

People-Watching



in Judges

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Introduction

“People-Watching” refers to the practice of casually observing the behavior of strangers. In this study we will do our own form of people-watching by considering individuals in the book of Judges. Unlike a more traditional approach to studying the book where we would be seeking to gain a better understanding of the narrative found within Judges, we will be instead seeking to understand some of the people within the book.

A person-study is valuable to the Christian life. By considering strengths and weaknesses of individuals that God used to perform His will, both good and evil, we can learn more about ourselves and those we come into contact with. Why do people do the things that they do? Why do some obey the Lord and some do not? Why do some leave the truth after having fought so valiantly to defend it? We will seek to understand why these individuals made the choices they did and seek to strengthen our own faith through what we find. We also find great examples of successful leadership and failed attempts to lead that can help us become increasingly effective influencers.

The core curriculum of this study book will focus on one individual per lesson. We will consider the influences in their lives, how they had purposed their hearts, the choices they made, and the consequences of their choices. We will also be considering their interactions with the Lord and His people. The student is encouraged to note personality traits in themselves that correspond to the people we study with the goal for us all that we may learn more about ourselves.

We are who we choose to be. The choices we make reflect our inward man. The Lord may exalt one to a great position and humble another, but such things are not our concern. May we learn in the Judges to purpose ourselves for the Lord’s glory and to leave the results to Him.



“no king in Israel”

IN PREPARATION

READ DEUTERONOMY
21 AND 1 SAMUEL 8.

RELATED FACTS

THE PERIOD OF THE
JUDGES LASTED OVER
300 YEARS.

THE ISRAELITES WERE
OPPRESSED BY
FOREIGN NATIONS
FOR ABOUT 114
YEARS DURING THIS
AGE.


THEY LIVED IN PEACE
FOR ABOUT 185
YEARS DURING THIS
PERIOD.

We do not exist separate and apart from the environment that we live in. Each of us is affected by the culture, language, and political system that is in the society around us. The people who lived during the days of the Judges are no exception. In this lesson we will consider some of the important characteristics of the societal structures that existed during this period of Hebrew history (from about 1350–1046 B.C.).

The Era of Small States

Egypt had been the power to speak of for many years before the days of the Judges. When the people were being delivered from Egyptian bondage by the Lord the plagues permanently debilitated the economy and workforce of the nation. The removal of the large slave population that was responsible for many of the building projects of Pharaoh brought governmental projects to a halt. When Pharaoh and his army were swallowed up in the waves of the sea while pursuing the Israelites they were effectively overthrown as a major world power. In the following years this part of the world moved into what is known as the Era of Small States. Many smaller nations existed and warred with one another to gain control of more territory and tax revenues. None were successful at replacing Egypt’s strength.

As we read the book of Judges we see many different nations overtake the Israelites in a relatively short period of time. All of these small states were vying for power in the region while the Israelites were pushing the Canaanites out of the promised land and fully settling the area God had given them.



“no king in Israel”

Political Structure

As we are reminded several times in the book, “In those days there was no king in Israel”. (Judges 17:6) Before the people rebelled against the will of God and asked for a king to be placed over them (1 Samuel 8), the Lord had established a system in which He alone was their king. Each tribe was given its own territory as assigned by God through Moses, except the tribe of Levi. (Joshua 13:32–33) City elders were appointed in each city in order to judge between individuals in civil cases as well as administer justice according to the pattern of the Law of the Moses. (Deuteronomy 21 and 22 explain some of the responsibilities of the city elders.) The Levitical priests taught the people the word of God and offered the sacrifices for the people which bound all of the tribes together with one standard of justice and one God. There were no taxes to speak of. A tithe was offered to the Lord through the priests by each person so that the ministering of the Levites could continue. There was no standing army. In the book of Numbers, the tribes were numbered for battle “according to the number of names, head by head, every male from twenty years old and upward, whoever was able to go out to war” (Numbers 1:20) To use a more modern word, every male of age and strength was considered “militia” and was to be ready to rise for battle in defense of his people. Truly, there was a “minimalist” structure put into place by God for His chosen people.

This political system worked incredibly well when the people served the Lord. The Lord poured blessings on them abundantly, they were free from outside oppression, the city elders and priests helped the people to be upright and honest, families were self-reliant, and communities were bonded together. When the people fell into sin, God rebuked them by sending a foreign enemy and then called them back to Him through the prophets and judges.

Social Structure

The social fabric of the Israelite nation during the days of the Judges is somewhat different from that which develops during the days of the kings. The people seem to have viewed their loyalties in a much more localized fashion than would later develop under the kings.



“no king in Israel”

An individual’s loyalty tended to be built from the family first, then to city, tribe, and lastly to the Hebrew people as a whole. A helpful illustration is seen in the actions of the judge Gideon. When preparing for war against the Midianites and Amalekites he called together his own family first, the Abiezrites, then his entire tribe of Manasseh. It was only after he had rallied those that were local that he sent messengers to the surrounding tribes. (Judges 6:34–35) It is also helpful to note that we see nothing of Gideon’s dealings with the southern tribes which suggests that he was a deliverer specifically for northern Israel. He may also have been a contemporary judge with Deborah.

The account of Gibeah also illustrates the localized loyalty common during the days of the judges. A Levite and his wife were staying overnight in Gibeah of the tribe of Benjamin. The men of the city took his wife by night and abused her to the point of death. Afterwards, the Levite divided up her body and sent it throughout the tribes. (Judges 19:1–30) The nation of Israel rose up to avenge her. They first sent word throughout all of Benjamin to have them remedy the wrong by saying, “deliver up the men, the worthless fellows in Gibeah, that we may put them to death.” (Judges 20:13) The tribe was unwilling and instead gathered to protect Gibeah. War ensued and eventually the tribe of Benjamin was nearly wiped out.

Two primary points are notable in the text: First, the rape and murder of a man’s wife was seen as an offense great enough to inspire men to arise for war. Second, the tribe of Benjamin felt a fierce loyalty to its own even in the face of such a heinous sin. This is the case throughout the book of Judges. Since each tribe, and sometimes even each family, was free to do as they wished they were only held to the standards of God and the social expectations they culturally shared.

The Era of Small States, political structure of Israel, and the social structure all had a great impact on the individuals we will be studying in the book of Judges. With this setting in mind perhaps we can begin to understand the “why”s behind the “what”s that are found in this incredible book.



“no king in Israel”

What affect did the fall of Egypt have on the peoples of the middle east? Why is this time period known as the Era of Small States?

What were the benefits found in the political system that existed during the days of the judges which were lost during the days of the kings?

Describe the ascending order of loyalty the people had during this time period. What accounts illustrate it?

Why did God allow oppressors to come against His people during those days? Did it accomplish the purpose God intended?



Ehud

IN PREPARATION

READ JUDGES

3:12-30

RELATED FACTS

THE CITY OF THE PALM-TREES WAS WITHIN BENJAMIN'S TERRITORY.

SECURING THE SWORD TO HIS RIGHT THIGH HELPED TO CONCEAL IT. IT WAS STILL ACCESSIBLE SINCE HE WAS LEFT-HANDED.

A "CUBIT" IS ABOUT THE DISTANCE FROM THE ELBOW TO THE KNUCKLE.

"So the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord." (Judges 3:12) Israel and Moab had been at war with one another in the past. Balak, king of Moab, had refused passage to the Israelites and sought to curse them during the wilderness wandering. (Numbers 21) Although they had formerly been in submission to Israel, the Lord strengthened Moab during the days of Eglon and the tribes were forced to pay tribute to him. While taking tribute one day, Ehud smuggled in a sword secured to his thigh and killed Eglon by stabbing him. (Judges 3:16-22) Afterwards, Ehud led the people into battle against the Moabites and defeated them, slaying about 10,000 of their warriors in the process. (Judges 3:27-29) That is the account. Consider the man.

A Trusted Person

Ehud was a trusted man long before he struck down Eglon. We note in the account that the sons of Israel sent tribute to Eglon via the hand of Ehud. (Judges 3:15) This task would not be entrusted to just anyone. The Israelites would suffer if there were problems with the tribute. He must have been handling this task for some time judging by Eglon's reaction to the "secret message" offered by Ehud. What king would have dismissed his companions to be alone with an untrusted newcomer? The trust granted to Ehud by his own people and also by Eglon reveal to us his character. We can presume from this evidence that Ehud was a pillar in the community, politically or socially, before assassination was in his mind. The account shows us that this trust was well



Ehud

warranted as well, at least from the Israelites. He came before Eglon after planning his method of attack, sharpening his blade, and intelligently concealing the weapon. Still, Ehud thought about those who had accompanied him. We read, “It came about when he had finished presenting the tribute that he sent away the people who had carried the tribute.” (Judges 3:18) It does not seem that this was a normal practice. Why take the chance of arousing suspicion by sending away his help? Ehud valued the lives of these men. It is likely that he sought to protect them in case his attempt failed. They were far from the palace by the time Ehud drew his sword.

A Self-Controlled Person

When the pressure was on, Ehud maintained his composure. Not only did he convincingly tell the king of this “secret message,” but he also calmly escaped after the deed was done. After slaying Eglon, he “went out into the vestibule and shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and locked them. When he had gone out, [Eglon’s] servants came and looked, and behold, the doors of the roof chamber were locked.” (Judges 3:23–24) How many guards and servants would Ehud walk past in order to make his escape? How many people were fooled by his calm demeanor? Ehud had an incredible amount of self-control that allowed him to enter the king’s presence, kill him, and escape, all without raising suspicion. It took some time before the servants were willing to unlock the door to check on Eglon.

A Godly Person

Ehud was also a godly person. One might think that his actions were rash or driven merely by wrath. Perhaps one might assume that Ehud was simply a zealot seeking to destroy an occupying enemy. However, Ehud had more noble aspirations. The Judges account leads us repeatedly to see Ehud as a man driven by a God directed purpose. “The Lord raised up” Ehud. (Judges 3:15) When speaking to Eglon he did not curse the man or spit in rage, Ehud simply said, “I have a message from God for you.” (Judges 3:20) After escaping, he blew the trumpet in Ephraim and told Israel, “Pursue them, for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hands.” (Judges 3:28) These are not the words of an angry assassin but of a godly man with a task.



Ehud

A Consistent Person

Ehud continued to influence Israel for the rest of his life and his consistency made him an excellent leader. We are told, “the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died.” (Judges 4:1) Many people that we will study influenced the people in a negative way and led them astray later in life. Ehud, on the other hand, served the Lord and taught others to do the same. His example is a noble one for us.

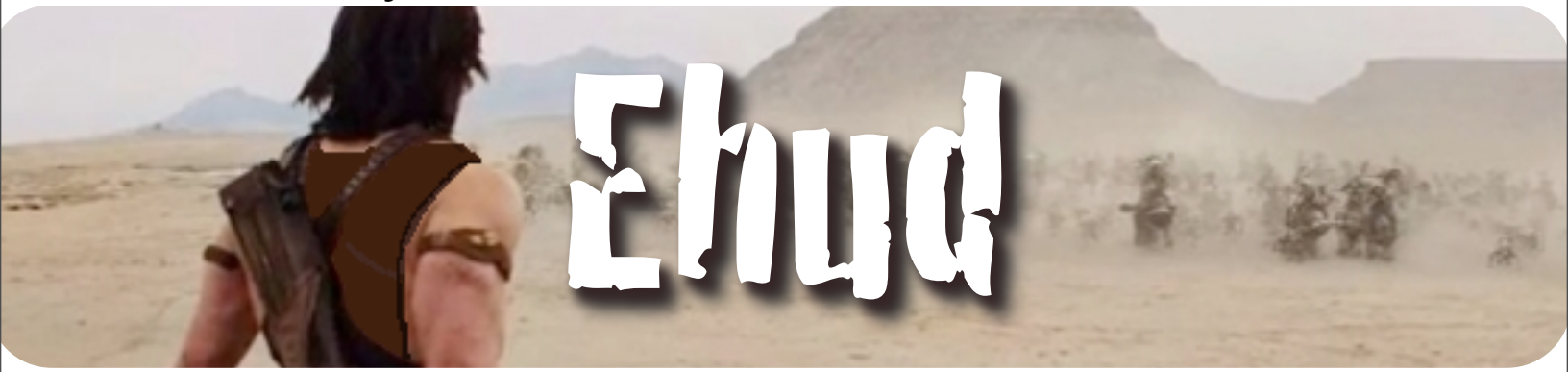
Imitating Ehud

All of these characteristics of Ehud are traits that would aid us as Christians. Are you a trustworthy person? The apostle Paul enjoins us, “Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices.” (Colossians 3:9) Like Ehud, we should earn the trust placed in us by doing what we say and doing it as well as we can.

Are you self-controlled or do your emotions often get the best of you? Our aspirations are to be higher. “A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back.” (Proverbs 29:11) Emotion is not evil but good. However, a person without self-control is a dangerous and reckless person.

Are you looking for the Lord’s guidance? We have God’s will revealed to us in His word. (2 Timothy 3:16–17) Ehud valued God’s word enough to risk his life in order to obey it. Are we as godly?

Also, many or only sporadically godly. Do you continue faithfully for only a short period before you are once again in rebellion to God? Learn from Ehud’s consistent example to Israel. The only way to influence others and save our own souls is to be a godly example to others. Remember the words of our Lord; “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.” (Matthew 5:13) Let us remain “salty” before the Lord.




What leads us to believe that Ehud was a trusted man among his own people? Why do you think Eglon trusted him enough to be alone with him?

How did Ehud show that he valued the lives of his companions? What risk did he take in regards to them?

Do you think Ehud helped keep the people faithful to God while he lived? If so, how do you think he did it?

What relevance do you think there is, if any, to this detail in the reading: "But [Ehud] himself turned back from the idols which were at Gilgal..." (Judges 3:19)



Deborah

IN PREPARATION

READ JUDGES

4:1-5:31

RELATED FACTS


HAZOR WAS LOCATED NORTH OF THE SEA OF GALILEE AND WAS WITHIN THE TERRITORY OF NAPHTALI. JOSHUA HAD BURNED THE CITY, BUT THE CANAANITES LATER REBUILT IT.

SISERA'S CHARIOTS WOULD HAVE BEEN USELESS ON THE UNEVEN GROUND AROUND MOUNT TABOR OR IN THE MUDDY VALLEY OF KISHON.

Deborah judged Israel during the oppression of Jabin king of Canaan. She was a prophetess that was well respected by the people and they came to her for judgment. (Judges 4:5) The word of the Lord came to her so that she called Barak to rise up against the Canaanites. He gathered an army against Sisera, the commander for Jabin, who then came down against him. The Israelites had a great victory over their enemies so that even Sisera fled. Soon thereafter he was killed by having a tent peg driven through his head and Jabin was overthrown. The account is famous. In this study we will consider Deborah and the pressures placed upon her.

Balancing Competing Expectations

Deborah is first introduced to us as “a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, [who] was judging Israel”. (Judges 4:4) We know nothing more of her husband, but one can imagine the difficulties of balancing the responsibilities of a wife with the pressures of being a judge. Did she have children? Where was her husband during the war against the Canaanites? These questions must go unanswered, but we should not diminish the pressure Deborah faced by having these dual roles to fulfill. It is interesting to note that Deborah also maintained a feminine touch that is absent in the accounts of the male judges. She recognizes that she was not seen as a military equal to the men of the day and tells Barak, “the honor shall not be yours on the journey you are about to take, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman.” (Judges 4:9) Despite the tendency to dismiss her in more traditionally masculine roles, Deborah did not react by rejecting her own femininity to please others.



Deborah


She instead embraced the uniqueness she brought as a woman to the position of “judge” and had no qualms about expressing her tender heart towards the people. Deborah embraced who she was as a strong woman while many other women in her position would have rejected the nature God has given them.

Exalting Others

Deborah expressed her love for the people in an especially feminine manner. In the song she sang after the victory she says, “My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel, the volunteers among the people; Bless the Lord!” (Judges 5:9) That statement is certainly more “heart-felt” than one would expect to see from some of the more rough judges like Samson. She also refers to herself as “a mother in Israel.” (Judges 5:7) What an expression of sincere concern for Israel! When commemorating the victory, she turned the glory from herself and gave it all to God and the people. She remembers the sacrifice of the tribes who fought and says, “Zebulun was a people who despised their lives even to death, and Naphtali also, on the high places of the field.” (Judges 5:18) The sincere love she had for her nation and the glory she freely poured out upon them caused the people to love her in like manner.

Having Boldness

Before the Lord delivered Israel by Deborah’s hand, “the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment.” (Judges 4:5) Only a bold person could speak the words of God and settle disputes between frustrated individuals. Apparently she was perfectly capable in the role she had since the people continued to come to her. Because of her bold leadership Barak came to her when she called for him. (Judges 4:6) Because of her confident speech of God’s purpose Barak required her company during the campaign to expel Sisera’s army. (Judges 4:8) At her bold words the army went forth and conquered the Canaanites on the day of battle. (Judges 4:14) There was no doubt about the direction to go because Deborah spoke plainly and directly. This characteristic inspired confidence in others.



Deborah


Imitating Deborah

These traits of Deborah are worthy of imitation by those who seek to lead, encourage, and strengthen the church today. We also have many competing responsibilities to balance. We cannot look solely to our own families to the neglect of Christ's church. We are part of one another and are to "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ." (Ephesians 5:21) Our brethren have the right to some of our time, energy, and love. On the other hand, we cannot consume ourselves with the needs of our church family and forget to invest time into our own homes. And we have not yet even considered the share we must give to labor! (2 Thessalonians 3:10) We must become masters and balancing our lives as Deborah seems to have been.

Do we share Deborah's love for God's people? As Deborah was anxious to exalt the good things others did, we must also "regard one another as more important than yourselves". (Philippians 2:3) Her expressions of love are meant to show others the affection she had for them. It is not so different from Paul's exhortation, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." (Romans 16:16)

Perhaps we struggle with having the boldness of Deborah. We must always seek to communicate the will of God clearly. The apostle desired to "speak forth the mystery of Christ... that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak." (Colossians 4:3-4) It can be difficult to have the appropriate boldness in order to help turn souls to righteousness. Deborah teaches us that we can speak plainly and yet be loving; we can be bold without being cruel or heartless.

Deborah was a godly woman with strong leadership skills. Having overcome those that may have been tempted to dismiss her, she earned respect and trust so that all desired her input. May the Lord continue to bless us with people such as Deborah. May we strive to be godly leaders as she was.



Deborah

What difficulties do you think Deborah faced by being a female judge of Israel? Yet, she was given much respect. Why?

Why did Barak demand the company of Deborah in order to go to war against the Canaanites? What did Deborah say was the cost of her company?

Why did Sisera choose to hide in the tent of Heber? Why do you think Heber and Jael turned on him?

Read Judges 5:2, 15, 17-18. These verses speak of the actions of the tribes during the war against Jabin. Were the people forced to fight? Why did some act and not others?



Barak

IN PREPARATION

READ JUDGES 4:6–24

RELATED FACTS

IT IS LIKELY THAT THE BATTLE TOOK PLACE DURING A HEAVY RAIN THAT CAUSED THE CHARIOTS TO BOG DOWN, BASED ON JUDGES 5:20–21.

THIS BATTLE IS STILL KNOWN AS THE BATTLE OF DEBORAH.

BARAK IS STILL THE NAMESAKE FOR MANY PEOPLE INCLUDING U.S. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA AND ISRAEL'S EHUD BARAK.

The army of the Canaanites is described as having “nine hundred iron chariots” and a multitude of men. (Judges 4:3) They had oppressed Israel for twenty years. The people were disarmed so that “not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel.” (Judges 5:8) Deborah, the prophetess and judge, called Barak to herself and spoke words that must have weighed heavily on him: “Behold, the Lord, the God of Israel, has commanded, ‘Go and march to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera... and I will give him into your hand.’” (Judges 4:6–7) Barak obeyed and took Deborah along. He led the Israelites in battle to a great victory in the face of seemingly impossible odds. Barak’s warring days are past but his life is still teaching.

Facing Difficult Tasks

Barak’s background is not revealed for us. We do not know how well known he was beforehand, but it is reasonable to assume that he was a man of some reputation. Regardless of his past, the assignment given to him would seem overwhelming to most. What can ten thousand do against so many? And what can men on foot do against an army of iron chariots? The Canaanites were not in fear of any army the Israelites may raise. The song of Deborah pictures their confidence: “Out of the window she looked and lamented, the mother of Sisera through the lattice, ‘Why does his chariot delay in coming?... ‘Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoil? A maiden, two maidens for every warrior’”. (Judges 5:28–30) What hope is there against such



Barak

an enemy? Nevertheless, Barak accepted the task. He heard the words of the Lord through Deborah, raised his ten thousand men, and marched to Mount Tabor. When word was given to attack Barak did not hesitate. When the battle was won, “Barak pursued the chariots and army... all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not even one was left.” (Judges 4:16) Seeing that Sisera had escaped, he “pursued Sisera”. (Judges 4:22) Once Barak had accepted the task he did not look back. He was tenacious and steadfast. A lesser man would have been deterred by the size of his force or discouraged by the strength of his enemy. A less secure man would have disputed with Deborah over battle plans or timing. Barak was too busy focusing on his task to fret over those types of distractions.

Having Humility and Purpose

Barak was given the task by Deborah but he was not afraid to admit that he needed her company to carry it out: “If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” (Judges 4:8) Various explanations of Barak’s request have been suggested. Perhaps he needed Deborah for political reasons in order to unite the tribes. It is possible that he desired to hear from her the word of the Lord in any difficulty that would arise. Maybe it was both of these. Regardless, Barak knew that Deborah was valuable to have close-by.

Many are too arrogant to admit their need. However, Deborah’s company would have a cost. She replied, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman.” (Judges 4:9) She hints at what is to come; the world would ascribe the victory to Deborah, and Jael would be the one to kill Sisera. These words would have dissuaded a more arrogant man, but Barak was a man of purpose. He sought to free his people not to win glory for himself. Deborah was too valuable to leave behind for something as fleeting as the praise of men. After the war was over, Deborah and Barak sang praises to the Lord together. Humility brings peace.



Barak

Confidence-Inspiring Leadership

Deborah knew the word of the Lord. Barak was humble and ready for the task. But why did the people follow Barak into battle? His trust caused him to lead out front of the people and so he inspired the confidence of others. The account of the battle gives us an important glimpse as to how Barak inspired the people. After hearing the Lord's command to attack, "Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him." (Judges 4:14) He did not command from the rear- He led the charge! The men believed in victory because Barak believed in victory. He moved his men to act by being an example. Because of his leadership it was sung, "Arise, Barak, and take away your captives, O son of Abinoam." (Judges 5:12)

Imitating Barak

Barak was not a judge of Israel. He was not the most notable person of his day. Still, there is much we can learn from this great man. We must also be willing to accept difficult tasks. If something is not easy perhaps it still needs to be done. God does not call us to a life of ease. As Jesus said of Paul, "I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." (Acts 9:16) Important tasks are often challenging in the Lord's body and Jesus needs us to step up to the task.

Barak's humility is a benchmark to strive for. The Lord spent a great deal of time teaching His disciples about humility. (See Matthew 18:2-4.) His lowliness allowed him to reach out for help and accept a "backseat" position to Deborah. How many lives were saved because of his attitude? How much animosity was avoided? The people were benefited by this man's humble demeanor just as our churches will benefit from our lowliness. Are you willing to give away glory in order to bring glory to Christ?

His out-front style of leadership inspired the people and helped cause them to rise up against their enemies. Are we the type to lead by example? Do we believe in our cause as much as Barak believed in his cause? Are we willing to take the risks involved with stepping out front? The Lord's church needs more people who will run down the hill and into the spiritual battle. Are you the one for the job?



Barak

Why is Sisera's mother envisioned looking for the return of her son? Why do the princesses respond to her as they do? (Judges 5:28-30)

In what ways did Barak show a great amount of humility in this account? What can we learn from his lowliness?

What type of leader was Barak? Why does this leadership style inspire people?

Barak put Deborah and the people above himself in glory. Jesus teaches Christians to do the same in the church. Explain one passage that shows Jesus teaching on humility.



Gideon

IN PREPARATION

READ JUDGES

6:1–8:35

RELATED FACTS

BAAL AND ASHERAH ARE OFTEN MENTIONED TOGETHER. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT ASHERAH WAS SEEN AS THE WIFE OF BAAL.

SUCCOTH AND PENUEL WERE CITIES OF THE GADITES ON THE EAST SIDE OF THE JORDAN RIVER, ABOUT 25 MILES FROM THE BATTLE SITE.

The Midianites did not come into the land in order to set up boundaries and build cities; they were plunderers who came at the time of the harvest to take the fruit of the land from the people. (Judges 6:3) Year after year the Israelites were sent into hiding and tried to secure food enough to provide for their families. Finally, the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon and told him to attack the Midianites and deliver the people. Taking only 300 men, he attacked their camp by night and sent them into a panic so that those of Midian turned on one another. The surrounding tribes were called into battle as the enemy fled until their army had been destroyed. Although the process sounds as though it were easy for Gideon, in truth there was a great internal struggle taking place within this man.

Overcoming Fear

Gideon accomplished great tasks through the blessing of God. However, his fear tempted him to inaction at every turn. We first see Gideon secretly “beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites.” (Judges 6:11) This task would have been very difficult in such a confined space. He had lost his brothers to the attackers at some point in the past, likely as they were hiding in Tabor. (Judges 8:18–19) The pressures of providing for his family and hiding from the Midian hordes had created a heart of fear in Gideon. His family saw it in him as well. Later, he would command his son to slay the bound kings of Midian and his son would refuse due to his own fear; a fear he learned from his father. (Judges 8:20)

We see this fear nearly paralyzing Gideon throughout the



account. His fear had destroyed his hope. In the first words the Angel of the Lord spoke to him He said, “The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior.” (Judges 6:12) Gideon did not see himself in this description. He responds, “if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?” (Judges 6:13) The Messenger again speaks and urges Gideon to action saying, “Go in this your strength and deliver Israel”. (Judges 6:14) Gideon objects by saying that he is the least man of the least family of the least tribe! He is not capable! (Judges 6:15) His fear kept him from trusting the Lord until a miracle was performed in front of him. (Judges 6:21) Then, his fear turns to the realization that He had seen the Angel of the Lord! (Judges 6:22–23) The first task assigned to him was to overthrow the idol his father had built. His fear kept him from acting immediately. He waited until nightfall. (Judges 6:27) When the people witnessed his deed they wanted to kill him. It is his father who comes to his defense. (Judges 6:29–31) The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, he blew the trumpet and the people were called to him. After assembling an army his fear again immobilized him. He returned to the Lord and asked for two miracles to confirm that he could defeat the Midianites. These were given to him. (Judges 6:36–40) The Lord then reduced the number of men from 32,000 to 300 that Gideon was to take into battle. When the time came, Gideon was still afraid and was given more evidence of God’s faithfulness. (Judges 7:10–11)

Highlighting Gideon’s recurring fear is not intended to mock the man. As John Wayne put it, “Courage is being scared to death – but saddling up anyway.” Each step along the way Gideon was afraid, but he continued to move forward. Gideon doubted himself and at times that caused him to doubt God. Eventually, though, the “switch flipped” in him so that he “bowed his head in worship... returned to the camp... and said, ‘Arise, for the Lord has given the camp of Midian into your hands.’” (Judges 7:15)

Speaking Peace to Others

After the great victory over the Midianites in the valley near Moreh, the tribe of Ephraim was called on to pursue and attack those retreating; a call Ephraim quickly answered. However, they were offended at having been left out of the first battle so that “they contended with [Gideon] vigorously.” (Judges 8:1) A hostile man would have been



offended and dealt harshly with the tribe. Gideon, instead, spoke peacefully to them saying, “What have I done now in comparison with you?... God has given the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb into your hands; what was I able to do in comparison with you?” (Judges 8:2–3) Gideon was willing to abase himself and speak peace others in order to keep unity among the people.

Failing in Faith

Sadly, Gideon did not remain faithful to God. He had brought glory to God by building Him an altar for worship (Judges 6:24), he gave God glory in battle (Judges 7:15, 18), and refused to become a king saying, “the Lord shall rule over you.” (Judges 8:23) However, when the people turned to idolatry Gideon followed. (Judges 8:27) He began to focus on the joys of this life and had a nice home (Judges 8:29) with many wives and sons (Judges 8:30). He could have become a stronger leader for righteousness but instead squandered the influence given him. When he died the people turned back to the idols Gideon once destroyed and even ceased paying kindness to his family. (Judges 8:33–35)

Lessons from Gideon

Fear is a natural thing. Some have stronger fears than others. We must also be able to set aside our fears and do what needs to be done. Our trust in God should strengthen our resolve. After all, “The LORD is for me; I will not fear; What can man do to me?” (Psalm 118:6)

Like Gideon, we must also learn to speak peace to others. Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9) Knowing how to calm a tense situation is a noble trait and only cool heads will prevail.

After speaking to God, witnessing miracles, honoring the Lord, and delivering a nation Gideon still failed to remain faithful to God. We learn in Gideon the same lesson Paul spoke to the Corinthians, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.” (1 Corinthians 10:12)



Why was Gideon beating out wheat in a winepress? Why would that have been difficult to accomplish?

Does Gideon seem to have had a high view of himself? What passages reveal his self-estimation?

How did Gideon calm the anger of Ephraim? In what ways can we imitate his actions?

Research the meaning of “ephod.” Do you think Gideon originally intended the ephod he made to be used as an idol? Why or why not?



Abimelech

IN PREPARATION

READ JUDGES 9:1-6,
22-57

RELATED FACTS

IT IS LIKELY THAT ZEBUL, WHO HAD REPORTED GAAL TO ABIMELECH, WAS KILLED ALONG WITH THE REST IN SHECHEM.

SOWING SALT ON THE LAND WAS INTENDED TO SPOIL IT SO THAT NO CROPS COULD BE GROWN THERE AGAIN.

“Gideon had seventy two sons... for he had many wives. His concubine who was in Schechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech.” (Judges 8:31) After the death of his father, Abimelech convinced his mother’s family to go along with a plot to make him king. They spoke to the people of Schechem and his move for power was given a following. These people funded his uprising and Abimelech killed 70 of his brothers. Only one brother, Jotham, escaped. Shechem and Beth-Millo made Abimelech king and his control grew from there so that we are told, “Abimelech ruled over Israel three years.” (Judges 9:22) After word of an uprising in Shechem came to his ears, he waged war against the city, killed the people and leaders, then razed it to the ground. (Judges 9:45 ff) He then warred against the city of Thebez where he was killed by a stone dropped from a woman’s hand. Abimelech is not an individual to admire, but we can still learn valuable lessons from his life.

Deceptive Heart

Abimelech was not a man who found contentment or peace in his life. He seems to have been one who felt inferior to others, especially his brothers. Jotham describes Abimelech as “bramble,” while the others sons of Gideon are olive trees, fig trees, and vines. Abimelech never seeks to hide his bitterness or his sin, he rather glories in it. But, to get others to go along with his plots, Abimelech learns to be deceptive. He depends on tricks and wordplay in order to accomplish his goals. When he decides to become king over the people he has no money, followers, or influence. In order to gain those things he looks to the aid of his mother’s family in



Abimelech

Shechem. They help him to deceive the people of the city by saying, “Which is better for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you? Also, remember that I am your bone and your flesh.” (Judges 9:2) Abimelech set up a false paradigm. Jerubbaal (Gideon) refused to become a king, and Jotham says that his brothers had also rejected the invitations to rule. (Judges 9:8–14) The people did not have a choice between Abimelech or all of the sons of Gideon, they had the choice to have a king or to not have a king! Abimelech continued to practice deception after he became king. It was not long before the people of Shechem regretted their decision to support him and “dealt treacherously with Abimelech.” (Judges 9:23)

Ruling Over Others

Abimelech was obsessed with power. He craved it before he had it and he feared losing it once it was attained. While Gideon had refused to be king and told the people that only the Lord should rule them (Judges 8:23), Abimelech killed 70 of his brothers in order to obtain the position. Being given word of Gaal’s talk of uprising, he set an ambush to kill him. Then, Abimelech killed all of the inhabitants of the city who had dared to challenge him. (Judges 9:28, 37–45) Abimelech’s ego caused him to obsess over the conversation and thoughts of others. The thought that someone would disrespect him drove him to foolishness. Even when dying after having a stone dropped on his head he commanded his servant, “Draw your sword and kill me, so that it will not be said of me, ‘A woman slew him.’” (Judges 9:54) This is a man who has so little regard for himself that he requires others to regard him highly. He sought this regard from others through violence and deception. What type of person needs to be king over others in order to be happy? One who has not yet ruled over himself.

Quarrelsome

Because of his low self-esteem and deceptive habits, Abimelech had grown into a quarrelsome person. There is no hint that he tried to make peace with Shechem during their time of tension. He was not a peacemaker like his father was. This man could not be at peace because he was always looking for a fight with someone over something.



Abimelech

Learning from Abimelech

There is not much in the life of Abimelech worth imitating. We can learn more about ourselves and others through studying even the most troublesome individuals. Abimelech deceived others in order to accomplish his goals. The Christian is warned against taking such ‘low roads’ repeatedly. In one of His parables, Jesus speaks of the shrewd behavior of a man who discounted the debts owed to his master in order to win favor from the borrowers for himself. The Lord summed up the thought by reminding all, “the sons of this age are more shrewd than the sons of light.” (Luke 16:8) We are not to behave as the deceptive unbelievers behave. We are seeking a more noble path where truth and righteousness are found.

What do you need from the people around you? Abimelech needed control and demanded respect. However, he did not earn respect. In the absence of hard work and trustworthiness some resort to violence and bullying to respect from others. Fear is not respect, as Abimelech should have learned. We may feel far removed from those times but many try these same tactics today. Instead of focusing on what we want for ourselves we should focus on providing for the good of others. The thief offers a good illustration of the point. Formerly, some may have stolen for selfish reasons. Paul enjoins thieves to “steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.” (Ephesians 4:28) Our life as Christians is not about exalting ourselves above others but rather about doing for the good of others.

Nor should we be quarrelsome people as Abimelech was. Wisdom says, “Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man, but any fool will quarrel.” (Proverbs 20:3) We should desire peace and friendship based on honesty and respect with those around us. A quarrelsome person misses out on the joy to be had with their brothers and sisters in Christ. All of their relationships are poisoned with their bickering. We follow a better way.



Abimelech

What options did Abimelech say the people of Shechem had regarding who would rule them? Was there another option?

How did Abimelech die? How did he reveal his fragile ego even with his final words?

Why didn't Gideon try to make peace with the city of Shechem when they grew frustrated with him? How can we keep from falling into the same destructive spiral?

Abimelech is never described as a judge of Israel. Why do you think the account of his life was preserved? What lessons do you think the Lord sought to teach Israel?



Jotham

IN PREPARATION

READ JUDGES 9:5-21,
56-57

RELATED FACTS

BRAMBLE IS A THORNY BUSH THAT OFFERS LITTLE, IF ANY, SHADE. WHAT BRAMBLE OFFERED THE TREES WAS NOT IN HIS POWER TO GIVE.

“BEER” MEANS “WELL” (AS IN A WATER-WELL) WAS USED IN MANY CITIES’ NAMES. THE LOCATION OF THIS BEER IS UNKNOWN, BUT IT WAS MOST LIKELY OUTSIDE OF ISRAEL.

Abimelech had convinced the people of Shechem to make him king. They gave him 70 pieces of silver to assist him in taking power. He hired “worthless and reckless fellows” and went to his father’s house, which was probably a collection of homes in close proximity to one another. (Judges 9:4-5) He located 70 of his brothers and had them all executed on one stone. Abimelech’s last brother, Jotham, escaped.

Jotham must have realized that men were coming for him as we are told that “he hid himself.” (Judges 9:5) However, he did not understand what was taking place. It is not until later that “they told Jotham” what had happened. (Judges 9:7) Imagine the sadness that must have taken hold of Jotham! To have so many brothers who lived so close to one another must have created a close bond between them. Losing them all in one day must have been devastating. How much worse, then, to discover that the one responsible for their murders was your last remaining brother. Survivor’s guilt over having escaped, wrath at the sin committed, confusion as to the motivations of Abimelech, and sadness for the loss of his brothers must have all been emotions that Jotham struggled with. The account is truly horrifying, but Jotham rallied himself enough to do something that would be recorded in the inspired scriptures until the end of time. It is because of the action Jotham takes that we are now able to devote this study to learning wisdom from his example.

Courageously Speaking Truth

We do not know all of the details concerning Jotham’s situation. How was he able to hide? How many were unwilling to turn him over to harm when they discovered his



Jotham

survival? For all we do not know, we do know that Jotham had something to say and he found a way to say it. We read, “he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and called out.” (Judges 9:7) This man who only barely escaped his own murder now went to a location where as many people as possible could both see and hear him. He had hidden from his enemies before and, after speaking this message, would go back into hiding again. However, in this moment there were things that people needed to consider regarding their actions. His message is given as a metaphor. The trees desired to anoint a king over them. They went to an olive tree, a fig tree, and then to the vines. All of these refused the position. Finally, the trees went to the bramble and asked for the same. The bramble accepted their request but with a threat; “if not, may fire come out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon.” (Judges 9:15) Jotham did not place all of the blame for his brother’s murders on Abimelech. He understood that the people must have desired a king and were willing to go along with murder to attain one. It truly took courage to plainly explain to the people that his family’s murder was just as much their responsibility.

Understanding the Affects of Sin

Jotham might have spoken to the people from a purely personal perspective and he would have been just in doing so; the people had sinned against him. However, Jotham understood that the affects of sin go far beyond his own suffering. When beginning his message to the people he said, “Listen to me, O men of Shechem, that God may listen to you.” (Judges 9:7) The people needed to understand that they had committed an offense against God by murdering the innocent. Jotham was alluding to the same fact that Isaiah would later observe; “But your iniquities have made a separation between you and you God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.” (Isaiah 59:2) As long as these people were unrepentant of their sin of murder God would not hear them. The scripture later confirms that Jotham was correct by recording, “Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he had done to his father in killing his seventy brothers. Also God returned all the wickedness of the men of Shechem on their heads...” (Judges 9:56–57) God was not listening to Abimelech or



or the people of Shechem in order to save them from their calamity because their sin had kept Him from listening. Had they heeded Jotham's message they would have found God to be willing to forgive.

Understanding God, Truth, and Integrity

When speaking to the people Jotham appealed to three standards in order to condemn their actions; God, truth, and integrity. As we formerly considered, Jotham first points out that they are being considered by God for their actions. (Judges 9:7) He goes on to say, "if you have dealt in truth and integrity in making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house... rejoice in Abimelech, and let him rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume the men of Shechem and Beth-Millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem and Beth-Millo, and consume Abimelech." (Judges 9:16-20) By the three standards: God condemned their actions as He had said, "You shall not murder." (Exodus 20:13) Truth reveals that Abimelech had lied to take his position (see former lesson) and the people had acted in accordance with lies. Finally, integrity would have required the people to do good to the house of Gideon (Jerubbaal) since he had done good to them in delivering them from their enemies. By all three standards they were condemned. Without repentance they had no hope of escaping judgment.

Imitating Jotham

Jotham was able to control his suffering in order to speak a message to the people that was courageous and centered on God and His will. The people needed to know that they had sinned not only against Jotham and Gideon but also against God in heaven. We would be wise to imitate Jotham's approach when someone has sinned against us. We must confront the sin (Matthew 18:15) and we must do it in a way to bring souls back to the truth in God. Jotham pointed out the affects of sin and appealed to a higher standard than man's opinion. All of our teaching as Christians should accomplish the same goals. Thanks be to God for men of godliness, self-control, and wisdom like Jotham!



Jotham

What did Jotham decide to do when he found out about the deaths of his brothers?

Describe the metaphor Jotham used to teach the people of the sin they had committed. Who is the “bramble”? Why do you think bramble was chosen to represent this person?

What standards did Jotham appeal to in order to convict the people of their sin?

God is credited with having “repaid” and “returned” the wickedness committed on the sons of Gideon to Abimelech and the people of Shechem. How did God accomplish this judgment? What are some other ways God judges people in the Scriptures?



Jephthah

IN PREPARATION

READ JUDGES

10:6-12:7

RELATED FACTS

JEPHTHAH'S VOW TO OFFER A BURNT SACRIFICE OF WHAT CAME OUT OF HIS HOUSE WAS MODIFIED SINCE GOD DOES NOT ACCEPT HUMAN SACRIFICE.

EPHRAIM HAD ALSO BEEN OFFENDED BY GIDEON WHEN HE WENT TO WAR WITHOUT THEM. (JUDGES 8:1-3)

SHIBBOLETH MEANS "STREAM." THE TRIBES' PRONUNCIATIONS WERE DIFFERENT.

The Ammonites held power over the Israelites for 18 years. The people cried out to the Lord but He refused to deliver them due to their constant rebellion and idolatry. The people put away their idols and returned to the Lord and continued to entreat Him. Finally, the Lord raised up a deliverer. Jephthah had already proven himself to be a "valiant warrior" before he delivered the people. (Judges 11:1) He was likely a raider and had spent this last portion of his life away from his family. Jephthah returned home and waged war against Ammon after being entreated by his kinsmen. He then faced another struggle with the tribe of Ephraim who was offended at having not been involved in the war against Ammon. Jephthah was victorious in both wars. His story is an oddity among in this book but his character was strengthened by the events which led him to the position of "judge."

Overcoming Difficulty with Strength

Jephthah was the son of a man named Gilead but his mother was a harlot. When his brothers became adults they drove him from his home insisting, "You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." (Judges 11:1-2) When the elders of the people later came to speak to him, Jephthah told them, "Did you not hate me and drive me out from my father's house?" (Judges 11:7) In what way the rest of the people were responsible for his situation is not clear, but Jephthah certainly felt rejected and alone. His hope of inheritance was taken from him, his own brothers drove him away, and he had no where to turn for security. Jephthah had to make a



Jephthah

choice concerning what would control his life; his circumstances or his choices. Jephthah fled from his kin to the land of Tob. He dedicated himself to learning the art of war and became a notable warrior. We are told that “worthless fellows gathered themselves about Jephthah, and they went out with him.” (Judges 11:3) Imagine the fear Jephthah must have felt when he was driven from his home. In Tob, Jephthah refused to allow fear to run him any longer. His exploits earned him such a reputation that even those he left behind heard of the warrior he had become. When they had grown tired of suffering under the Ammonites and when the people were humbled enough to look to Jephthah, the elders came and implored him to return to his people and lead them in battle against the enemy. They even asked him to “become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.” (Judges 11:8) Jephthah is a great example of an individual who overcame difficult circumstances through dedication and leadership. He refused to allow his unfortunate change of circumstances to rule his life.

Confident, Yet Humble

Jephthah learned humility at an early age. His brothers considered him as far less worthy than themselves due to Jephthah’s lineage. We are not told what happened to his mother, but it is obvious that Jephthah lived close to his father and brothers and had a close enough relationship to his father, Gilead, to cause his brothers to fear losing a portion of their inheritance to him. When he was driven from his home Jephthah took no revenge nor did he act out in wrath. Despite his humility, Jephthah learned to be confident. He speaks confidently to the elders of the tribe of Gilead (not to be confused with his father’s name) when they appealed to him for help. He reminds them of the treatment he received among the tribe and asks, “So why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?... If you take me back to fight against the sons of Ammon and the Lord gives them up to me, will I become your head?” (Judges 11:7, 9) Jephthah knew he was the one being sought and spoke with confidence. He again showed confidence when corresponding with the Ammonites. He tried to avoid war, historically refuted their claim to the land, offered up the strength of God as Israel’s defense, and rebuked them for their sin saying, “you are doing me wrong by making



Jephthah

war against me; may the Lord, the Judge, judge today...” (Judges 11:27) He was confident enough to speak plainly when necessary but humble enough to pursue peace and hear the words of those who had formerly counted him an enemy.

Following Through

Anyone can keep their word when it is easy to do so; Jephthah kept his word when it was heart wrenching to do so. Having been pushed from his home and surrounded by “worthless fellows,” it would have been easy for Jephthah to become dishonest and crooked. However, Jephthah decided to be the kind of man who keeps his word even when it is inconvenient. He had vowed to the Lord, “If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace... it shall be the Lord’s”. (Judges 11:30–31) When he returned home the first thing out of his door was not a gift or an animal but his only daughter. Jephthah wept. Even still, he never considered breaking his vow. His daughter was dedicated as a perpetual virgin to the Lord. Although his vow may have been made rashly, his willingness to follow through was built over his lifetime.

Learning from Jephthah

Were you raised in difficult circumstances? See in Jephthah the wisdom and strength to overcome where you have been. Decide today that you will control what kind of person you will be instead of allowing your circumstances to rule you.

It can be difficult balancing confidence and humility. Christians are to always be ready “to make a defense to everyone who asks” about the faith. (1 Peter 3:15) That requires confidence. However, arrogance will turn others away from the truth and cost souls. Jephthah’s example shows us that it is possible to be both confident and humble. We should strive to imitate him.

Like Jephthah, we have also made a vow. Ours took place in the waters of baptism when we died to sin and were made slaves to God. (Romans 6:1–7, 16–18) Are you following through on your vow as steadfastly as Jephthah followed through on his vow?



Jephthah

Why did Jephthah's brothers drive him from his home? What was their motivation?

How did Jephthah take control of his situation in the land of Tob? Why do you think others gathered to him?

Why did Jephthah go to war with the tribe of Ephraim? Did Jephthah try to avoid the conflict?

What do you think about Jephthah's vow? Why do you think he made the vow? Compare his regret to that of Herod's in Matthew 14:6-8. What can we learn?



Samson

IN PREPARATION

READ JUDGES

13:1-16:31

RELATED FACTS

ALTHOUGH THE MARRIAGE HAD NOT YET BEEN CONSUMMATED, THE PHILISTINE WOMAN WOULD LEGALLY HAVE BEEN CONSIDERED HIS WIFE AFTER THE FEAST.

SAMSON WAS A CONTEMPORARY DELIVERER WITH JEPHTHAH BUT WAS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE JORDAN.

The story of Samson is a familiar one to most bible students. It has been a favorite of children for generations due to the superhuman strength that Samson possessed. The Angel of the Lord spoke to his mother and father before Samson was conceived and promised a child that would begin to deliver the people from the Philistines. (Judges 13:5) When the Spirit of the Lord moved on Samson he was granted strength that enabled him to do remarkable things. He killed a lion with his bare hands (Judges 14:5-6), struck down a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey (Judges 15:15), and even carried the doors and gates of a city to the top of a mountain (Judges 16:3). Despite these things, he was betrayed by a woman he loved, Delilah, and captured by the Philistines. His head was shaved so that he lost his strength. Once his hair had grown back, however, he used his strength once again and knocked over the pillars of a great Philistine house killing about 3,000 people, including himself. The account of Samson is entertaining, but this man also exhibits characteristics that we would be wise to avoid.

Spoiled by Strength

Considering Samson as an individual does not reveal many godly traits worthy of emulation. This man was a deliverer for Israel, but that does not mean that he behaved in a godly way. Samson lacked the leadership abilities and godliness that many of the other judges possessed. He resorted to violence quickly and was often overcome by whatever emotion he felt in the moment. Samson behaved like a spoiled child more often than not. "But," someone may ask,



Samson

“didn’t God give Samson his strength?” Certainly! But for what end? The Lord was seeking to deliver Israel and Samson played a large part in that work. However, there is nothing in the account that suggests that Samson was a godly man. Was it due to his incredible strength that he was spoiled and unable function well with others? Had his parents over-inflated his ego by constantly speaking of the words spoken by the Angel of the Lord? We do not know what caused it but by the time we are introduced to Samson he has already developed an entitlement mentality.

Impetuous

Samson was an impetuous person; he reacted rashly and emotionally to whatever situation he was placed in. This is revealed early in the account: “Then Samson... saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines. So he came back and told his father and mother... Samson said to his father, ‘Get her for me, for she looks good to me.’” (Judges 14:1-3) It was not lawful for a Hebrew to take a Philistine as a wife. (Deuteronomy 7:3) The next verse says, “it was of the Lord,” but that does not mean that Samson knew of it, either. Rather, the Lord was using Samson’s foolishness to begin to bring down the Philistines. This event leads to Samson’s problems with the Philistines. At the wedding feast Samson was offended that his wife had leaked the answer to a riddle he posed the guests. In his wrath he killed thirty Philistines. While the Lord was using this event for his purpose, even Samson recognized that he had acted poorly. Before striking the Philistines later he said, “This time I shall be blameless in regard to the Philistines...” (Judges 15:3) Even Samson admits that he did not behave “blamelessly” before. At another time we read, “Samson went to Gaza and saw a harlot there, and went in to her.” (Judges 16:1) God forbid that we be forced into a position to defend the actions of Samson in regard to this behavior. But this was the typical attitude that Samson had. When his anger flared he struck out in violence. When his lust was aroused he behaved as a Gentile. Samson lacked self-control.

Selfishness

Samson showed little concern for anyone other than himself. He had no concern for his



Samson

parent's objections to his marriage with a Philistine woman. (Judges 14:1-3) Samson did not lament the plight of his kinsmen when he caused a small army of Philistines to come up against Judah. Instead, when confronted by the people of Israel for the anger he had aroused from the Philistines, his defense was, "As they did to me, so I have done to them." (Judges 15:11) These are not the words of a man who is driven by a desire to defend God's nation. Even at the end of his life while seeking to topple the Philistine house his words to God reveal selfishness. He said, "O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, O God, that I may at once be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes." (Judges 16:28) He did not speak of the Lord's cause or of delivering the people. Samson could only think about himself.

One positive thing can be said of Samson: Even this strong man knew that God was the source of his strength and that God was stronger than him. In his last words Samson begs God to strengthen him and trusted that God was able and willing. Perhaps it is for this reason that he is referenced in Hebrews 11:32-34 as one who "by faith... from weakness [was] made strong."

Learning from Samson

The world has no need for more spoiled and childlike adults. We should see in Samson's demeanor something to avoid. All that we have is a gift from God and He is to be praised for it. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Self-control is not optional for a child of God. While those around us may be impetuous, we are to "be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." (James 1:19-20) Imagine the good Samson could have done had he chosen to be self-controlled!

Lastly, let us rid ourselves of selfishness. As brothers and sisters we should remember that we are here to serve one another. "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another..." (Hebrews 10:25)



Samson

How was Samson given his strength? How did the Philistines overcome him?

Compare God's ability to use Samson, even while he was behaving in an ungodly manner, to accomplish His will with the words of Acts 2:22-23.

What types of ungodly behavior does Samson participate in during the account?

How does Samson reveal his selfishness? What other Judge(s) do you think better portray the selfless attitude a deliverer should have?



Micah

IN PREPARATION

READ JUDGES

17:1-18:31

RELATED FACTS

THE TRIBE OF DAN HAD A PORTION GIVEN TO THEM BUT THEY FAILED TO TAKE THE VALLEY. (JOSHUA 19:47, JUDGES 1:34)

THE PRIEST LIED TO THE SPIES OF DAN IN JUDGES 18:6. THE LORD HAD GIVEN NO APPROVAL FOR THEM TO TAKE LAND OUTSIDE OF THE BOUNDARIES ESTABLISHED THROUGH MOSES.

We first meet Micah when he is returning 1,100 pieces of silver to his mother that he had stolen from her without her knowledge. She was grateful to have the money returned and anxious to avoid the curse she had spoken upon the thieves coming to pass against her son. Therefore, she took 200 pieces of silver and had a “graven image and a molten image” created that were dedicated “to the Lord.” (Judges 17:3-4) Micah’s family was very wealthy. He built a shrine, ephod, and household idols to accompany the silver image. Later, he met a Levite priest whom Micah hired to become a priest for his home. At the same time the tribe of Dan was looking for a new land to settle since they had not pushed the peoples out of the land God had given them. As spies went out they passed by the home of Micah and spoke to the priest. When they decided on a land to take, they stole Micah’s idols and asked his priest to come with them and serve as the priest for the entire tribe. This account serves the primary purpose of identifying how the tribe of Dan came to leave the land God had given the people and turn from God to serve idols. Micah, though, is an interesting case study since there are important lessons to see from the mindset that led him into folly.

Presumptuous

Micah was a presumptuous person, especially in regard to the will of the Lord. This man was not completely ignorant of the will of God; he at least had a half-knowledge of Moses’ Law. Although he had dedicated one of his sons to be a priest for his house, he was thrilled to hire a Levite into the position which reveals that he knew Levites to be the



Micah

rightful priests as prescribed by God. (Exodus 28:1) Micah and his mother also knew to honor God, but they did not know (or heed) God's command to avoid graven images: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth." (Exodus 20:4) Despite his apparent lack of knowledge, Micah presumed that the Lord would accept whatever He was offered. The value of a graven image or simply stating that it was dedicated to the Lord did not make it pleasing in God's sight. Micah was the type of person who assumed that whatever he did was acceptable. Perhaps this attitude came from his wealthy upbringing and spiritually ungrounded parents.

Expecting Blessings

After hiring the priest, Micah said, "Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as a priest." (Judges 17:13) He speaks of God as though He would be pleased simply because Micah had a man ministering in front of his idols that was a Levite. Micah was convinced he was pleasing to God because he was presumptuous and then he expected God to pour blessings out on his house. Those blessings never came. Instead, the tribe of Dan stole his expensive graven images and bribed the priest away from Micah. The Lord was not going to bless Micah or hear him as long as Micah was disobeying the word of the Lord. His expectation of blessings from the Lord did not convince the Lord of Micah's righteousness. In fact, the blessings of the Lord were contingent upon keeping His word as God had spoken: "You shall not make for yourselves idols, nor shall you set up for yourselves an image... If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, then I shall give you rains... peace in the land... [etc.]" (Leviticus 26:1-12) However, the Lord promised curses upon the people "if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments..." (Leviticus 20:15ff)

Why did Micah have such thorough expectations of God's approval and blessings? It may be due to the way his mother dealt with him from his youth. 1,100 silver coins is a great deal of money in both size and value. Yet, when his mother was informed that her



Micah

son had stolen it she gave no rebuke. In fact, she praised him saying, “Blessed be my son by the Lord.” (Judges 17:2) She then immediately offered to give 200 pieces of silver molded into a graven image to him. Note that Micah had not even returned the silver to her before she was praising him! (Judges 17:2–3) Micah had been shown such leniency and favored treatment with regards to this serious infraction that it is logical to conclude that smaller matters received no discipline, either. For most of his life Micah was pampered and spoiled so that he could not fathom God or anyone else being displeased with his works.

Lessons from Micah

Presumption is a dangerous trait to have when serving the Lord. Nadab and Abihu were also presumptuous in the fire they offered to the Lord and it cost them their lives. (Leviticus 10:1–3) May we remember that God is to be respected and it is our duty to seek Him according to His will. “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

The blessings of God are not attained in just any way that we create in our minds. All spiritual blessings are in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 1:3) Just as Micah could not obtain the blessings of God by seeking them outside of God’s instruction neither can we receive the spiritual blessings in Jesus by ignoring His teachings. The apostles made disciples by baptizing them and “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded You.” (Matthew 28:19–20) We would be wise to follow the apostles’ example instead of Micah’s example.

Parents, are you raising up a “Micah”? Are your children spoiled and undisciplined? Do they understand the seriousness of sin? Do you teach them the word of God and lead them by godly example? Micah’s mother is not blameless regarding the character of the son she raised. Hopefully we can learn to raise up our children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:4)



Micah

Compare Micah's mindset in setting up idols and graven images dedicated to the Lord and the sacrifice of Cain in Genesis 4:3-7. What did these men do incorrectly?

What did Micah expect God to do when he hired the Levite priest?

What was the motivation of the Levite in this account? (See Judges 17:10-11; 18:18-20)

How did Micah's mother contribute to the character flaws found in Micah?



The Levite

IN PREPARATION

READ JUDGES

19:1-20:14

RELATED FACTS

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A “WIFE” AND A “CONCUBINE” USUALLY ONLY CONCERNED THE WOMAN’S STATUS AS “FREE” OR A “SLAVE.” THE LEVITE’S SPOUSE WAS ALSO A SLAVE AND SO SHE WAS CALLED A CONCUBINE.

A concubine of a Levite “played the harlot against him” and went to her father’s home. (Judges 19:2) Her husband went to entreat her to return with him four months later and she was reconciled to him. On the journey home they stopped to spend the night in the Benjamite town of Gibeah. No others offering hospitality, they stayed in the home of an Ephraimite man. During the night perverse men of the city set upon the house in order to rape the Levite. The account does not reveal the reaction of the Levite, but his concubine was given to the mob by his host and she was ravaged all night. The next morning, the Levite found her dead on the door steps. (Judges 19:22-27) He took her body to his home, divided it into twelve pieces, and mailed a portion to each of the twelve tribes. The people of Israel were disgusted at the people of Gibeah. They investigated the matter and vowed to bring justice upon those responsible. (Judges 19:29-20:7) However, the tribe of Benjamin decided to defend Gibeah from the attack and a war between the tribes ensued. At the end of the conflict all of the tribe of Benjamin was destroyed except 600 men.

This is one of the most challenging accounts in all of the Old Testament. A quick Google search reveals a multitude of opinions, criticisms, and considerations of this text. Many questions immediately come to mind when reading the account such as, “Why did the Ephraimite give his guest’s concubine to the mob?” and “Why did the Levite allow his concubine to be abused?– or did he even know?” While we are unable to answer these questions, it is worthwhile to consider what we do know about the Levite.



The Levite

Pursuing Mercy

The punishment for adultery under the Law of Moses was death. (Leviticus 20:10) Upon discovering the unfaithfulness of his wife the Levite could have pressed the matter in order to have her executed. The fact that he did not seek judgment against her reveals that the sin must have been seen as against the husband so, therefore, he had the right to “press charges” or to refrain. Instead, the Levite decides that he cares deeply for this woman and travels to her family’s home. He went “to speak tenderly to her in order to bring her back.” (Judges 19:3) Simply put, the Levite loved this woman and was humble and merciful enough to seek her restoration to him in the face of probable criticism. Besides that, he sought her in a gentle way. Another may have held bitterness and anger for years due to her transgression. The Levite decided to put it behind him and press forward. Forgiveness was a deep-seated trait of this man.

Pursuing Justice

When the Levite discovered that his wife had been murdered he purposed himself to seek justice. Although it may seem crude to us, he “cut her in twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout the territory of Israel.” (Judges 19:29) This was not meant as an act of disrespect. It was meant to shock the people and communicate the truth of the message accompanying the body parts. The tactic worked and the people said, “Nothing like this has ever happened... Consider it, take counsel and speak up!” (Judges 19:30) This man would not slump back to his home knowing that such an injustice had been committed. The Levite purposed to seek justice and was willing to call all of Israel together in order to get it. When the people assembled to investigate the matter the Levite spoke boldly, “the men of Gibeah... ravished my concubine so that she died... they have committed a lewd and disgraceful act in Israel. Behold, all you sons of Israel, give your advice and counsel here.” (Judges 20:4-7) It would be easy for some to suggest that the love the Levite had shown for his concubine after her infidelity showed weakness, but this man was not weak. He knew there was a time to “speak gently” and a time to speak boldly for justice sake. Few would be willing to go to these lengths to seek justice.




The Levite

Lessons to Consider

The lack of details concerning the time in the Ephraimite's house can be frustrating. Speculations abound. Some of these speculations go so far as to virtually ignore the lack of detail given in the account. We may speak boldly about what we would have done had we been there but we simply do not know what actually happened. We do not need to defend the actions of the man from Ephraim. We have no shame in condemning the offering of his daughter and the concubine to the mob. (Judges 19:24) We read that the host "seized" the concubine. Seized her because she was not willing? Surely she was not. It is also possible that he seized her from her husband who did not wish for her to be cast to them. On the other hand, it is possible that the Levite behaved cowardly and allowed her to be abused in order to save himself. This is how some read Judges 20:5. We can not learn from what we do not know.

We do know that the Levite sought his concubine with kindness even after she was unfaithful. While the Lord permits divorce for adultery (Matthew 19:1-9) He does not require it. If a marriage is to continue after such an occurrence then patience, forgiveness, and love must abound. It would be wiser to learn such godly traits as these before adultery takes place so that it will be avoided altogether. (1 Peter 3:1-7)

The Levite also knew how to pursue justice tenaciously, and so should we. Whether through prayers, teaching, or involvement in a godly manner, Christians should know how to exalt what is right and bring low what is evil. In the end, our God is the ultimate Judge who will "render to man according to his work." (Proverbs 24:12) May we seize the day in order to spread the word of God while we have opportunity.



The Levite

What did this Levite and the prophet Hosea have in common? Compare their motivations for the behavior towards their wives. (Hosea 1:2, 3:1-3)

What did the Levite do when he discovered his wife had been killed? How did the nation respond to his actions?

Both Lot and the Ephraimite offered their daughters to the mob of men who sought their guests. There is no text that condemns or praises their attempt. Do you think these men were right or wrong in their actions? Why or why not?

Do you think the Levite allowed his concubine to be raped, was forced to release her, or had no knowledge of the events until the next day? Why?



“right in his own eyes”

IN PREPARATION

READ JUDGES 21:25,
DEUTERONOMY
17:14-20, 1 SAMUEL 8

REFLECTIONS

WHY DID GOD SET UP
A SYSTEM OF JUDGES
FOR THE PEOPLE?

WHY DID GOD DESIRE
TO BE THE ONLY
KING OF ISRAEL?

WHY DID THE PEOPLE
WANT TO TAKE A
KING FOR
THEMSELVES?

WHY DID GOD SET UP
ONLY LOCAL
CHURCHES IN THE
NEW COVENANT?

WHY DIDN'T GOD
SET UP A HUMAN
HEAD FOR THE
CHURCH?

In Lesson One we discussed the political and social system of the Israelites during the period of the judges. Judges 17:6 and 21:25 both read the same: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Underlying lessons are revealed in these words, some legitimate and some not, that are used by teachers to affect the understanding of the book.

There must have been a king in place during the time of the writing of the book of Judges. Otherwise, the statement would make no sense to the readers. It is a contrasting statement meant to disassociate the condition of the people during the era of the judges to those first receiving the book. We may further limit the writing of the book to a time in which the kingdoms were still united since it seems the author is contrasting those days of division in the tribes with his own time. (The Danites were going north and the tribes were warring against Benjamin in 17:6 and 21:25.) We can conclude that the book must have been written during the days of Saul, David, or Solomon.

But what of the behavior of the people? We read that “each man did what was right in his own eyes.” Is this statement an obviously negative one? It is used in Judges 17:6 as though to imply that the behavior of Micah would have been restrained by the king in the day the book was written. Thus, the statement can, in a given context, be a negative contrast with the time of the kings. However, to understand the statement more fully we must revisit the will of God for His people in the promised land.



“right in his own eyes”

What restrains?

God set up the nation of Israel in the manner He did in order to be King over them. When the people clamored for a king during the days of Samuel, God said, “Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them.” (1 Samuel 8:7) It is clear that God did not want the people to take a human king for themselves. As God set up the system for the people, when they were faithful He directly blessed them. When they were unfaithful He directly punished them. When they repented of their sins He raised up a deliverer. Every time the people were oppressed they eventually repented and God then delivered them. There was no king for the people to place their trust in. God was their king. He alone was to be responsible for delivering them. When each man did what was right in God’s eyes the people had blessings poured out upon them.

So, what does the author mean when he says that “each man did what was right in his own eyes?” Being inspired by the Spirit, it is not possible that the purpose is to exalt the days of the kings over the period of the judges. It is true that a king could restrain the people from some sins that otherwise might have gone unpunished, such as with the household idols of Micah. However, some kings actually led the people into sin and thus it could be said that they did “what was right in the king’s eyes.” There were faithful and unfaithful generations in both time periods.

A better understanding of the author’s words is to see the statement as an observation on the source of restraint. During the days of the judges the people chose individually to serve the Lord or not. During the days of the kings the people were often dragged about so that a single king could force reform (such as king Josiah– see 2 Kings 22) or cause sin to increase. Thus, the statement of Judges 17:6 is a neutral observation concerning the condition of restraint. There was nothing restraining Micah and Micah chose to behave poorly. Job, on the other hand, chose to behave wisely when “he was righteous in his own eyes” for having done as the Lord instructs. (Job 32:1) Choosing what is right in our own eyes can be a very good or very evil thing.



“right in his own eyes”

Our Covenant with Christ

The system under the judges where “each man did what was right in his own eyes” was intended to foreshadow the covenant we now have under Christ. Consider the two statements of Judges 17:6 and 21:25:

“In those days there was no king in Israel...

There was no physical king, but “the Lord your God was your king.” (1 Samuel 12:12). God’s direct rule was rejected by the hard-hearted people. The day was coming, however, that the Lord would once again be the direct and only king over His people. Isaiah prophecies, “How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, And says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isaiah 52:7) He speaks of Christ and says, “For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called... Mighty God” (Isaiah 9:6) God desired to rule His people directly. He does it today. The church is His nation.

“each man did what was right in his own eyes.”

During the days of the judges each person chose to serve God or not to serve God. This was as the Lord willed, with the desire that they choose righteously. He prophesied of a time when that would once again be the case: “Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel.. I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.’ declares the Lord, ‘for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34) Jeremiah foresaw a time in which each person would be responsible for choosing to serve the Lord. That time is now. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” (John 3:5) You are doing what is right in your own eyes. Is it right in God’s eyes as well?



“right in his own eyes”

What implications are found in Judges 21:25 concerning the time period that the book of Judges was written in?

Who was truly king in Israel during the days of the judges according to Samuel?

Micah was righteous in his own eyes just as Job was. What is the difference between these two men? How can a person know if they are righteous before God?

Discuss the concepts of God’s direct rule in the church and the idea of individual choice in conversion to Christ. Compare those things to the days of the judges.

This book belongs to:
