves into trouble – he does not offer a 'get out of jail free card', he requires true repentance – ie an actual turning away from sin. Note there is a significant difference between repentance and remorse. Remorse is regretting sin and the misery it brings but true repentance requires a turning away from sin. The Greek word for 'repentance' is metanoia literally 'a change of mind'. Paul expresses the nature of true repentance perfectly in Rom 12:1:

'Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what is the good, well-pleasing, and perfect will of God.'

We wilfully exchange our will for his will.

The Israelites cried out to the LORD 'we have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals' (v10) and to their credit, the people 'got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD' (v16). Notice that God's response to their repentance was a broken heart because 'he could bear Israel's misery no longer' (v16) and see Isaiah 63:9 'in all their distress, (the LORD) he too was distressed'.

The result of repentance was that when the Ammonites came against them again, the Israelites assembled together and looked for a leader to lead them against their enemy (v17-18). This

shows how far their morale and morality had deteriorated – there were no willing candidates to take on leadership.

### **The qualifications of Jephthah 11:1-3**

As we have seen right throughout the book of Judges, God often chooses unlikely people – in this case the son of a prostitute. But ‘Gilead’s wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away’ (11:2). Note the parallels with Jesus who was also accused of being illegitimate and was rejected by his family and community.

Jephthah gathered others around him – he had a reputation as a mighty warrior and others were attracted to him (again like Jesus gathering his followers).

So, the prime qualifications Jephthah had were: leadership and fighting skills - there is nothing moral or spiritual yet.

### **The call of Jephthah 11:4-11**

The Ammonites territory was East of the Jordan river (modern Jordan) but some Israelite tribes (half the tribe of Manasseh and Ephraim) had chosen to settle there. It is part of the Promised Land that God had promised to Abraham and his descendants, but their fighting men were required to help the other tribes conquer their allotted territories before they were permitted to settle permanently East of the Jordan. In their desperation, the leaders of Gilead approached Jephthah and asked him to lead them in their battle against the Ammonites (v5-6).

Jephthah’s response is cynical but understandable – he reminds them ‘didn’t you hate me and drive me from my father’s house?’ (v7). When they acknowledge this but repeat their request, he is still hesitant ‘suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me will I really be your head?’ (v9). The elders of Gilead confirm their commitment ‘The LORD is our witness; we will certainly do as you say’ (v10). Notice that both parties are acknowledging ‘the LORD’ so there are signs of them renewing their covenant commitments to him and of having abandoned their previous idolatry.

This renewed sense of trust in and commitment to the LORD is confirmed when Jephthah ‘repeated all his words before the LORD in Mizpah’ (v11). Mizpah means ‘watchtower’ and was the location where Jacob had settled his dispute with his father-in-law Laban (Gen 31:48-50).

### **The challenge from Jephthah 11:12-27**

All Christian living and ministry must be based on God’s Word and historic truth – everyone is accountable to what God has revealed to them. Jephthah sends a message to the Ammonites asking, ‘what do you have against me that you have attacked my country?’ (v12). When this question is ignored, he recounts the children of Israel’s journey from Egypt to the Promised land and how they had been refused access through these lands east of the Jordan and even been attacked by the Amorites (v20-21). God had given Israel victory and Israel had ‘occupied’ the land for 300 years (v26). It seems the issue of Israel’s ‘occupation’ of land in the Middle East has been going on for a long time – and certainly well before 1948 and 2023!

There are no human solutions to historic grievances and the current attempts to rewrite history in favour of contemporary ideologies are fatally flawed. There is only one source of true justice and that is God himself and he alone will judge with truth and knowledge. As James Macpherson said recently here in New Life:

Good judgement used to be a virtue. We now have an entire generation who think that refusing to exercise any judgement of any sort, at any time, about anything at all, is a virtue!

In stark contrast to the naïve mantra ‘do not judge’, Jephthah rightly says ‘Let the LORD, the judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites’ (v27). With this acknowledgment, Jephthah is now equipped to be a judge for his time and circumstance: ‘Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Jephthah’ (v29).

### **The fatal vow of Jephthah 11:30-31**

Having been chosen by the Gileadites to be their leader and having been indwelt by the Spirit of the LORD, Jephthah has all he needs to fight successfully against the Ammonites. However, he decides to make a vow to the LORD ‘if you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering’ (v30-31).

This vow may have been inspired by the fact that he ‘passed through Mizpah’ (v29) but we should never bargain with God or try to impress him with our dedication (Eccl 5:1-7) – he will hold us to account and anyway, we can never give him anything he hasn’t first given us!

Regardless of this foolish, unnecessary vow, God gave Jephthah complete victory ‘Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into his hands’ (v32) and Israel had no more trouble from Ammon for 50 years.

### **The cost to Jephthah 11:34-40**

Sadly, and possibly tragically, there was a real cost to Jephthah on his return because when he returned home ‘who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines!’ (v34). When he saw who it was, Jephthah was understandably devastated. Perhaps he had anticipated an animal that he could have sacrificed? But he knows that he cannot break his vow.

The text makes a point of saying that ‘she was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter’ – this adds to the poignancy of the moment but also points prophetically to the ‘one and only Son’ that was sacrificed (1 John 4:9-10) for our sins.

Amazingly, his daughter confirms that her father must keep his vow ‘you have given your word to the LORD’ (v36). She makes just one request and that is that she be permitted to roam the hills and grieve with her friends for two months ‘because I will never marry’ (v37).

Scholars and commentators differ on their understanding of what actually took place. Did Jephthah literally sacrifice his daughter? This would violate the Law according to Leviticus

20:1-5 and the prophecies in Jeremiah 7:31 etc., so it is more likely that she sacrificed her prospect of ever being married. This fits in with the text saying, 'she was a virgin' and the tradition of Jewish young women commemorating the event each year. Furthermore, not to bear children was considered a great failing among Jewish women because it meant that that woman could never potentially bear the coming Messiah. Either way, his daughter was more God-fearing and God-honouring than her father!

### **The challenge to Jephthah 12:1-7**

Much like what happened to Gideon after his success (Judges 8:1), there was jealousy within the Israelite community after Jephthah's success. We should always expect there to be opposition from 'within the camp' which is often motivated by jealousy or resentment. The consequences are always serious and particularly in this case as it led to the death of forty-two thousand Ephraimites.

### **Conclusion**

There is nothing that is right about the ending of Jephthah's story – except the commitment of Jephthah's daughter and that the Lord resolves things that we often mess up. It also anticipates the decline that happens in the future as it reveals the on-going demise in the wisdom and character of people as they continue in this cycle of rebellion and retribution. Despite this, God is not diminished and will achieve his timeless purposes. So we can be encouraged and just need to remember that there is always...

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## **PART 9**

### **Samson and the Philistines – Ch 13:1 – 15:20 – Part 1**

All the other Judges fought on behalf of a repentant people, but Samson fought alone – was he a one-man nation and actually fulfilling the role of the covenant nation of Israel in just his one body? I think so, and this explains his supernatural strength as being a lot more than his physical strength! Even though we love making giant Samsons in Sunday school, I'm not sure that Samson had a physique like Arnold Schwarzenegger (if you remember him)!

Samson literally fulfilled the promise of Joshua 23:9-10: 'The LORD has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you. One of you routs a thousand, because the LORD your God fights for you, just as he promised'. The important thing is to realise that the source of Samson's strength was not physical muscle but spiritual anointing.

There is no evidence that Israel cried out to God for deliverance any time during the forty years of Philistine domination. According to Warren Wiersbe, Judges 15:9-13 indicates that the Jews were apparently content with their lot and didn't want Samson to "rock the boat". Wiersbe says, 'as a powerful and unpredictable hero, Samson frightened and troubled the Philistines (16:24) and kept them from devastating Israel as other invading nations had done, but it would take the prayers of Samuel (1 Sam 7) and the conquests of David to finish the job that Samson started'.

Perhaps, as we see the horrendous events connected with Palestine today – 'Palestine' is the Roman version of 'Philistine' – obviously mercilessly exploited by the terrorist organisation Hamas, we should be joining Samuel in praying for Israel's deliverance in Gaza (one of the five major Philistine cities) and look forward to the final 'son of David' (Matt 1:1; 21:9) who will truly bring peace on earth and goodwill to mankind! (Luke 2:14).

'The Philistines had entered the Promised land at the same time as Israel (Amos 9:7) – maybe because the power of Egypt had been broken at the Exodus? A key point in the light of the current events in Gaza (one of the five cities of the Philistines) is that they were arriving for the first time (from 'Caphtor' see Genesis 10:14; Deuteronomy 2:23; 1 Chronicles 1:12; Amos 9:7; Jeremiah 47:4 which is usually understood as being Crete). The children of Israel were arriving home – they were 'returning' to the Land of their ancestors – so who are the actual indigenous people of Israel!

The threat of the Philistines had been temporarily contained during the time of Shamgar (Judges 3:31). He 'struck down 600 Philistines with an ox-goad' - the only thing we know about him!

We know a lot more about Samson than Shamgar and he is included with other Judges in Heb 11:32-34 '... I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah... who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised... whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies'. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him at times but he was not always under the control

of the Spirit, and he ignored the promptings of the Holy Spirit and gave in to the pull of his passions.

Samson emerges in the days of Eli the High Priest when 'the word of the Lord was precious (scarce) in those days' (1 Sam 3:1). This is descriptive of the overall time of the Judges of degeneration and decline. Samson personifies this because he starts off with a rich spiritual heritage but stoops to the basic carnal lusts of the flesh – like Israel through history and especially here in the time of the Judges. There is recovery but this is at great cost as there always is a price to pay when we ignore the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives.

As stated earlier, there's no record that the Philistines 'oppressed' the Israelites the way other nations had done – but they were still a threat to Israel because they accommodated them into their religious practices. They let the Philistines slowly influence them away from their distinct identity as God's chosen people. This is just like today with our contemporary culture which tries to be 'inclusive' but which is actually selective and fundamentally absurd. If the Christian message is just one of many equal messages it is no longer the true Christian message. As Jesus said 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). He was not being arrogant, just truthful, and 'through me' meant through his sacrificial death. As Paul says in Acts 4:12 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved'.

A small Christ can be just as destructive as an anti-Christ (Os Guinness)

### **Samson's Birth 13:1-25**

Samson's birth was miraculous. This is in direct contrast to Jephthah's birth which was through a prostitute and which was totally despised (Judges 11:1-2). So both Jephthah and Samson anticipate Christ's birth – despised and miraculous!

Manoah – Samson's father, means 'rest' – his unnamed wife was 'sterile and remained childless' (v2), so barrenness and rest come together. God is not threatened or limited by our limitations. The text doesn't tell us why she was barren but God is repeatedly in the business of 'opening the womb' i.e. bringing life to where there is no life. He repeatedly enables 'barren' women to bear children (Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel, Hannah, Elizabeth) and this is brought to its ultimate climax with the birth of Jesus to a virgin (Matt 1:21-23).

When 'the angel of the LORD' appeared to Manoah's wife and told her that she would 'become pregnant and give birth to a son' (v3), he also required her to comply with the Nazirite requirements (Num 6:1-8). The word 'Nazirite' comes from a Hebrew word that means to separate, to consecrate. The Law (Num 3:13) said that every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the LORD'. This was fulfilled in Luke 2:23 and Paul applied this to himself when he said he was 'set apart for the gospel of God' (Rom 1:1). The angel made it clear that this Nazirite consecration was to apply to the son when he was born (v5) and that he would 'take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines' (v5). There were three specific requirements:

- He was to abstain from the product of the vine – ie fermented drink – alcohol tends to inflate passions and reduce self-control

- His hair was to remain uncut during the period of the vow – a symbol of purity before God – lepers, frequently a picture of sin in the Bible, had to shave their hair off, even beard and eyebrows! (Lev 14:8-9)
- He was not to be in contact with a dead body and so be ritually defiled. Note that a priest was automatically disqualified if he touched a dead body (Num 19:11)

It is interesting that Manoah's wife was to meet the Nazirite requirements prior to Samson's birth. It indicates that the pre-born child is already considered a person who is accountable and can please the Lord. There was a clear Jewish understanding that a child could sin before they were born (think of Jacob wrestling with Esau while still in the womb and the question the disciples asked Jesus in John 9:2 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'). There are clear implications for the issue of abortion – medical experts claim that 'by week 8 of pregnancy your baby has developed touch receptors in his face — mostly on his lips and nose — that connect to his growing brain' (Colleen de Bellefonds, an expert in pregnancy, health, wellness, fitness and nutrition). This has strong implications for the issue of abortion as it seems that the foetus is much more than just insensitive tissue inside a woman's body!

### **Manoah's Sacrifice v15-23**

The 'angel of the Lord' appeared to Manoah's wife and then later to Manoah himself (v8-13). Manoah invited the angel to stay for a meal (v15) not realising he was in the presence of the divine (we see this appearance of the angel of the LORD as a Christophany). Sharing a meal was a sign of friendship and fellowship. But Manoah realises it is a divine being when his name is announced as 'wonderful' (see Is 9:6!) – the angel ascends in the flames (shekinah glory cloud?). Manoah assumed they would die because they had 'seen the Lord's person' (God) but as with Gideon (Judges 6:19-23) who also prepared and presented a sacrifice on a rock, the sacrifice was consumed not his person. This is one of the many pointers to the ultimate sacrifice made for us on Calvary.

The promised son was born – Samson – which literally means 'sun man' or 'sun like' or 'brightness' – so one who can bring light when times are dark. We know that only God is the source of light – the first act of God in creation was 'let there be light' (Gen 1:3) and that we are simply reflectors of that light, 'For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Cor 4:6). As Samson began to grow up, 'the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him...' (v25). It is good to remember that the first work of the Holy Spirit is conviction (John 16:8). God is moving on Samson and preparing him to bring light and hope in an era of gloom and oppression.

### **Conclusion**

This has been a good start to Samson's life and everything is in place for him to be an effective Judge (deliverer and leader) for Israel. As you will well know, the coming days for Samson will be very much a roller-coaster ride but despite his many failings, the Lord still fulfils his purposes as he always does and there are many important lessons we can learn through Samson's life.

As we have seen through each of the Judges, there is always,

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## **PART 10**

### **Samson and the Philistines – Ch 14:1 – 15:20 – Part 2**

We continue the 'roller-coaster' ride that is Samson's story with the focus in these two chapters being Samson's relationship with women. It reminds me of Salieri's famous description (in the film 'Amadeus' at least), of Mozart as 'a performing monkey' and his deep quandary: 'it seemed to me I was hearing the voice of God but why... why... would God choose an obscene child to be his instrument?' From the optimism of a miraculous birth and the assurance of 'the Spirit of the LORD coming powerfully on him' (13:19) everything is in place for a man of God to assume the leadership of the nation. Instead 'we find by far the most flawed character in the book: a violent, impulsive, sexually addicted, emotionally immature and selfish man' (Timothy Keller).

#### **Samson wants a bride 14:1-4**

Samson is now a grown man and should be fully focused on fulfilling the angel's prophecy that 'he will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines' (13:5). Instead, he socialises with the Philistines, sees an attractive young Philistine woman and when he returns home, bluntly tells his parents 'Get her for me as my wife' (14:1-2). That's not the way it's usually done today – we have Christian dating apps!

The more serious issue was that she belonged to the 'uncircumcised Philistines' and any marriage would be directly against the Covenant law 'Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land... and when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those wives prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same' Ex 34:16 (see also Deut 7:3). God's prohibition is not against inter-racial marriage but against interfaith marriage. In the New Testament we have a similar instruction: 'be not unequally yoked with unbelievers' (2 Cor 6:14) – the influence of a non-believing spouse can lead to a very barren Christian life. As we suggested in an earlier article, Samson represents Israel hence he has the strength of a nation in one body. He also reflects the sin of the nation which 'always did that which was right in their own eyes' (21:25).

Samson's motive was clearly selfish and lustful, and we're reminded in 1 John 3:16 of the 'lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes' does not come from the Father but from the world. God never initiates or approves sinful behaviour, but a dynamically sovereign God can still use it to accomplish his greater purposes – as he does here: 'his parents did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines who at that time were ruling over Israel' (v4).

#### **Samson kills a Lion v5-8**

On his way to his intended future wife's home, Samson is challenged by a lion – as we will be (1 Peter 5:8 'be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith').

The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power so that he tore the lion apart - the same Hebrew word/phrase that is used of the sacrifices as prepared for the altar (Lev 1:17 'He shall tear it

open by the wings, not dividing it completely, and then the priest shall burn it on the wood that is burning on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD').

In the process though, Samson has broken the first of his Nazirite vows – not to touch a dead animal. His response should have been to go to the tabernacle (which was in Shiloh) for cleansing, but he had other things on his mind! He also didn't tell his parents which suggests he knew it would be best to keep this as a secret.

Later (v8) he found honey in the carcass – a precious commodity reminding him of the promise through the manna in the wilderness, that the Promised land would taste of coriander and honey (Ex 16:31) – only when the lion is slain in our lives will we get a taste heaven.

### **Samson's Riddle v8-20**

v12-14 Samson set up a riddle which is a common form of entertainment and prowess in the Middle East – the death of a lion was leading to high stakes! The young men were given seven days to solve the riddle:

*Out of the eater, something to eat;*

*Out of the strong something sweet.*

'Seven days' is a reminder that there is enough evidence in creation to know that there is a Creator (Rom 1:20), but when the Philistines were baffled by Samson's riddle, their pride was hurt. 'For three days they could not give the answer' (v14). This is one of many references (there are actually 37 references) to the significance of 'three days' in the Old Testament (e.g. Moses stretched his hands over Egypt and there was darkness for three days; Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days). This is a clear pointer to the fact that it takes divine revelation and human humility to understand the ultimate truth of the three days Jesus suffered, died and was resurrected! Otherwise, life is a perpetually unresolved dilemma – like the riddle the Philistines couldn't resolve.

Like many human responses to the mystery of life, the Philistines turn nasty (v15-18). They violently threaten his new bride and so she plays the emotional card 'she cried the whole seven days of the feast' (v17). The 'seven days' means that there was no consummation of the marriage – Samson is robbed of his bride. Satan always tries to come between Christ and his bride, and he will offer an alternative husband who may even look like a friend! (v20)

'The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him' (v19) because this was his true calling as a Judge to break the stronghold the Philistines had on God's people. Ironically, Samson paid for the thirty clothes from their own people. Satan's schemes never pay off in the long run.

### **Samson Rejected and his Revenge 15:1-17**

How terrible it would be to find that your bride had been given to someone else (15:1-2) – but remember that is what has happened to the Lord's bride! The amazing grace of our faithful Bridegroom is that he never gives up on restoring us. This is powerfully illustrated in the

relationship between Hosea and Gomer which is a picture of Jehovah and Israel and Christ and the church. Note: 'I will court her again' (Hos 2:14) – this is the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus – he never gives up on us. But don't think you can just come to God on your terms... when you feel like it... as Dr Alan Redpath says:

*partial obedience is still disobedience*

Samson's response at the loss of his intended bride is typical – he lashes out (15:3-5). There is no reference here to 'the Spirit of the LORD' coming on him – this is sheer vengeful humanity. God had said 'an eye for an eye' (Ex 21:12-26) not requiring that you were required to match injustice with revenge but making it clear that you should not go beyond that. In the NT Jesus calls us to 'turn the other cheek' (Matt 5:38-48) which is a lot harder to do than take revenge. At any moment Jesus could have destroyed those torturing him and nailing him to the cross but he chose to suffer unjustly so that he may be able to offer full justification (salvation) to even the most hardened killer or terrorist. Anyone can pick up a gun and shoot people they don't like – that is not being a heroic 'freedom fighter' that is perpetuating misery and depravity with literally all hell to pay.

Ch 15:6-8 gives us a further glimpse into the cruelty of the Philistines – they burned the intended bride and her father to death. The Philistine's revenge (v6) was an excessive cruel human version of justice no doubt orchestrated by Satan. Fire is often a picture of the Holy Spirit and Satan loves to parody God's activity (that's all he can do as he's not a creator or equal with God in any way). God is dangerous and ultimately will destroy with fire 'For with fire and with his sword the LORD will execute judgement on all people, and many will be those slain by the LORD' (Isaiah 66:16). We don't need to be embarrassed about that because it will be a purifying fire and remember: 'He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he' (Deut 32:4).

Samson's response was no better than the Philistines, 'he attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them' (v8). In retaliation at least a thousand Philistines (v15-16) chased after one man Samson! Despite Samson's lack of spiritual integrity, the Lord was using him to wake up Israel who had settled for the status quo that 'the Philistines are rulers over us' (v11). At least in previous times during these days of the Judges, the people had cried out to the Lord because of the invasion of alien people. Now it seems they had settled for it and accommodated it into their own belief system. This is a huge lesson for us today. There is a profound danger we as the church accommodate the non-Biblical values and distinctives that should set us apart from the world and enable us to be 'salt and light'. As Michael Wilcock says:

'there is no such thing as harmonious coexistence between the church and the world, for where there is no conflict – it is because the world has taken over'

There are many examples in church history where true followers of Jesus have been opposed more by the church itself than the secular cultural forces in the world. In this case 3,000 from Judah (compared to only 1,000 Philistines!) come to challenge Samson and they come with only a weak proposal – don't cause problems! The world increasingly claims the death of Christianity (eg 'the churches are declining and irrelevant'; 'God is dead, science has resolved the mysteries

of life'; 'morality is only a choice not an absolute' etc.) If we listen to them, we will be weak and compromise out of fear of not conforming to the latest cultural values. If we keep going down this path, we will be directly ignoring Paul's command 'do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (Rom 12:2).

Samson allowed his own people to hand him over to the Philistines 'bound with two new ropes' (v13). But rough and crude as he was, 'the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him' and he struck down a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. The instrument was incidental because he threw it away (v17) – but it symbolised the fact that a most unimpressive instrument even used by a most unimpressive person makes a complete mockery of the supposed sophistication of those who think they can compete with God and his people. Even unsophisticated Samson can express this:

*'With a donkey's jawbone*

*I have made donkeys of them.*

*With a donkey's jawbone*

*I have killed a thousand men'*

This incident graphically fulfils the prophecy of Josh 23:9-10 The Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you. One of you routs a thousand, because the Lord your God fights for you, just as he promised'.

### **Samson Revived v18-20**

Samson was thirsty physically when he should have been thirsty spiritually (v18-19). We're reminded in Matt 5:6 that 'blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled'. God 'opened up the hollow place in Lehi and water came out of it' (v19). It is described as 'a spring' and Samson's 'strength returned and he was revived'. We need to drink from the fountain of life – Christ continually – one victory will not sustain us – only Christ. Remember Elijah ran away from one woman, Jezebel, despite his amazing victory on Mount Carmel! 'Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So, Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." Elijah was afraid and ran for his life' (1 Kings 19:1-3).

### **Conclusion**

Despite all the evidence of Samson's carnality, this was the high point of Samson's life, and he led Israel for 20 yrs. The old Samson nature was still there as we'll find out in chapter 16 but as we have seen through each of the Judges, there is always:

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## PART 11

### Samson's Downfall and Death 16:1-31

Samson's downfall and death begin with:

- Casual sin v1-3 - he has absolutely no resistance to temptation

'he saw... and he wanted...'. Of course, we are warned in 1 John 2:16 'that all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world'. So much depends on how we look at things – here are some classic examples:

- Gen 39:17, 26 Lot's wife looked back
- Ex 2:12 Moses looked this way and that but not up!
- Matt 5:28 'whoever looks at a woman to lust has committed adultery
- 1 Sam 6:19 'God smote the men of Beth-she-mesh because they looked into the ark

Of course, there is a right way to be looking too – as Hebrews 12:2 reminds us, we need to 'run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of faith'. Other examples and challenges are:

- Num 21:8-9 everyone who was bitten but looked up at the bronze serpent lived
- 2 Peter 3:12-14 we are to be 'looking for his appearing'

Despite his shameful failures, Samson was still able to carry the two posts, bar and all on his shoulders up the hill (apparently 38 miles!). Some commentators see this as a foreshadowing of Christ who carries his cross of our shame up to the hill of Calvary.

Samson's continuing dalliance with sin means that he is:

#### **Caught by sin v4-21 – he 'fell in love with a woman'**

This time his sensuous desire is deeper than just physical pleasure. If we fool ourselves that we can handle a little bit of sin, we will soon find out that it begins to handle us! Samson falls under Delilah's spell and she begins to manipulate his love for her. He should have learned from Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife (Gen 39:12)! Delilah tries to tease the truth of the source of his extraordinary strength out of him. Her motivation seems to have been pure greed – the 'rulers of the Philistines offered her a significant monetary reward but she may also have been intimidated by these powerful people who had no respect for human life other than their own. Samson tries to avoid revealing the actual truth but his suggestions become increasingly close to the mark – Samson is playing with fire! Firstly he claims that his strength could be overcome with:

- 'Seven green cords' – seven is God's number and then:

- 'new ropes... never used' – the cart carrying the ark of the covenant was never used – then:
- 'seven braids of hair... woven into fabric' – seven is God's number and he is introducing the significance of his hair - finally the actual source of his strength is revealed:
- 'if my head were shaved' – and the confession that he is a Nazarite – so dedicated to God.

Samson now experiences the:

### **Consequences of sin v20-25**

This contains one of the saddest (scariest?) verses in scripture '... he did not know that the Lord had left him' – as new covenant believers we can't lose our salvation (Eph 1:13-14) but we can lose the sense of his presence in 'falling away from grace' (Gal 5:4; Heb 6:4-6). The danger is that we are no longer responsive to God's Spirit in us and keep on just going through the motions of the Christian life but with no Holy Spirit power.

Samson is made blind... bound... enslaved... and humiliated as we are when we allow sin to overrule the Holy Spirit in our lives. He has been spiritually blind to his important calling as a Judge (leader) of God's people and is now made literally blind. When we choose wilful sin as believers, we become impotent and insensitive to the Holy Spirit – but the end of Samson is the beginning for God!

Samson finally faces up to his violation of his and his parents' vows that he would serve the Lord with his whole life. We should be careful in making vows to the Lord – as Ecclesiastes says 'When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfil it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfil your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfil it.' (Eccl 5:4-5)

**Confession of sin v28-30** - 'then Samson prayed to the Lord... please God strengthen me just once more'

(v28) - this is the first time Samson has prayed for strength but it begins with humble repentance 'remember me'. This is echoed many centuries later as the thief on the cross dying alongside Jesus 'remember me when you come into your kingdom' (Luke 23:42). Samson has also come to the place where he is willing to die (v30) which is of course where every believer needs to come to if we are truly going to be effective as Christians. Paul declared 'I am crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me' (Gal 2:20).

God did for Samson what he always does for us to if we genuinely repent and give our lives to the Lord. He restored his supernatural strength and enabled him to fulfil more in this moment of death than he had accomplished in his whole lifetime! (v30)

### **Conquering of sin v30**

Samson had said to the servant 'put me where I can feel the pillars...' (v26) he then put 'his right hand on one and his left hand on the other' (v29) an unconscious representation of the cross.

'down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it' (v30) – the false spiritual worship and power of the Philistines was destroyed in one act! 'They brought him back and buried him' (v31) – just like Jesus except Samson stayed in the tomb!

Samson was at his strongest when he was at his weakest...

All the other Judges fought on behalf of a repentant people – Samson fought to stir up the people – like Jesus he went to his death alone but his death broke the powers of evil who were violating God's land.

### **Conclusion**

There are many disappointing aspects to Samson's life but there are many important lessons we can learn. His life and ministry began as a result of his parent's devotion to God and God used Samson to disrupt the Philistines who were polluting the Holy land with their idolatry. It was also a 'wake up' call for all Israel to be reminded that they were God's covenant people and had the responsibility to cleanse the land and be a blessing to the world as they had committed to under the Abrahamic Covenant.

It is interesting to note too that Samson is mentioned in Hebrews 11:32-34 who 'through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised...' so while he didn't seem to live by faith faithfully or consistently he did exercise faith and the Lord always honours that and can bring about great purposes even though our faith may be weak.

As mentioned above, Samson was at his strongest when he was at his weakest and he discovered:

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## **PART 12**

### **The Consequences of repeated rebellion is Spiritual and Moral Anarchy - Judges 17-21**

#### **Spiritual Anarchy – Ch 17-18**

As we have noted from the beginning of our study in the book of Judges the repeated phrase is that: 'in those days everyone did what was right in their own eyes' and as we have seen this has been a recipe for disaster. Here it is again in this final section (17:6).

The reality is that when the cycle of rebellion... retribution... repentance...restoration... and rest is repeated, it is not just more of the same over and over again, it inevitably leads to a downward spiral. That is exactly what happens here in the book of Judges – and the sad, ugly consequences are spelt out loud and clear. We have reached rock bottom.

Here at the end of the period of the Judges, the nation is bereft of spiritual health and hunger, and consequently, there are no Judges raised up and certainly no appetite to be restored to being a covenant nation that can fulfil the Abrahamic covenant to be blessed and be a blessing to the nations of the world (Gen 12:2).

When there is a famine of the word of God and everyone does that which is right in their own eyes then there is a fatal decline in the spiritual and moral fibre of the nation. We are seeing this played out in our world today too. As we in Australia (or any other traditionally 'Christian nation') abandon our foundational Christian values and settle for doing that which is right in our own eyes we will see an increasing decline in every facet of society. When that foundation crumbles, society begins to fall apart. As Ps 11:3 says 'If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?'

This decline always begins with the spiritual and as the Christian presence and influence in Australia has waned, we are seeing the inevitable vacuum filled with a whole range of alternative ideologies and life-styles – none of which honour our Creator Redeemer and which produce nothing but the most devastating self-harm. As James Macpherson (SkyNews host) says 'unfortunately, we are now living off the fumes of our Christian past. It is only a matter of time before the Christian deposit is overdrawn and what will replace it?'

Here after the time of the Judges, there are three causes and consequences of false spirituality represented by the three main persons recorded: Micah – make my own god (17:4-5) – note he ends up with nothing 18:26 The story of Micah stealing from his mother and then being 'blessed' by her and commissioned to make a household idol to worship is almost farcical, except that it is very tragic. Micah's mother cast a curse on the person that stole her 1,100 shekels which clearly unnerved Micah so that he confessed to being the thief. Ironically Micah means 'who or what is the Lord like' and he was displaying the exact opposite nature to that which is Lord-like! The spiritual ignorance and decline is confirmed by the fact that Micah's mother commissions him to make 'an image overlaid with silver' to the LORD (v3). This directly violates Ex 20:4-5 and Deut 4:15-17 where God condemns the making of any image. An image cannot do justice to the invisible eternal God and he knows full well that the people will quickly forget the true nature of



God and worship the wood or stone as an idol. In addition, in Deut 12:13-14 God had said: 'Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. Offer them only at the place the LORD will choose'.

So Micah makes his own god even in the name of Yahweh. It is sadly possible that prominent Christians can do something similar. They can build their own 'ministry' in the name of God when in fact they are actually worshipping what they have made – usually their own reputation – not God alone.

Micah appoints his own son as priest (v5) – this perpetuates his own dynasty not the true God's and clearly violates the requirements of the law: 'The Levitical priests—indeed, the whole tribe of Levi—are to have no allotment or inheritance with Israel... They shall have no inheritance among their fellow Israelites; the LORD is their inheritance, as he promised them... for the LORD your God has chosen them and their descendants out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the LORD's name always.' (Deut 18:1-5) Jonathan – define my own priesthood (17:11; 18:19-20) – note he ended up as a nobody 18:30 The story of Jonathan is just as depressing as that of Micah. The story begins with Jonathan's restlessness and determination to better himself in worldly terms rather than be faithful to his status as a Levite in Judah. He abandons his home in Bethlehem and finds himself at Micah's house in the hill country of Ephraim (v8). When Micah finds out that he is a Levite he invites him to stay and become his personal priest. (There is no mention of his son who presumably was cast aside). Neither men are seeking the Lord's will in this or following his revealed protocols. It was very much a marriage of convenience – Micah got an actual Levite as his priest and Jonathan got a paid secure position in his home. Not only is there no indication of seeking the Lord's will or abiding by his Word, Micah even believes superstitiously that his life will be improved.

He virtually manipulates God 'now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest' (v13). Jonathan has exchanged the opportunity of being a priest in the town of Bethlehem in Judah with all its historical significance (Rachel's tomb; Naomi and Ruth's home; prophesied by Micah as the birthplace of the Messiah) for an obscure life in a private home and later a remote location in the far north of the country with the tribe of Dan.

Dan – choose my own inheritance – for an easy prosperous life (18:1-2; 27- 31) – note ended up with no inheritance (18:30; Rev 7:4-8) The story of the Danites failing to settle in their allotted territory and being willing to rob territory from other people is another symptom of the spiritual bankruptcy of the time. The section starts with 'In those days Israel had no king' (18:1). In human terms this was true of course but in true terms God was their king but they were so lacking in spiritual perspective that they didn't recognize this truth. Samuel had to deal with the same attitude when they were demanding a king not long after this and God pointedly said, 'it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king' (1 Sam 8:7).

The Danites had failed to inherit the land allotted to them by Joshua or at least had been 'confined to the hill country' (Judges 1:34). So now they were going to find their own inheritance by stealing land from another people. (Perhaps this is why the tribe of Dan is missing from the list of tribes in Revelation 7:5-8?). They sent out five of their leading men to find some land suitable according to their perspective – so in effect 'land that is right in their own eyes'. In the

process they came to Micah's house and recognized Jonathan's voice (v2-3) and even asked him to determine God's blessing on their plans. It is not uncommon for Christians today to ask God to 'bless' their plans instead of staying faithful to God's plan all along! The Danites plan to attack another people and steal their land could never be approved/blessed by God. When they reported back to the main tribe they even had the audacity to say 'when you get there you will find unsuspecting people and a spacious land that God has put into your hands' (v10). God (or at least God's name) gets dragged into a lot of things that he has nothing to with whatsoever!

During their first encounter with Jonathan, they had become aware of Micah's shrine and ephod and when they passed by with the 600 men 'armed for battle' they stole 'the idol, the ephod and the household gods' (v16-17). When Jonathan protested, they invited him to abandon Micah and join them with the lure that 'isn't it better that you serve a tribe and clan in Israel as a priest rather than just one man's household?' (v19). How many so-called Christian ministers and leaders have been enticed away by the promise of greater glory and status in a bigger church or ministry?

As the Danites travel north to Laish, they are challenged by a pursuing Micah who is seeing his 'god' (actually an idol) disappearing over the horizon with his own priest. He is not strong enough to reclaim it. But what real god needs rescuing! This confirms the futility of creating your own god – only the true God is worthy of our allegiance and he will always prove utterly trustworthy. The Danites themselves ruthlessly attacked the unsuspecting people in Laish and established their 'inheritance' there (v28-30) but along with the glaring omission in the book of Revelation, they were only there 'until the time of the captivity of the land' (v30) so failed to establish a lasting inheritance. Most telling of all is the fact that all the time that Micah was making his own god, Jonathan was defining his own priesthood and the Danites were establishing their own inheritance 'all the time the house of God was in Shiloh!' (v31)

They all paid the penalty for ignoring...**God's Grace in Dark Times**

## **PART 13**

### **The Consequences of repeated rebellion is Spiritual and Moral Anarchy - Judges 17-21**

This section continues the extremely depressing condition of the Children of Israel at the end of this period of the Judges. In Chapters 17-18 we saw the 'spiritually bankrupt' condition of the nation, now we see the 'morally bankrupt' state of the nation. It is important to recognize that one leads to the other. As we are experiencing here in Australia and is happening in most of the historically 'Christian' nations, the decline of our Christian heritage is leading to an equivalent decline in the moral health of our societies.

It is easy to dismiss this as just nostalgia but the reality is that as Peter Harrison states in Religion and Ethics: the central moral category in the West had been 'virtues' rather than 'values'. The first is objective while the latter is subjective. The concept of 'virtues' assumes a consensus of moral absolutes whereas the concept of 'values' can vary from individual to individual or organisation to organisation. Virtues in our Western heritage were pretty much defined by the 10 Commandments specifically or at least a Biblical worldview generally. However, there is no societal consensus as to what values should be based on today except maybe very vacuous, undefined cliches such as 'inclusion, tolerance etc'. Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott laments 'the neglect of the Western canon, the literature, the poetry, the music, the history and above all the faith without which our culture and our civilisation is unimaginable.'

This section begins with the statement 'In those days Israel had no king' (19:1) and ends with the statement 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit' (21:25). Much like today as mentioned above, there was no recognizable moral authority so they could choose whatever 'values' seemed right to them. The truth of course was that they did have a king – the one and only true king of kings! When later they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. And the LORD told him: 'Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.' (1 Sam 8:6-7)

### **Moral Anarchy – Ch 19-21**

In these chapters there are three causes and consequences of gross immorality.

1. Personal sin – the Levite 'took a concubine' (19:1) – a concubine was a wife of secondary rank ('the Hebrew word for concubine *pileges* is a non-Semitic loanword borrowed to refer to a phenomenon not indigenous to Israel' – Baker's dictionary of Biblical theology) but who was guaranteed food, clothing, and marital privileges (Ex. 21:7–11; Deut. 21:10–14). This is very different from the true definition of Biblical marriage established by God in Genesis 2:24 and affirmed by Jesus in Matt 19:4-6, and everything about this arrangement smacks of self-interest not divine calling. It is obvious he wants sexual privileges without a true marriage commitment. He is a Levite – and so called to the priestly role in the nation with all the moral expectations that would go with that role. As Timothy Keller says: 'It is a deeply ominous opening that this Levite who was supposed to be set apart as holy, has instead been swept into pagan culture, taking a concubine'.

Personal sin always affects others – it damages our character, so we fail to do justice to those we interact with. Some people justify personal sin by claiming it is only harming them, not anyone else, but if we wilfully choose to sin, we are damaging our very humanity. Every day I am either growing in Christ or walking away from Christ. If it is walking away, then I am bringing disgrace to His name and reputation and undermining the character of Christ he has designed me to express.

Remarkably or maybe inevitably, his concubine proves ‘unfaithful to him... and went back to her parents’ home in Bethlehem’ (v2). The relationship was clearly empty and meaningless. After four months the Levite returns to her family home with the intention of persuading her to return to him. In the process her father ‘prevailed on him to stay’ longer than he intended and when eventually they left (on the fifth day) it meant that their journey would require an overnight stay. The obvious place was Jebus (later to become Jerusalem) but not willing to risk staying with foreigners they went on as far as Gibeah (in the tribal territory of the Benjamites). There they are hosted by an old man from the hill country of Ephraim (v16-21).

2. Sexual sin – sexual sin always deteriorates and always multiplies (see Rom 1:18-32).

Having been provided with hospitality by the old man ‘wicked men of the city surrounded the house... pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house “bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him”’ (v22). This is the inevitable consequence of having no king and everyone doing what they saw fit. When we reject God’s presence, there are no moral boundaries left and as Paul declares in Rom 1:24-27 ‘God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another... even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones... in the same way men abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lusts for one another’. In this instance there is a decline from personal sin to aggressive homosexuality to violent rape and ultimately to murder. We are seeing the same deterioration in our world today – even if in our more ‘civilised’ society we just put it on the movie screen for entertainment!

The response from the host and the Levite was horrific – the host offered his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine as substitutes for his guest ‘to do to them whatever you wish’ (v24) which they did ‘they raped her and abused her throughout the night’. We should be shocked and outraged at this – and yet there is subdued and only tentative condemnation of exactly the same kind of behaviour perpetrated on Oct 7 th last year by the Hamas terrorists in Southern Israel!

Incredibly it seems that while this was happening, both men simply slept (which is matched by the tepid response from the Western nations to the massacres and rapes in Israel). In the morning the Levite finds his concubine ‘fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold’. She died abandoned to her fate.

The Levite put her body on his donkey and returned home. When the Levite reached home, he ‘took a knife and cut up his concubine limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel’ (v29). It is important to note that his anger is not because he cared for her personally (he had agreed to handing her over to the men of Gibeah!) – rather it was because

his 'property' had been damaged. This reveals and confirms the callous hardness and self-centeredness that personal sin produces.

3. Rampant evil – what started as one person's sin has now expanded to impacting the whole nation. Just as the one sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:6 becomes 'every inclination of his (men's) hearts was only evil all the time' Genesis 6:5). As we noted earlier unresolved sin always runs rampant like a virus. All the tribes came together in Mizpah to attempt to find out the reason for the Levite's action and resolved to punish those in Gibeah (of the Benjamite tribe) who were responsible. But 'the Benjamites would not listen to their fellow Israelites' (20:13) which led to a national crisis and the near elimination of the whole tribe of Benjamin. Only God can resolve evil – human solutions always fail and cause greater problems.

To their credit the tribes inquire of the LORD 'who of us shall go first to fight against the Benjamites?' (v18) but the battle was not straightforward and there was much loss of life. Only when 'the Israelites went up to Bethel...sat weeping before the LORD... fasted... and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings' (v26) did the LORD respond 'Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands' (v27). Entrenched sin in a society is not easily removed.

As we hopefully know, a change of leader (Prime minister/President) or even whole governments can never resolve the true destructive issues in our nation. We need to truly repent as individuals and as a nation. The Benjamites were finally defeated, and all the inhabitants of their towns were put 'to the sword' (v48). There is no indication at all that this was God's will – it was sheer vindictive revenge. Only six hundred men who had 'fled into the desert to the rock of Rimmon' survived.

'Now the Israelites grieved for their brothers, the Benjamites' (21:6) – they lamented the fact that nearly a whole tribe had been wiped out except for the 600 men. They had made an oath at Mizpah that none of their daughters would be permitted to marry a Benjamite and so it seemed as though there would be no future tribe of Benjamin, but then 'they discovered that no-one from Jabesh Gilead had come to the assembly' (v8) and so they put to the sword all those living there including the women and children. The result was that they 'found four hundred young women who had never slept with a man' (v12) who they gave to the surviving Benjamite men as wives. But there were still two hundred men without wives and so they set up an ambush during an annual festival at Shiloh and instructed the two hundred Benjamite men to 'rush from the vineyards and each of you seize a wife from the girls of Shiloh and go to the land of Benjamin' (v21).

So, the tribe of Benjamin continued and later on provided Israel's first king (Saul) and later queen Esther and Mordecai, who God used to save the nation from annihilation. Paul the apostle was also a Benjamite so we can be grateful they survived.

This whole tragic episode borders on the farcical but graphically illustrates the incapacity of mankind to function without any recognition of or submission to our Creator/Sustainer God. When we decide there is no king (i.e. no higher authority) and do that which is right in our own eyes we are doomed to self-destruction and failure. Praise God we do have a Saviour who is

also King of Kings and who will reign in us individually as we repent of our sin and trust his work of saving grace. He will also reign over all on earth when he returns and then forever in heaven.

As Psalm 96:10-13 tells us:

Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns."

The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;

he will judge the peoples with equity.

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;

let the sea resound, and all that is in it.

Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;

let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes,

he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness

and the peoples in his faithfulness.

### **Overall Lessons:**

1. Spiritual failure leads to moral failure – they are intrinsically linked and you can't be spiritual without moral fruit – God hates 'religion' that is superficial (Is 1:10-15)
2. It is very dangerous and ultimately self-destructive to distort and corrupt God's revealed ways (2 Peter 2:10-20)
3. There are no human solutions to spiritual or moral problems – only God can deal with the fundamental crisis in the human condition (James 4:1-10)
4. The alternative to moral failure is not legalism or asceticism (depriving self of pleasure) but a living faith in the presence of the Lord Jesus in our lives (Prov 3:5-6)

And remember there is always: **'God's Grace... in Dark Times'**