JUDGES
AND RUTH
BIBLE STUDY

A Verse-by-Verse Study



Dark days, a faithful God, and a harvest in Bethlehem:
the judges He raised up, and the redeemer who prepared the way for David

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Judges and Ruth Bible Study

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A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Study

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this study direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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Introduction

Welcome, and thank you for taking the time to work through this verse-by-verse study of the books of Judges and Ruth. My purpose in writing this study guide is the same as it was for my study of Revelation: to bring you closer to our Creator and to give you a way to grow in your Christian walk.

My wife has stood by me through all kinds of trials in my life. She has lifted me up and supported me when it would have been easier to walk away. Ruth chose to stay. We all need someone like that, someone who is there through everything.

Judges and Ruth tell of the same dark stretch of Israel's history, the years between the death of Joshua and the rise of the kings. Judges shows a nation that kept forgetting God and a God who kept rescuing them anyway. Ruth shows, in the very same days, one quiet family where faith and kindness were still alive, and how God used them to prepare the way for King David. I do not claim to be an authority on the Bible or on these books. I am simply someone like you who wants to grow closer to God and understand how He deals with His people when they wander, and how He keeps His promises when it seems no one is looking. Before you read any part of this book, or any part of Scripture, I ask that you pray, asking God:

- For the Holy Spirit to be present, to help open your eyes and your heart (Psalm 119:18, 119:105)
- For discernment and knowledge (Psalm 119:66, James 1:5)

2 Timothy 2:15 (SLB)

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker not needing to be ashamed, cutting straight the word of truth."

The Bible is God's Word to us (2 Timothy 3:16), given for training in righteousness. If we cannot understand what it says, we cannot apply it to our lives or help build God's kingdom.

So how do we go about understanding God's Word?

The first rule is context. You may have heard the saying "Context is King," but what does that mean? Every word, sentence, and passage helps explain the ones around it. Before we read any passage, we should ask a few simple questions: Who wrote it? Who was it written to? What came right before it? Knowing the answers gives us a clearer picture of what God is saying, both in general and to each of us personally.

Context matters a great deal in Judges. It is not a book of heroes to copy. It is the record of a people sliding downhill, told in a cycle that repeats again and again: Israel sins, God gives them over to an enemy, they cry out, God raises up a deliverer, and then they fall back again, each time a little worse. Many of the judges did things the book reports without praising. If we forget that, we will make Gideon's fleece a method for finding God's will, or Jephthah's vow a model of devotion, or Samson a pattern for living. The writer tells us how to read it in his own words at the end: "In

those days there was no king in Israel; each man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Ruth needs its context too. It opens "in the days of the judging of the judges" (Ruth 1:1), and its loyalty and kindness shine brighter because of how dark those days were.

Exegesis, Eisegesis, and Hermeneutics

People typically interpret the Bible using one of two methods, Exegesis or Eisegesis. Both are explained below, along with a third word, Hermeneutics. Sometimes people use both methods to "make their case" for the interpretation they want. These definitions are based on www.merriam-webster.com, with my own notes added.

Exegesis means explaining a text, especially a passage of Scripture. Exegesis is reading and interpreting the full text of a passage, and drawing out what it is actually saying.

Eisegesis means reading your own ideas into a text. This happens when we try to find something in the text that really isn't there. It can lead to many errors, especially when we bring assumptions to a passage that aren't actually in it. This method can be used to justify a behavior, position, or belief that goes against what the text originally meant.

Hermeneutics is the study of the principles used to interpret a text, such as the Bible. "Hermeneutics" and "Exegesis" are sometimes used to mean the same thing. The difference is that Exegesis is the work of explaining a passage, while Hermeneutics is the set of principles that guides that work. In Biblical Hermeneutics, the Bible should be read literally unless the text itself gives us a different meaning.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (SLB)

"16 Every Scripture ***is*** God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training which ***is*** in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work."

This passage tells us plainly that the writers of Scripture were inspired by God. Every passage in the Bible came from God and was written down by man. These are not fairy tales or made-up stories. They are God's own breath, given to us so we can be equipped and ready to do good work.

Because every word was inspired and breathed by God, I believe we must let God's Word interpret itself. We must study the Bible using Exegesis, drawing out what the text says, guided by sound Biblical Hermeneutics.

We should study God's Word using the Golden Rule of Interpretation, as Dr. David L. Cooper stated it:

"When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."

(http://www.biblicalresearch.info/page55.html)

I read the Bible as it is written. Judges and Ruth are real history, and this study takes them at their word: these were real people, real battles and real towns, and God really did raise up deliverers, give His Spirit for the work, and watch over a widow and a foreign woman on the road to Bethlehem. A note on the name of God: in the SLB, when you see "the LORD" in capital letters, it stands for God's personal name, YHWH, often written Yahweh, which He made known to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14-15). When you see "Lord" in regular letters, it translates a word that means master. When you see "God," it usually translates Elohim, the general Hebrew word for God.

This study uses the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB) unless I note otherwise. To better understand the original Hebrew, I also used The Interlinear Bible (Jay P. Green Sr., ISBN 1-56563-977-4).

How This Study Is Laid Out

Each chapter of this study follows the same pattern as my study of Revelation:

- Scripture: the full text of the chapter, broken into sections, so you can read it straight through first.
- Preview: a short look at what the chapter covers.
- Study: the chapter again, verse by verse, with my notes on what each verse says and what it means for us.
- Summary: the main points of the chapter in a few lines.
- Study Questions: questions for personal study or a small group, from simple fact questions to questions about how we live. Some of them are personal. In a group, no one should ever have to answer one aloud, and what is shared in the group stays there.

Each book also has its own Overview and Background before its first chapter, so you know who wrote it, when its events happened, and why it was written.

Why Judges and Ruth Are Studied Together

Ruth begins where Judges is set: "in the days of the judging of the judges" (Ruth 1:1). In our English Bibles Ruth comes right after Judges, as it does in the old Greek translation of the Old Testament. (In the Hebrew Bible it is placed with the Writings, among the five short books later read at the Jewish feasts.) The two books belong side by side. Judges ends with two terrible stories that both begin with a Levite tied to Bethlehem of Judah (Judges 17:7; 19:1). Ruth takes us back to Bethlehem and shows us what God was doing there at the same time: a family brought low, a foreign widow who chose the God of Israel, and a man of honor who acted as a redeemer. Judges keeps saying that Israel had no king. Ruth ends with the name of the king God was preparing: "Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David" (Ruth 4:22). And David's line leads to Jesus Christ, the King who was born in that same Bethlehem.

Using This Study With a Group

This study works for one person or for a group. Judges has twenty-one chapters and Ruth has four, so here are two ways a group can pace it:

- One chapter a week: twenty-five weeks, about six months. If you like, add a first meeting to read the Introduction and the Background of Judges together, and another before Ruth for its Background.
- Two chapters a week: about thirteen weeks. Some chapters pair well (Judges 6 and 7 on Gideon's call and victory, 14 and 15 on Samson, 20 and 21 on the war with Benjamin, Ruth 1 and 2, Ruth 3 and 4). Take Judges 9, 11 and 19 one at a time, because they need the time.

For each meeting, I suggest reading the Scripture out loud together first, straight through, before anyone comments. Then walk through the Study section, stopping where the group has questions, and finish with the Study Questions and prayer. The first questions in each list can be answered from the text. The later ones are more personal, and no one should feel pressed to answer them aloud.

Some parts of Judges are among the hardest in the Bible. The maiming of Adoni-bezek (1:6-7), Ehud's killing of Eglon (3:15-30), Jael and Sisera (4:17-22), Abimelech's murder of his brothers (chapter 9), Jephthah's vow and his daughter (11:29-40), Samson's violence and his sins with women (chapters 14 to 16), and above all the abuse and murder of the Levite's concubine and the war and kidnappings that followed (chapters 19 to 21) can raise honest questions about God and about how people treat one another. The study handles each one plainly and with care, and it does not pretend that Scripture approves of everything it reports. Ruth is gentler, but it begins with famine, death and grief, and some in your group may know those well. Some people in your group may have been abused, may have lost a child, or may carry wounds from violence at home, and these chapters can stir that up. If you lead a group, read those sections ahead of time and be ready to listen. If someone shares something that puts them or another person in danger, help them get help right away.

I look forward to walking with you through the books of Judges and Ruth. If you'd like to share feedback, please email me at andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.

May God bless you and your time studying and getting to know Him better.

Overview of Judges

Judges is the seventh book of the Bible. It comes right after Joshua and right before Ruth. The Hebrew title is Shophtim, which means judges. In Judges the word does not mainly mean a man in a robe in a courtroom. A judge (Hebrew shophet) was a leader God raised up to rescue His people from their enemies and then to lead them and settle their disputes. The book itself calls Othniel and Ehud "a savior" (3:9, 15).

Joshua ends with Israel in the land, the tribes in their places, and the people promising to serve the LORD (Joshua 24). Judges opens right after Joshua's death and shows what happened next. The tribes did not finish driving out the Canaanites. They made peace with them, married them and began to worship their gods. A new generation grew up "who did not know the LORD" (2:10). So God handed them over to enemy after enemy. When they cried out, He raised up a judge to save them, and when the judge died they went back to their idols. The book runs through that cycle again and again, and each turn goes lower than the one before.

The theme of Judges is what happens when God's people forget Him and every person becomes his own authority, and how patient God is with them even then. The book shows it in its last line:

Judges 21:25 (SLB)

"In those days ***there was*** no king in Israel; each man did what ***was*** right in his own eyes."

The other side of the theme is God's mercy. Again and again He heard His people when they had brought trouble on themselves: "the LORD was moved to compassion by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and those who crushed them" (2:18).

Judges has 21 chapters and 618 verses. Twelve judges are named in it: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah (with Barak), Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon and Samson. Abimelech, Gideon's son, made himself king, but God never raised him up. Here is its structure:

Part One: Israel Fails to Finish the Conquest (1:1 to 3:6)

- Judges 1: Israel's Unfinished Conquest
- Judges 2: Weeping at Bochim and the Pattern of the Judges

Part Two: The Judges God Raised Up (3:7 to 16:31)

- Judges 3: Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar
- Judges 4: Deborah, Barak and Jael
- Judges 5: The Song of Deborah
- Judges 6: The Call of Gideon
- Judges 7: Gideon's Three Hundred
- Judges 8: Gideon's Victory and His Ephod
- Judges 9: Abimelech, the Bramble King

- Judges 10: Tola, Jair and Israel's Repentance
- Judges 11: Jephthah and His Vow
- Judges 12: Jephthah, Ephraim and Three Judges
- Judges 13: The Birth of Samson
- Judges 14: Samson's Wedding and Riddle
- Judges 15: Samson Strikes the Philistines
- Judges 16: Samson and Delilah

Part Three: When There Was No King in Israel (chapters 17 to 21)

- Judges 17: Micah's Idols
- Judges 18: The Danites Move North
- Judges 19: The Crime at Gibeah
- Judges 20: War Against Benjamin
- Judges 21: Wives for Benjamin

Where this book points to Christ: every judge in this book was a savior with a shelf life. Each one rescued Israel for a while, and then died, and the people slid back. Several of them had deep flaws. The book leaves us longing for a better Deliverer and a righteous King. Hebrews 11:32 names Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah among those who acted by faith, so God used weak people who trusted Him, and He still does. But only Jesus Christ saves completely and never dies again. Hebrews 7:25 says He is "able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, always living to intercede for them." The Spirit of the LORD came on the judges for their work (3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 14:6). God gave the Spirit to Christ without measure (John 3:34), and Christ gives His Spirit to everyone who believes. Many Bible teachers also see the angel of the LORD, who appears in chapters 2, 6 and 13, as the Son of God appearing before He was born in Bethlehem.

Background of Judges

Author: The book does not name its writer. Jewish tradition names Samuel, the last of the judges and the prophet who anointed Saul and David. The book gives us a few clues. The writer keeps saying "In those days there was no king in Israel" (17:6; 21:25; compare 18:1; 19:1), so he wrote when Israel did have a king and could look back on the time before. He also says the Jebusites still lived in Jerusalem "until this day" (1:21), which points to a time before David captured Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6-9). That fits Samuel well. Many modern scholars believe Judges was put together centuries later, during or after the exile, from older stories, as part of a longer history running from Deuteronomy to Kings. I take the book as an early, true record. Its clues point to the first days of the kings, and nothing in it requires a later date.

When it was written: Most likely early in the time of the kings, about 1050 to 1000 B.C., during the reign of Saul or the first years of David, while Jerusalem was still a Jebusite city.

Who it was written to: The people of Israel in the early days of the kingdom. They had asked for a king (1 Samuel 8:5), and Judges showed them why Israel was in such trouble without one, and also that a king alone could not fix them. Their real problem was that they had left the LORD, who was supposed to be their King (8:23; 1 Samuel 8:7).

Setting: After the conquest under Joshua, each tribe received its land and was responsible to drive out the Canaanites who were left. There was no capital city, no king and no standing army. The tabernacle, the tent where God was worshiped and where the ark of the covenant was kept, stood at Shiloh (18:31; Joshua 18:1). The tribes often acted alone, and sometimes fought each other (8:1-3; 12:1-6; chapter 20). Their enemies came from every side: a king from Mesopotamia, the Moabites and Ammonites from the east, the Canaanites of Hazor in the north, the Midianites and Amalekites from the desert, and the Philistines on the coast.

When the events happened: The judges ruled from shortly after Joshua's death until Saul became king, about 1375 to 1050 B.C. This fits an exodus of about 1446 B.C. (1 Kings 6:1) and the entry into Canaan about 1406 B.C. It also fits what Jephthah told the king of Ammon, that Israel had lived in those lands for "three hundred years" (11:26). If you add up every number of years in Judges, the total comes to about 410 years, more than the time available. The best answer is that some judges overlapped. They were mostly local leaders, and one could be at work in one region while another led somewhere else. The book shows this itself: the LORD gave Israel to "the Philistines" and to the Ammonites at the same time (10:7), so Jephthah fought Ammon in the east while the Philistine years that Samson faced were under way in the west. The last five chapters also do not come after Samson in time. They happened early in the period, when Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, was still serving as priest (20:28).

The cycle: The pattern of the book is laid out in 2:11-19 and then repeated in story after story. Israel does "the evil in the eyes of the LORD" (3:7). The LORD gives them into the hand of an enemy. Israel cries out to the LORD. The LORD raises up a judge who saves them. The land has rest while the judge lives. Then the judge dies and the people go back to their sin. Watch for the wording as you read. It is the writer's way of marking each new turn.

Purpose: Judges was written to show that God keeps His word, both His warnings and His promises (2:1-3, 15), that sin always takes people further than they meant to go, and that God is merciful to His people even when they do not deserve it. It also shows Israel's need for a righteous king who would lead the people in the ways of the LORD. That need was partly met in David, and fully met in David's Son, Jesus Christ.

Judges 1: Israel's Unfinished Conquest

Scripture

1:1-15 And it was after the death of Joshua, and the sons of Israel inquired of the LORD, saying, "Who will go up for us against the Canaanites at the first, to fight against them?" And the LORD said, "Judah will go up. Look, I have given the land into his hand." And Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come up with me into my lot, and let us fight against the Canaanites; and I also will go with you into your lot." And Simeon went with him. And Judah went up, and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand, and they struck them at Bezek, ten thousand men. And they found Adoni-bezek at Bezek, and they fought against him, and they struck the Canaanites and the Perizzites. And Adoni-bezek fled, and they pursued after him, and they seized him, and they cut off the thumbs of his hands and ***of*** his feet. And Adoni-bezek said, "Seventy kings, the thumbs of their hands and ***of*** their feet cut off, were gathering up under my table. Just as I have done, so God has repaid me." And they brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there. And the sons of Judah fought against Jerusalem, and they captured it, and they struck it by the mouth of ***the*** sword, and the city they set on fire. And afterward the sons of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites dwelling ***in*** the hill country and the Negeb and the Shephelah. And Judah went against the Canaanites who dwelt in Hebron, and the name of Hebron formerly ***was*** Kiriath-arba; and they struck Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmai. And he went from there against the inhabitants of Debir, and the name of Debir formerly ***was*** Kiriath-sepher. And Caleb said, "He who strikes Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will give to him Achsah my daughter as a wife." And Othniel the son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb, younger than he, captured it; and he gave to him Achsah his daughter as a wife. And it was, when she came, and she urged him to ask from her father the field. And she got down from on the donkey, and Caleb said to her, "What ***is it*** for you?" And she said to him, "Give me a blessing; for the land of the Negeb you have given me, and you shall give me springs of water." And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs.

1:16-26 And the sons of ***the*** Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up from the city of the palm trees with the sons of Judah ***to*** the wilderness of Judah, which ***is*** in the Negeb of Arad; and he went and dwelt with the people. And Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they struck the Canaanites dwelling ***in*** Zephath, and they devoted it to destruction; and he called the name of the city Hormah. And Judah captured Gaza and its territory, and Ashkelon and its territory, and Ekron and its territory. And the LORD was with Judah, and he dispossessed the hill country; but ***he could*** not dispossess the inhabitants of the valley, for they ***had*** chariots of iron. And they gave Hebron to Caleb, just as Moses had spoken; and he dispossessed from there the three sons of Anak. And the Jebusites who dwelt ***in*** Jerusalem, the sons of Benjamin did not dispossess; and the Jebusites have dwelt with the sons of Benjamin in Jerusalem until this day. And the house of Joseph went up, they also, ***to*** Bethel, and the LORD ***was*** with them. And the house of Joseph had ***men*** spy out at Bethel (and the name of the city formerly ***was*** Luz). And the watchers saw a man coming out from the city, and they said to him, "Show us, please, the entrance of the city, and we will do steadfast love with you." And he showed them the entrance of the city, and they struck the city by the mouth of ***the*** sword; and the man and all his family they let go. And the man went ***to***

the land of the Hittites, and he built a city, and he called its name Luz; that ***is*** its name until this day.

1:27-36 And Manasseh did not dispossess Beth-shean and its daughter ***towns***, and Taanach and its daughter ***towns***, and the inhabitants of Dor and its daughter ***towns***, and the inhabitants of Ibleam and its daughter ***towns***, and the inhabitants of Megiddo and its daughter ***towns***; and the Canaanites were determined to dwell in this land. And it was, when Israel became strong, and put the Canaanites to forced labor, and did not utterly dispossess them. And Ephraim did not dispossess the Canaanites who dwelt in Gezer; and the Canaanites dwelt in his midst, in Gezer. Zebulun did not dispossess the inhabitants of Kitron and the inhabitants of Nahalol; and the Canaanites dwelt in his midst, and they became forced labor. Asher did not dispossess the inhabitants of Acco and the inhabitants of Sidon, and Ahlab and Achzib and Helbah and Aphek and Rehob. And the Asherites dwelt in the midst of the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not dispossess them. Naphtali did not dispossess the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and the inhabitants of Beth-anath, and he dwelt in the midst of the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; and the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and Beth-anath became forced labor for them. And the Amorites pressed the sons of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to go down to the valley. And the Amorites were determined to dwell in the mountain of Heres, in Aijalon and in Shaalbim; and the hand of the house of Joseph was heavy, and they became forced labor. And the border of the Amorites ***was*** from the ascent of Akrabbim, from the Sela and upward.

Preview

Joshua is dead, and the tribes must now finish the work of taking the land, each in its own territory. The chapter starts well. Judah asks the LORD who should go first, obeys, and wins. Caleb's family takes Hebron and Debir, and the house of Joseph takes Bethel. But as the chapter goes on, the news gets worse. Tribe after tribe "did not dispossess" the Canaanites, and by the end the Danites cannot even hold their own valley.

This chapter can read like a list of places, but it is really a report card. It shows the slow slide that the rest of the book will follow. Israel did not lose the land in one great battle. They lost it one compromise at a time. As we read it, we should ask where we have settled for part of what God told us to do.

Study

1:1-2 *And it was after the death of Joshua, and the sons of Israel inquired of the LORD, saying, "Who will go up for us against the Canaanites at the first, to fight against them?" And the LORD said, "Judah will go up. Look, I have given the land into his hand."*

"After the death of Joshua" Israel had no single leader. So they did the right thing: they "inquired of the LORD." The priest most likely asked God through the Urim and Thummim, the sacred lots kept in the high priest's breastpiece (Numbers 27:21). The question was simple: who goes first?

The LORD answered, "Judah will go up." Judah was the tribe of kingship, the tribe Jacob had blessed with the scepter (Genesis 49:10). God also gave a promise before the battle began: "I have given the land into his hand." The victory was already settled. Judah's part was to go and take it.

That is how God still works. He does not ask us to win His battles for Him. He asks us to believe Him and go.

1:3-5 *And Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come up with me into my lot, and let us fight against the Canaanites; and I also will go with you into your lot." And Simeon went with him. And Judah went up, and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand, and they struck them at Bezek, ten thousand men. And they found Adoni-bezek at Bezek, and they fought against him, and they struck the Canaanites and the Perizzites.*

Judah asked Simeon to come with him. Simeon's land lay inside Judah's territory in the south (Joshua 19:1, 9), so the two tribes naturally fought side by side. Judah promised to return the favor.

The LORD gave them the victory at Bezek, about ten thousand men. The Canaanites were the peoples living in the land, and the Perizzites were one of the groups among them, probably people who lived in open villages in the hills.

There they found a king called Adoni-bezek, which means lord of Bezek. Some think he is the same man as Adoni-zedek, the king of Jerusalem in Joshua 10, but the names and the story are different, and Scripture does not say so.

1:6-7 *And Adoni-bezek fled, and they pursued after him, and they seized him, and they cut off the thumbs of his hands and **of** his feet. And Adoni-bezek said, "Seventy kings, the thumbs of their hands and **of** their feet cut off, were gathering up under my table. Just as I have done, so God has repaid me." And they brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there.*

Adoni-bezek ran, and they caught him and "cut off the thumbs of his hands and of his feet," that is, his thumbs and big toes. A man without thumbs cannot hold a sword or a bow. A man without big toes cannot run or keep his balance in battle. It ended his life as a warrior and marked him as beaten.

This is hard to read, and I don't want to rush past it. Notice who explains it. Adoni-bezek himself said he had done the same to seventy kings and made them gather scraps "under my table" like dogs. Then he said, "Just as I have done, so God has repaid me." A pagan king saw the hand of God in what happened to him. What he sowed, he reaped (Galatians 6:7).

Scripture records what Judah did. It does not say God commanded it, and it does not hold it up as a pattern. The Law did teach that a punishment should fit the crime (Exodus 21:23-25), but that was a rule for judges in a court, to keep punishment from going too far, not a license for personal revenge. What we can learn here is that God sees how the powerful treat the weak, and in His time He repays. He brought Adoni-bezek to Jerusalem, where he died.

1:8 *And the sons of Judah fought against Jerusalem, and they captured it, and they struck it by the mouth of **the** sword, and the city they set on fire.*

Judah fought against Jerusalem, captured it, and set it on fire. Yet verse 21 says the Jebusites went on living in Jerusalem, and the city was not taken for good until David captured it hundreds of years later (2 Samuel 5:6-9). The most likely answer is that Judah took and burned the lower part of the city but did not hold it, and the Jebusites came back and held the strong hilltop. Jerusalem sat on the border between Judah and Benjamin, and neither tribe finished the job.

1:9-11 *And afterward the sons of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites dwelling **in** the hill country and the Negeb and the Shephelah. And Judah went against the Canaanites who dwelt in Hebron, and the name of Hebron formerly **was** Kiriath-arba; and they struck Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmai. And he went from there against the inhabitants of Debir, and the name of Debir formerly **was** Kiriath-sepher.*

Judah moved on to the rest of its land: the hill country, the Negeb (the dry south) and the Shephelah (the low hills toward the coast). At Hebron they struck Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmai. These three were sons of Anak, the giants whose size had frightened the ten spies forty years before (Numbers 13:22, 28). What the fathers had feared, the sons now defeated.

This is a quick summary of what Joshua 15:13-19 tells in more detail. The writer reminds us that Hebron was once called Kiriath-arba, and Debir was once called Kiriath-sepher, which means city of the book.

1:12-15 *And Caleb said, "He who strikes Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will give to him Achsah my daughter as a wife." And Othniel the son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb, younger than he, captured it; and he gave to him Achsah his daughter as a wife. And it was, when she came, and she urged him to ask from her father the field. And she got down from on the donkey, and Caleb said to her, "What **is it** for you?" And she said to him, "Give me a blessing; for the land of the Negeb you have given me, and you shall give me springs of water." And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs.*

Caleb was one of the two faithful spies, now an old man (Joshua 14:10-12). He offered his daughter Achsah as a wife to the man who captured Kiriath-sepher. "Othniel the son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb, younger than he," took the city. Othniel matters. In chapter 3 he becomes the first judge.

Then Achsah did something bold. She got off her donkey and asked her father, "Give me a blessing." She had been given land in the Negeb, dry country, and land without water is not worth much. So she asked for springs. Caleb gave her "the upper springs and the lower springs," more than she asked.

In a chapter full of people settling for less, here is a woman who asked for more of what God had given her family. Caleb's household believed the promise and wanted all of it. We should ask our Father the same way (Matthew 7:11; James 4:2).

1:16 *And the sons of **the** Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up from the city of the palm trees with the sons of Judah **to** the wilderness of Judah, which **is** in the Negeb of Arad; and he went and dwelt with the people.*

The Kenites were the family of Moses' father-in-law (called Hobab in 4:11; compare Numbers 10:29-32). They had come with Israel from the wilderness and now settled with Judah in the dry country near Arad. "The city of the palm trees" is Jericho (Deuteronomy 34:3). These were not Israelites by birth, but they had joined God's people. We will meet one of their women, Jael, in chapter 4.

1:17-18 *And Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they struck the Canaanites dwelling **in** Zephath, and they devoted it to destruction; and he called the name of the city Hormah. And Judah captured Gaza and its territory, and Ashkelon and its territory, and Ekron and its territory.*

Judah kept its promise and went with Simeon into Simeon's land. They "devoted it to destruction," which translates the Hebrew herem. It meant giving a city over completely to God in judgment, with nothing kept back for the soldiers. God had commanded this for the cities of Canaan because of their long and deep wickedness (Genesis 15:16; Deuteronomy 7:2; 9:5). So the city was named Hormah, a word that sounds like herem.

Judah also took Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron, three of the five main Philistine cities on the coast. They did not keep them long. By the time of Samson the Philistines held all three again.

1:19-20 *And the LORD was with Judah, and he dispossessed the hill country; but **he could** not dispossess the inhabitants of the valley, for they **had** chariots of iron. And they gave Hebron to Caleb, just as Moses had spoken; and he dispossessed from there the three sons of Anak.*

"And the LORD was with Judah." That is the key fact. Then comes a sad line: Judah could not drive out the people of the valley, "for they had chariots of iron." Chariots were the tanks of the ancient world, and on flat ground they were hard to beat. But was the problem really the chariots? Joshua had told the house of Joseph that they would drive out the Canaanites in the valleys "though they have chariots of iron" (Joshua 17:18). In chapter 4, God will defeat nine hundred iron chariots in a single day. The problem was not God's power. It was Israel's faith.

Caleb received Hebron, as Moses had promised (Numbers 14:24; Joshua 14:9-14), and he drove out the three sons of Anak. One old man who trusted God did what whole tribes did not.

1:21 *And the Jebusites who dwelt **in** Jerusalem, the sons of Benjamin did not dispossess; and the Jebusites have dwelt with the sons of Benjamin in Jerusalem until this day.*

Benjamin "did not dispossess" the Jebusites of Jerusalem. To dispossess means to drive the people out and take their land. This is the first time we hear that phrase in the chapter, and we will hear it again and again. The words "until this day" tell us the book was written before David captured the city.

1:22-26 *And the house of Joseph went up, they also, **to** Bethel, and the LORD **was** with them. And the house of Joseph had **men** spy out at Bethel (and the name of the city formerly **was** Luz). And the watchers saw a man coming out from the city, and they said to him, "Show us, please, the entrance of the city, and we will do steadfast love with you." And he showed them the entrance of the city, and they struck the city by the mouth of **the** sword; and the man and all his family they let go. And the man went **to** the land of the Hittites, and he built a city, and he called its name Luz; that **is** its name until this day.*

The house of Joseph means the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's two sons. They went up against Bethel, "and the LORD was with them." Bethel was the place where God had met Jacob (Genesis 28:19).

Their spies caught a man coming out of the city and promised to "do steadfast love with you" if he would show them the way in. That is the Hebrew word hesed, faithful, loyal love. He showed them, they took the city, and they kept their word and let his family go.

It sounds like the story of Rahab, but it ends differently. Rahab joined Israel and trusted Israel's God (Joshua 6:25). This man went off to the land of the Hittites and built a new Luz, a copy of the old pagan city. He was saved from the sword, but he never turned to the LORD. It is possible to be near God's people and come away unchanged.

1:27-28 *And Manasseh did not dispossess Beth-shean and its daughter **towns**, and Taanach and its daughter **towns**, and the inhabitants of Dor and its daughter **towns**, and the inhabitants of Ibleam and its daughter **towns**, and the inhabitants of Megiddo and its daughter **towns**; and the Canaanites were determined to dwell in this land. And it was, when Israel became strong, and put the Canaanites to forced labor, and did not utterly dispossess them.*

Now the report turns. Manasseh did not drive out the people of five important towns, including Beth-shean, Taanach and Megiddo. These towns guarded the main roads and the great Jezreel Valley. "The Canaanites were determined to dwell in this land," and Manasseh let them.

When Israel grew strong, they still did not drive them out. They "put the Canaanites to forced labor." That was not a lack of strength. It was a choice. Making money from the Canaanites looked better than obeying God. But God had said plainly, "you shall not make a covenant with them" (Deuteronomy 7:2). What Israel kept around to serve them would soon rule them.

1:29-33 *And Ephraim did not dispossess the Canaanites who dwelt in Gezer; and the Canaanites dwelt in his midst, in Gezer. Zebulun did not dispossess the inhabitants of Kitron and the inhabitants of Nahalol; and the Canaanites dwelt in his midst, and they became forced labor. Asher did not dispossess the inhabitants of Acco and the inhabitants of Sidon, and Ahlab and Achzib and Helbah and Aphek and Rehob. And the Asherites dwelt in the midst of the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not dispossess them. Naphtali did not dispossess the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and the inhabitants of Beth-anath, and he dwelt in the midst of the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; and the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and Beth-anath became forced labor for them.*

The list goes on, and each line is a little worse. Ephraim let the Canaanites live "in his midst" at Gezer. Zebulun did the same. With Asher the wording flips: "the Asherites dwelt in the midst of the Canaanites." Naphtali did the same. At first the Canaanites lived among Israel. Now Israel lived among the Canaanites, as if they were the guests.

That is how compromise works. First we let sin stay in a corner of our lives. Then we make a deal with it. In the end we find we are the ones living in its house. Sin does not stay small for long.

1:34-36 *And the Amorites pressed the sons of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to go down to the valley. And the Amorites were determined to dwell in the mountain of Heres, in Aijalon and in Shaalbim; and the hand of the house of Joseph was heavy, and they became forced labor. And the border of the Amorites **was** from the ascent of Akrabbim, from the Sela and upward.*

The last report is the worst. The Amorites "pressed the sons of Dan into the hill country" and would not let them into the valley. Dan did not just fail to drive the enemy out. Dan was driven out. That is why, in chapter 18, the Danites go looking for new land in the far north.

The house of Joseph did help put some of these Amorites to forced labor, but the chapter ends with a line about the Amorites' border, as if to say the enemy still held its ground.

Why does Judges begin with this long list? Because everything that follows grows out of it. The idols, the wars and the moral collapse of the later chapters all started with partial obedience.

Summary

After Joshua's death Israel asked the LORD who should lead the fight, and He sent Judah. Judah and Simeon defeated the Canaanites at Bezek and captured Adoni-bezek, who confessed that God had repaid him for what he had done to seventy kings. Judah struck Jerusalem, Hebron and the south, Othniel took Debir and married Caleb's daughter Achsah, who asked her father for springs of water, and the house of Joseph took Bethel. But Judah did not drive out the people of the valley, and tribe after tribe, Benjamin, Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher and Naphtali, let the Canaanites stay, often putting them to forced labor instead. The chapter ends with Dan pushed into the hills by the Amorites. Israel's conquest was left unfinished, and the seeds of the whole book were planted.

Study Questions

1. What did Israel do first after Joshua died, and what did the LORD answer? (1:1-2)

2. What did Adoni-bezek say about what had happened to him? What does that teach us about God's justice? (1:6-7)

3. What did Achsah ask her father for, and what did he give her? (1:14-15)

4. What reason is given for Judah not driving out the people of the valley? How do Joshua 17:18 and Judges 4 help us see the real problem? (1:19)

5. How was the man from Bethel different from Rahab? (1:24-26; Joshua 6:25)

6. When Israel became strong, what did they do with the Canaanites instead of driving them out? Why was that a choice and not a weakness? (1:28)

7. How does the wording change from Ephraim and Zebulun to Asher and Naphtali? What does that show about compromise? (1:29-33)

8. Caleb and Achsah wanted all that God had promised. Where are you tempted to settle for less than what God has given you?

9. Israel kept the Canaanites around because they were useful. Is there a sin you keep around because it seems to serve you? What would it take to drive it out?

10. This chapter shows that people usually lose ground with God one small compromise at a time. What is one small step of obedience you can take this week?

Judges 2: Weeping at Bochim and the Pattern of the Judges

Scripture

2:1-10 And the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and he said, "I brought you up from Egypt, and I brought you into the land which I swore to your fathers; and I said, 'I will not break My covenant with you forever. And you, you shall not cut a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; their altars you shall pull down.' And you have not listened to My voice. What ***is*** this ***that*** you have done? And also I have said, 'I will not drive them out from before you; and they shall become ***thorns in*** your sides, and their gods shall become a snare to you.'" And it was, when the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, and the people lifted up their voice and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim, and they sacrificed there to the LORD. And Joshua sent the people away, and the sons of Israel went, each man to his inheritance, to take possession of the land. And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who prolonged days after Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the LORD which He had done for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, a son of a hundred and ten years. And they buried him in the territory of his inheritance, in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, on the north of the mountain of Gaash. And also all that generation were gathered to their fathers; and another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD, and also the work which He had done for Israel.

2:11-23 And the sons of Israel did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and they served the Baals. And they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who brought them out from the land of Egypt, and they went after other gods, from the gods of the peoples who ***were*** around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. And they forsook the LORD, and they served the Baal and the Ashtaroth. And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hand of plunderers, and they plundered them; and He sold them into the hand of their enemies all around, and they were not able any longer to stand before their enemies. In every ***place*** where they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, just as the LORD had spoken, and just as the LORD had sworn to them; and it was distressing to them exceedingly. And the LORD raised up judges, and they saved them from the hand of their plunderers. And also to their judges they did not listen, for they prostituted themselves after other gods, and they bowed down to them; they turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked, listening to the commandments of the LORD; they did not do so. And when the LORD raised up judges for them, and the LORD was with the judge, and He saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to compassion by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and those who crushed them. And it was, when the judge died, they turned back and acted more corruptly than their fathers, by walking after other gods, to serve them and to bow down to them; they did not let fall ***any*** of their deeds or of their stubborn way. And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He said, "Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and they have not listened to My voice, I also will not again dispossess anyone from before them of the nations which Joshua left, and he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they ***are*** keeping the way of the LORD, to

walk in them, just as their fathers kept ***it***, or not." And the LORD left these nations, not dispossessing them quickly; and He did not give them into the hand of Joshua.

Preview

The angel of the LORD comes to Israel with a hard word. God has kept His covenant, but Israel has made deals with the Canaanites and has not torn down their altars. So God will no longer drive those nations out. They will be thorns in Israel's sides, and their gods a snare. The people weep, but the tears do not last. Then the writer steps back to Joshua's death and tells us how a whole new generation grew up not knowing the LORD.

The second half of the chapter is the key to the whole book. In a few verses it lays out the cycle we will watch over and over: Israel serves other gods, God gives them over to their enemies, God raises up judges to save them, and when each judge dies they go back to their sin, worse than before. If you understand this chapter, you will understand Judges.

Study

2:1-3 *And the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and he said, "I brought you up from Egypt, and I brought you into the land which I swore to your fathers; and I said, 'I will not break My covenant with you forever. And you, you shall not cut a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; their altars you shall pull down.' And you have not listened to My voice. What **is** this **that** you have done? And also I have said, 'I will not drive them out from before you; and they shall become **thorns in** your sides, and their gods shall become a snare to you.'"*

"The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim." Gilgal was Israel's first camp in the land, where they renewed the covenant after crossing the Jordan (Joshua 5:9-10). Now the angel comes from that place of beginnings to confront them.

Look at how He speaks: "I brought you up from Egypt, and I brought you into the land which I swore to your fathers." No ordinary angel could say that. He speaks as the LORD Himself. That is why many Bible teachers believe the angel of the LORD was the Son of God, appearing before He was born in Bethlehem.

God reminds them that He had kept His side: "I will not break My covenant with you forever." A covenant is a binding agreement, here one God Himself made and swore to keep. Israel's side was plain too: make no covenant with the people of the land, and pull down their altars. "And you have not listened to My voice. What is this that you have done?"

So God tells them the result. He will not drive the nations out, and they will become thorns in Israel's sides, and "their gods shall become a snare to you." God had warned them of this very thing (Numbers 33:55; Joshua 23:13). He was not changing the deal. He was keeping His word.

2:4-5 *And it was, when the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, and the people lifted up their voice and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim, and they sacrificed there to the LORD.*

"The people lifted up their voice and wept." They named the place Bochim, which means weepers, and they offered sacrifices to the LORD.

Were the tears real? I believe they were. But tears are not the same as turning. The rest of the chapter shows that nothing changed. Paul wrote that godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation, while worldly sorrow does not (2 Corinthians 7:10). It is possible to feel very sorry about the results of our sin and still not let go of it. Real repentance changes what we do next.

2:6-10 *And Joshua sent the people away, and the sons of Israel went, each man to his inheritance, to take possession of the land. And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who prolonged days after Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the LORD which He had done for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, a son of a hundred and ten years. And they buried him in the territory of his inheritance, in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, on the north of the mountain of Gaash. And also all that generation were gathered to their fathers; and another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD, and also the work which He had done for Israel.*

Now the writer goes back a little in time and repeats what Joshua 24:28-31 tells. Joshua sent the people to their land. They "served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who prolonged days after Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the LORD which He had done for Israel." Joshua died at a hundred and ten and was buried in his own land in the hill country of Ephraim.

Then comes one of the saddest verses in the Bible: "another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD." How could that happen in one generation? These were the grandchildren of people who had seen the sea part and the walls of Jericho fall. The answer is that faith is not passed down by blood. Each generation has to be taught, and each person has to know God for himself. God had told the parents to teach His words to their sons when they sat at home, walked on the road, lay down and rose up (Deuteronomy 6:7). Somewhere along the way, the parents stopped.

That should stop us too. What our children know about God will not come from what we saw. It will come from what we tell them and show them.

2:11-13 *And the sons of Israel did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and they served the Baals. And they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who brought them out from the land of Egypt, and they went after other gods, from the gods of the peoples who **were** around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. And they forsook the LORD, and they served the Baal and the Ashtaroth.*

Here the cycle begins. "The sons of Israel did the evil in the eyes of the LORD." That phrase will open almost every new story in the book.

"They served the Baals." Baal means lord or master. He was the storm god of Canaan, worshiped as the giver of rain and good crops. The plural, "the Baals," means the many local forms of him in town after town. The Ashtaroth were forms of Ashtoreth (also called Astarte), a goddess of love, fertility and war. Their worship often included sexual rites at the shrines.

Why would Israel be drawn to these gods? Israel's people had been wanderers and soldiers. Now they were farmers, and the Canaanites told them that Baal was the one who made the fields grow. The pull was practical: worship what seems to work. Israel "forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who brought them out from the land of Egypt." They forgot who had really given them everything.

2:14-15 *And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hand of plunderers, and they plundered them; and He sold them into the hand of their enemies all around, and they were not able any longer to stand before their enemies. In every **place** where they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, just as the LORD had spoken, and just as the LORD had sworn to them; and it was distressing to them exceedingly.*

"The anger of the LORD burned against Israel." God's anger is not a temper tantrum. It is His holy, steady response to evil, and here it is the anger of a faithful husband whose wife has gone after other men.

"He gave them into the hand of plunderers" and "He sold them into the hand of their enemies." The language is the language of the market. Israel had sold themselves to other gods, so God let them be sold. "The hand of the LORD was against them for evil, just as the LORD had spoken." God had warned them in the Law that this would happen (Leviticus 26:17; Deuteronomy 28:25). He did exactly what He said.

That is a hard truth, but it is also a comfort. The same God who keeps His warnings keeps His promises.

2:16-19 *And the LORD raised up judges, and they saved them from the hand of their plunderers. And also to their judges they did not listen, for they prostituted themselves after other gods, and they bowed down to them; they turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked, listening to the commandments of the LORD; they did not do so. And when the LORD raised up judges for them, and the LORD was with the judge, and He saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to compassion by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and those who crushed them. And it was, when the judge died, they turned back and acted more corruptly than their fathers, by walking after other gods, to serve them and to bow down to them; they did not let fall **any** of their deeds or of their stubborn way.*

"And the LORD raised up judges, and they saved them." The judges were not elected. God raised them up. They were deliverers first and leaders second.

Even then, Israel did not listen. "They prostituted themselves after other gods." The Bible often pictures idolatry as unfaithfulness in marriage, because God's covenant with Israel was like a

marriage (Hosea 2:19-20; James 4:4). They "turned aside quickly" from the way their fathers had walked.

Verse 18 is the heart of the book: "the LORD was moved to compassion by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and those who crushed them." Notice what moved God. It was not their good deeds. It was their groaning. Israel's misery was their own fault, and God still had compassion on them.

But when each judge died, "they turned back and acted more corruptly than their fathers." Each turn of the cycle went lower. They "did not let fall any of their deeds or of their stubborn way." That is the pattern of the book, and sadly it is often the pattern of our own hearts. We cry out in trouble, God rescues us, and then we drift back. Thank God that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Romans 5:20).

2:20-23 *And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He said, "Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and they have not listened to My voice, I also will not again dispossess anyone from before them of the nations which Joshua left, and he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they **are** keeping the way of the LORD, to walk in them, just as their fathers kept **it**, or not." And the LORD left these nations, not dispossessing them quickly; and He did not give them into the hand of Joshua.*

God gave His verdict: "this nation has transgressed My covenant." So He would no longer drive out the nations Joshua had left. They would stay "in order to test Israel by them, whether they are keeping the way of the LORD."

Why did God leave these nations? Not because He could not defeat them. He left them as a test. Would Israel obey and trust Him in the fight, or would they make peace with evil? God still lets hard things stay in our lives for a time, not to destroy us, but to show what is in our hearts and to teach us to depend on Him.

The last verse explains why Joshua had not finished the job either. God "did not give them into the hand of Joshua." Joshua took the land as a whole (Joshua 11:23), but God had planned that the last work of driving the nations out would be done little by little, as each tribe trusted Him (Exodus 23:29-30).

Summary

The angel of the LORD came from Gilgal to Bochim and told Israel that, because they had made covenants with the Canaanites and had not torn down their altars, God would not drive those nations out, and their gods would become a snare. The people wept and offered sacrifices. The writer then looks back to Joshua's death and tells how the generation after the elders did not know the LORD. Chapter 2 lays out the cycle of the whole book: Israel served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the LORD in anger gave them to plunderers, then in compassion He raised up judges who saved them, but after each judge died the people went back to idols and acted more corruptly than their fathers. So God left the nations in the land to test Israel.

I have lived the cycle of Judges more times than I can count. Since my baptism in 1995, I drifted in 2000 and again in 2013. What usually gets in the way of my walk is my pride. When I lack humility, I put myself before God in everything. Every time I turned back, He met me with mercy.

Study Questions

1. Who came to Bochim, and what did He say God had done for Israel? (2:1)

2. What two things had God told Israel to do with the people of the land, and what would happen because they had not done them? (2:2-3)

3. Why do you think the people's weeping at Bochim did not lead to lasting change? (2:4-5; 2 Corinthians 7:10)

4. What does verse 10 say about the generation that came after Joshua and the elders? (2:10)

5. Who were the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and why might Israel have been drawn to them? (2:11-13)

6. What moved the LORD to raise up judges for His people? (2:18)

7. What happened every time a judge died? (2:19)

8. Why did God leave the nations in the land, according to verses 21 and 22? (2:21-23)

9. Are you passing your faith on to the next generation, in your family or your church? What is one way you can tell them about the great works of the LORD?

10. Is there a cycle in your own life of drifting from God, crying out in trouble, and drifting again? What would it look like to break it?

Judges 3: Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar

Scripture

3:1-11 And these ***are*** the nations which the LORD left, to test Israel by them, all who had not known all the wars of Canaan, only so that the generations of the sons of Israel might know, to teach them war, only those who formerly had not known them: the five lords of ***the*** Philistines, and all the Canaanites, and the Sidonians, and the Hivites dwelling ***on*** the mountain of the Lebanon, from the mountain of Baal-hermon as far as the entrance of Hamath. And they were to test Israel by them, to know whether they would listen to the commandments of the LORD which He had commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. And the sons of Israel dwelt in the midst of the Canaanites, the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and their ***own*** daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods. And the sons of Israel did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and they forgot the LORD their God, and they served the Baals and the Asherahs. And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim the king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years. And the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up a savior for the sons of Israel, and he saved them: Othniel the son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb, younger than he. And the Spirit of the LORD was on him, and he judged Israel, and he went out to war; and the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim the king of Aram into his hand, and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. And the land was at rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

3:12-31 And the sons of Israel again did the evil in the eyes of the LORD; and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done the evil in the eyes of the LORD. And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek, and he went and struck Israel, and they took possession of the city of the palm trees. And the sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years. And the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up for them a savior, Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a man restricted ***in*** his right hand. And the sons of Israel sent tribute by his hand to Eglon the king of Moab. And Ehud made for himself a sword, and it ***had*** two mouths, approximately a foot (a gomed) ***in*** its length; and he girded it under his garments on his right thigh. And he brought the tribute near to Eglon the king of Moab. And Eglon ***was*** a very fat man. And it was, when he had finished bringing the tribute near, and he sent away the people who carried the tribute. And he himself turned back from the carved images which ***were*** at Gilgal, and he said, "I ***have*** a secret word for you, O king." And he said, "Hush!" And all who stood by him went out from beside him. And Ehud came to him; and he ***was*** sitting in the cool roof chamber which ***was*** his alone. And Ehud said, "I ***have*** a word of God for you." And he rose from on the throne. And Ehud stretched out his left hand, and he took the sword from on his right thigh, and he thrust it into his belly. And the handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out from his belly; and it went out at the opening. And Ehud went out toward the porch, and he shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and he locked ***them***. And he had gone out, and his servants came, and they looked, and look, the doors of the roof chamber ***were*** locked. And they said, "Surely he ***is*** covering his feet in the cool chamber." And they waited until ***they were*** ashamed, and look, he ***was*** not

opening the doors of the roof chamber. And they took the key and opened ***them***, and look, their lord ***was*** fallen to the ground, dead. And Ehud escaped while they delayed, and he passed beyond the carved images, and he escaped to Seirah. And it was, when he came, and he blew the ram's horn in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he ***was*** before them. And he said to them, "Pursue after me, for the LORD has given your enemies, Moab, into your hand." And they went down after him, and they captured the fords of the Jordan toward Moab, and they did not allow a man to cross over. And they struck Moab at that time, about ten thousand men, every robust ***one*** and every man of valor; and not a man escaped. And Moab was subdued on that day under the hand of Israel. And the land was at rest eighty years. And after him was Shamgar the son of Anath, and he struck the Philistines, six hundred men, with the goad of the cattle; and he also saved Israel.

Preview

The chapter opens by naming the nations God left in the land to test Israel, and Israel fails the test. They marry the Canaanites and serve their gods. Then the cycle laid out in chapter 2 begins to turn. Three judges appear. Othniel, Caleb's nephew, is the model judge: the Spirit of the LORD comes on him, he wins, and the land has rest for forty years. Ehud, a left-handed man from Benjamin, kills the king of Moab in his own private room and leads Israel to victory. Shamgar strikes six hundred Philistines with an ox goad.

These are stories of God using unlikely people and unlikely tools. They are also stories set in a time of war and oppression, and some of the details are hard. As we read, we should watch the pattern: sin, oppression, crying out, deliverance and rest.

Study

3:1-4 *And these **are** the nations which the LORD left, to test Israel by them, all who had not known all the wars of Canaan, only so that the generations of the sons of Israel might know, to teach them war, only those who formerly had not known them: the five lords of **the** Philistines, and all the Canaanites, and the Sidonians, and the Hivites dwelling **on** the mountain of the Lebanon, from the mountain of Baal-hermon as far as the entrance of Hamath. And they were to test Israel by them, to know whether they would listen to the commandments of the LORD which He had commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.*

These are the nations "which the LORD left, to test Israel by them." There were two reasons. One was to teach war to a generation that had not fought in the conquest. The other was to see "whether they would listen to the commandments of the LORD."

The list names the five lords of the Philistines, the rulers of their five cities on the coast (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron), and the Canaanites, Sidonians and Hivites to the north as far as Lebanon. These peoples ringed the land.

God does not test us to find out what we will do. He already knows. He tests us so that what is in our hearts comes out into the open, and so that we learn to fight our battles His way.

3:5-6 *And the sons of Israel dwelt in the midst of the Canaanites, the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and their **own** daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods.*

Israel failed the test. They "dwelt in the midst of" six peoples of Canaan. Then they took the Canaanites' daughters as wives and gave their own daughters to Canaanite sons, "and they served their gods."

The order is no accident. Living among them led to marrying them, and marrying them led to worshiping their gods. God had warned that this would happen, because a foreign spouse would "turn your son away from after Me" (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). The issue was never race. Rahab and Ruth were foreigners who came to trust the LORD and were welcomed. The issue was faith. Paul gives believers the same warning about marriage in 2 Corinthians 6:14.

3:7-8 *And the sons of Israel did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and they forgot the LORD their God, and they served the Baals and the Asherahs. And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim the king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.*

Here is the first full turn of the cycle. Israel "did the evil in the eyes of the LORD." They "forgot the LORD their God" and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The Asherahs were wooden poles or trees set up beside altars in honor of Asherah, a Canaanite mother goddess.

So the LORD "sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim the king of Mesopotamia." His name means something like Cushan of double wickedness. It may be a nickname Israel gave him. Mesopotamia here is the land between the great rivers to the far northeast, the region Abraham had left long before. Israel served him eight years.

3:9-11 *And the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up a savior for the sons of Israel, and he saved them: Othniel the son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb, younger than he. And the Spirit of the LORD was on him, and he judged Israel, and he went out to war; and the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim the king of Aram into his hand, and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. And the land was at rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died.*

"And the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up a savior." That word savior is worth noticing. The judges were saviors in a small way. Each one points us toward the great Savior God would one day send.

The first judge is Othniel, whom we met in 1:13. He was of Judah, from the family of Caleb, a family that had believed God. "The Spirit of the LORD was on him." In the Old Testament, the Spirit came on certain people to give them power for a particular task, often for a time. Since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit lives in every believer and stays (John 14:17).

Othniel judged Israel and went out to war, and the LORD gave the enemy into his hand. "And the land was at rest forty years." Othniel is the clean pattern of a judge: raised by God, filled with the Spirit, victorious, and nothing told against him. After him, the judges grow more and more flawed.

3:12-14 *And the sons of Israel again did the evil in the eyes of the LORD; and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done the evil in the eyes of the LORD. And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek, and he went and struck Israel, and they took possession of the city of the palm trees. And the sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.*

"The sons of Israel again did the evil." This time "the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel." God used even a pagan king to discipline His people. Moab lay east of the Dead Sea. Eglon brought in the Ammonites and the Amalekites, crossed the Jordan and took "the city of the palm trees," Jericho. Israel served Eglon eighteen years, more than twice as long as the first time.

3:15-18 *And the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up for them a savior, Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a man restricted **in** his right hand. And the sons of Israel sent tribute by his hand to Eglon the king of Moab. And Ehud made for himself a sword, and it **had** two mouths, approximately a foot (a gomed) **in** its length; and he girded it under his garments on his right thigh. And he brought the tribute near to Eglon the king of Moab. And Eglon **was** a very fat man. And it was, when he had finished bringing the tribute near, and he sent away the people who carried the tribute.*

Israel cried out again, and the LORD raised up "Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a man restricted in his right hand." That means he was left-handed. There is a quiet irony here. Benjamin means son of the right hand, and here is a son of the right hand who fights with his left. Benjamin seems to have had many left-handed fighters (20:16).

Israel sent Ehud to carry the yearly tribute to Eglon. Tribute was the payment a conquered people made to the king who ruled them. Ehud made a short two-edged sword, about a foot long, and strapped it on his right thigh under his clothes. A guard would check a soldier's left side, where a right-handed man wears his sword. No one checked Ehud's right.

Ehud brought the tribute, and the writer tells us Eglon "was a very fat man." That detail matters to what follows. Then Ehud sent the carriers home.

3:19-22 *And he himself turned back from the carved images which **were** at Gilgal, and he said, "I **have** a secret word for you, O king." And he said, "Hush!" And all who stood by him went out from beside him. And Ehud came to him; and he **was** sitting in the cool roof chamber which **was** his alone. And Ehud said, "I **have** a word of God for you." And he rose from on the throne. And Ehud stretched out his left hand, and he took the sword from on his right thigh, and he thrust it into his belly. And the handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out from his belly; and it went out at the opening.*

Ehud went as far as "the carved images which were at Gilgal," probably stone idols or carved stones that marked the border of Eglon's control, and then turned back alone. He told the king, "I have a secret word for you, O king." Eglon sent everyone out. In his private cool room upstairs, Ehud said, "I have a word of God for you." The king stood, and Ehud struck him with the hidden sword and left it in him.

This is one of the hard passages of Judges, and I want to read it with care. How should we think about it? Israel was under a foreign king who had invaded their land and ruled them by force for eighteen years. Ehud was not a private man settling a grudge. The text says the LORD raised him up as a savior, and what he did was an act of war against an oppressor, the first blow in a battle for Israel's freedom. The Bible records the trick he used, but it does not hold up deception as a pattern for us. We live under different callings. The sword in a nation's hand is for governing authorities (Romans 13:4), and believers are told not to take revenge but to leave it to God (Romans 12:19).

"A word of God" was exactly right, though Eglon did not understand it. The message God had for this king was judgment.

3:23-25 *And Ehud went out toward the porch, and he shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and he locked **them**. And he had gone out, and his servants came, and they looked, and look, the doors of the roof chamber **were** locked. And they said, "Surely he **is** covering his feet in the cool chamber." And they waited until **they were** ashamed, and look, he **was** not opening the doors of the roof chamber. And they took the key and opened **them**, and look, their lord **was** fallen to the ground, dead.*

Ehud locked the doors of the upper room and slipped out by the porch. When the servants came back and found the doors locked, they thought the king was relieving himself. That is what "covering his feet" means here (compare 1 Samuel 24:3). So they waited, embarrassed, until they could wait no longer. Then they opened the doors and found their lord dead on the floor.

The delay was God's provision. Every minute the servants stood outside the door gave Ehud more time to escape.

3:26-30 *And Ehud escaped while they delayed, and he passed beyond the carved images, and he escaped to Seirah. And it was, when he came, and he blew the ram's horn in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he **was** before them. And he said to them, "Pursue after me, for the LORD has given your enemies, Moab, into your hand." And they went down after him, and they captured the fords of the Jordan toward Moab, and they did not allow a man to cross over. And they struck Moab at that time, about ten thousand men, every robust **one** and every man of valor; and not a man escaped. And Moab was subdued on that day under the hand of Israel. And the land was at rest eighty years.*

Ehud escaped past the carved images to Seirah in the hill country of Ephraim and blew the ram's horn, the shofar, to call Israel to war. "Pursue after me, for the LORD has given your enemies, Moab, into your hand." Ehud gave the credit where it belonged.

They seized the fords of the Jordan, the shallow crossing places, so the Moabites on the west side could not get home. About ten thousand Moabite soldiers died, strong men, and "not a man escaped."

"And the land was at rest eighty years." This is the longest rest in the book, two full generations of peace. God's mercy was greater than Israel's sin.

3:31 *And after him was Shamgar the son of Anath, and he struck the Philistines, six hundred men, with the goad of the cattle; and he also saved Israel.*

One verse tells us about Shamgar, "the son of Anath." Anath was the name of a Canaanite war goddess, so Shamgar may have come from a family or town with a pagan background. He struck six hundred Philistines "with the goad of the cattle." An ox goad was a long wooden pole, often eight feet or so, with a metal point on one end for driving oxen and a blade on the other for scraping the plow.

Shamgar had no sword, no army and no famous family. He had a farm tool. "And he also saved Israel." God is not limited by what we have in our hands. He asks us to use what we have for Him. The Song of Deborah remembers the days of Shamgar as a time when the roads were too dangerous to travel (5:6).

Summary

God left the Philistines and several Canaanite peoples in the land to test Israel, and Israel failed by marrying them and serving their gods. The LORD sold Israel to Cushan-rishathaim for eight years, and when they cried out He raised up Othniel, on whom the Spirit of the LORD came, and the land rested forty years. When Israel sinned again, the LORD strengthened Eglon of Moab against them for eighteen years. Ehud, a left-handed Benjaminite, brought the tribute, killed Eglon with a hidden sword in his private room, escaped while the servants waited, and led Israel to seize the fords of the Jordan and defeat Moab. The land rested eighty years. After him Shamgar struck six hundred Philistines with an ox goad and also saved Israel.

Study Questions

1. What two reasons does the chapter give for why the LORD left these nations in the land? (3:1-4)

2. What steps led Israel from living among the Canaanites to serving their gods? (3:5-6)

3. What is said about Othniel that is not said about every judge? (3:9-11)

4. Why do you think the writer tells us that Ehud was left-handed and that he wore his sword on his right thigh? (3:15-16)

5. What did Ehud say to the people when he called them to follow him? Who did he give the credit to? (3:28)

6. How long did the land rest after Ehud, and what does that show about God? (3:30)

7. What did Shamgar use to strike the Philistines, and what does that teach us about what God can use? (3:31)

8. Israel's slide began with where they chose to live and who they chose to marry. What relationships in your life pull you toward God, and which pull you away?

9. Ehud and Shamgar were not the people anyone would expect God to use. What do you have in your hand that God could use?

10. The land rested eighty years after Ehud. How do you use times of peace and rest in your own walk with God?

Judges 4: Deborah, Barak and Jael

Scripture

4:1-10 And the sons of Israel again did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and Ehud had died. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin the king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; and the commander of his army ***was*** Sisera, and he ***was*** dwelling in Harosheth-hagoyim. And the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, for he ***had*** nine hundred chariots of iron, and he oppressed the sons of Israel with force twenty years. And Deborah, a woman, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, she ***was*** judging Israel at that time. And she ***was*** dwelling under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went up to her for judgment. And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali, and she said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded, 'Go, and draw ***out*** at the mountain of Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun. And I will draw to you, to the wadi Kishon, Sisera the commander of the army of Jabin, and his chariots and his multitude, and I will give him into your hand'?" And Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; and if you will not go with me, I will not go." And she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless the honor will not be yours on the way on which you ***are*** going, for into the hand of a woman the LORD will sell Sisera." And Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up at his feet; and Deborah went up with him.

4:11-24 And Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites, from the sons of Hobab, the father-in-law of Moses, and he had pitched his tent as far as the terebinth in Zaanannim, which near Kedesh. And they told Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up ***to*** the mountain of Tabor. And Sisera summoned all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who ***were*** with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the wadi Kishon. And Deborah said to Barak, "Arise, for this ***is*** the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?" And Barak went down from the mountain of Tabor, and ten thousand men after him. And the LORD threw Sisera and all the chariots and all the camp into confusion by the mouth of ***the*** sword before Barak; and Sisera got down from on the chariot, and he fled on his feet. And Barak pursued after the chariots and after the camp as far as Harosheth-hagoyim; and all the camp of Sisera fell by the mouth of ***the*** sword; not even one was left. And Sisera fled on his feet to the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite; for ***there was*** peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and she said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; do not be afraid." And he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with the blanket. And he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." And she opened the skin of milk, and she gave him a drink, and she covered him. And he said to her, "Stand ***at*** the entrance of the tent, and it shall be, if a man comes and asks you and says, 'Is there a man here?' and you shall say, 'No.'" And Jael the wife of Heber took the peg of the tent, and she put the hammer in her hand, and she went to him secretly, and she drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; and he ***was*** fast asleep, and he was weary, and he died. And look, Barak ***was*** pursuing Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him, and she said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you ***are*** seeking." And he came to her, and look, Sisera

was fallen dead, and the peg ***was*** in his temple. And God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the sons of Israel. And the hand of the sons of Israel went on, going and ***growing*** hard against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had cut off Jabin the king of Canaan.

Preview

After Ehud dies, Israel sins again, and this time the LORD sells them to Jabin, a Canaanite king in the north, whose army commander Sisera has nine hundred iron chariots. For twenty years he crushes them. Then God speaks through Deborah, a prophetess who is judging Israel. She calls Barak to lead ten thousand men against Sisera at Mount Tabor, and tells him the LORD will give Sisera into his hand. Barak will only go if Deborah goes with him, so she tells him the honor will go to a woman.

The LORD routs Sisera's army by the Kishon River. Sisera runs on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, and she kills him while he sleeps. It is a story of God keeping His word, of men who held back and women who did not, and it ends with a hard scene we will need to read carefully.

Study

4:1-3 *And the sons of Israel again did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and Ehud had died. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin the king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; and the commander of his army **was** Sisera, and he **was** dwelling in Harosheth-hagoyim. And the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, for he **had** nine hundred chariots of iron, and he oppressed the sons of Israel with force twenty years.*

"The sons of Israel again did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and Ehud had died." As long as the judge lived, the people held on. When he died, they let go.

The LORD sold them to "Jabin the king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor." Hazor was the greatest city in the north. Joshua had burned it and killed a king named Jabin there (Joshua 11:1, 10-11). It had been rebuilt, and this Jabin was probably a later king of the same line. The name may have been a royal title, the way Pharaoh was in Egypt.

His commander Sisera had "nine hundred chariots of iron," and "he oppressed the sons of Israel with force twenty years." Each oppression in Judges is longer than the last: eight years, then eighteen, now twenty. That is what sin does. It gets heavier the longer we carry it.

4:4-5 *And Deborah, a woman, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, she **was** judging Israel at that time. And she **was** dwelling under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went up to her for judgment.*

"And Deborah, a woman, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, she was judging Israel at that time." A prophetess was a woman through whom God spoke His word, like Miriam (Exodus 15:20) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). Deborah is the only judge in the book who is also called a prophet.

She sat under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel, "and the sons of Israel went up to her for judgment." Unlike most of the judges, she is first seen settling disputes and giving God's word, not leading an army.

Some Bible teachers see Deborah's leadership as unusual, a sign of how weak the men of Israel had become. Others see it as showing that God can and does call women to lead His people. Either way, the text treats her with respect. God raised her up, the people came to her, and she was faithful.

4:6-7 *And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali, and she said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded, 'Go, and draw **out** at the mountain of Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun. And I will draw to you, to the wadi Kishon, Sisera the commander of the army of Jabin, and his chariots and his multitude, and I will give him into your hand'?"*

Deborah sent for Barak from Kedesh in Naphtali. She did not give him her own idea. She gave him God's command: "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded" him to go to Mount Tabor with ten thousand men from Naphtali and Zebulun? Mount Tabor is a tall, round hill at the northeast edge of the Jezreel Valley, a safe place for foot soldiers to gather out of reach of chariots.

God also gave a promise: "I will draw to you, to the wadi Kishon, Sisera" and "I will give him into your hand." A wadi is a stream bed that is dry much of the year and can flood quickly after rain. God told Barak where the battle would be, who would come, and how it would end.

4:8-10 *And Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; and if you will not go with me, I will not go." And she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless the honor will not be yours on the way on which you **are** going, for into the hand of a woman the LORD will sell Sisera." And Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up at his feet; and Deborah went up with him.*

Barak answered, "If you will go with me, then I will go; and if you will not go with me, I will not go." What should we make of that? Some see weak faith. God had already promised the victory, and Barak wanted a person to lean on. Others see a man who wanted God's prophet beside him so he could hear God's word in the battle. There may be some of both. Hebrews 11:32 still names Barak among the people of faith, so God counted his trust as real, even if it was not strong.

Deborah agreed to go, but she told him, "the honor will not be yours on the way on which you are going, for into the hand of a woman the LORD will sell Sisera." Most readers think at first she means herself. She doesn't. The woman is someone we have not met yet.

Barak called up Zebulun and Naphtali, ten thousand men followed him, "and Deborah went up with him."

4:11 *And Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites, from the sons of Hobab, the father-in-law of Moses, and he had pitched his tent as far as the terebinth in Zaanannim, which **is** near Kedesh.*

The story pauses to tell us about Heber the Kenite. The Kenites were the family of Moses' father-in-law (1:16). Heber had split off from the rest of them and moved north, near Kedesh. Why tell us this here? Because Heber's tent will be where the story ends. Verse 17 adds that Heber's family was at peace with King Jabin. God was setting the pieces in place before anyone knew it.

4:12-16 *And they told Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up **to** the mountain of Tabor. And Sisera summoned all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who **were** with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the wadi Kishon. And Deborah said to Barak, "Arise, for this **is** the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?" And Barak went down from the mountain of Tabor, and ten thousand men after him. And the LORD threw Sisera and all the chariots and all the camp into confusion by the mouth of **the** sword before Barak; and Sisera got down from on the chariot, and he fled on his feet. And Barak pursued after the chariots and after the camp as far as Harosheth-hagoyim; and all the camp of Sisera fell by the mouth of **the** sword; not even one was left.*

Sisera heard that Barak had gone up Mount Tabor and brought out all nine hundred chariots to the Kishon. Then Deborah said, "Arise, for this is the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?" Barak went down the mountain with his ten thousand behind him.

"The LORD threw Sisera and all the chariots and all the camp into confusion." The Song of Deborah gives more detail: the heavens poured rain, and "The wadi Kishon swept them away" (5:4, 21). Chariots that were terrifying on dry ground were useless in mud and floodwater. The very thing that made Sisera strong became his trap.

Sisera jumped down from his chariot and ran on foot. Barak chased the army all the way back to Harosheth-hagoyim, and "not even one was left."

4:17-20 *And Sisera fled on his feet to the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite; for **there was** peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and she said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; do not be afraid." And he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with the blanket. And he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." And she opened the skin of milk, and she gave him a drink, and she covered him. And he said to her, "Stand **at** the entrance of the tent, and it shall be, if a man comes and asks you and says, 'Is there a man here?' and you shall say, 'No.'"*

Sisera ran to the tent of Jael, Heber's wife, because Heber's household was at peace with Jabin. He expected a safe place to hide.

Jael met him: "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; do not be afraid." She covered him with a blanket. He asked for water, and she gave him milk. He told her to stand at the tent door and say no one was there if anyone asked.

In that culture, a guest in your tent was under your protection. Sisera trusted that custom, and he trusted the peace between Jabin and Heber. But Jael had made her own choice about whose side she was on.

4:21-22 *And Jael the wife of Heber took the peg of the tent, and she put the hammer in her hand, and she went to him secretly, and she drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; and he **was** fast asleep, and he was weary, and he died. And look, Barak **was** pursuing Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him, and she said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you **are** seeking." And he came to her, and look, Sisera **was** fallen dead, and the peg **was** in his temple.*

While Sisera was "fast asleep" and worn out, Jael took a tent peg and a hammer, the tools women of the tents used to pitch and take down the family's tent, and drove the peg through his temple. He died. When Barak came chasing, Jael went out and said, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." Barak found Sisera dead.

How should we think about Jael? This is a hard passage, and Bible teachers read it in more than one way. Some point out that she deceived a guest and killed a sleeping man, and that the Bible records this without saying every part of it was right. Others point out that Sisera was the commander of an army that had crushed Israel for twenty years, that this was war and he was still a dangerous enemy, that Jael chose to stand with God's people when her husband's family had sided with their oppressor, and that the Song of Deborah calls her "blessed above women" (5:24). Both sides agree that this was God's word coming true. Deborah had said, "into the hand of a woman the LORD will sell Sisera" (4:9). The Song of Deborah does honor Jael for her courage and for siding with the LORD's people (5:24), but she is not a pattern for how we treat people today. We are called to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) and leave judgment to God.

And Barak's honor went to a woman, just as Deborah had said.

4:23-24 *And God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the sons of Israel. And the hand of the sons of Israel went on, going and **growing** hard against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had cut off Jabin the king of Canaan.*

"God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan." The writer makes sure we know who won the battle. It was not Deborah, or Barak, or Jael. It was God.

After that, Israel kept pressing harder and harder against Jabin "until they had cut off Jabin the king of Canaan." The victory at the Kishon was the turning point, but it took time and steady effort to finish the job. The same is true in our lives. God gives a great victory, and then He calls us to keep walking in it.

Summary

After Ehud's death Israel sinned, and the LORD sold them to Jabin of Hazor, whose commander Sisera oppressed them for twenty years with nine hundred iron chariots. Deborah, a prophetess who was judging Israel, gave Barak God's command to gather ten thousand men at Mount Tabor

and God's promise to give Sisera into his hand. Barak would go only if Deborah went too, so she told him the honor would go to a woman. The LORD threw Sisera's army into confusion at the Kishon, and Barak destroyed it. Sisera fled on foot to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, and she killed him while he slept with a tent peg. God subdued Jabin that day, and Israel pressed on until Jabin was destroyed.

Study Questions

1. Who did the LORD sell Israel to, and how long did he oppress them? (4:2-3)

2. Who was Deborah, and what was she doing when the story begins? (4:4-5)

3. What did God command Barak to do, and what did He promise? (4:6-7)

4. What condition did Barak set, and what did Deborah tell him would happen because of it? (4:8-9)

5. Why do you think the writer tells us about Heber the Kenite in verse 11? (4:11, 17)

6. How did the LORD defeat Sisera's chariots? Look also at 5:4 and 5:21. (4:15)

7. Who does verse 23 say subdued Jabin? Why does that matter? (4:23)

8. Barak wanted someone beside him before he would obey. Is there something God has made clear to you that you are waiting to do until someone else goes with you?

9. Sisera's greatest strength, his chariots, became useless in the flood. What do you rely on that God might need to take away so you will rely on Him?

10. Israel kept pressing against Jabin until the job was done (4:24). What victory has God given you that you need to keep walking in?

Judges 5: The Song of Deborah

Scripture

5:1-11 And Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying, "When leaders took the lead in Israel, when ***the*** people volunteered, bless the LORD! Hear, O kings; give ear, O rulers! I, to the LORD, I, let me sing; I will sing praise to the LORD, the God of Israel. O LORD, when You went out from Seir, when You marched from the field of Edom, ***the*** earth shook, also ***the*** heavens dropped, also ***the*** clouds dropped water. ***The*** mountains flowed from before the LORD, this Sinai, from before the LORD, the God of Israel. In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, ***the*** roads ceased, and walkers of paths walked ***on*** twisting roads. ***The*** villagers ceased in Israel; they ceased, until I arose, Deborah, until I arose, a mother in Israel. ***Israel*** chose new gods; then war ***was at the*** gates. Was a shield seen, and a spear, among forty thousand in Israel? My heart ***is*** toward the commanders of Israel, those who volunteered among the people. Bless the LORD! Riders on tawny female donkeys, you who sit on rich cloths, and walkers on the road, talk ***of it***! From the sound of the archers between the watering places, there they shall recount the righteous acts of the LORD, the righteous acts ***toward*** His villagers in Israel. Then the people of the LORD went down to the gates.

5:12-23 Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, speak a song! Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam! Then a survivor went down to the nobles, ***the*** people; the LORD went down for me against the mighty. From Ephraim, their root ***was*** in Amalek; after you, Benjamin, among your peoples. From Machir came down commanders, and from Zebulun those who draw with the staff of the scribe. And my princes in Issachar ***were*** with Deborah; and Issachar, so Barak; into the valley he was sent at his feet. Among the divisions of Reuben ***were*** great resolves of heart. Why did you sit between the sheepfolds, to hear the pipings for the flocks? For the divisions of Reuben ***there were*** great searchings of heart. Gilead settled beyond the Jordan; and Dan, why did he sojourn ***by*** ships? Asher dwelt at the shore of the seas, and by his landing places he settled. Zebulun ***was*** a people ***that*** scorned its life to the death, and Naphtali, on the heights of the field. Kings came, they fought; then the kings of Canaan fought at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo; gain of silver they did not take. From heaven they fought; the stars from their highways fought with Sisera. The wadi Kishon swept them away, a wadi of ancient times, the wadi Kishon. You shall tread, O my soul, ***in*** strength! Then the heels of ***the*** horse hammered from the galloping, the galloping of his mighty ones. 'Curse Meroz,' says the angel of the LORD, 'curse bitterly its inhabitants, for they did not come to the help of the LORD, to the help of the LORD against the mighty.'

5:24-31 She shall be blessed above women, Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; above women in the tent she shall be blessed. Water he asked; milk she gave; in a bowl of nobles she brought near curds. Her hand to the peg she stretched out, and her right hand to the hammer of workmen; and she hammered Sisera, she crushed his head, and she shattered and she pierced his temple. Between her feet he bent down, he fell, he lay down; between her feet he bent down, he fell; where he bent down, there he fell, devastated. Through the window she looked down, and the mother of Sisera wailed through the lattice, 'Why has his chariot delayed to come? Why have the hoofbeats of his chariots lingered?' The wise ones of her princesses answer; even she returns her words to

herself: 'Are they not finding, dividing up plunder? A womb, two wombs for the head of a man; plunder of dyed cloths for Sisera, plunder of dyed cloths, embroidery, dyed cloth, double embroidery for the necks of plunder?' So may all Your enemies perish, O LORD! And those who love Him ***be*** like the going out of the sun in its might." And the land was at rest forty years.

Preview

Chapter 4 told the story of Sisera's defeat in plain history. Chapter 5 sings it. Deborah and Barak lift up a song of praise to the LORD, the God who came marching from the south and made the earth shake. They remember how bad life had become, with empty roads and frightened villages, until God raised up Deborah. They praise the tribes that volunteered, shame the ones that stayed home, tell how the stars and the Kishon River fought against Sisera, honor Jael, and end with a picture of Sisera's mother waiting at the window for a son who will never come home.

Many scholars count this song among the oldest poems in the Bible. Like Moses' song after the Red Sea (Exodus 15), it teaches God's people to remember His victories by singing them. As we read it, we should notice who gets the glory: "bless the LORD!"

Study

5:1 *And Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying,*

"Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam sang on that day." The song came right after the victory. They did not wait. When God has done something great, the first right response is praise.

This chapter is Hebrew poetry, so it reads differently from chapter 4. The main mark of Hebrew poetry is parallelism: a line says something, and the next line says it again in other words, or adds to it, or sets it against its opposite. For example, "Hear, O kings; give ear, O rulers!" (5:3) says the same thing twice. Once you see that pattern, the song is much easier to follow.

5:2-3 *"When leaders took the lead in Israel, when **the** people volunteered, bless the LORD! Hear, O kings; give ear, O rulers! I, to the LORD, I, let me sing; I will sing praise to the LORD, the God of Israel.*

The song opens with the reason for praise: "When leaders took the lead in Israel, when the people volunteered, bless the LORD!" God gave the victory, but He gave it through people who were willing. The leaders led, and the people came.

Deborah calls on kings and rulers, even the rulers of other nations, to listen while she sings to the LORD. This is a public witness. She wants the world to know who Israel's God is.

5:4-5 *O LORD, when You went out from Seir, when You marched from the field of Edom, **the** earth shook, also **the** heavens dropped, also **the** clouds dropped water. **The** mountains flowed from before the LORD, this Sinai, from before the LORD, the God of Israel.*

Deborah looks back to the great days of the exodus, when the LORD went out from Seir and marched from the field of Edom. Seir and Edom lie to the south, along the way Israel came from Sinai. When God marched with His people, "earth shook," the heavens poured, and "The

mountains flowed from before the LORD, this Sinai." She remembers the quaking mountain where God gave the Law (Exodus 19:18; Psalm 68:8).

Why go back to Sinai in a song about the Kishon? Because the same God who came down on the mountain had come down again by the river. The storm that turned the valley to mud (4:15; 5:21) was the LORD marching out for His people.

5:6-8 *In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael,* ***the*** *roads ceased, and walkers of paths walked* ***on*** *twisting roads.* ***The*** *villagers ceased in Israel; they ceased, until I arose, Deborah, until I arose, a mother in Israel.* ***Israel*** *chose new gods; then war* ***was at the*** *gates. Was a shield seen, and a spear, among forty thousand in Israel?*

Here is what life was like before the victory. "In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the roads ceased." It was too dangerous to travel the main roads, so people took back paths. "The villagers ceased in Israel." Farmers and families in the open villages could not live in peace.

"Until I arose, Deborah, until I arose, a mother in Israel." Deborah does not call herself a queen or a general. She calls herself a mother, someone who cared for the people and stood up for them.

Verse 8 gives the root of the trouble: "Israel chose new gods; then war was at the gates." Israel chose new gods, and war came right to their city gates. And they had no weapons. Hardly a shield or spear could be found among forty thousand men. The enemy had disarmed them. Sin always leaves us weaker than it promised.

5:9-11 *My heart* ***is*** *toward the commanders of Israel, those who volunteered among the people. Bless the LORD! Riders on tawny female donkeys, you who sit on rich cloths, and walkers on the road, talk* ***of it****! From the sound of the archers between the watering places, there they shall recount the righteous acts of the LORD, the righteous acts* ***toward*** *His villagers in Israel. Then the people of the LORD went down to the gates.*

"My heart is toward the commanders of Israel, those who volunteered among the people. Bless the LORD!" Deborah loves the leaders who stepped forward.

She then calls on everyone to tell the story, the rich who ride on fine donkeys and sit on rich cloths, and the ordinary people who walk the roads. Now that the roads are safe again, even at the wells, where the herders drew water, "they shall recount the righteous acts of the LORD." The righteous acts of the LORD are His acts of saving and setting things right. The victory gave the people something to talk about at the well, and what they talked about was God.

5:12-13 *Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, speak a song! Arise, Barak, and lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam! Then a survivor went down to the nobles,* ***the*** *people; the LORD went down for me against the mighty.*

"Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, speak a song!" The song stirs itself up, as if Deborah is calling to her own soul. Then it calls Barak to "lead away your captives." A small band of survivors went down against the nobles, and "the LORD went down for me against the mighty." Israel was the weaker side, but the LORD fought for them.

5:14-18 *From Ephraim, their root **was** in Amalek; after you, Benjamin, among your peoples. From Machir came down commanders, and from Zebulun those who draw with the staff of the scribe. And my princes in Issachar **were** with Deborah; and Issachar, so Barak; into the valley he was sent at his feet. Among the divisions of Reuben **were** great resolves of heart. Why did you sit between the sheepfolds, to hear the pipings for the flocks? For the divisions of Reuben **there were** great searchings of heart. Gilead settled beyond the Jordan; and Dan, why did he sojourn **by** ships? Asher dwelt at the shore of the seas, and by his landing places he settled. Zebulun **was** a people **that** scorned its life to the death, and Naphtali, on the heights of the field.*

Now the song calls the roll of the tribes, and not all of them answered. Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (part of Manasseh), Zebulun and Issachar came. "And my princes in Issachar were with Deborah."

Then the tone changes. Reuben had "great searchings of heart" but stayed home with the sheep, listening to the shepherds' pipes. They thought hard about it and did nothing. Gilead stayed east of the Jordan. Dan stayed with the ships, and Asher sat by the shore.

Then comes high praise: "Zebulun was a people that scorned its life to the death, and Naphtali, on the heights of the field." These two tribes risked everything.

This roll call is a mirror for us. Some of God's people show up. Some talk about it and stay home. Good intentions that never move us are not faith. James says that the one who knows to do good and does not do it, "to him it is sin" (James 4:17).

5:19-22 *Kings came, they fought; then the kings of Canaan fought at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo; gain of silver they did not take. From heaven they fought; the stars from their highways fought with Sisera. The wadi Kishon swept them away, a wadi of ancient times, the wadi Kishon. You shall tread, O my soul, **in** strength! Then the heels of **the** horse hammered from the galloping, the galloping of his mighty ones.*

The kings of Canaan fought at Taanach "by the waters of Megiddo," and they did not get the silver and plunder they came for. "From heaven they fought; the stars from their highways fought with Sisera." This is poetry. The song does not mean the stars came down. It means heaven itself was on Israel's side. God used the storm and the rain against Sisera.

"The wadi Kishon swept them away." The dry stream bed became a flood. Chariots sank, and the horses' hooves pounded as they tried to flee. Deborah sings to herself, "You shall tread, O my soul, in strength!" God's strength became her strength.

5:23 *'Curse Meroz,' says the angel of the LORD, 'curse bitterly its inhabitants, for they did not come to the help of the LORD, to the help of the LORD against the mighty.'*

"Curse Meroz," says the angel of the LORD. Meroz was a town, probably in the north near the battle, that refused to help. Its people did not come "to the help of the LORD." That is a striking phrase. The LORD does not need help, but He calls His people to stand with Him, and refusing is serious. Meroz is never heard of again.

Jesus said, "The one who is not with Me is against Me" (Matthew 12:30). There was no neutral ground in this battle, and there is none in following Christ.

5:24-27 *She shall be blessed above women, Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; above women in the tent she shall be blessed. Water he asked; milk she gave; in a bowl of nobles she brought near curds. Her hand to the peg she stretched out, and her right hand to the hammer of workmen; and she hammered Sisera, she crushed his head, and she shattered and she pierced his temple. Between her feet he bent down, he fell, he lay down; between her feet he bent down, he fell; where he bent down, there he fell, devastated.*

Now the song turns to Jael: "She shall be blessed above women, Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite." The song retells chapter 4 in poetry. Sisera asked for water, and she gave milk, curds in a fine bowl. Then she took the peg and the workman's hammer and struck him.

The repeated lines in verse 27 slow the moment down: he bent down, he fell, he lay still. The great commander who had terrified Israel for twenty years died at the feet of a woman in a tent, just as Deborah had said (4:9). As we saw in chapter 4, this is a hard scene. The song praises Jael for siding with God's people, and it shows us God's justice on a cruel oppressor.

5:28-30 *Through the window she looked down, and the mother of Sisera wailed through the lattice, 'Why has his chariot delayed to come? Why have the hoofbeats of his chariots lingered?' The wise ones of her princesses answer; even she returns her words to herself: 'Are they not finding, dividing up plunder? A womb, two wombs for the head of a man; plunder of dyed cloths for Sisera, plunder of dyed cloths, embroidery, dyed cloth, double embroidery for the necks of plunder?'*

The last picture is quiet and painful. Sisera's mother looks out her window, waiting. "Why has his chariot delayed to come?" Her wise ladies give her an answer, and she repeats it to herself: they must be dividing the plunder. Each man is getting a girl or two, and Sisera is getting fine dyed and embroidered cloth.

This is a sad scene. Her words show us what Sisera's army did to the villages of Israel. They carried off women and goods as their right. But there is grief here too. A mother is waiting for a son who is already dead. The song does not mock her. It lets us feel the cost of evil, even for those on the side of the oppressor. Sin brings sorrow to everyone it touches.

5:31 *So may all Your enemies perish, O LORD! And those who love Him **be** like the going out of the sun in its might." And the land was at rest forty years.*

"So may all Your enemies perish, O LORD! And those who love Him be like the going out of the sun in its might." The song ends with a prayer and a picture. God's enemies fall, and those who love Him rise like the sun at dawn, growing brighter and stronger.

"And the land was at rest forty years." The cycle reaches its rest again. The question for us is the same as for Israel: will we keep loving Him when the trouble is gone?

Summary

Deborah and Barak sang a song of praise on the day of victory. They blessed the LORD for leaders who led and people who volunteered, and remembered how the LORD had marched from Seir and made the earth quake as at Sinai. Before God raised up Deborah, a mother in Israel, the roads were empty, the villages were deserted, and Israel had chosen new gods and had no weapons. The song praises Zebulun, Naphtali and the tribes that came, shames Reuben, Gilead, Dan and Asher for staying home, and curses Meroz for not coming to the help of the LORD. It tells how the stars fought from heaven and the Kishon swept the enemy away, blesses Jael for killing Sisera, and pictures Sisera's mother waiting in vain. It ends with a prayer that God's enemies perish and those who love Him shine like the sun, and the land had rest forty years.

Study Questions

1. What two things does the song bless the LORD for in its opening line? (5:2)

2. What earlier event does Deborah remember in verses 4 and 5, and why? (5:4-5; Exodus 19:18)

3. What was life like in Israel before Deborah arose? What was the cause? (5:6-8)

4. What did people talk about at the watering places once the roads were safe again? (5:11)

5. Which tribes came to the battle, and which stayed home? What did Reuben do with its "great searchings of heart"? (5:14-18)

6. What does it mean that "the stars from their highways fought with Sisera"? (5:20-21)

7. Why was Meroz cursed? (5:23)

8. Deborah sang right after the victory. When God answers a prayer or helps you through something, how do you remember it and praise Him for it?

9. Reuben thought hard about it and stayed home. Is there a place where God is calling you to step forward, and you are still thinking about it?

10. The song ends by saying those who love God will be "like the going out of the sun in its might" (5:31). What would it look like for your love for God to grow stronger like that?

Judges 6: The Call of Gideon

Scripture

6:1-10 And the sons of Israel did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. And the hand of Midian prevailed over Israel. Because of Midian the sons of Israel made for themselves the dens which ***are*** in the mountains, and the caves, and the strongholds. And it would be, whenever Israel had sown, and Midian would come up, and Amalek, and the sons of ***the*** east, and they would come up against him. And they encamped against them, and they destroyed the produce of the land until you come to Gaza; and they did not leave sustenance in Israel, or sheep, or ox, or donkey. For they and their livestock would come up, and their tents, and they would come like the abundance of locusts for multitude; and to them and to their camels ***there was*** no number; and they came into the land to destroy it. And Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD. And it was, when the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD on account of Midian, and the LORD sent a man, a prophet, to the sons of Israel, and he said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: 'I Myself brought you up from Egypt, and I brought you out from a house of slaves. And I rescued you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and I drove them out from before you, and I gave you their land. And I said to you, "I ***am*** the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you ***are*** dwelling." And you have not listened to My voice.'"

6:11-24 And the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak which ***was*** in Ophrah, which ***belonged*** to Joash the Abiezrite; and Gideon his son ***was*** beating out wheat in the winepress, to hide ***it*** from before Midian. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him, and he said to him, "The LORD ***is*** with you, O mighty man of valor." And Gideon said to him, "Please, my lord, ***if*** the LORD is with us, then why has all this found us? And where ***are*** all His wonders which our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' And now the LORD has abandoned us, and He has given us into the palm of Midian." And the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this strength of yours, and you shall save Israel from the palm of Midian. Have I not sent you?" And he said to Him, "Please, Lord, with what shall I save Israel? Look, my clan ***is*** the weakest in Manasseh, and I ***am*** the least in the house of my father." And the LORD said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall strike Midian as one man." And he said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Your eyes, then make for me a sign that You ***are*** speaking with me. Please do not depart from here until I come to You, and bring out my offering, and set ***it*** before You." And He said, "I will remain until you return." And Gideon went in and prepared a young goat of ***the*** goats, and approximately 3/5 bushel (an ephah) of flour ***as*** unleavened cakes; the meat he put in the basket, and the broth he put in the pot; and he brought ***them*** out to him under the oak, and he presented ***them***. And the angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and set ***them*** on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so. And the angel of the LORD stretched out the end of the staff that ***was*** in his hand, and he touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and the fire went up from the rock, and it consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the LORD went from his eyes. And Gideon saw that he ***was*** the angel of the LORD; and Gideon said, "Alas, Lord GOD! For therefore I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." And the LORD said to him, "Peace ***be*** to you; do not be afraid; you shall not die." And Gideon built an

altar there to the LORD, and he called it "The LORD ***is*** Peace." Until this day it ***is*** still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

6:25-35 And it was on that night, and the LORD said to him, "Take the young bull of the ox which ***belongs*** to your father, and the second young bull, seven years ***old***, and tear down the altar of the Baal which ***belongs*** to your father, and the Asherah which ***is*** beside it you shall cut down. And build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of this stronghold, in the arrangement, and take the second young bull, and offer up a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah which you shall cut down." And Gideon took ten men from his servants, and he did just as the LORD had spoken to him. And it was, since he feared the household of his father and the men of the city to do ***it*** by day, and he did ***it*** by night. And the men of the city rose early in the morning, and look, the altar of the Baal was torn down, and the Asherah which ***was*** beside it was cut down, and the second young bull had been offered up on the altar ***that had been*** built. And they said, each man to his neighbor, "Who has done this thing?" And they inquired and searched, and they said, "Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing." And the men of the city said to Joash, "Bring out your son, and let him die, for he has torn down the altar of the Baal, and for he has cut down the Asherah which ***was*** beside it." And Joash said to all who stood against him, "Will you yourselves contend for the Baal? Or will you yourselves save him? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by the morning. If he ***is*** a god, let him contend for himself, because someone has torn down his altar." And he called him on that day Jerubbaal, saying, "Let the Baal contend against him, because he has torn down his altar." And all Midian and Amalek and the sons of ***the*** east gathered together, and they crossed over, and they encamped in the valley of Jezreel. And the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon, and he blew the ram's horn, and Abiezer was called together after him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and it also was called together after him; and he sent messengers into Asher and into Zebulun and into Naphtali, and they came up to meet them.

6:36-40 And Gideon said to God, "If You ***are*** saving Israel by my hand, just as You have spoken, look, I ***am*** placing the fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If dew is on the fleece alone, and on all the ground ***there is*** dryness, and I will know that You will save Israel by my hand, just as You have spoken." And it was so. And he rose early on the next day, and he squeezed the fleece, and he drained dew from the fleece, the fullness of the bowl, water. And Gideon said to God, "Do not let Your anger burn against me, and let me speak only this time. Let me test, please, only this time with the fleece; please let there be dryness on the fleece alone, and on all the ground let there be dew." And God did so on that night; and there was dryness on the fleece alone, and on all the ground there was dew.

Preview

Israel sins again, and this time the Midianites come up every harvest like a swarm of locusts and strip the land bare. The people hide in caves. When they cry out, God first sends a prophet to remind them why this is happening. Then the angel of the LORD comes to a frightened young man named Gideon, who is threshing wheat in a winepress to hide it, and calls him a "mighty man of valor." Gideon has questions and doubts, and God answers him patiently, with fire from a rock.

Gideon's first job is at home: tear down his father's altar to Baal. He does it, at night, and the town wants him dead. Then the Spirit of the LORD comes on him and he calls the tribes to war. Before the battle he asks God twice for a sign with a fleece of wool. This chapter shows how patient God is with weak faith. It also shows us a man learning, slowly, to trust the God who had already spoken to him.

Study

6:1-6 *And the sons of Israel did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. And the hand of Midian prevailed over Israel. Because of Midian the sons of Israel made for themselves the dens which **are** in the mountains, and the caves, and the strongholds. And it would be, whenever Israel had sown, and Midian would come up, and Amalek, and the sons of **the** east, and they would come up against him. And they encamped against them, and they destroyed the produce of the land until you come to Gaza; and they did not leave sustenance in Israel, or sheep, or ox, or donkey. For they and their livestock would come up, and their tents, and they would come like the abundance of locusts for multitude; and to them and to their camels **there was** no number; and they came into the land to destroy it. And Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD.*

"The sons of Israel did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years." The Midianites were desert peoples from east and south of the land. They were related to Israel through Abraham's wife Keturah (Genesis 25:1-2), and Moses' wife had come from Midian, but they had long been enemies (Numbers 31).

This oppression was different. The Midianites, with the Amalekites and "the sons of the east," did not come to rule. They came to raid. Every time Israel planted, they swept in with their tents, their flocks and their camels and ate everything, all the way to Gaza on the coast. They came "like the abundance of locusts for multitude." The camel was a new weapon of war in this period, and it let them travel far and fast.

Israel was reduced to hiding in caves and dens in the mountains. "And Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD."

6:7-10 *And it was, when the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD on account of Midian, and the LORD sent a man, a prophet, to the sons of Israel, and he said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: 'I Myself brought you up from Egypt, and I brought you out from a house of slaves. And I rescued you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and I drove them out from before you, and I gave you their land. And I said to you, "I **am** the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you **are** dwelling." And you have not listened to My voice.'"*

This time God did something new. Before He sent a deliverer, He sent "a man, a prophet." The prophet reminded them of what God had done: He brought them up from Egypt, rescued them from all who oppressed them, and gave them the land. He reminded them of what God had said: "I am the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites." Then he named the problem: "And you have not listened to My voice."

Why send a sermon before a savior? Because God wanted them to understand why they were suffering. Rescue without repentance would only lead to the next disaster. God still does this. Before He lifts us out of the trouble our sin has caused, He often makes us face what we have done.

6:11-12 *And the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak which **was** in Ophrah, which **belonged** to Joash the Abiezrite; and Gideon his son **was** beating out wheat in the winepress, to hide **it** from before Midian. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him, and he said to him, "The LORD **is** with you, O mighty man of valor."*

"The angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak which was in Ophrah." Ophrah was the town of Gideon's family, the Abiezrites, a clan of Manasseh. Gideon was "beating out wheat in the winepress, to hide it from before Midian." Wheat was normally threshed on an open, high threshing floor where the wind could blow the chaff away. A winepress was a pit cut into rock. Gideon was threshing in a hole, hoping no one would see.

And that is where the angel greeted him: "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor." Gideon did not look like a mighty man. But God sees what He is going to make of us, not only what we are now.

6:13-14 *And Gideon said to him, "Please, my lord, **if** the LORD is with us, then why has all this found us? And where **are** all His wonders which our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' And now the LORD has abandoned us, and He has given us into the palm of Midian." And the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this strength of yours, and you shall save Israel from the palm of Midian. Have I not sent you?"*

Gideon answered with honest questions: "If the LORD is with us, then why has all this found us? And where are all His wonders which our fathers recounted to us?" He had heard the stories of the exodus. He just did not see that God in his own day. "And now the LORD has abandoned us."

God did not scold him for asking. But notice that Gideon had the answer wrong. The prophet had just told Israel why this had happened. God had not abandoned them. They had abandoned Him.

Then "the LORD turned to him." The writer now calls the angel the LORD. He said, "Go in this strength of yours, and you shall save Israel from the palm of Midian. Have I not sent you?" Gideon's strength was not in himself. It was in the One who was sending him.

6:15-16 *And he said to Him, "Please, Lord, with what shall I save Israel? Look, my clan **is** the weakest in Manasseh, and I **am** the least in the house of my father." And the LORD said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall strike Midian as one man."*

Gideon objected: "Please, Lord, with what shall I save Israel? Look, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in the house of my father." Moses made the same kind of excuse at the burning bush (Exodus 3:11; 4:10).

God's answer is the answer to every excuse: "Surely I will be with you, and you shall strike Midian as one man." God did not tell Gideon he was stronger than he thought. He told Gideon who would

be with him. "God chose the weak things of the world, so that He might put the strong things to shame" (1 Corinthians 1:27).

6:17-21 *And he said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Your eyes, then make for me a sign that You **are** speaking with me. Please do not depart from here until I come to You, and bring out my offering, and set **it** before You." And He said, "I will remain until you return." And Gideon went in and prepared a young goat of **the** goats, and approximately 3/5 bushel (an ephah) of flour **as** unleavened cakes; the meat he put in the basket, and the broth he put in the pot; and he brought **them** out to him under the oak, and he presented **them**. And the angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and set **them** on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so. And the angel of the LORD stretched out the end of the staff that **was** in his hand, and he touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and the fire went up from the rock, and it consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the LORD went from his eyes.*

Gideon asked for a sign "that You are speaking with me." He wanted to know this was really God. He asked the visitor to wait while he brought an offering. He prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from about three-fifths of a bushel of flour, a large amount in a time of famine.

The angel told him to set the meat and cakes on a rock and pour out the broth. Then he touched them with the tip of his staff, "and the fire went up from the rock, and it consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes." Then the angel vanished. Fire from God consuming an offering was a sign that God had accepted it (Leviticus 9:24; 1 Kings 18:38).

6:22-24 *And Gideon saw that he **was** the angel of the LORD; and Gideon said, "Alas, Lord GOD! For therefore I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." And the LORD said to him, "Peace **be** to you; do not be afraid; you shall not die." And Gideon built an altar there to the LORD, and he called it "The LORD **is** Peace." Until this day it **is** still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.*

Now Gideon understood: "Alas, Lord GOD! For therefore I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." "Lord GOD" stands for the Hebrew Adonai Yahweh, Lord and LORD together. Gideon was terrified, because God had said, "man shall not see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20).

The LORD said to him, "Peace be to you; do not be afraid; you shall not die." So Gideon built an altar and called it "The LORD is Peace," in Hebrew Yahweh Shalom. Shalom is more than the absence of war. It means wholeness, well-being and being right with God.

In a land full of war and fear, Gideon learned that God's first word to him was peace. That is still His first word to anyone who comes to Him through Christ (Romans 5:1).

6:25-27 *And it was on that night, and the LORD said to him, "Take the young bull of the ox which **belongs** to your father, and the second young bull, seven years **old**, and tear down the altar of the Baal which **belongs** to your father, and the Asherah which **is** beside it you shall cut down. And build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of this stronghold, in the arrangement, and take the second young bull, and offer up a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah which you shall cut down." And Gideon took ten men from his servants, and he did just as the LORD had spoken to him. And it was, since he feared the household of his father and the men of the city to do **it** by day, and he did **it** by night.*

That same night God gave Gideon his first assignment, and it was at home. Gideon's own father had an altar to Baal and an Asherah pole beside it. God told him to tear them down, build a proper altar to the LORD, and offer his father's second bull, seven years old, as a burnt offering, using the wood of the Asherah for the fire. A burnt offering was an animal wholly burned on the altar, given completely to God.

Before Gideon could lead Israel against Midian, he had to deal with the idols in his own family. Revival often starts at home. Gideon took ten servants and did it, "since he feared the household of his father and the men of the city," so he did it by night. His obedience was real, even though it was fearful. God can use fearful obedience.

6:28-32 *And the men of the city rose early in the morning, and look, the altar of the Baal was torn down, and the Asherah which **was** beside it was cut down, and the second young bull had been offered up on the altar **that had been** built. And they said, each man to his neighbor, "Who has done this thing?" And they inquired and searched, and they said, "Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing." And the men of the city said to Joash, "Bring out your son, and let him die, for he has torn down the altar of the Baal, and for he has cut down the Asherah which **was** beside it." And Joash said to all who stood against him, "Will you yourselves contend for the Baal? Or will you yourselves save him? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by the morning. If he **is** a god, let him contend for himself, because someone has torn down his altar." And he called him on that day Jerubbaal, saying, "Let the Baal contend against him, because he has torn down his altar."*

In the morning the town found the altar torn down, the Asherah cut down and the bull offered on the new altar. They asked around and learned it was Gideon, and they demanded that his father Joash bring him out to die. How far had Israel fallen? An Israelite town wanted to kill a man for tearing down an idol.

Joash's answer is surprising, and wise: "Will you yourselves contend for the Baal?" and "If he is a god, let him contend for himself." If Baal is real, let him defend his own altar. Perhaps Joash was ashamed, or perhaps his son's courage woke something in him. Either way, he stood up for his son.

So Gideon got a new name, Jerubbaal, which means let Baal contend. The name became a running joke against Baal. Gideon lived, and Baal did nothing.

6:33-35 *And all Midian and Amalek and the sons of **the** east gathered together, and they crossed over, and they encamped in the valley of Jezreel. And the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon, and he blew the ram's horn, and Abiezer was called together after him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and it also was called together after him; and he sent messengers into Asher and into Zebulun and into Naphtali, and they came up to meet them.*

Then Midian and Amalek and the sons of the east crossed the Jordan again and camped in the valley of Jezreel, the broad, rich plain in the north.

"And the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon." The picture is of the Spirit putting Gideon on like a garment. The frightened man in the winepress now blew the ram's horn, and his own clan came after him first, the same people who had wanted him dead. Then he sent messengers through Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, and they came.

6:36-38 *And Gideon said to God, "If You **are** saving Israel by my hand, just as You have spoken, look, I **am** placing the fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If dew is on the fleece alone, and on all the ground **there is** dryness, and I will know that You will save Israel by my hand, just as You have spoken." And it was so. And he rose early on the next day, and he squeezed the fleece, and he drained dew from the fleece, the fullness of the bowl, water.*

Now, with an army gathering, Gideon asked God for another sign. "If You are saving Israel by my hand, just as You have spoken." He put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor overnight. If dew was on the fleece alone and the ground was dry, then he would know. In the morning he wrung out a bowl full of water from the fleece.

Look at what Gideon said: "just as You have spoken." God had already told him plainly what to do and promised to be with him (6:14, 16). The fleece was not a way of finding God's will. Gideon already knew God's will. The fleece was a request for proof, because his faith was weak.

6:39-40 *And Gideon said to God, "Do not let Your anger burn against me, and let me speak only this time. Let me test, please, only this time with the fleece; please let there be dryness on the fleece alone, and on all the ground let there be dew." And God did so on that night; and there was dryness on the fleece alone, and on all the ground there was dew.*

Gideon knew he was pushing. "Do not let Your anger burn against me, and let me speak only this time." He asked for the reverse: a dry fleece on wet ground. Maybe he thought a wool fleece just naturally held dew. "And God did so on that night."

What should we learn from the fleece? First, that God is very patient with weak faith. He did not strike Gideon down. He met him where he was. That is good news for every one of us who has struggled to trust.

But I want to say this gently: Gideon's fleece is not a pattern for finding God's will today. Many believers speak of putting out a fleece, asking God to show His will through some event or coincidence. Gideon's fleece was not a way of discovering what God wanted. God had already told him. It was a sign to calm his doubts. We have something Gideon did not have: the whole written Word of God, which makes us "fully equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:17), and the

Holy Spirit living in us. When we need wisdom, James tells us to ask God, "who gives to all generously and does not reproach" (James 1:5), and to ask in faith. God guides us through His Word, through prayer, through wise counsel, and through the Spirit's work in our hearts. When He has already spoken, the faithful thing is to obey.

Summary

Israel sinned and the LORD gave them to Midian for seven years. The Midianites and their allies came every harvest like locusts, and Israel hid in caves and cried out. God sent a prophet to remind them that they had not listened to His voice. Then the angel of the LORD came to Gideon, who was threshing wheat in a winepress, and called him a mighty man of valor. Gideon asked why God had let this happen and said his clan was the weakest, but the LORD promised to be with him. Fire from the rock consumed Gideon's offering, and he built an altar called The LORD is Peace. That night Gideon tore down his father's altar to Baal and the Asherah, and when the town wanted to kill him, his father said Baal should defend himself, so Gideon was called Jerubbaal. When Midian gathered in the valley of Jezreel, the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon and he called the tribes to war. He asked God twice for a sign with a fleece, and God patiently gave it.

Study Questions

1. What did the Midianites do to Israel, and how did Israel try to survive? (6:1-6)

2. Why did God send a prophet before He sent a deliverer? What did the prophet say? (6:7-10)

3. Where was Gideon when the angel of the LORD came, and what did the angel call him? (6:11-12)

4. What questions did Gideon ask, and how did the LORD answer his excuse about being the least? (6:13-16)

5. What did Gideon name the altar he built, and what does that name mean? (6:22-24)

6. What was Gideon's first assignment, and why do you think God started there? (6:25-27)

7. What did Joash say to the men of the town, and what new name did Gideon receive? (6:30-32)

8. Gideon said "just as You have spoken" before asking for the fleece. What does that tell you about why he asked? (6:36-37)

9. God called Gideon "mighty man of valor" while he was hiding. How does it change things to know that God sees what He will make of you, not only what you are now?

10. Is there something God has already made clear in His Word that you are waiting for more signs before you obey?

Judges 7: Gideon's Three Hundred

Scripture

7:1-8 And Jerubbaal, that ***is*** Gideon, and all the people who ***were*** with him rose early, and they encamped beside En-harod; and the camp of Midian was north of him, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley. And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people who ***are*** with you ***are*** too many for Me to give Midian into their hand, lest Israel glorify itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.' And now, please proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, 'Whoever ***is*** fearful and trembling, let him return and depart from the mountain of Gilead.'" And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained. And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people ***are*** still ***too*** many. Bring them down to the water, and I will refine them for you there. And it shall be, ***the one*** of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go with you; and everyone of whom I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go." And he brought the people down to the water; and the LORD said to Gideon, "Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, just as the dog laps, you shall set him by himself; and everyone who bends down on his knees to drink." And the number of those who lapped with their hand to their mouth was three hundred men; and all the rest of the people bent down on their knees to drink water. And the LORD said to Gideon, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and I will give Midian into your hand; and let all the people go, each man to his place." And the people took provisions in their hand, and their ram's horns; and all the men of Israel he sent away, each man to his tents, and he kept hold of the three hundred men; and the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

7:9-15 And it was on that night, and the LORD said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. And if you ***are*** afraid to go down, go down, you and Purah your young man, to the camp. And you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands will be strong, and you shall go down against the camp." And he went down, he and Purah his young man, to the edge of the armed men who ***were*** in the camp. And Midian and Amalek and all the sons of ***the*** east ***were*** lying in the valley like locusts for multitude; and to their camels ***there was*** no number, like the sand that ***is*** on the shore of the sea for multitude. And Gideon came, and look, a man ***was*** recounting a dream to his neighbor, and he said, "Look, I dreamed a dream, and look, a round loaf of barley bread ***was*** tumbling into the camp of Midian, and it came to the tent, and it struck it, and it fell, and it turned it upside down, and the tent fell." And his neighbor answered and said, "This ***is*** nothing except the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp." And it was, when Gideon heard the recounting of the dream and its interpretation, and he bowed down; and he returned to the camp of Israel, and he said, "Arise, for the LORD has given into your hand the camp of Midian."

7:16-25 And he divided the three hundred men ***into*** three companies, and he put ram's horns in the hand of all of them, and empty jars, and torches inside the jars. And he said to them, "You shall look at me, and so you shall do. And look, I ***am*** coming to the edge of the camp, and it shall be, just as I do, so you shall do. And I will blow the ram's horn, I and all who ***are*** with me, and you also shall blow the ram's horns all around the whole camp, and you shall say, 'For the LORD and for Gideon!'" And Gideon came, and a hundred men who ***were*** with him, to the edge of the camp ***at*** the beginning of the middle watch; they had just stationed the watchmen; and they blew the

ram's horns, and they smashed the jars that ***were*** in their hand. And the three companies blew the ram's horns, and they broke the jars, and they held in their left hand the torches, and in their right hand the ram's horns to blow; and they called out, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" And they stood, each man in his place, all around the camp; and all the camp ran, and they shouted, and they fled. And they blew the three hundred ram's horns, and the LORD set the sword of each man against his neighbor, and against all the camp; and the camp fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. And the men of Israel were summoned from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian. And Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down to meet Midian, and capture before them the waters as far as Beth-barah, and the Jordan." And all the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they captured the waters as far as Beth-barah, and the Jordan. And they captured the two commanders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb, and they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb; and they pursued Midian; and the head of Oreb and Zeeb they brought to Gideon from beyond the Jordan.

Preview

Gideon has an army of thirty-two thousand men, and the Midianites are camped in the valley below "like locusts for multitude." Then God says something no general wants to hear: you have too many. He cuts the army down twice, first to ten thousand and then to three hundred, so that no one can say Israel saved itself. God then lets Gideon overhear an enemy soldier's dream, and Gideon's fear turns to worship.

The battle is unlike any other. Three hundred men surround the camp at night with ram's horns, empty jars and torches. They blow the horns, smash the jars, shout, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" and stand still. The LORD throws the enemy into panic, and they kill each other and flee. This chapter shows us that God does not need our numbers. He wants our trust, so that the glory goes to Him.

Study

7:1 *And Jerubbaal, that **is** Gideon, and all the people who **were** with him rose early, and they encamped beside En-harod; and the camp of Midian was north of him, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley.*

Gideon, now called Jerubbaal, camped with his army at the spring of Harod, at the foot of the hills on the south side of the Jezreel Valley. Harod sounds like the Hebrew word for trembling, which fits what comes next. The Midianite camp was to the north, by the hill of Moreh, down in the valley.

7:2-3 *And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people who **are** with you **are** too many for Me to give Midian into their hand, lest Israel glorify itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.' And now, please proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, 'Whoever **is** fearful and trembling, let him return and depart from the mountain of Gilead.'" And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained.*

"The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hand." The Midianite army was huge (8:10 counts about 135,000), and Gideon's 32,000 were already outnumbered about four to one. Why would God make it worse?

He tells us why: "lest Israel glorify itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'" God knew the human heart. If Israel won with a large army, they would give themselves the credit. God wanted the victory to be so clearly His that no one could miss it.

So Gideon gave the people a way out. Anyone "fearful and trembling" could go home, as the Law itself allowed (Deuteronomy 20:8). Twenty-two thousand left. More than two out of three were afraid. That says a lot about the state of Israel, and it may say something about Gideon too, who had his own fears. Ten thousand stayed.

7:4-6 *And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people **are** still **too** many. Bring them down to the water, and I will refine them for you there. And it shall be, **the one** of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go with you; and everyone of whom I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go." And he brought the people down to the water; and the LORD said to Gideon, "Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, just as the dog laps, you shall set him by himself; and everyone who bends down on his knees to drink." And the number of those who lapped with their hand to their mouth was three hundred men; and all the rest of the people bent down on their knees to drink water.*

"The people are still too many." God told Gideon to bring them down to the water, and He Himself would "refine them for you there." To refine is to test metal and burn off what is not wanted.

God sorted the men by how they drank. Most knelt down to drink. Three hundred lapped the water, bringing it to their mouths with their hand. Many teachers have said that the lappers were the more alert soldiers, watching for the enemy while they drank. That may be true, but the text does not say so. What it shows is that God chose the smaller group, and the smaller the better. The point was not how good the three hundred were. The point was how few they were.

7:7-8 *And the LORD said to Gideon, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and I will give Midian into your hand; and let all the people go, each man to his place." And the people took provisions in their hand, and their ram's horns; and all the men of Israel he sent away, each man to his tents, and he kept hold of the three hundred men; and the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.*

"By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you." Notice who saves: "I will save you." Three hundred against well over a hundred thousand is not a battle plan. It is a promise.

The rest went home, but the three hundred kept the provisions and the ram's horns that the others left behind. Now they had three hundred horns, which will matter later. "And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley." Gideon could look down and see the whole enemy army spread out below him.

7:9-11 *And it was on that night, and the LORD said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. And if you **are** afraid to go down, go down, you and Purah your young man, to the camp. And you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands will be strong, and you shall go down against the camp." And he went down, he and Purah his young man, to the edge of the armed men who **were** in the camp.*

"That night" God told Gideon to attack, "for I have given it into your hand." Then He did something tender. "And if you are afraid to go down, go down, you and Purah your young man, to the camp." God knew Gideon was afraid, and He did not shame him for it. He gave him a way to be strengthened.

"And you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands will be strong." So Gideon and his servant crept down to the edge of the enemy camp. We do not read that Gideon said he was not afraid. He went. That tells us the truth.

7:12-14 *And Midian and Amalek and all the sons of **the** east **were** lying in the valley like locusts for multitude; and to their camels **there was** no number, like the sand that **is** on the shore of the sea for multitude. And Gideon came, and look, a man **was** recounting a dream to his neighbor, and he said, "Look, I dreamed a dream, and look, a round loaf of barley bread **was** tumbling into the camp of Midian, and it came to the tent, and it struck it, and it fell, and it turned it upside down, and the tent fell." And his neighbor answered and said, "This **is** nothing except the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp."*

The writer reminds us of the size of the enemy: "like locusts for multitude," with camels "like the sand that is on the shore of the sea."

Then Gideon heard one man telling another about a dream. A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp, hit a tent, and flattened it. Barley bread was the food of poor farmers. The tent stood for the desert people who lived in tents. His friend knew at once what it meant: "This is nothing except the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp."

Think about that. The enemy already knew Gideon's name, and they were already afraid of him. God had gone ahead of Gideon into the enemy's dreams.

7:15 *And it was, when Gideon heard the recounting of the dream and its interpretation, and he bowed down; and he returned to the camp of Israel, and he said, "Arise, for the LORD has given into your hand the camp of Midian."*

"When Gideon heard the recounting of the dream and its interpretation, and he bowed down." Before he did anything else, he worshiped, right there at the edge of the enemy camp. Then he went back and said, "Arise, for the LORD has given into your hand the camp of Midian."

This is a turning point for Gideon. The man who asked for signs now speaks with confidence. What changed him? Hearing God's promise confirmed. Faith comes from hearing (Romans 10:17).

7:16-18 *And he divided the three hundred men **into** three companies, and he put ram's horns in the hand of all of them, and empty jars, and torches inside the jars. And he said to them, "You shall look at me, and so you shall do. And look, I **am** coming to the edge of the camp, and it shall be, just as I do, so you shall do. And I will blow the ram's horn, I and all who **are** with me, and you also shall blow the ram's horns all around the whole camp, and you shall say, 'For the LORD and for Gideon!'"*

Gideon divided the three hundred into three companies of a hundred. Each man held a ram's horn, an empty clay jar and a torch inside the jar, so its light would be hidden. Those are strange weapons. No swords are even mentioned.

"You shall look at me, and so you shall do." Gideon led by example. When he blew his horn, they were all to blow and shout, "For the LORD and for Gideon!"

Paul wrote, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). Paul does not mention Gideon, but the clay jars and hidden light make a fitting picture. God's light shines out when our clay jars are broken and our weakness is plain.

7:19-21 *And Gideon came, and a hundred men who **were** with him, to the edge of the camp **at** the beginning of the middle watch; they had just stationed the watchmen; and they blew the ram's horns, and they smashed the jars that **were** in their hand. And the three companies blew the ram's horns, and they broke the jars, and they held in their left hand the torches, and in their right hand the ram's horns to blow; and they called out, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" And they stood, each man in his place, all around the camp; and all the camp ran, and they shouted, and they fled.*

They came to the edge of the camp at "the beginning of the middle watch." The night was divided into three watches, so this was around ten at night or a little later, just after the new guards had taken their posts and while the camp was settling into sleep.

They blew the horns and smashed the jars. Three hundred torches flared up on three sides in the dark, three hundred horns blew, and three hundred men shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" In those days only a few men in an army carried a horn, so to the sleeping Midianites it sounded like a vast army had surrounded them.

"And they stood, each man in his place." They did not charge. They stood still and held their ground, "and all the camp ran, and they shouted, and they fled." The battle was won by people who stood where God put them and let Him fight.

7:22 *And they blew the three hundred ram's horns, and the LORD set the sword of each man against his neighbor, and against all the camp; and the camp fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath.*

"The LORD set the sword of each man against his neighbor." In the dark and the panic, the Midianites struck at anyone near them and killed each other. Then they fled east toward the Jordan, through places named Beth-shittah, Zererah, Abel-meholah and Tabbath.

God had done exactly what He promised. Isaiah would later look back on "the day of Midian" as a picture of the day God would break the oppressor's rod (Isaiah 9:4). The prophecy in Isaiah 9 goes on to promise a Child who would be born, whose name is "Mighty God" (Isaiah 9:6), Jesus Christ, who breaks the power of every oppressor for good.

7:23-25 *And the men of Israel were summoned from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian. And Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down to meet Midian, and capture before them the waters as far as Beth-barah, and the Jordan." And all the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they captured the waters as far as Beth-barah, and the Jordan. And they captured the two commanders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb, and they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb; and they pursued Midian; and the head of Oreb and Zeeb they brought to Gideon from beyond the Jordan.*

Now the men who had gone home were called back from Naphtali, Asher and Manasseh to chase the fleeing army. Gideon also sent word to Ephraim to seize the crossings of the Jordan as far as Beth-barah to cut off the escape.

Ephraim captured two Midianite commanders, Oreb and Zeeb, whose names mean raven and wolf. They killed Oreb at a rock and Zeeb at a winepress, and the places were named after them. Long after, Israel still remembered this day (Psalm 83:11; Isaiah 10:26). It is fitting that Zeeb died at a winepress. Midian had driven Gideon into a winepress to hide. Now a Midianite prince died at one.

Summary

Gideon camped at Harod with thirty-two thousand men, but the LORD said they were too many, lest Israel boast that its own hand had saved it. Twenty-two thousand fearful men went home, and God refined the remaining ten thousand at the water, keeping only three hundred who lapped with their hands. That night God told Gideon to attack, and because he was afraid, He let him overhear a Midianite tell a dream of a barley loaf flattening a tent, which his friend said meant God had given Midian into Gideon's hand. Gideon worshiped, then divided his three hundred into three companies with ram's horns and torches in jars. At the middle watch they blew the horns, broke the jars and shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" while standing in place, and the LORD turned the Midianites' swords against each other. The tribes joined the pursuit, and Ephraim captured and killed the commanders Oreb and Zeeb.

Study Questions

1. Why did the LORD say Gideon's army was too large? (7:2)

2. How many men went home when Gideon let the fearful leave, and how many stayed? (7:3)

3. How did God choose the three hundred? Does the text say why He chose the ones who lapped? (7:4-7)

4. What did God offer Gideon if he was afraid, and what did Gideon hear in the enemy camp? (7:9-14)

5. What was the first thing Gideon did after he heard the dream? (7:15)

6. What did the three hundred carry, and what did they do when Gideon blew his horn? (7:16-21)

7. Who actually defeated the Midianites, according to verse 22? (7:22)

8. God cut Gideon's army down so that Israel could not boast. Where in your life might God be making you weaker so that you will depend on Him?

9. God gave Gideon a way to face his fear instead of shaming him for it. How does that encourage you in the things you are afraid of?

10. The three hundred won by standing in their places. Where has God placed you to stand firm right now?

Judges 8: Gideon's Victory and His Ephod

Scripture

8:1-12 And the men of Ephraim said to him, "What ***is*** this thing ***that*** you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?" And they contended with him with force. And he said to them, "What have I done now like you? Are not the gleanings of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer? Into your hand God has given the commanders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; and what have I been able to do like you?" Then their spirit toward him relaxed, when he spoke this word. And Gideon came to the Jordan, crossing over, he and the three hundred men who ***were*** with him, exhausted and pursuing. And he said to the men of Succoth, "Please give loaves of bread to the people who ***are*** at my feet, for they ***are*** exhausted, and I ***am*** pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian." And the officials of Succoth said, "***Is*** the palm of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?" And Gideon said, "Therefore, when the LORD gives Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will thresh your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with the briers." And he went up from there ***to*** Penuel, and he spoke to them in the same way; and the men of Penuel answered him just as the men of Succoth had answered. And he said also to the men of Penuel, saying, "When I return in peace, I will tear down this tower." And Zebah and Zalmunna ***were*** in Karkor, and their camps with them, about fifteen thousand, all who were left of all the camp of the sons of ***the*** east; and those who had fallen ***were*** a hundred and twenty thousand men who drew ***the*** sword. And Gideon went up by the way of those who dwell in tents, east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and he struck the camp; and the camp was secure. And Zebah and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued after them, and he captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna; and all the camp he threw into terror.

8:13-21 And Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle, from the ascent of Heres. And he captured a young man of the men of Succoth, and he questioned him; and he wrote down for him the officials of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men. And he came to the men of Succoth, and he said, "Look, Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, '***Is*** the palm of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who ***are*** weary?'" And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth. And the tower of Penuel he tore down, and he killed the men of the city. And he said to Zebah and to Zalmunna, "Where ***are*** the men whom you killed at Tabor?" And they said, "As you, so they; each one ***was*** like the appearance of the sons of the king." And he said, "They ***were*** my brothers, the sons of my mother. ***As*** the LORD lives, if you had let them live, I would not kill you." And he said to Jether his firstborn, "Arise, kill them." And the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, for he ***was*** still a young man. And Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Arise yourself and fall on us; for as the man ***is***, ***so is*** his strength." And Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and he took the crescent ornaments that ***were*** on the necks of their camels.

8:22-35 And the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son and the son of your son, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian." And Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son shall not rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you." And Gideon said to them, "Let me ask a request of you, and give me, each man, the ring of his plunder." For they

had rings of gold, because they ***were*** Ishmaelites. And they said, "We will surely give ***them***." And they spread out the cloak, and they threw there, each man, the ring of his plunder. And the weight of the gold rings which he asked for was approximately 42 pounds (one thousand seven hundred ***shekels***) of gold, apart from the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments that ***were*** on the kings of Midian, and apart from the chains that ***were*** on the necks of their camels. And Gideon made it into an ephod, and he set it in his city, in Ophrah; and all Israel prostituted themselves after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his household. And Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not again lift up their head. And the land was at rest forty years in the days of Gideon. And Jerubbaal the son of Joash went, and he dwelt in his house. And Gideon had seventy sons who came out of his thigh, for he had many wives. And his concubine who ***was*** in Shechem, she also bore him a son, and he set his name Abimelech. And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age, and he was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. And it was, as soon as Gideon had died, and the sons of Israel turned back, and they prostituted themselves after the Baals, and they set Baal-berith for themselves as god. And the sons of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies all around. And they did not do steadfast love with the house of Jerubbaal, Gideon, according to all the good which he had done with Israel.

Preview

The battle is won, but Gideon's story is not over. First he calms the angry men of Ephraim with a gentle answer. Then he crosses the Jordan chasing the two kings of Midian, and two Israelite towns, Succoth and Penuel, refuse to feed his exhausted men. Gideon captures the kings, comes back and punishes both towns harshly, and then kills the kings himself to avenge his brothers.

Israel offers to make Gideon king. He gives a fine answer, "the LORD shall rule over you," but then he asks for gold and makes an ephod that becomes an object of worship and a snare to all Israel. This chapter is a warning. The man who began in a winepress and rose by faith ends by leading the nation into idolatry. A good start does not guarantee a good finish.

Study

8:1-3 *And the men of Ephraim said to him, "What **is** this thing **that** you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?" And they contended with him with force. And he said to them, "What have I done now like you? Are not the gleanings of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer? Into your hand God has given the commanders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; and what have I been able to do like you?" Then their spirit toward him relaxed, when he spoke this word.*

The men of Ephraim were angry. "What is this thing that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?" Ephraim was a large, proud tribe, and they felt left out. Gideon had called them, but only at the end (7:24).

Gideon answered with humility: "Are not the gleanings of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer?" Gleanings are the few grapes left after the harvest. He meant that the little Ephraim

did at the end, capturing the two Midianite commanders, was worth more than all his own clan had done. "Then their spirit toward him relaxed."

"A soft answer turns away rage" (Proverbs 15:1). Gideon could have argued that Ephraim had not shown up for the hard part. Instead he gave them honor and kept the peace. Jephthah will face the same complaint from Ephraim in chapter 12 and handle it very differently.

8:4-9 *And Gideon came to the Jordan, crossing over, he and the three hundred men who **were** with him, exhausted and pursuing. And he said to the men of Succoth, "Please give loaves of bread to the people who **are** at my feet, for they **are** exhausted, and I **am** pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian." And the officials of Succoth said, "**Is** the palm of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?" And Gideon said, "Therefore, when the LORD gives Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will thresh your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with the briers." And he went up from there **to** Penuel, and he spoke to them in the same way; and the men of Penuel answered him just as the men of Succoth had answered. And he said also to the men of Penuel, saying, "When I return in peace, I will tear down this tower."*

Gideon and his three hundred crossed the Jordan, "exhausted and pursuing." They were worn out, but they kept going. At Succoth, an Israelite town east of the Jordan, Gideon asked for bread for his men.

The officials of Succoth refused: "Is the palm of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?" They meant, You have not caught the kings yet. Why should we risk Midian's revenge by helping you? They were Israelites, but they would not stand with God's people until they were sure who would win.

Gideon threatened to "thresh your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with the briers" when he returned. At Penuel the same thing happened, and he promised to tear down their tower.

Gideon's answer to Ephraim was gentle. His answer to Succoth and Penuel was fierce. Something is changing in him.

8:10-12 *And Zebah and Zalmunna **were** in Karkor, and their camps with them, about fifteen thousand, all who were left of all the camp of the sons of **the** east; and those who had fallen **were** a hundred and twenty thousand men who drew **the** sword. And Gideon went up by the way of those who dwell in tents, east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and he struck the camp; and the camp was secure. And Zebah and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued after them, and he captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna; and all the camp he threw into terror.*

The two kings had about fifteen thousand men left, all that remained of an army that had lost a hundred and twenty thousand. Gideon came around by the desert road, where the nomads traveled, and struck the camp when it thought itself safe. The kings fled, and Gideon captured them both. The three hundred tired men had chased a much larger army far out into the desert and won.

8:13-17 *And Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle, from the ascent of Heres. And he captured a young man of the men of Succoth, and he questioned him; and he wrote down for him the officials of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men. And he came to the men of Succoth, and he said, "Look, Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, '**Is** the palm of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who **are** weary?'" And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth. And the tower of Penuel he tore down, and he killed the men of the city.*

Gideon came back. He caught a young man from Succoth, who wrote down for him the names of the town's leaders and elders, seventy-seven men. Writing was known well enough in that day that a young man could do it.

Gideon showed the officials the two captive kings and threw their own words back at them. Then he "taught the men of Succoth" with thorns and briers. He tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

How should we think about this? Succoth and Penuel had sinned. They refused to help God's army in the middle of a war and sided in their hearts with the enemy. In that day, refusing aid to the army in battle was treason. But notice that the text never says the LORD told Gideon to do this. In chapter 7, everything was "for the LORD." Here the LORD is not mentioned at all. Gideon is acting on his own, and his punishment of his own people goes very far. The frightened man has become a hard one.

8:18-21 *And he said to Zebah and to Zalmunna, "Where **are** the men whom you killed at Tabor?" And they said, "As you, so they; each one **was** like the appearance of the sons of the king." And he said, "They **were** my brothers, the sons of my mother. **As** the LORD lives, if you had let them live, I would not kill you." And he said to Jether his firstborn, "Arise, kill them." And the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, for he **was** still a young man. And Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Arise yourself and fall on us; for as the man **is, so is** his strength." And Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and he took the crescent ornaments that **were** on the necks of their camels.*

Gideon asked the kings about the men they had killed at Tabor. They answered that the men looked like Gideon, like the sons of a king. "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother." This had become personal. Gideon swore that if they had spared his brothers, he would spare them.

Gideon told his oldest son Jether to kill them. It was a way of shaming the kings, to die by a boy's hand, but the boy was afraid. The kings said, "Arise yourself and fall on us; for as the man is, so is his strength." So Gideon killed them himself and took the crescent-shaped ornaments from their camels' necks, the royal decorations of the desert kings.

Zebah and Zalmunna deserved to die for their crimes. But the battle for Israel has turned into Gideon's own blood feud. Even when God gives us victory, we must watch our hearts so that we do not start fighting for ourselves.

8:22-23 *And the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son and the son of your son, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian." And Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son shall not rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you."*

Now the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son and the son of your son, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian." They wanted a king and a dynasty. And they gave the credit to the wrong one: "you have saved us." God had cut the army down to three hundred to keep this very thing from happening (7:2).

Gideon gave a good answer: "I will not rule over you, and my son shall not rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you." This is the right answer. The LORD was Israel's King. Years later, when Israel asked Samuel for a king, the LORD said, "they have rejected Me from reigning over them" (1 Samuel 8:7).

But words are one thing. The rest of the chapter shows that Gideon lived more like a king than he admitted.

8:24-27 *And Gideon said to them, "Let me ask a request of you, and give me, each man, the ring of his plunder." For they **had** rings of gold, because they **were** Ishmaelites. And they said, "We will surely give **them**." And they spread out the cloak, and they threw there, each man, the ring of his plunder. And the weight of the gold rings which he asked for was approximately 42 pounds (one thousand seven hundred **shekels**) of gold, apart from the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments that **were** on the kings of Midian, and apart from the chains that **were** on the necks of their camels. And Gideon made it into an ephod, and he set it in his city, in Ophrah; and all Israel prostituted themselves after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his household.*

Right after refusing the crown, Gideon asked for gold. Each man threw in a gold earring from the plunder. The Midianites wore gold earrings, the writer explains, "because they were Ishmaelites," a broad name for the desert traders. The rings came to about forty-two pounds of gold, besides the kings' ornaments and purple robes, purple being the color of royalty.

"And Gideon made it into an ephod, and he set it in his city, in Ophrah." An ephod was a vest worn by the high priest, part of his holy garments, and connected with asking God for guidance (Exodus 28:6-30). Gideon may have meant to honor God or to have a way to ask God's will in his own town. But God had placed the priesthood and the tabernacle at Shiloh, not at Ophrah.

The result was disaster: "all Israel prostituted themselves after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his household." The man who tore down his father's altar to Baal set up a new object of false worship. Aaron did the same with gold at Sinai (Exodus 32:4). Good intentions do not make worship right. God tells us how He wants to be worshiped, and adding to it leads people away from Him.

8:28-32 *And Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not again lift up their head. And the land was at rest forty years in the days of Gideon. And Jerubbaal the son of Joash went, and he dwelt in his house. And Gideon had seventy sons who came out of his thigh, for he had many wives. And his concubine who* ***was*** *in Shechem, she also bore him a son, and he set his name Abimelech. And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age, and he was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.*

Still, God's mercy shows. "Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not again lift up their head. And the land was at rest forty years in the days of Gideon."

Gideon went home and lived out his life. But look at how he lived. He "had seventy sons," "for he had many wives." He also had a concubine in Shechem, a secondary wife of lower rank, and she bore him a son. He named him Abimelech, which means my father is king. Gideon had said he would not be king, but he named his son as if he were one. The Law had warned that a king must not "multiply wives" or gold for himself (Deuteronomy 17:17). Gideon did both.

"And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age." God had been kind to him to the end. But he left behind a household and a nation set up for trouble.

8:33-35 *And it was, as soon as Gideon had died, and the sons of Israel turned back, and they prostituted themselves after the Baals, and they set Baal-berith for themselves as god. And the sons of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies all around. And they did not do steadfast love with the house of Jerubbaal, Gideon, according to all the good which he had done with Israel.*

"As soon as Gideon had died," Israel turned back to the Baals and took Baal-berith as their god. Baal-berith means lord of the covenant. They made a covenant with Baal in place of the covenant with the LORD.

"The sons of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them." And they did not show steadfast love, hesed, to Gideon's family for all the good he had done. Forgetting God leads to forgetting what we owe to people too. These last verses set the stage for chapter 9, where Gideon's own family will be destroyed.

What should we take from Gideon's life? God used a fearful man to do a great work, and Hebrews 11:32 names him among the people of faith. But Gideon's later years warn us. Victory can make us proud. Success can make us careless. The real test of faith is not only how we start, but how we finish.

Summary

Gideon calmed the angry men of Ephraim by honoring what they had done. He crossed the Jordan with his exhausted three hundred, and when the towns of Succoth and Penuel refused to feed his men, he threatened them. He then defeated the remaining Midianite army and captured the kings Zebah and Zalmunna. On his return he punished the elders of Succoth with thorns and briers, tore down the tower of Penuel and killed its men, and killed the two kings to avenge his

brothers. Israel asked him to rule over them, and he answered that the LORD would rule over them, but he asked for the gold earrings from the plunder and made an ephod that all Israel worshiped and that became a snare to his household. The land had rest forty years. Gideon had many wives and seventy sons, and a concubine in Shechem bore him Abimelech. As soon as Gideon died, Israel turned to Baal-berith, forgot the LORD, and showed no kindness to Gideon's family.

There were times I was leading others in God's Word while I was not living the clean life I should have been. Gideon said the right words and lived the wrong way. I know how easy that is. What we say about God has to show up in how we live.

Study Questions

1. How did Gideon answer the angry men of Ephraim, and what happened as a result? (8:1-3)

2. Why do you think the officials of Succoth and Penuel refused to help Gideon's men? (8:5-9)

3. What did Gideon do to Succoth and Penuel when he returned? Do you notice whether the LORD is mentioned in this part of the story? (8:13-17)

4. Why did Gideon kill Zebah and Zalmunna? How had the battle become personal? (8:18-21)

5. What did the men of Israel ask Gideon to do, and what was right about his answer? (8:22-23)

6. What did Gideon make with the gold, and what did it become for Israel and for his family? (8:24-27)

7. What did Gideon name his son by the concubine, and why is that name telling? (8:31)

8. What happened as soon as Gideon died? (8:33-35)

9. Gideon said the right thing about the LORD ruling, and then lived like a king. Where do your words about God and your way of living not match?

10. Gideon started well and finished poorly. What is one thing you can do now to help you finish your walk with God well?

Judges 9: Abimelech, the Bramble King

Scripture

9:1-21 And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem, to the brothers of his mother, and he spoke to them and to all the clan of the house of the father of his mother, saying, "Speak, please, in the ears of all the lords of Shechem: 'What ***is*** good for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?' And you shall remember that I ***am*** your bone and your flesh." And the brothers of his mother spoke concerning him in the ears of all the lords of Shechem all these words, and their heart turned aside after Abimelech, for they said, "He ***is*** our brother." And they gave him seventy ***pieces*** of silver from the house of Baal-berith, and with them Abimelech hired empty and reckless men, and they went after him. And he went to the house of his father to Ophrah, and he killed his brothers, the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone. And Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself. And all the lords of Shechem and all Beth-millo gathered together, and they went and caused Abimelech to reign as king, by the terebinth of the pillar which ***was*** in Shechem. And they told Jotham, and he went and stood on the top of the mountain of Gerizim, and he lifted up his voice and called out, and he said to them, "Listen to me, lords of Shechem, so God may listen to you. The trees went, going, to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us!' And the olive tree said to them, 'Shall I give up my fatness, by which they honor gods and men through me, and go to sway over the trees?' And the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come, reign over us!' And the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I give up my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to sway over the trees?' And the trees said to the vine, 'You come, reign over us!' And the vine said to them, 'Shall I give up my new wine, which makes gods and men glad, and go to sway over the trees?' And all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come, reign over us!' And the bramble said to the trees, 'If in truth you are anointing me as king over you, come, take refuge in my shade; and if not, let fire go out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon.' And now, if in truth and in integrity you have acted, and caused Abimelech to reign, and if you have done good with Jerubbaal and with his house, and if you have done to him according to the dealing of his hands, in that my father fought for you, and threw his life out in front ***of him***, and delivered you from the hand of Midian, and you have risen up against the house of my father this day, and have killed his sons, seventy men, on one stone, and have caused Abimelech, the son of his female slave, to reign over the lords of Shechem, because he ***is*** your brother; and if in truth and in integrity you have acted with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. And if not, let fire go out from Abimelech and consume the lords of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire go out from the lords of Shechem and from Beth-millo and consume Abimelech." And Jotham fled and ran away, and he went to Beer, and he dwelt there, away from the face of Abimelech his brother.

9:22-41 And Abimelech was prince over Israel three years. And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem, and the lords of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, for the violence ***done to*** the seventy sons of Jerubbaal to come, and to set their blood on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the lords of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers. And the lords of Shechem set ambushers for him on the tops of the

mountains, and they robbed everyone who passed by them on the road. And it was told to Abimelech. And Gaal the son of Ebed came, and his brothers, and they passed into Shechem; and the lords of Shechem trusted in him. And they went out into the field and gathered the grapes of their vineyards and trod ***them***, and they made praises, and they went into the house of their god, and they ate and drank, and they cursed Abimelech. And Gaal the son of Ebed said, "Who ***is*** Abimelech, and who ***is*** Shechem, that we should serve him? ***Is he*** not the son of Jerubbaal, and Zebul his officer? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem! And why should we serve him, we? And if only this people were in my hand! Then I would remove Abimelech." And he said to Abimelech, "Increase your army and come out!" And Zebul the official of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, and his anger burned. And he sent messengers to Abimelech deceitfully, saying, "Look, Gaal the son of Ebed and his brothers are coming to Shechem, and look, they are shutting up the city against you. And now, rise up by night, you and the people who ***are*** with you, and lie in wait in the field. And it shall be in the morning, as the sun rises, you shall rise early and rush upon the city; and look, he and the people who ***are*** with him ***will be*** going out against you, and you shall do to him as your hand finds." And Abimelech rose up, and all the people who ***were*** with him, by night, and they lay in wait against Shechem ***in*** four companies. And Gaal the son of Ebed went out and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city; and Abimelech rose up, and the people who ***were*** with him, from the ambush. And Gaal saw the people, and he said to Zebul, "Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains!" And Zebul said to him, "The shadow of the mountains you are seeing as men." And Gaal spoke again and said, "Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and one company is coming from the direction of the terebinth of soothsayers." And Zebul said to him, "Where then ***is*** your mouth, that you said, 'Who ***is*** Abimelech, that we should serve him?' ***Is*** not this the people that you rejected? Go out, please, now, and fight against it." And Gaal went out before the lords of Shechem and fought against Abimelech. And Abimelech pursued him, and he fled from before him; and many fell slain, up to the entrance of the gate. And Abimelech dwelt at Arumah; and Zebul drove out Gaal and his brothers from dwelling in Shechem.

9:42-57 And it was on the next day, and the people went out into the field; and they told Abimelech. And he took the people and divided them into three companies, and he lay in wait in the field. And he looked, and look, the people were going out from the city; and he rose up against them and struck them down. And Abimelech and the companies that ***were*** with him rushed ***forward*** and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city, and the two companies rushed upon all who ***were*** in the field and struck them down. And Abimelech fought against the city all that day, and he captured the city, and the people who ***were*** in it he killed; and he tore down the city and sowed it ***with*** salt. And all the lords of the tower of Shechem heard, and they went into the stronghold of the house of El-berith. And it was told to Abimelech that all the lords of the tower of Shechem had gathered themselves together. And Abimelech went up the mountain of Zalmon, he and all the people who ***were*** with him; and Abimelech took the axes in his hand, and he cut off a branch of the trees, and lifted it up and put ***it*** on his shoulder; and he said to the people who ***were*** with him, "What you have seen I have done, hurry, do like me." And all the people also cut off each one his branch, and they went after Abimelech, and they put ***them*** against the stronghold, and they set the stronghold on fire over them with fire; and all the men of the tower of Shechem also died, about a thousand, man and woman. And Abimelech went to Thebez, and he encamped

against Thebez and captured it. And a tower of strength was in the midst of the city, and all the men and the women, and all the lords of the city, fled there; and they shut ***the door*** behind them and went up on the roof of the tower. And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it, and he drew near to the entrance of the tower to burn it with fire. And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on the head of Abimelech and crushed his skull. And he called quickly to the young man, the bearer of his weapons, and said to him, "Draw your sword and put me to death, lest they say of me, 'A woman killed him.'" And his young man pierced him through, and he died. And the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, and they went each one to his place. And God returned the evil of Abimelech which he had done to his father by killing his seventy brothers; and all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their head; and the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal came to them.

Preview

This is the longest chapter in Judges, and it is not about a judge. It is about Abimelech, Gideon's son by his concubine in Shechem, who wanted the crown his father had turned down. He gets the men of Shechem to back him, hires a gang with money from Baal's temple, and murders seventy of his brothers on one stone. Only the youngest, Jotham, escapes. From a mountaintop Jotham tells a parable about trees choosing a thorn bush for their king, and he warns that fire will come out of Abimelech and Shechem and burn each other up.

That is exactly what happens. God sends a spirit of trouble between Abimelech and Shechem. A man named Gaal stirs up a revolt, Abimelech crushes it, destroys the city, and burns a thousand people in a tower. At the next town a woman drops a millstone on his head. The chapter ends with the key to all of it: God repaid the evil. This is a hard, dark chapter. It shows where grasping for power leads, and it shows that God sees and judges, even when He seems silent.

Study

9:1-3 *And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem, to the brothers of his mother, and he spoke to them and to all the clan of the house of the father of his mother, saying, "Speak, please, in the ears of all the lords of Shechem: 'What **is** good for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?' And you shall remember that I **am** your bone and your flesh." And the brothers of his mother spoke concerning him in the ears of all the lords of Shechem all these words, and their heart turned aside after Abimelech, for they said, "He **is** our brother."*

Abimelech went to his mother's family in Shechem. Shechem was an old and important city in the hill country of Ephraim. Abraham built an altar there (Genesis 12:6-7), and Joshua led Israel to renew the covenant there (Joshua 24). Now it would become the place of a murderer's crowning.

Abimelech's pitch was simple: "What is good for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?" Gideon's sons were not ruling over anyone. Gideon had refused that (8:23). Abimelech invented a threat to make himself the answer. Then he played

on family loyalty: "I am your bone and your flesh." His mother was from Shechem, so he was one of them.

It worked. "Their heart turned aside after Abimelech, for they said, He is our brother." They chose a leader because he was their own, not because he was good or because God had chosen him.

9:4-6 *And they gave him seventy **pieces** of silver from the house of Baal-berith, and with them Abimelech hired empty and reckless men, and they went after him. And he went to the house of his father to Ophrah, and he killed his brothers, the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone. And Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself. And all the lords of Shechem and all Beth-millo gathered together, and they went and caused Abimelech to reign as king, by the terebinth of the pillar which **was** in Shechem.*

The men of Shechem gave him seventy pieces of silver from the temple of Baal-berith, the same false god Israel had turned to after Gideon died (8:33). With that money Abimelech hired "empty and reckless men," worthless men with nothing to lose.

Then he went to Ophrah, his father's house, and "killed his brothers, the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone." That may mean he killed them one by one on a single rock, like an execution. Seventy pieces of silver, seventy brothers. The price of each life was one piece of silver. Only Jotham, the youngest, survived because he hid.

This is one of the hard passages of Judges. Scripture does not soften it, and it does not approve of it. It tells us plainly what Abimelech did so that we will see later that God did not forget it.

The lords of Shechem and Beth-millo (probably the fortress of Shechem) made Abimelech king "by the terebinth of the pillar which was in Shechem." This may be the very tree and stone where Joshua had set up a witness to the covenant (Joshua 24:26). The place where Israel had promised to serve the LORD became the place where they crowned a murderer.

9:7 *And they told Jotham, and he went and stood on the top of the mountain of Gerizim, and he lifted up his voice and called out, and he said to them, "Listen to me, lords of Shechem, so God may listen to you.*

When Jotham heard, he climbed Mount Gerizim, the mountain that rises right above Shechem. Mount Gerizim was the mountain of blessing, where half the tribes had stood to bless Israel in the days of Joshua (Deuteronomy 27:12; Joshua 8:33). From there Jotham called down to the city: "Listen to me, lords of Shechem, so God may listen to you." He was saying, If you want God to hear you, you had better hear this.

9:8-13 *The trees went, going, to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us!' And the olive tree said to them, 'Shall I give up my fatness, by which they honor gods and men through me, and go to sway over the trees?' And the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come, reign over us!' And the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I give up my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to sway over the trees?' And the trees said to the vine, 'You come, reign over us!' And the vine said to them, 'Shall I give up my new wine, which makes gods and men glad, and go to sway over the trees?'*

Jotham told a parable, a short story with a point. This one is a fable, where trees speak like people. "The trees went, going, to anoint a king over them." To anoint was to pour oil on someone's head to set him apart for an office.

First they asked the olive tree. It said no: should I give up my oil, by which gods and men are honored, just to "sway over the trees"? Then they asked the fig tree, and it would not give up its sweet fruit. Then the vine, and it would not give up its new wine.

Each of these trees was useful. They were busy bearing fruit and blessing people. They had no wish to give that up just to wave over the other trees. Gideon and his sons were like those trees. Gideon had refused to rule. The good and fruitful are often not the ones who grab for power.

9:14-15 *And all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come, reign over us!' And the bramble said to the trees, 'If in truth you are anointing me as king over you, come, take refuge in my shade; and if not, let fire go out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon.'*

At last the trees asked the bramble, a low, thorny bush good for nothing but burning. The bramble said yes, of course. And look at its offer: "come, take refuge in my shade." A thornbush has no shade worth the name. It is a joke, and a bitter one. Then comes the threat: if not, "let fire go out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon." Dry brambles catch fire easily, and a brush fire can burn down even the mighty cedars.

Abimelech was the bramble. He had nothing to give the people, only a promise of protection he could not keep and a threat he would carry out. People who grasp for power and offer nothing but thorns are still with us. So are people who follow them because they are "our brother."

9:16-20 *And now, if in truth and in integrity you have acted, and caused Abimelech to reign, and if you have done good with Jerubbaal and with his house, and if you have done to him according to the dealing of his hands, in that my father fought for you, and threw his life out in front* ***of him****, and delivered you from the hand of Midian, and you have risen up against the house of my father this day, and have killed his sons, seventy men, on one stone, and have caused Abimelech, the son of his female slave, to reign over the lords of Shechem, because he* ***is*** *your brother; and if in truth and in integrity you have acted with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. And if not, let fire go out from Abimelech and consume the lords of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire go out from the lords of Shechem and from Beth-millo and consume Abimelech."*

Jotham explained the parable. If Shechem had acted "in truth and in integrity" toward Gideon's family, then let them rejoice in Abimelech, and he in them. But they had not. Gideon had risked

his life to save them from Midian, and they had repaid him by killing his sons and crowning "the son of his female slave."

"And if not, let fire go out from Abimelech and consume the lords of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire go out from the lords of Shechem and from Beth-millo and consume Abimelech." Jotham's warning was really a curse and a prophecy. People who join together in evil will end up destroying each other. The rest of the chapter shows this coming true word for word.

9:21-22 *And Jotham fled and ran away, and he went to Beer, and he dwelt there, away from the face of Abimelech his brother. And Abimelech was prince over Israel three years.*

Jotham ran for his life and lived at Beer, out of Abimelech's reach. He is never heard from again, but his words are remembered at the end of the chapter (9:57).

"Abimelech was prince over Israel three years." The word is not the usual word for king. He ruled Shechem and the area around it, not the whole nation, and only for three years. God never raised him up. He raised himself up.

9:23-25 *And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem, and the lords of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, for the violence* ***done to*** *the seventy sons of Jerubbaal to come, and to set their blood on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the lords of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers. And the lords of Shechem set ambushers for him on the tops of the mountains, and they robbed everyone who passed by them on the road. And it was told to Abimelech.*

"God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem." What does that mean? God is never the author of sin (James 1:13). But He rules over all things, even evil spirits and evil men, and sometimes in judgment He lets evil turn on itself. Bible teachers differ on whether this was an evil spirit being that God allowed to stir up trouble (compare 1 Samuel 16:14; 1 Kings 22:19-23), or a spirit of distrust and hatred that God sent into their hearts. Either way the purpose is stated plainly in the next verse: "for the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal," so that "their blood" would come on Abimelech and on the men who had helped him.

God may seem slow, but He had not forgotten the seventy. Three years later He began to repay.

The men of Shechem turned on Abimelech. They set men in ambush on the mountain roads to rob travelers, which hurt his income and his name.

9:26-29 *And Gaal the son of Ebed came, and his brothers, and they passed into Shechem; and the lords of Shechem trusted in him. And they went out into the field and gathered the grapes of their vineyards and trod **them**, and they made praises, and they went into the house of their god, and they ate and drank, and they cursed Abimelech. And Gaal the son of Ebed said, "Who **is** Abimelech, and who **is** Shechem, that we should serve him? **Is he** not the son of Jerubbaal, and Zebul his officer? Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem! And why should we serve him, we? And if only this people were in my hand! Then I would remove Abimelech." And he said to Abimelech, "Increase your army and come out!"*

A newcomer named Gaal son of Ebed moved into Shechem, and the lords of Shechem trusted him. At the grape harvest festival they went into the temple of their god, ate and drank, and cursed Abimelech. This was a pagan party with a political edge.

Gaal, likely drunk, mocked Abimelech: "Who is Abimelech, and who is Shechem, that we should serve him?" He reminded them that Abimelech was Gideon's son, half an outsider. "Serve the men of Hamor the father of Shechem!" Hamor was the ruler of Shechem long before, in Jacob's day (Genesis 34). Gaal was stirring up the old Canaanite pride of the city. Then he boasted that if he had the people in his hand he would get rid of Abimelech, and dared him to come out and fight.

The men who had crowned Abimelech because he was "our brother" now turned to another man who claimed to be more truly one of them. Loyalty built on pride does not last.

9:30-33 *And Zebul the official of the city heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, and his anger burned. And he sent messengers to Abimelech deceitfully, saying, "Look, Gaal the son of Ebed and his brothers are coming to Shechem, and look, they are shutting up the city against you. And now, rise up by night, you and the people who **are** with you, and lie in wait in the field. And it shall be in the morning, as the sun rises, you shall rise early and rush upon the city; and look, he and the people who **are** with him **will be** going out against you, and you shall do to him as your hand finds."*

Zebul, Abimelech's officer in the city, heard and was angry. He secretly sent word to Abimelech: Gaal and his brothers are turning the city against you. Come by night, hide in the fields, and attack at sunrise when Gaal comes out. Zebul was playing a double game, living in the city while working for Abimelech.

9:34-41 *And Abimelech rose up, and all the people who **were** with him, by night, and they lay in wait against Shechem **in** four companies. And Gaal the son of Ebed went out and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city; and Abimelech rose up, and the people who **were** with him, from the ambush. And Gaal saw the people, and he said to Zebul, "Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains!" And Zebul said to him, "The shadow of the mountains you are seeing as men." And Gaal spoke again and said, "Look, people are coming down from the center of the land, and one company is coming from the direction of the terebinth of soothsayers." And Zebul said to him, "Where then **is** your mouth, that you said, 'Who **is** Abimelech, that we should serve him?' **Is** not this the people that you rejected? Go out, please, now, and fight against it." And Gaal went out before the lords of Shechem and fought against Abimelech. And Abimelech pursued him, and he fled from before him; and many fell slain, up to the entrance of the gate. And Abimelech dwelt at Arumah; and Zebul drove out Gaal and his brothers from dwelling in Shechem.*

Abimelech came by night with four companies and lay in ambush. In the morning Gaal stood at the city gate and saw men coming down the mountains. Zebul mocked him: "The shadow of the mountains you are seeing as men." He was stalling while Abimelech's men drew closer.

When Gaal saw more companies coming, one by the terebinth of soothsayers (a tree where fortune-tellers practiced), Zebul dropped the act: "Where then is your mouth?" You boasted. Now go out and fight.

Gaal fought and lost. Many fell dead up to the gate, and Zebul drove Gaal and his brothers out of the city. The boaster was gone, but the trouble between Abimelech and Shechem was just beginning.

9:42-45 *And it was on the next day, and the people went out into the field; and they told Abimelech. And he took the people and divided them into three companies, and he lay in wait in the field. And he looked, and look, the people were going out from the city; and he rose up against them and struck them down. And Abimelech and the companies that **were** with him rushed **forward** and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city, and the two companies rushed upon all who **were** in the field and struck them down. And Abimelech fought against the city all that day, and he captured the city, and the people who **were** in it he killed; and he tore down the city and sowed it **with** salt.*

The next day, the people of Shechem went out to their fields, maybe thinking the fight was over. Abimelech was waiting. He divided his men into three companies, struck the people in the fields, and seized the city gate so no one could get back in.

He fought all day, captured the city, killed the people, tore it down, "and sowed it with salt." Salt makes ground barren. It was a sign that the city was cursed and should never be rebuilt. The first half of Jotham's curse had come true: fire had come out of Abimelech and consumed Shechem.

9:46-49 *And all the lords of the tower of Shechem heard, and they went into the stronghold of the house of El-berith. And it was told to Abimelech that all the lords of the tower of Shechem had gathered themselves together. And Abimelech went up the mountain of Zalmon, he and all the people who **were** with him; and Abimelech took the axes in his hand, and he cut off a branch of the trees, and lifted it up and put **it** on his shoulder; and he said to the people who **were** with him, "What you have seen I have done, hurry, do like me." And all the people also cut off each one his branch, and they went after Abimelech, and they put **them** against the stronghold, and they set the stronghold on fire over them with fire; and all the men of the tower of Shechem also died, about a thousand, man and woman.*

The leaders of the tower of Shechem, probably a fortress near the city, ran into the stronghold of the temple of El-berith, another name for the same false covenant god. They looked to Baal to protect them. He did not.

Abimelech went up Mount Zalmon, cut a branch, put it on his shoulder, and told his men to do the same. They piled the branches against the stronghold and set it on fire. About a thousand men and women died. The bramble had kept its word. Fire went out from the bramble and burned the "cedars" who had trusted in its shade.

9:50-54 *And Abimelech went to Thebez, and he encamped against Thebez and captured it. And a tower of strength was in the midst of the city, and all the men and the women, and all the lords of the city, fled there; and they shut **the door** behind them and went up on the roof of the tower. And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it, and he drew near to the entrance of the tower to burn it with fire. And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on the head of Abimelech and crushed his skull. And he called quickly to the young man, the bearer of his weapons, and said to him, "Draw your sword and put me to death, lest they say of me, 'A woman killed him.'" And his young man pierced him through, and he died.*

Abimelech went on to Thebez, a nearby town that seems to have joined the revolt. He took the town, but the people fled into a strong tower and climbed to the roof. Abimelech came up to the door to burn it the same way.

"And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on the head of Abimelech and crushed his skull." An upper millstone was the top stone of a hand mill, the round stone women used every day to grind grain, about the size of a small wheel. An unnamed woman with a kitchen tool ended the life of the man who killed seventy brothers on one stone. He died by a stone.

Abimelech's last concern was his pride. He told his armor-bearer to kill him "lest they say of me, 'A woman killed him.'" The young man did. But Israel remembered it anyway. Generations later, Joab spoke of how a woman threw a millstone on Abimelech at Thebez (2 Samuel 11:21). He could not escape the very shame he feared.

9:55-57 *And the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, and they went each one to his place. And God returned the evil of Abimelech which he had done to his father by killing his seventy brothers; and all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their head; and the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal came to them.*

When the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they went home. His kingdom vanished as quickly as it came.

Then the writer tells us what the whole chapter means: "God returned the evil of Abimelech which he had done to his father by killing his seventy brothers; and all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their head; and the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal came to them."

For three years it looked as if Abimelech had gotten away with murder. He had not. God is patient, but He is not blind. "Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). That is a warning to every one of us who is tempted to grab for power or to go along with evil because it serves us. It is also a comfort to anyone who has been wronged. God sees, and in His time He will set things right. And there is good news for those who see their own sin in this chapter: the One who judges sin also sent His Son to bear it for all who turn to Him (Romans 5:8-9).

Summary

Abimelech, Gideon's son by his concubine, persuaded the lords of Shechem to make him their ruler, hired worthless men with silver from the temple of Baal-berith, and killed his seventy brothers on one stone. Only Jotham escaped. From Mount Gerizim Jotham told a fable about the trees asking the olive, the fig and the vine to rule, and then the bramble, which offered its shade and threatened fire, and he warned that fire would come out from Abimelech and from Shechem to consume each other. After three years God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and Shechem. Gaal son of Ebed stirred up a revolt, but Zebul warned Abimelech, who defeated Gaal, destroyed Shechem and sowed it with salt, and burned about a thousand people in the stronghold of El-berith. At Thebez a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head, and his armor-bearer killed him so no one could say a woman had done it. God repaid Abimelech and the men of Shechem for their evil, and Jotham's curse came on them.

Study Questions

1. What argument did Abimelech use to win over the men of Shechem? (9:1-3)

2. Where did the money for Abimelech's hired men come from, and what did he do with them? (9:4-5)

3. In Jotham's fable, why did the olive tree, the fig tree and the vine refuse to be king? (9:8-13)

4. What did the bramble offer, and what did it threaten? Who was the bramble? (9:14-15)

5. What did Jotham say would happen if Shechem had not acted in truth and integrity? (9:20)

6. Why did God send an evil spirit between Abimelech and Shechem, according to verse 24? (9:23-24)

7. How did Abimelech die, and why did he ask his armor-bearer to kill him? (9:53-54)

8. What do verses 56 and 57 tell us about how God dealt with Abimelech and the men of Shechem? (9:56-57)

9. The men of Shechem followed Abimelech because "He is our brother." What wrong reasons are people tempted to follow leaders for today? How can we choose better?

10. Abimelech seemed to get away with murder for three years. How does this chapter help you trust God when it seems that evil is winning?

Judges 10: Tola, Jair and Israel's Repentance

Scripture

10:1-18 And after Abimelech there arose, to save Israel, Tola the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, a man of Issachar; and he was dwelling in Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. And he judged Israel twenty-three years; and he died and was buried in Shamir. And after him arose Jair the Gileadite, and he judged Israel twenty-two years. And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities; they call them Havvoth-jair to this day, which ***are*** in the land of Gilead. And Jair died and was buried in Kamon. And the sons of Israel again did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and they served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Sidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the LORD and did not serve Him. And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the sons of Ammon. And they shattered and crushed the sons of Israel in that year, eighteen years, all the sons of Israel who ***were*** beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which ***is*** in Gilead. And the sons of Ammon crossed over the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim; and Israel was in great distress. And the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, "We have sinned against You, for we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals." And the LORD said to the sons of Israel, "***Did I*** not ***save you*** from Egypt, and from the Amorites, and from the sons of Ammon, and from the Philistines? And the Sidonians and Amalek and Maon oppressed you, and you cried out to Me, and I saved you from their hand. And you have forsaken Me and served other gods; therefore I will not again save you. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress." And the sons of Israel said to the LORD, "We have sinned. You do to us according to all that ***is*** good in Your eyes; only deliver us, please, this day." And they removed the foreign gods from their midst and served the LORD; and His soul became impatient over the trouble of Israel. And the sons of Ammon were called together, and they encamped in Gilead; and the sons of Israel gathered together, and they encamped at Mizpah. And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said each man to his neighbor, "Who ***is*** the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

Preview

After the disaster of Abimelech, God gives Israel two quiet judges, Tola and Jair, and nearly fifty years of peace. We know very little about them. Then Israel falls deeper into idolatry than ever before, serving the gods of every nation around them. God gives them to the Philistines in the west and the Ammonites in the east at the same time, and for eighteen years the Ammonites crush the tribes east of the Jordan.

When Israel cries out this time, God answers with words that sting: "Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen." But the people do not just ask for rescue. They confess, put away their foreign gods and serve the LORD, and God's heart is moved. This short chapter shows us what real repentance looks like, and how deep the compassion of God is.

Study

10:1-2 *And after Abimelech there arose, to save Israel, Tola the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, a man of Issachar; and he was dwelling in Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. And he judged Israel twenty-three years; and he died and was buried in Shamir.*

"After Abimelech there arose, to save Israel, Tola the son of Puah." Abimelech had raised himself up. Tola arose "to save Israel." He was from Issachar but lived in Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. He judged Israel twenty-three years, died and was buried.

That is all we know. No battles, no famous stories. Tola and the other judges who get only a few verses are often called the minor judges, not because they mattered less, but because the book says less about them. After the chaos of Abimelech, twenty-three years of quiet, faithful leadership was a gift. Not every servant of God is called to be famous. Many are called to be faithful.

10:3-5 *And after him arose Jair the Gileadite, and he judged Israel twenty-two years. And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities; they call them Havvoth-jair to this day, which **are** in the land of Gilead. And Jair died and was buried in Kamon.*

"After him arose Jair the Gileadite," from Gilead, the land east of the Jordan. He judged twenty-two years. He had thirty sons who rode thirty donkeys and ruled thirty towns called Havvoth-jair, which means the villages of Jair (compare Numbers 32:41). Riding a donkey was a mark of rank in that day. Jair's family was wealthy and important.

Jair is remembered mostly for his large and prosperous family. That is not a bad thing, but it is a little sad that nothing is said about his faith. Then he died and was buried in Kamon.

10:6 *And the sons of Israel again did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and they served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Sidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the LORD and did not serve Him.*

Here begins the darkest turn of the cycle yet. "The sons of Israel again did the evil in the eyes of the LORD." Look at the list: the Baals and the Ashtaroth, "and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Sidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines." Seven groups of gods. Israel worshiped everything except the one true God. "They forsook the LORD and did not serve Him."

This is how idolatry grows. It starts with one false god and ends with many, because no false god can satisfy. When people leave the true God, they do not believe in nothing. They believe in anything.

10:7-9 *And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the sons of Ammon. And they shattered and crushed the sons of Israel in that year, eighteen years, all the sons of Israel who **were** beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which **is** in Gilead. And the sons of Ammon crossed over the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim; and Israel was in great distress.*

"The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of the Philistines" and into the hand of the Ammonites. This is two oppressions at once, one from the west and one from the east. The next chapters follow both. Jephthah will fight the Ammonites in the east (chapter 11), and Samson will fight the Philistines in the west (chapters 13 to 16). Many Bible teachers believe these two stories happened at about the same time, which helps explain how the years in Judges fit into the time available.

The Ammonites lived east of the Jordan, beyond Gilead. For eighteen years they "shattered and crushed" the Israelites who lived in Gilead. Then they crossed the Jordan and attacked Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim too. "Israel was in great distress."

10:10-14 *And the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, "We have sinned against You, for we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals." And the LORD said to the sons of Israel, "**Did I** not **save you** from Egypt, and from the Amorites, and from the sons of Ammon, and from the Philistines? And the Sidonians and Amalek and Maon oppressed you, and you cried out to Me, and I saved you from their hand. And you have forsaken Me and served other gods; therefore I will not again save you. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress."*

"We have sinned against You, for we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals." For the first time in the book, Israel does more than cry out. They confess. They name their sin.

But the LORD's answer is hard. He reminds them of all the times He saved them: from Egypt, from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and the Philistines, from the Sidonians, Amalek and Maon. "And you have forsaken Me and served other gods; therefore I will not again save you. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress."

Why would God say that? Was He finished with them? I don't believe so, because He did save them. But He wanted them to see that their cry could not be one more turn of the cycle, crying out when it hurts and drifting back when it stops. He was testing whether their confession was real. And there is a hard truth in His words. The gods we choose cannot save us. In the day of trouble, every idol is silent.

10:15-16 *And the sons of Israel said to the LORD, "We have sinned. You do to us according to all that **is** good in Your eyes; only deliver us, please, this day." And they removed the foreign gods from their midst and served the LORD; and His soul became impatient over the trouble of Israel.*

Israel's answer shows real repentance. "We have sinned. You do to us according to all that is good in Your eyes; only deliver us, please, this day." They did not argue. They did not make excuses. They put themselves in God's hands.

Then they acted. "They removed the foreign gods from their midst and served the LORD." Repentance is not only saying sorry. It is turning around, putting away what took God's place, and serving Him.

And look at God's heart: "His soul became impatient over the trouble of Israel." That is a deeply personal way to say it. God could not bear to watch His people suffer any longer. He had said He would not save them, but when they truly turned, His compassion would not let Him leave them. That is the God of the Bible. He is holy, and He takes sin seriously. But He delights in mercy (Micah 7:18). "The steadfast loves of the LORD, for we are not finished, for His compassions do not come to an end" (Lamentations 3:22).

10:17-18 *And the sons of Ammon were called together, and they encamped in Gilead; and the sons of Israel gathered together, and they encamped at Mizpah. And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said each man to his neighbor, "Who **is** the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."*

The Ammonites gathered their army in Gilead, and Israel camped at Mizpah, a town in Gilead. But Israel had no leader. The leaders of Gilead asked each other, "Who is the man who will begin to fight" against the Ammonites? Whoever would lead them would be head over all Gilead.

They were asking the right question, but notice they did not ask God. In chapter 1, Israel asked the LORD who should go first. Here they ask each other and offer a reward. God would still raise up a deliverer, but He would do it in a surprising way, through a man everyone had rejected.

Summary

After Abimelech, Tola of Issachar judged Israel twenty-three years, and then Jair of Gilead judged twenty-two years, with thirty sons on thirty donkeys ruling thirty towns. Then Israel sank deeper into idolatry, serving the gods of Syria, Sidon, Moab, Ammon and the Philistines along with the Baals and the Ashtaroth. The LORD sold them to the Philistines and the Ammonites, and for eighteen years the Ammonites crushed Gilead and then attacked Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim. When Israel confessed their sin, the LORD reminded them of all His past rescues and told them to cry out to the gods they had chosen. Israel confessed again, put themselves in His hands, put away their foreign gods and served the LORD, and His soul could no longer bear Israel's trouble. As the Ammonites gathered in Gilead, Israel's leaders asked who would lead the fight.

Study Questions

1. What do we know about Tola and Jair? What does their short record teach us about faithfulness? (10:1-5)

2. List the gods Israel served in verse 6. What does that list tell you about how idolatry grows? (10:6)

3. Which two nations did the LORD sell Israel to, and where did each one attack? (10:7-9)

4. What was different about Israel's cry this time, compared with earlier cries in Judges? (10:10)

5. Why do you think the LORD said, "I will not again save you"? (10:11-14)

6. What did Israel say and do in verses 15 and 16 that showed real repentance? (10:15-16)

7. What does "His soul became impatient over the trouble of Israel" tell us about God's heart? (10:16)

8. The leaders of Gilead asked each other who would lead them. What did they leave out? (10:17-18; compare 1:1)

9. Is there anything in your life that you have let take God's place? What would it look like to put it away, as Israel did?

10. Have you ever felt that you had gone back to the same sin too many times for God to help you again? What does this chapter say to you?

Judges 11: Jephthah and His Vow

Scripture

11:1-11 And Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, and he ***was*** the son of a woman, a prostitute; and Gilead fathered Jephthah. And the wife of Gilead bore him sons; and the sons of the wife grew up, and they drove out Jephthah and said to him, "You shall not inherit in the house of our father, for you ***are*** the son of another woman." And Jephthah fled from before his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and empty men gathered themselves to Jephthah, and they went out with him. And it was after a time, and the sons of Ammon fought with Israel. And it was, when the sons of Ammon fought with Israel, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah from the land of Tob. And they said to Jephthah, "Come, and you shall be commander for us, and let us fight against the sons of Ammon." And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me out from the house of my father? And why have you come to me now, when distress ***is*** yours?" And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "Therefore we have now returned to you, and you shall go with us and fight against the sons of Ammon, and you shall be head for us, for all the inhabitants of Gilead." And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you are bringing me back to fight against the sons of Ammon, and the LORD gives them before me, I, I will be head for you." And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD shall be the One who hears between us, if we do not do so according to your word." And Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people set him over them as head and as commander; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah.

11:12-28 And Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon, saying, "What ***is there*** to me and to you, that you have come to me to fight against my land?" And the king of the sons of Ammon said to the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel took my land when it came up from Egypt, from the Arnon and to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; and now, restore them in peace." And Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon, and he said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: 'Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the sons of Ammon. For when they came up from Egypt, Israel went in the wilderness to the Red Sea, and came to Kadesh. And Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, "Let me pass, please, through your land." And the king of Edom did not listen. And also to the king of Moab it sent, and he was not willing. And Israel remained at Kadesh. And it went in the wilderness and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab, and came ***on*** the east ***side*** of the land of Moab; and they encamped beyond the Arnon, and they did not come within the border of Moab, for the Arnon ***was*** the border of Moab. And Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, the king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, "Let us pass, please, through your land to my place." And Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his border; and Sihon gathered all his people, and they encamped at Jahaz, and he fought with Israel. And the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they struck them; and Israel possessed all the land of the Amorites, the inhabitants of that land. And they possessed all the border of the Amorites, from the Arnon and to the Jabbok, and from the wilderness and to the Jordan. And now the LORD, the God of Israel, has dispossessed the Amorites from before His people Israel; and will you possess it? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god causes you to possess? And all that the LORD our God has dispossessed from

before us, it we will possess. And now, are you indeed better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive with Israel, or did he ever fight against them? While Israel dwelt in Heshbon and its daughter ***towns***, and in Aroer and its daughter ***towns***, and in all the cities that ***are*** on the sides of the Arnon, three hundred years, why did you not deliver ***them*** at that time? And I have not sinned against you, and you are doing evil with me by fighting against me. Let the LORD, the Judge, judge this day between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon.'" And the king of the sons of Ammon did not listen to the words of Jephthah which he sent to him.

11:29-40 And the Spirit of the LORD was on Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and he passed through Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed on ***to*** the sons of Ammon. And Jephthah vowed a vow to the LORD and said, "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out, that comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up ***as*** a burnt offering." And Jephthah passed on to the sons of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD gave them into his hand. And he struck them from Aroer until you come to Minnith, twenty cities, and to Abel-keramim, a very great striking; and the sons of Ammon were humbled before the sons of Israel. And Jephthah came to Mizpah, to his house; and look, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dances; and she ***was*** only an only one; he had of his own no son or daughter. And it was, when he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; and I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot turn back." And she said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the LORD; do to me according to what has gone out from your mouth, since the LORD has done vengeance for you on your enemies, on the sons of Ammon." And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, and let me go, and I will go down on the mountains and weep over my virginity, I and my companions." And he said, "Go." And he sent her away ***for*** two months; and she went, she and her companions, and she wept over her virginity on the mountains. And it was at the end of two months, and she returned to her father, and he did to her his vow which he had vowed; and she had not known a man. And it became a statute in Israel: from year to year the daughters of Israel go to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days in the year.

Preview

Israel has repented, and the Ammonites are camped in Gilead, but no one will lead the fight. So the elders of Gilead go to the one man they had rejected: Jephthah, a mighty warrior, the son of a prostitute, driven out by his half brothers and living with a band of outcasts. Jephthah agrees to lead them if they will make him their head. Before he fights, he sends messages to the king of Ammon, setting out the history of the land and asking the LORD to judge between them. The king will not listen.

The Spirit of the LORD comes on Jephthah, and the LORD gives him a great victory. But on the way to battle, Jephthah makes a rash vow: whatever comes out of his house to meet him when he returns will be the LORD's, and he will offer it as a burnt offering. His only child, his daughter, comes out dancing. This is one of the hardest stories in the Bible, and Bible teachers have read its ending in two ways. We will look at both carefully and fairly.

Study

11:1-3 *And Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, and he **was** the son of a woman, a prostitute; and Gilead fathered Jephthah. And the wife of Gilead bore him sons; and the sons of the wife grew up, and they drove out Jephthah and said to him, "You shall not inherit in the house of our father, for you **are** the son of another woman." And Jephthah fled from before his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and empty men gathered themselves to Jephthah, and they went out with him.*

"Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor," the same words the angel used of Gideon (6:12). But his birth was a shame in his family's eyes: "the son of a woman, a prostitute." When his father's other sons grew up, they drove him out so he would not share the inheritance.

Jephthah fled to the land of Tob, north and east of Gilead, and "empty men gathered themselves to Jephthah." These were men with nothing, outcasts and drifters, and Jephthah became their leader. It sounds a little like David later, when the distressed and the debtors gathered to him in the cave of Adullam (1 Samuel 22:2).

Jephthah was not to blame for how he was born. But he carried the wound of being rejected by his own family, and that wound shows up in what he says later. God, though, does not reject people because of their family history. He often chooses the very ones others push away.

11:4-8 *And it was after a time, and the sons of Ammon fought with Israel. And it was, when the sons of Ammon fought with Israel, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah from the land of Tob. And they said to Jephthah, "Come, and you shall be commander for us, and let us fight against the sons of Ammon." And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me out from the house of my father? And why have you come to me now, when distress **is** yours?" And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "Therefore we have now returned to you, and you shall go with us and fight against the sons of Ammon, and you shall be head for us, for all the inhabitants of Gilead."*

When the Ammonites attacked, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah. They offered to make him their commander.

Jephthah's answer had some bite: "Did you not hate me and drive me out from the house of my father? And why have you come to me now, when distress is yours?" Some of these elders may have been the very ones who had pushed him out, or had stood by while his brothers did. Now they needed him.

The elders upped the offer. He would not just be commander for the war. He would be "head for us, for all the inhabitants of Gilead."

11:9-11 *And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you are bringing me back to fight against the sons of Ammon, and the LORD gives them before me, I, I will be head for you." And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD shall be the One who hears between us, if we do not do so according to your word." And Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people set him over them as head and as commander; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah.*

Jephthah made sure of the terms: if they brought him back and "the LORD gives them before me," he would be their head. Notice that Jephthah spoke of the LORD. He understood that victory would come from God.

The elders answered with an oath: "The LORD shall be the One who hears between us." The deal was made, and Jephthah "spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah." He took his agreement to God. For a man raised on the edges, he knew the LORD's name and wanted Him as witness.

11:12-13 *And Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon, saying, "What **is there** to me and to you, that you have come to me to fight against my land?" And the king of the sons of Ammon said to the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel took my land when it came up from Egypt, from the Arnon and to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; and now, restore them in peace."*

Before going to war, Jephthah tried to settle things with words. He sent messengers to the king of Ammon: why have you come to fight against my land?

The king gave his reason. Israel, he said, took his land when they came up from Egypt, from the Arnon River in the south to the Jabbok in the north and over to the Jordan. "And now, restore them in peace." It was a land claim, three hundred years old.

11:14-18 *And Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon, and he said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: 'Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the sons of Ammon. For when they came up from Egypt, Israel went in the wilderness to the Red Sea, and came to Kadesh. And Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, "Let me pass, please, through your land." And the king of Edom did not listen. And also to the king of Moab it sent, and he was not willing. And Israel remained at Kadesh. And it went in the wilderness and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab, and came **on** the east **side** of the land of Moab; and they encamped beyond the Arnon, and they did not come within the border of Moab, for the Arnon **was** the border of Moab.*

Jephthah answered with history, and he got it right. He tells the story Moses records in Numbers 20 and 21. Israel did not take land from Moab or from Ammon. When Israel came up from Egypt to Kadesh, they asked Edom and Moab for permission to pass through. Both refused, and Israel honored that. They went around Edom and Moab through the wilderness and camped beyond the Arnon, outside Moab's border.

Jephthah knew his Bible history. He may have been an outcast, but he had learned the story of what God had done. It mattered, because the truth of what happened was his defense.

11:19-22 *And Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, the king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, "Let us pass, please, through your land to my place." And Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his border; and Sihon gathered all his people, and they encamped at Jahaz, and he fought with Israel. And the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they struck them; and Israel possessed all the land of the Amorites, the inhabitants of that land. And they possessed all the border of the Amorites, from the Arnon and to the Jabbok, and from the wilderness and to the Jordan.*

Israel then asked Sihon, the king of the Amorites at Heshbon, to let them pass. Sihon did not trust them, gathered his army, and attacked. "And the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel." So Israel took the land of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok (Numbers 21:21-25).

Jephthah's point is clear. The land the king wanted had not belonged to Ammon at all. It belonged to the Amorites, and Israel took it from Sihon in a war Sihon started.

11:23-24 *And now the LORD, the God of Israel, has dispossessed the Amorites from before His people Israel; and will you possess it? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god causes you to possess? And all that the LORD our God has dispossessed from before us, it we will possess.*

"And now the LORD, the God of Israel, has dispossessed the Amorites from before His people Israel; and will you possess it?" Jephthah then said, Keep what Chemosh your god gives you, and we will keep what the LORD our God has given us.

Chemosh was the god of Moab. The main god of Ammon was Milcom (also called Molech, 1 Kings 11:5, 7). Jephthah may have named Chemosh because the land in question had once been Moabite before Sihon took it, or because Ammon and Moab worshiped some of the same gods. Jephthah was not saying Chemosh was real. He was arguing from the king's own beliefs: you keep what you think your god gave you, and we will keep what our God really gave us.

11:25-28 *And now, are you indeed better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive with Israel, or did he ever fight against them? While Israel dwelt in Heshbon and its daughter **towns**, and in Aroer and its daughter **towns**, and in all the cities that **are** on the sides of the Arnon, three hundred years, why did you not deliver **them** at that time? And I have not sinned against you, and you are doing evil with me by fighting against me. Let the LORD, the Judge, judge this day between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon.'" And the king of the sons of Ammon did not listen to the words of Jephthah which he sent to him.*

Jephthah pressed on. Balak, king of Moab in Moses' day, never went to war with Israel over this land (Numbers 22 to 24). And Israel had lived there "three hundred years." Why had Ammon not claimed it before?

That "three hundred years" is an important clue for dating. If Jephthah lived about 1100 B.C., three hundred years earlier brings us to about 1400 B.C., which fits Israel entering the land about 1406 B.C.

Jephthah ended with an appeal to God: "Let the LORD, the Judge, judge this day between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon." Here is the only place in the book where the word judge is used of God Himself. The judges of Israel come and go. The LORD is the true Judge. The king would not listen.

11:29 *And the Spirit of the LORD was on Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and he passed through Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed on* ***to*** *the sons of Ammon.*

"And the Spirit of the LORD was on Jephthah." This is God's answer and God's empowering. He passed through Gilead and Manasseh, gathering troops, and went out against the Ammonites.

Notice the order. The Spirit came on Jephthah before he made his vow. God was already with him. He did not need to bargain for God's help.

11:30-31 *And Jephthah vowed a vow to the LORD and said, "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out, that comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up* ***as*** *a burnt offering."*

"And Jephthah vowed a vow to the LORD." A vow was a solemn promise to God, often made in time of need: if God would do something, the person would give or do something in return. The Law allowed vows but warned that they must be kept (Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21-23).

Jephthah promised, "whatever comes out, that comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering." Houses in that day often had animals living in the courtyard or the ground floor, so he may have expected an animal. But "comes out from the doors of my house to meet me" sounds like a person. Either way, this was a rash vow. He did not know what he was promising, and he made it when God had already given him His Spirit.

Why make it at all? Perhaps Jephthah, who had been rejected and had to bargain for everything, thought he had to bargain with God too. Perhaps he had picked up the thinking of the pagans around him, who believed their gods had to be paid for victory. God is not like that. We do not buy His help. He gives it out of grace.

11:32-33 *And Jephthah passed on to the sons of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD gave them into his hand. And he struck them from Aroer until you come to Minnith, twenty cities, and to Abel-keramim, a very great striking; and the sons of Ammon were humbled before the sons of Israel.*

"And the LORD gave them into his hand." Jephthah struck the Ammonites from Aroer to Minnith, twenty towns, as far as Abel-keramim, "a very great striking; and the sons of Ammon were humbled before the sons of Israel." The writer makes sure we know it was the LORD who won. The victory did not come because of the vow. It came because God had already decided to save His people (10:16).

11:34-35 *And Jephthah came to Mizpah, to his house; and look, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dances; and she **was** only an only one; he had of his own no son or daughter. And it was, when he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; and I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot turn back."*

Jephthah came home to Mizpah, "and look, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dances." In Israel, women came out with music and dancing to welcome victors home (Exodus 15:20; 1 Samuel 18:6). It was a joyful moment. "And she was only an only one; he had of his own no son or daughter."

When he saw her, Jephthah tore his clothes, a sign of deep grief. "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low." He blamed her, as if she had done this to him. But it was his own mouth that had done it. "I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot turn back."

Was that true? The Law did make a way out. Leviticus 27:1-8 allowed a person who had been vowed to the LORD to be redeemed with a payment of silver. And God never wanted a vow that required something He had forbidden. Jephthah either did not know the Law well or did not seek the priests' counsel. A rash vow led to a broken heart.

11:36-38 *And she said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the LORD; do to me according to what has gone out from your mouth, since the LORD has done vengeance for you on your enemies, on the sons of Ammon." And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, and let me go, and I will go down on the mountains and weep over my virginity, I and my companions." And he said, "Go." And he sent her away **for** two months; and she went, she and her companions, and she wept over her virginity on the mountains.*

His daughter's answer is one of the most selfless in Scripture: "My father, you have opened your mouth to the LORD; do to me according to what has gone out from your mouth, since the LORD has done vengeance for you on your enemies." She put her father's word to God, and God's victory for Israel, ahead of herself.

She asked for one thing: two months to go to the mountains with her friends "and weep over my virginity." Her father said, "Go." She went with her companions and grieved on the mountains.

Why weep over her virginity? In Israel, to die unmarried and childless, with no one to carry on your name, was a great sorrow. And she was Jephthah's only child. With her, his family line would end. That grief is part of both readings of this story.

11:39-40 *And it was at the end of two months, and she returned to her father, and he did to her his vow which he had vowed; and she had not known a man. And it became a statute in Israel: from year to year the daughters of Israel go to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days in the year.*

"And it was at the end of two months, and she returned to her father, and he did to her his vow which he had vowed; and she had not known a man." Every year after that, "the daughters of Israel go to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days in the year."

What did Jephthah do? Faithful Bible teachers have read this in two ways, and I want to give both fairly.

The first reading is that Jephthah offered his daughter as a burnt offering. This is the plain sense of the words "I will offer it up as a burnt offering" and "he did to her his vow." Many ancient Jewish and Christian readers took it this way. Those who hold this view point out that Jephthah grew up among outcasts, that the pagan nations around Israel did sacrifice children (2 Kings 3:27), and that the book of Judges shows Israel sinking into the ways of the Canaanites. If this is what happened, it was a terrible sin. God had forbidden child sacrifice in the strongest terms. He called it an abomination (Deuteronomy 12:31) and said it had never even come into His mind (Jeremiah 7:31). The text reports what Jephthah did. It does not say God accepted it or approved it.

The second reading is that Jephthah gave his daughter to the LORD for lifelong service, and that she lived the rest of her life unmarried, serving at the tabernacle. Those who hold this view point out that the Hebrew word for "and" in verse 31 can also mean "or," so the vow could mean that whatever came out would be the LORD's, or, if it was a fitting animal, it would be offered. They point out that she wept over her virginity, not over her death, and that the writer adds "she had not known a man" after saying the vow was kept, which seems to describe the result. They note that there were women who served at the entrance of the tabernacle (Exodus 38:8; 1 Samuel 2:22), that no faithful priest would have offered a human sacrifice, and that Hebrews 11:32 names Jephthah among the people of faith. Some also read the word "commemorate" in verse 40 as visiting or talking with her.

I believe we should hold this with humility. Both readings take the text seriously. What both agree on matters more. Jephthah's vow was rash and unnecessary. God never asks us to bargain with Him. A careless promise brought grief on a godly young woman who had done nothing wrong, and on her father. "Better is it that you do not vow than that you vow and do not pay" (Ecclesiastes 5:5), and "A snare to a man is that he says rashly, Holy! and after vows he begins to inquire" (Proverbs 20:25). Jesus taught us to let our yes be yes and our no be no (Matthew 5:37).

And there is one more thing to see. Jephthah's daughter willingly gave herself up because of a promise made to God. Thousands of years later, God the Father did what He never asked of Jephthah. He "did not spare His own Son, but handed Him over for us all" (Romans 8:32). God does not need us to buy His favor. He paid the price Himself.

Summary

Jephthah, a mighty warrior and the son of a prostitute, was driven out by his half brothers and led a band of outcasts in the land of Tob. When the Ammonites attacked, the elders of Gilead asked him to lead them, and he agreed to fight on the condition that he would become their head if the LORD gave him the victory. He sent messengers to the king of Ammon, showing from history that Israel had not taken land from Moab or Ammon but had taken it from Sihon the Amorite three hundred years before, and he asked the LORD, the Judge, to decide between them. The Spirit of the LORD came on Jephthah, and he vowed that whatever came out of his house to meet him when he

returned would be the LORD's and would be offered as a burnt offering. The LORD gave him a great victory. When his only child, his daughter, came out dancing to meet him, he tore his clothes. She told him to keep his vow, asked for two months to weep over her virginity, and then returned, and he did to her as he had vowed. Bible teachers read this as either a burnt offering or a lifelong dedication to the LORD as a virgin. The daughters of Israel commemorated her four days each year.

Study Questions

1. Why was Jephthah driven out of his father's house, and who gathered to him in the land of Tob? (11:1-3)

2. What did Jephthah say to the elders of Gilead when they came for him, and what did they promise? (11:7-11)

3. What claim did the king of Ammon make, and how did Jephthah answer it from history? (11:13-22; Numbers 21:21-25)

4. Whom did Jephthah ask to judge between Israel and Ammon? (11:27)

5. What came on Jephthah before he made his vow? Why does the order matter? (11:29-30)

6. What did Jephthah vow, and who came out of his house to meet him? (11:30-31, 34)

7. How did Jephthah's daughter answer him, and what did she ask for? (11:36-37)

8. What are the two ways Bible teachers have read verse 39? What do both readings agree on? (11:39)

9. Jephthah thought he had to bargain with God for help. Have you ever tried to bargain with God? What does God's grace say to that?

10. Have you ever made a promise without thinking it through? What does this chapter teach you about the words you speak, to God and to others?

Judges 12: Jephthah, Ephraim and Three Judges

Scripture

12:1-15 And the men of Ephraim were called together, and they crossed over to Zaphon, and they said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? Your house we will burn over you with fire." And Jephthah said to them, "I was a man of great strife, I and my people, with the sons of Ammon; and I summoned you, and you did not save me from their hand. And I saw that you were not a savior, and I put my life in my palm and crossed over against the sons of Ammon, and the LORD gave them into my hand. And why have you come up against me this day to fight against me?" And Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim; and the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, for they had said, "You ***are*** fugitives of Ephraim, Gilead, in the midst of Ephraim, in the midst of Manasseh." And Gilead captured the fords of the Jordan toward Ephraim. And it was, when the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," and the men of Gilead said to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" and he said, "No," then they said to him, "Say, please, 'Shibboleth.'" And he said, "Sibboleth," and he did not take care to speak ***it*** right. And they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. And there fell at that time of Ephraim forty-two thousand. And Jephthah judged Israel six years; and Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in the cities of Gilead. And after him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. And he had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he sent outside, and thirty daughters he brought in for his sons from outside. And he judged Israel seven years. And Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem. And after him Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel; and he judged Israel ten years. And Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried in Aijalon in the land of Zebulun. And after him Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. And he had forty sons and thirty sons of sons, who rode on seventy donkeys. And he judged Israel eight years. And Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

Preview

Jephthah has just won a great victory over the Ammonites, but there is no celebration. The men of Ephraim come across the Jordan in anger, as they had once come to Gideon (8:1-3), and they threaten to burn Jephthah's house down over him because he did not call them to the battle. Gideon calmed Ephraim with a soft answer. Jephthah does not. The quarrel turns into a war between Israelites, and at the fords of the Jordan one word, "Shibboleth," decides who lives and who dies.

The chapter ends with three short notes about judges named Ibzan, Elon and Abdon. We are told about their children, their donkeys and where they were buried, and very little else. After the noise of Jephthah's story, the quiet is telling. Israel is no longer fighting only its enemies. It is turning on itself.

Study

12:1 *And the men of Ephraim were called together, and they crossed over to Zaphon, and they said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? Your house we will burn over you with fire."*

"The men of Ephraim were called together, and they crossed over to Zaphon." Ephraim was one of the largest and proudest tribes, the tribe of Joshua, with the tabernacle at Shiloh inside its borders. Zaphon was a town on the east side of the Jordan, in Gilead.

Their complaint sounds a lot like the one they made to Gideon: why did you go to fight Ammon "and did not call us to go with you?" Then they went much further than they did with Gideon: "Your house we will burn over you with fire." That is a death threat against the man God had just used to save Israel.

What was really going on? Ephraim wanted the honor of the victory without the risk of the battle. Pride is touchy. It is quick to feel left out and slow to show up when the work is hard.

12:2-3 *And Jephthah said to them, "I was a man of great strife, I and my people, with the sons of Ammon; and I summoned you, and you did not save me from their hand. And I saw that you were not a savior, and I put my life in my palm and crossed over against the sons of Ammon, and the LORD gave them into my hand. And why have you come up against me this day to fight against me?"*

Jephthah answered with the facts. He and his people had been in "great strife" with the Ammonites, and "I summoned you, and you did not save me from their hand." Judges 11 does not record that call, but there is no reason to doubt him. Ephraim had been asked and had stayed home.

So Jephthah says, "I put my life in my palm," a Hebrew way of saying he took his life in his hands and risked everything. And he gives God the credit: "the LORD gave them into my hand." Then he turns their question back on them: why have you come to fight against me?

Jephthah was right on the facts. But being right is not the same as being wise. Gideon had faced the same anger and answered gently (8:2-3). "A soft answer turns away rage," Solomon later wrote (Proverbs 15:1). Jephthah, the man who had once tried words before war with Ammon (11:12-28), had no patience left for his own brothers.

12:4 *And Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim; and the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, for they had said, "You **are** fugitives of Ephraim, Gilead, in the midst of Ephraim, in the midst of Manasseh."*

"Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim." Israelite against Israelite. The insult that set it off is in the second half of the verse. The men of Ephraim had said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, Gilead, in the midst of Ephraim, in the midst of Manasseh."

In other words, Ephraim mocked the Gileadites as runaways and nobodies, people with no real tribe of their own. Gilead was the land of half the tribe of Manasseh, east of the Jordan, and Manasseh and Ephraim were brothers, the two sons of Joseph. This was a family insult, and it turned into a family war. It is a sad thing to watch. The people God had just rescued from Ammon now spill one another's blood over pride and name-calling.

12:5-6 *And Gilead captured the fords of the Jordan toward Ephraim. And it was, when the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," and the men of Gilead said to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" and he said, "No," then they said to him, "Say, please, 'Shibboleth.'" And he said, "Sibboleth," and he did not take care to speak* ***it*** *right. And they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. And there fell at that time of Ephraim forty-two thousand.*

The men of Gilead "captured the fords of the Jordan," the shallow places where the river could be crossed on foot. When Ephraimite fugitives tried to cross back home, the guards asked, "Are you an Ephraimite?" A man who said "No" was given a test.

He had to say the word Shibboleth, a Hebrew word that means an ear of grain or a flowing stream. People from Ephraim seem to have spoken with an accent that could not make the "sh" sound, so the word came out "Sibboleth." That one sound gave them away. "And they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan."

"And there fell at that time of Ephraim forty-two thousand." Forty-two thousand men of Israel died at the hands of other men of Israel, more than many of the foreign wars in this book. The word shibboleth has even come into English for a test word or a custom that shows which group a person belongs to.

There is a warning here for God's people today. It is easy to draw lines between believers over small things, the way a person talks, the group they come from, the church they grew up in, and then treat those lines as if they decided who is in and who is out. Pride divided the tribes of Israel. Jesus prayed that those who believe in Him would be one (John 17:21).

12:7 *And Jephthah judged Israel six years; and Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in the cities of Gilead.*

"Jephthah judged Israel six years," and then he died and was buried "in the cities of Gilead." The Hebrew is unusual here, and it may mean in one of the towns of Gilead.

Six years is one of the shortest terms in the book. Jephthah's story is a mix. He was a rejected son who trusted the LORD, appealed to God as Judge, and was given His Spirit and a great victory. Hebrews 11:32 names him among the people of faith. He was also a man whose rash words cost him his only child and whose harsh words cost Israel forty-two thousand lives. God used him, and God did not hide his failures. That should both humble us and give us hope. God uses flawed people who trust Him, but our sins still have consequences.

12:8-10 *And after him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. And he had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he sent outside, and thirty daughters he brought in for his sons from outside. And he judged Israel seven years. And Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem.*

"After him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel." Most believe this was the Bethlehem in Judah, the town that matters so much in Ruth, though there was also a Bethlehem in Zebulun in the north (Joshua 19:15), and some think Ibzan came from there.

What we learn about Ibzan is his family. He had thirty sons and thirty daughters. He gave his daughters in marriage "outside," to men outside his clan, and he brought in thirty young women from outside for his sons. This was a man building alliances through marriage, the way powerful men did then. It shows wealth and influence. It does not show anything about leading the people back to God.

He judged seven years, died and was buried in Bethlehem.

12:11-12 *And after him Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel; and he judged Israel ten years. And Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried in Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.*

"Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel; and he judged Israel ten years." Then he died and was buried in Aijalon in Zebulun. That is all we are told. Zebulun was a tribe in the north, in Galilee, the region where Jesus would later grow up and preach (Matthew 4:13-16).

Sometimes the Bible tells us a great deal about a person, and sometimes only a name and a number. Elon's ten years may have been quiet and faithful. Scripture doesn't tell us. But God knew him, and his name is written in God's Word.

12:13-15 *And after him Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. And he had forty sons and thirty sons of sons, who rode on seventy donkeys. And he judged Israel eight years. And Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.*

The last of the three is "Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite." Pirathon was in the hill country of Ephraim. Like Jair before him (10:4), Abdon is remembered for his household: "he had forty sons and thirty sons of sons, who rode on seventy donkeys." Riding a donkey was a sign of rank in those days (5:10). Abdon was rich and important, with a large family of riders.

He judged eight years, died and was buried at Pirathon, "in the hill country of the Amalekites." The Amalekites were a desert people who had attacked Israel in Moses' day (Exodus 17:8-16). The phrase may mean that Amalekites had once lived in that area.

These three judges together cover about twenty-five years, and there is no mention of an enemy, a battle or a cry to the LORD. Their stories read more like the lives of chieftains than of deliverers. That is part of the writer's point. Israel had leaders, but the book is moving toward something worse. The next chapter opens with Israel doing evil again, and this time there is no cry for help at all (13:1).

Summary

After Jephthah's victory, the men of Ephraim crossed the Jordan and threatened to burn his house because he had not called them to fight Ammon. Jephthah answered that he had called them and they had not come, and that the LORD had given him the victory. Ephraim mocked the Gileadites as fugitives, and Jephthah led Gilead against them. The Gileadites held the fords of the Jordan and used the word Shibboleth to find the Ephraimites, who said Sibboleth, and forty-two thousand men of Ephraim died. Jephthah judged Israel six years and died. After him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged seven years and was known for marrying his sixty children outside his clan, Elon the Zebulunite judged ten years, and Abdon of Pirathon judged eight years and had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys.

Study Questions

1. What did the men of Ephraim say to Jephthah, and what did they threaten to do? (12:1)

2. How did Jephthah answer their complaint? Whom did he give credit for the victory? (12:2-3)

3. Compare Jephthah's answer to Ephraim with Gideon's answer in 8:1-3. What was different, and what was the result?

4. What insult did the Ephraimites use against the men of Gilead? (12:4)

5. How did the men of Gilead find out who was from Ephraim at the fords of the Jordan? (12:5-6)

6. How many men of Ephraim died, and what does that tell you about where Israel was heading? (12:6)

7. What do we learn about Ibzan, Elon and Abdon? What is missing from their stories? (12:8-15)

8. Ephraim wanted the honor of the victory without the risk of the battle. Where do you see that same attitude in families, workplaces or churches?

9. Jephthah was right on the facts but harsh in his answer. Have you ever won an argument and lost a relationship? What could you have done differently?

10. What "shibboleths" do Christians sometimes use to divide from one another? How can you work for unity with other believers without giving up the truth?

Judges 13: The Birth of Samson

Scripture

13:1-14 And the sons of Israel again did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines forty years. And there was a certain man from Zorah, of the clan of the Danites, and his name ***was*** Manoah; and his wife ***was*** barren, and she had not borne. And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "Look, please, you ***are*** barren and have not borne; and you shall conceive and bear a son. And now, take care, please, and do not drink wine and strong drink, and do not eat any unclean ***thing***. For look, you ***are*** pregnant and ***will be*** bearing a son, and a razor shall not go up on his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite of God from the womb; and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines." And the woman came and said to her husband, saying, "A man of God came to me, and his appearance ***was*** like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome; and I did not ask him where he ***was*** from, and his name he did not tell me. And he said to me, 'Look, you ***are*** pregnant and ***will be*** bearing a son; and now, do not drink wine and strong drink, and do not eat any uncleanness, for the boy shall be a Nazirite of God from the womb until the day of his death.'" And Manoah prayed to the LORD and said, "Please, Lord, let the man of God whom You sent come again, please, to us, and let him teach us what we shall do for the boy who is to be born." And God listened to the voice of Manoah; and the angel of God came again to the woman, and she ***was*** sitting in the field, and Manoah her husband ***was*** not with her. And the woman hurried and ran and told her husband, and she said to him, "Look, the man who came to me that day has appeared to me." And Manoah arose and went after his wife, and he came to the man and said to him, "Are you the man who spoke to the woman?" And he said, "I ***am***." And Manoah said, "Now let your words come ***to pass***. What shall be the manner of the boy, and his work?" And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "Of all that I said to the woman let her take care. Of anything that comes out from the vine of wine she shall not eat, and wine and strong drink let her not drink, and any uncleanness let her not eat; all that I commanded her she shall keep."

13:15-25 And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "Let us detain you, please, and let us prepare before you a kid of the goats." And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "If you detain me, I will not eat of your food; and if you make a burnt offering, to the LORD you shall offer it up." For Manoah did not know that he ***was*** the angel of the LORD. And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "What ***is*** your name, that when your word comes ***to pass***, we may honor you?" And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why ***is*** this ***that*** you ask for my name? And it ***is*** wonderful." And Manoah took the kid of the goats and the grain offering, and offered ***it*** up on the rock to the LORD; and ***He was*** doing a wonder, and Manoah and his wife were looking on. And it was, when the flame went up from on the altar toward the heavens, and the angel of the LORD went up in the flame of the altar, and Manoah and his wife were looking on; and they fell on their faces to the ground. And the angel of the LORD did not again appear to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he ***was*** the angel of the LORD. And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." And his wife said to him, "If the LORD had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted from our hand a burnt offering and a grain offering, and He would not have shown us all these ***things***, and at this time He would not have caused us to hear ***things*** like this." And the

woman bore a son and called his name Samson; and the boy grew up, and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

Preview

Israel sins again, and the LORD gives them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years, the longest oppression in the book. This time we never read that Israel cried out. But God moves anyway. The angel of the LORD appears to a childless woman from the tribe of Dan and tells her she will have a son. He is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from the womb, and he will begin to save Israel from the Philistines.

Her husband Manoah prays for the visitor to come back and teach them how to raise the boy. The angel returns, refuses to give his name because it is "wonderful," and goes up to heaven in the flame of their offering. Manoah is afraid they will die because they have seen God, and his wife answers him with good sense and faith. The boy is born, named Samson, and the Spirit of the LORD begins to stir him. Samson's life will be one of the hardest in the book to read, and it begins with grace.

Study

13:1 *And the sons of Israel again did the evil in the eyes of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines forty years.*

"The sons of Israel again did the evil in the eyes of the LORD." It is the familiar opening line of the cycle. "And the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines forty years."

The Philistines were a people who came by sea and settled on the southern coast of Canaan, in five main cities: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron. They knew how to work iron, and they would trouble Israel all the way to the days of Saul and David.

Notice what is missing. Every earlier oppression ends with Israel crying out to the LORD (3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10). Here there is no cry. As we will see in chapter 15, the men of Judah seem to have settled into life under the Philistines and did not want anyone rocking the boat. Israel had grown used to its chains. Even so, God began to work. His mercy came before they asked for it.

13:2 *And there was a certain man from Zorah, of the clan of the Danites, and his name **was** Manoah; and his wife **was** barren, and she had not borne.*

"There was a certain man from Zorah, of the clan of the Danites, and his name was Manoah; and his wife was barren." Zorah was a town in the low hills west of Jerusalem, on the border between Israel and Philistine land. The tribe of Dan had been given land near the coast but could not hold it (1:34). Chapter 18 tells how most of the tribe later moved north.

Manoah's wife is never named. She was barren, unable to have children. In Israel that was a deep sorrow and often a shame. But in the Bible, a barren woman is often where God is about to do something great: Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel in Genesis, Hannah in 1 Samuel 1, and Elizabeth in

Luke 1. When God wants to show that a child is His gift, He sometimes starts where there is no hope at all.

13:3-5 *And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "Look, please, you **are** barren and have not borne; and you shall conceive and bear a son. And now, take care, please, and do not drink wine and strong drink, and do not eat any unclean **thing**. For look, you **are** pregnant and **will be** bearing a son, and a razor shall not go up on his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite of God from the womb; and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."*

"The angel of the LORD appeared to the woman." This is the same mysterious messenger who met Hagar, Abraham, Moses and Gideon (6:11-24). He speaks for God and as God, and Manoah will later say that they have seen God (13:22). Many Bible teachers believe this was the Son of God appearing before He was born in Bethlehem.

The promise is plain: "you shall conceive and bear a son." Then come the instructions. She was not to drink wine or strong drink or eat anything unclean, meaning food the Law of Moses forbade (Leviticus 11). The boy would be "a Nazirite of God from the womb."

A Nazirite was a person set apart to God by a special vow (Numbers 6:1-21). He did not drink wine or eat anything from the grapevine, he did not go near a dead body, and he let his hair grow. Usually a person took the vow for a set time. Samson would be a Nazirite for his whole life, starting before he was born. That is why his mother had to keep the rules too.

"And he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines." Notice the word "begin." Samson would not finish the job. The Philistines would still be a threat in the days of Samuel, Saul and David. God gives some people the work of starting what others will complete.

13:6-7 *And the woman came and said to her husband, saying, "A man of God came to me, and his appearance **was** like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome; and I did not ask him where he **was** from, and his name he did not tell me. And he said to me, 'Look, you **are** pregnant and **will be** bearing a son; and now, do not drink wine and strong drink, and do not eat any uncleanness, for the boy shall be a Nazirite of God from the womb until the day of his death.'"*

The woman ran to tell her husband. "A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome." She did not ask where he was from, and he did not tell her his name.

She repeated the message almost word for word, with one addition at the end. The angel had said the boy would be a Nazirite "from the womb." She said he would be one "until the day of his death." She may have been simply telling what she understood. But her words hang over the whole story. Samson would be set apart to God until the day he died, and the way he died would be tied to that calling.

13:8 *And Manoah prayed to the LORD and said, "Please, Lord, let the man of God whom You sent come again, please, to us, and let him teach us what we shall do for the boy who is to be born."*

"And Manoah prayed to the LORD." Here is a good father before his son is even born. He believed his wife, and he did not ask for a sign. He asked God to send the man of God again "and let him teach us what we shall do for the boy who is to be born."

That is a prayer every parent can pray. Manoah knew that raising a child set apart to God was more than he knew how to do. So he asked God to teach him. We are not left to raise our children on our own wisdom either. James 1:5 says that if anyone lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives freely.

13:9-14 *And God listened to the voice of Manoah; and the angel of God came again to the woman, and she **was** sitting in the field, and Manoah her husband **was** not with her. And the woman hurried and ran and told her husband, and she said to him, "Look, the man who came to me that day has appeared to me." And Manoah arose and went after his wife, and he came to the man and said to him, "Are you the man who spoke to the woman?" And he said, "I **am**." And Manoah said, "Now let your words come **to pass**. What shall be the manner of the boy, and his work?" And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "Of all that I said to the woman let her take care. Of anything that comes out from the vine of wine she shall not eat, and wine and strong drink let her not drink, and any uncleanness let her not eat; all that I commanded her she shall keep."*

"And God listened to the voice of Manoah." The angel came again, but once more to the woman while she sat alone in the field. She ran and brought her husband, who asked, "Are you the man who spoke to the woman?" He answered, "I am."

Manoah asked the question that was on his heart: "What shall be the manner of the boy, and his work?" How should we raise him, and what will he do?

The angel did not give him anything new. He repeated what he had already told the woman: no wine, no strong drink, nothing from the vine, nothing unclean. "All that I commanded her she shall keep." God had already said what they needed to know. Sometimes we pray for more direction when what we need is to obey the direction God has already given.

13:15-16 *And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "Let us detain you, please, and let us prepare before you a kid of the goats." And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "If you detain me, I will not eat of your food; and if you make a burnt offering, to the LORD you shall offer it up." For Manoah did not know that he **was** the angel of the LORD.*

Manoah wanted to show hospitality, as Abraham had done for his three visitors (Genesis 18:1-8). "Let us detain you, please, and let us prepare before you a kid of the goats." A kid is a young goat.

The angel said he would not eat, but "if you make a burnt offering, to the LORD you shall offer it up." A burnt offering was an offering wholly burned on the altar to God, a way of giving yourself completely to Him and asking His acceptance. The writer adds, "For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the LORD." Manoah still thought he was talking to a prophet. The visitor pointed the worship away from a meal for himself and toward the LORD.

13:17-18 *And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "What **is** your name, that when your word comes **to pass**, we may honor you?" And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why **is** this **that** you ask for my name? And it **is** wonderful."*

Manoah asked his name, "that when your word comes to pass, we may honor you." It was a fair request. He wanted to thank the man when the son was born.

The answer is one of the most striking lines in Judges: "Why is this that you ask for my name? And it is wonderful." The word means beyond understanding, too high and too great to grasp. Jacob had once asked the same question of the One who wrestled with him and received the same kind of answer (Genesis 32:29).

Many Christians hear in this an echo of Isaiah 9:6, where the Child to be born is called "Wonder, Counselor, Mighty God." The Hebrew words are closely related. The New Testament does not make this link, so I hold it loosely. But it fits what we see here: a name too wonderful for a man to know.

13:19-21 *And Manoah took the kid of the goats and the grain offering, and offered **it** up on the rock to the LORD; and **He was** doing a wonder, and Manoah and his wife were looking on. And it was, when the flame went up from on the altar toward the heavens, and the angel of the LORD went up in the flame of the altar, and Manoah and his wife were looking on; and they fell on their faces to the ground. And the angel of the LORD did not again appear to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he **was** the angel of the LORD.*

Manoah took the young goat and a grain offering, an offering of flour or grain given to God, and "offered it up on the rock to the LORD; and He was doing a wonder." The word "wonder" ties back to the name the angel would not tell. The One whose name is wonderful did something wonderful.

As the flame rose from the altar toward heaven, "the angel of the LORD went up in the flame of the altar." Manoah and his wife fell on their faces to the ground. Only then did Manoah understand: "Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the LORD." The angel did not appear to them again. He had given his message, and now it was theirs to obey.

13:22-23 *And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." And his wife said to him, "If the LORD had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted from our hand a burnt offering and a grain offering, and He would not have shown us all these **things**, and at this time He would not have caused us to hear **things** like this."*

Manoah was terrified: "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." He knew that no sinful person could see God's face and live (Exodus 33:20). Gideon had the same fear (6:22-23).

His wife answered with clear thinking and faith: "If the LORD had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted from our hand a burnt offering and a grain offering." He would not have shown us these things or told us these promises. God does not make promises to people He is about to destroy.

That is a good word for anxious hearts. When we fear that God is against us, we can look at what He has already done. If He gave His Son for us, will He not also, along with Him, give us everything we need? (Romans 8:32). His acceptance of the sacrifice is our assurance. For us, that sacrifice is Christ.

13:24-25 *And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson; and the boy grew up, and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.*

"The woman bore a son and called his name Samson." The name is probably related to the Hebrew word for the sun, perhaps meaning sunny or little sun. Beth-shemesh, house of the sun, was a town near Zorah. Some think the name was a sign of joy, light breaking into a dark time.

"The boy grew up, and the LORD blessed him." Everything about Samson's start was good: a miracle birth, godly parents who prayed, a calling from God, and the LORD's blessing.

"And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol." Mahaneh-dan means the camp of Dan. The word "stir" suggests pushing or troubling, like a bell struck to ring. God's Spirit was already moving in him, getting him ready for the work.

What happens next will show us that a good beginning does not guarantee a faithful life. Samson had every advantage. The question his story asks is what he would do with them. That is the same question for us.

Summary

Israel did evil again, and the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years, though this time Israel did not cry out. The angel of the LORD appeared to the barren wife of Manoah of Zorah, of the tribe of Dan, and promised her a son who would be a Nazirite from the womb and would begin to save Israel from the Philistines. She was to drink no wine or strong drink and eat nothing unclean, and no razor was to touch the boy's head. Manoah prayed for the man of God to return and teach them, and God heard him, but the angel only repeated the instructions. Manoah offered a meal and asked his name, and the angel said his name was wonderful and directed the offering to the LORD. When Manoah offered a young goat and a grain offering, the angel went up in the flame of the altar. Manoah feared they would die for seeing God, but his wife reasoned that the LORD would not have accepted their offering or given them His promise if He meant to kill them. Samson was born, the LORD blessed him, and the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him.

Study Questions

1. What was different about this oppression compared to the ones before it? What is missing from verse 1? (13:1; compare 10:10)

2. What was a Nazirite, and what three things did the vow include? (13:4-5; Numbers 6:1-8)

3. What did the angel say Samson would begin to do? Why is the word "begin" important? (13:5)

4. What did Manoah pray for, and how did God answer? (13:8-14)

5. What did the angel say when Manoah asked his name? (13:17-18)

6. What happened when Manoah offered the burnt offering? (13:19-20)

7. How did Manoah's wife answer his fear that they would die? (13:22-23)

8. Israel had grown used to living under the Philistines and did not cry out. Is there a sin or a bondage in your life that you have grown used to?

9. Manoah prayed, "teach us what we shall do for the boy." What would it look like for you to pray that prayer for the children in your life?

10. Manoah's wife reasoned from what God had already done to calm her husband's fear. What has God already done for you that you can remember when you are afraid?

Judges 14: Samson's Wedding and Riddle

Scripture

14:1-9 And Samson went down to Timnah, and he saw a woman in Timnah, of the daughters of the Philistines. And he went up and told his father and his mother, and he said, "A woman I have seen in Timnah, of the daughters of the Philistines; and now, take her for me as a wife." And his father and his mother said to him, "***Is there*** no woman among the daughters of your brothers and among all my people, that you are going to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" And Samson said to his father, "Take her for me, for she is right in my eyes." And his father and his mother did not know that it ***was*** from the LORD, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. And at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel. And Samson went down, and his father and his mother, to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah; and look, a young lion of lions ***was*** roaring to meet him. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he tore it apart as one tears apart a kid, and ***there was*** nothing in his hand; and he did not tell his father and his mother what he had done. And he went down and spoke to the woman, and she was right in the eyes of Samson. And he returned after some days to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion; and look, a swarm of bees ***was*** in the body of the lion, and honey. And he scraped it out into his palms and went on, going and eating; and he came to his father and to his mother and gave to them, and they ate; and he did not tell them that from the body of the lion he had scraped out the honey.

14:10-20 And his father went down to the woman; and Samson made a feast there, for so the young men used to do. And it was, when they saw him, they took thirty companions, and they were with him. And Samson said to them, "Let me pose a riddle to you, please. If you will indeed tell it to me ***within*** the seven days of the feast, and find ***it*** out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of garments. And if you are not able to tell ***it*** to me, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of garments." And they said to him, "Pose your riddle, that we may hear it." And he said to them, "Out of the eater came out food, and out of the strong came out sweetness." And they were not able to tell the riddle ***in*** three days. And it was on the seventh day, and they said to the wife of Samson, "Entice your husband, that he may tell us the riddle, lest we burn you and the house of your father with fire. Have you called us to impoverish us? ***Is it*** not ***so***?" And the wife of Samson wept over him and said, "You only hate me, and you do not love me. The riddle you have posed to the sons of my people, and to me you have not told ***it***." And he said to her, "Look, to my father and to my mother I have not told ***it***, and to you shall I tell ***it***?" And she wept over him the seven days that the feast was theirs; and it was on the seventh day, and he told her, for she pressed him; and she told the riddle to the sons of her people. And the men of the city said to him on the seventh day, before the sun went down, "What ***is*** sweeter than honey? And what ***is*** stronger than a lion?" And he said to them, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle." And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck down thirty men of them, and he took their spoils and gave the changes to those who told the riddle. And his anger burned, and he went up ***to*** the house of his father. And the wife of Samson became his companion's, who had been a friend to him.

Preview

Samson grows up and goes down to the Philistine town of Timnah, where he sees a young Philistine woman and demands that his parents get her for him as a wife. His parents object, but the writer tells us something they did not know: the LORD was using even this to stir up a conflict with the Philistines. On the way to Timnah, the Spirit of the LORD rushes on Samson and he tears apart a young lion with his bare hands. Later he finds bees and honey in the carcass, eats it, and says nothing.

At the wedding feast Samson poses a riddle about the lion and the honey to thirty Philistine young men, with a large bet on the answer. They threaten his bride, she nags him for seven days until he tells her, and she tells them. Samson pays the bet by killing thirty Philistines in Ashkelon and taking their clothes, and he goes home angry while his bride is given to another man. This chapter shows us the kind of man Samson was: strong in body, weak in self-control, and driven by what was "right in my eyes," as he put it.

Study

14:1-2 *And Samson went down to Timnah, and he saw a woman in Timnah, of the daughters of the Philistines. And he went up and told his father and his mother, and he said, "A woman I have seen in Timnah, of the daughters of the Philistines; and now, take her for me as a wife."*

"Samson went down to Timnah." Timnah was a few miles from Zorah, in the valley toward the Philistine plain. The Bible often uses "went down" for more than a change of height. Samson's whole life is a series of goings down.

"He saw a woman in Timnah, of the daughters of the Philistines." He went home and told his parents, "take her for me as a wife." In those days parents arranged marriages, so he was asking them to make the match. But notice he did not ask. He told them. And the only reason he gave was that he had seen her.

14:3 *And his father and his mother said to him, "**Is there** no woman among the daughters of your brothers and among all my people, that you are going to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" And Samson said to his father, "Take her for me, for she is right in my eyes."*

His parents pushed back: "Is there no woman among the daughters of your brothers and among all my people, that you are going to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" "Uncircumcised" was a way of saying outside God's covenant. The Law had warned Israel not to marry the people of the land, because they would turn their hearts to other gods (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). The Philistines were not named in that list, but the danger was the same.

Samson's answer tells us everything: "Take her for me, for she is right in my eyes." That is very close to the refrain that closes this book: "each man did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25). Samson was a picture in one man of what all Israel had become. He was set apart to God, and he lived by his own eyes. It is no accident that his story ends with those eyes taken from him (16:21).

14:4 *And his father and his mother did not know that it **was** from the LORD, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. And at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel.*

"His father and his mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an occasion against the Philistines." This is one of the hardest verses in the chapter. Does it mean God approved of Samson's choice?

No. Samson's motives were his own, and Scripture does not praise them. But God is Lord even over our foolish choices. He was "seeking an occasion," an opening for conflict, because Israel had grown comfortable under Philistine rule, "and at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel." God used Samson's own desires to start a fight that Israel would not start for itself.

This is the same truth Joseph spoke in Genesis 50:20: people plan evil, and God plans it for good. God's ability to bring good out of our sin never makes our sin good. It shows how great and patient He is.

14:5-6 *And Samson went down, and his father and his mother, to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah; and look, a young lion of lions **was** roaring to meet him. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he tore it apart as one tears apart a kid, and **there was** nothing in his hand; and he did not tell his father and his mother what he had done.*

Samson went down to Timnah with his parents, and in the vineyards "a young lion of lions was roaring to meet him." He seems to have been off the road by himself, since his parents did not see what happened. Why would a Nazirite be walking in a vineyard, among the grapes he was forbidden to eat? Scripture doesn't tell us. But it is a strange place for him to be.

"And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he tore it apart as one tears apart a kid, and there was nothing in his hand." This is the first time we see Samson's strength, and the text is clear where it came from. It was not his muscles or his hair. It was the Spirit of the LORD. Samson had no weapon at all.

"He did not tell his father and his mother what he had done." This is the first of Samson's secrets.

14:7-9 *And he went down and spoke to the woman, and she was right in the eyes of Samson. And he returned after some days to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion; and look, a swarm of bees **was** in the body of the lion, and honey. And he scraped it out into his palms and went on, going and eating; and he came to his father and to his mother and gave to them, and they ate; and he did not tell them that from the body of the lion he had scraped out the honey.*

He spoke with the woman, "and she was right in the eyes of Samson." Again, his eyes are his guide.

Some days later he went back to take her as his wife, and "he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion." Bees had made a hive in it. Samson "scraped it out into his palms" and ate as he walked, and he gave some to his parents without telling them where it came from.

Here Samson broke his Nazirite vow. A Nazirite was not to go near anything dead (Numbers 6:6-7), and touching the carcass of an animal like a lion made any Israelite unclean

(Leviticus 11:27). Samson reached into a carcass for honey, and then he let his parents eat it unknowing. Notice how the slide works. First he goes where he should not go. Then he touches what he should not touch. Then he hides it. Sin rarely starts big. It starts with "turning aside" to look.

14:10-11 *And his father went down to the woman; and Samson made a feast there, for so the young men used to do. And it was, when they saw him, they took thirty companions, and they were with him.*

"His father went down to the woman; and Samson made a feast there, for so the young men used to do." A wedding feast in those days lasted seven days. The Hebrew word for feast comes from the word for drinking. It is hard to imagine a seven-day Philistine wedding feast without wine, and Samson was the host. Scripture does not say he drank, but he put himself in the middle of it.

When the Philistines saw him, "they took thirty companions, and they were with him." These may have been wedding guests or groomsmen, but the way it is told sounds like they were also there to keep an eye on this strong Israelite.

14:12-14 *And Samson said to them, "Let me pose a riddle to you, please. If you will indeed tell it to me **within** the seven days of the feast, and find **it** out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of garments. And if you are not able to tell **it** to me, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of garments." And they said to him, "Pose your riddle, that we may hear it." And he said to them, "Out of the eater came out food, and out of the strong came out sweetness." And they were not able to tell the riddle **in** three days.*

Samson posed a riddle with a wager. If they could solve it within the seven days, he would give them thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes. If not, they would give him the same. That was a lot of clothing. A good set of clothes was valuable in that day, and this was a bet for thirty men's wardrobes.

The riddle was: "Out of the eater came out food, and out of the strong came out sweetness." No one could guess it, because only Samson knew about the lion and the honey. It was not a fair riddle. It was built on his secret. "And they were not able to tell the riddle in three days."

14:15-17 *And it was on the seventh day, and they said to the wife of Samson, "Entice your husband, that he may tell us the riddle, lest we burn you and the house of your father with fire. Have you called us to impoverish us? **Is it** not **so**?" And the wife of Samson wept over him and said, "You only hate me, and you do not love me. The riddle you have posed to the sons of my people, and to me you have not told **it**." And he said to her, "Look, to my father and to my mother I have not told **it**, and to you shall I tell **it**?" And she wept over him the seven days that the feast was theirs; and it was on the seventh day, and he told her, for she pressed him; and she told the riddle to the sons of her people.*

The Philistines turned nasty. They went to Samson's bride and said, "Entice your husband, that he may tell us the riddle, lest we burn you and the house of your father with fire." These were her own people, threatening to burn her family alive over a bet.

So she wept over Samson: "You only hate me, and you do not love me." Samson answered that he had not even told his own father and mother, so why should he tell her? "And she wept over him the seven days that the feast was theirs." On the seventh day "he told her, for she pressed him; and she told the riddle to the sons of her people."

We should feel for this young woman. She was caught between a threatening people and a husband who kept secrets from her. But we should also notice the pattern. Samson gave in to a woman's pressure here. He will do it again with Delilah (16:15-17). A man who cannot say no to his own desires will have a hard time saying no to anyone else.

14:18 *And the men of the city said to him on the seventh day, before the sun went down, "What **is** sweeter than honey? And what **is** stronger than a lion?" And he said to them, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle."*

Just before sunset on the seventh day, the men of the city came with the answer: "What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?"

Samson knew exactly how they got it: "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle." A heifer is a young cow. He meant, if you had not used my wife against me. It was a crude and bitter thing to say about his bride.

14:19-20 *And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck down thirty men of them, and he took their spoils and gave the changes to those who told the riddle. And his anger burned, and he went up **to** the house of his father. And the wife of Samson became his companion's, who had been a friend to him.*

"The Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck down thirty men of them, and he took their spoils and gave the changes to those who told the riddle." Ashkelon was a Philistine city on the coast, more than twenty miles away.

This is a hard verse. Samson paid a bet by killing thirty men. Was that God's will? Here is how I understand it. God had raised Samson to fight the Philistines, who were oppressing Israel, and the Spirit gave him the strength to do it. But Samson's motives were anger and revenge over a lost bet. God was using Samson's strength for His purpose of breaking Philistine power, even while Samson was using it for his own pride. We should never read this as God blessing revenge. Jesus told us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44), and Paul tells us to leave vengeance to God (Romans 12:19).

"And his anger burned, and he went up to the house of his father." He left his bride behind. "And the wife of Samson became his companion's, who had been a friend to him." Her father gave her to the best man. The wedding that started with "she is right in my eyes" (14:3) ended in death, anger and loss.

What do we learn from Samson here? God gives gifts, and His Spirit can work through a person who is not walking closely with Him. But gifts are not the same as godliness. Samson had great power and very little self-control. Galatians 5:22-23 lists self-control as part of the fruit of the Spirit. Power without self-control will always hurt people.

Summary

Samson went down to Timnah, saw a Philistine woman, and told his parents to get her for him as a wife because she was right in his eyes. His parents objected, but they did not know that the LORD was seeking an occasion against the Philistines, who ruled Israel. On the way, the Spirit of the LORD rushed on Samson and he tore apart a young lion with his bare hands. Later he found honey in the lion's carcass, ate it, and gave some to his parents without telling them, breaking his Nazirite vow. At the seven-day wedding feast he posed a riddle to thirty Philistine companions, with thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes as the wager. They threatened to burn his bride and her family, so she wept until Samson told her, and she told them. The Spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and he killed thirty men in Ashkelon to pay the bet. He went home angry, and his bride was given to his companion.

Study Questions

1. What did Samson tell his parents to do, and what reason did he give? (14:1-3)

2. What did his parents object to, and why? (14:3; Deuteronomy 7:3-4)

3. What does verse 4 tell us that Samson's parents did not know? (14:4)

4. Where did Samson's strength come from when he killed the lion? (14:6)

5. What did Samson do with the lion's carcass, and how did that break his Nazirite vow? (14:8-9; Numbers 6:6)

6. How did the Philistines learn the answer to the riddle? (14:15-17)

7. What did Samson do to pay the bet, and how did his marriage end? (14:19-20)

8. Samson chose a wife because "she is right in my eyes." In what areas of your life are you tempted to decide by what looks good to you instead of by what God says?

9. Samson's sin started with turning aside to look. What are some small "turning asides" that can lead a believer into bigger sin?

10. God used Samson's choices for His purpose, but that did not make Samson's choices right. How does that truth comfort you, and how does it warn you?

Judges 15: Samson Strikes the Philistines

Scripture

15:1-8 And it was after some days, in the days of the wheat harvest, and Samson visited his wife with a kid of the goats, and he said, "Let me go in to my wife, into the chamber." And her father did not allow him to go in. And her father said, "I surely thought that you surely hated her, and I gave her to your companion. ***Is*** not her younger sister better than she? Please let her be yours instead of her." And Samson said to them, "This time I shall be blameless toward the Philistines, for I ***am*** doing harm with them." And Samson went and captured three hundred foxes, and he took torches, and he turned ***them*** tail to tail and put one torch between two tails in the middle. And he kindled fire in the torches and let ***them*** go into the standing grain of the Philistines; and he burned ***everything***, from the stacked sheaves and to the standing grain and to the olive vineyards. And the Philistines said, "Who has done this?" And they said, "Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he took his wife and gave her to his companion." And the Philistines went up and burned her and her father with fire. And Samson said to them, "If you do like this, then surely I will be avenged on you, and after ***that*** I will cease." And he struck them leg on thigh, a great striking; and he went down and dwelt in the cleft of the rock of Etam.

15:9-20 And the Philistines went up and encamped in Judah, and they spread themselves out at Lehi. And the men of Judah said, "Why have you come up against us?" And they said, "To bind Samson we have come up, to do to him as he did to us." And three thousand men from Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and they said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines are ruling over us? And what ***is*** this you have done to us?" And he said to them, "As they did to me, so I have done to them." And they said to him, "To bind you we have come down, to give you into the hand of the Philistines." And Samson said to them, "Swear to me, lest you yourselves fall upon me." And they said to him, saying, "No, but we will surely bind you and give you into their hand, and we will surely not put you to death." And they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock. He was coming to Lehi, and the Philistines shouted to meet him. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and the ropes that ***were*** on his arms became like flax that they have burned with fire, and his bonds melted from off his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and he stretched out his hand and took it, and he struck down with it a thousand men. And Samson said, "With the jawbone of the donkey, a heap, two heaps; with the jawbone of the donkey I have struck down a thousand men." And it was, when he had finished speaking, he threw the jawbone from his hand, and he called that place Ramath-lehi. And he was very thirsty, and he called out to the LORD and said, "You have given this great salvation by the hand of Your servant; and now shall I die with thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?" And God split open the hollow that ***is*** at Lehi, and water came out from it, and he drank, and his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore he called its name En-hakkore, which ***is*** at Lehi to this day. And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.

Preview

Some time after the wedding, Samson goes back to Timnah to see his wife, only to learn that her father has given her to another man. Samson takes revenge by tying torches to the tails of three

hundred foxes and burning the Philistines' grain fields, vineyards and olive groves. The Philistines answer by burning his wife and her father. Samson strikes back again. Each act of revenge brings a worse one.

Then the men of Judah do something shocking. Instead of standing with the man God raised up to save them, three thousand of them come to tie him up and hand him over to the Philistines. At Lehi the Spirit of the LORD rushes on Samson, the ropes melt off, and with the jawbone of a donkey he strikes down a thousand men. Afterward, faint with thirst, he cries out to the LORD for the first time in his story, and God splits open the ground to give him water. The chapter ends by telling us Samson judged Israel twenty years.

Study

15:1-2 *And it was after some days, in the days of the wheat harvest, and Samson visited his wife with a kid of the goats, and he said, "Let me go in to my wife, into the chamber." And her father did not allow him to go in. And her father said, "I surely thought that you surely hated her, and I gave her to your companion. **Is** not her younger sister better than she? Please let her be yours instead of her."*

"In the days of the wheat harvest," in late spring, Samson went to visit his wife with a young goat as a gift. He seems to have thought that he could walk away angry and then come back as if nothing had happened. "Let me go in to my wife, into the chamber," he said. But her father would not let him in.

Her father explained: "I surely thought that you surely hated her, and I gave her to your companion." Then he offered a way out: "Is not her younger sister better than she? Please let her be yours instead of her." He treated his daughters as if they could be traded. The whole scene shows how little these women were valued by the men around them, and the Bible tells it plainly without approving it.

15:3-5 *And Samson said to them, "This time I shall be blameless toward the Philistines, for I **am** doing harm with them." And Samson went and captured three hundred foxes, and he took torches, and he turned **them** tail to tail and put one torch between two tails in the middle. And he kindled fire in the torches and let **them** go into the standing grain of the Philistines; and he burned **everything**, from the stacked sheaves and to the standing grain and to the olive vineyards.*

Samson took this as an excuse for revenge: "This time I shall be blameless toward the Philistines, for I am doing harm with them." He was saying, this time they started it.

"Samson went and captured three hundred foxes." The word can also mean jackals, which run in packs and would be easier to catch in large numbers. He tied them tail to tail in pairs, put a torch between each pair, lit the torches, and let them loose in the Philistine fields at harvest time. He burned the stacked sheaves, the standing grain and "the olive vineyards." That was a whole year's food and income for a region, gone in a day.

15:6 *And the Philistines said, "Who has done this?" And they said, "Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he took his wife and gave her to his companion." And the Philistines went up and burned her and her father with fire.*

"Who has done this?" the Philistines asked. When they learned it was Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because his wife had been given to his companion, "the Philistines went up and burned her and her father with fire."

This is terrible, and it is exactly what the young men had threatened at the wedding (14:15). She had told the riddle to save her family from fire, and in the end her own people burned her anyway. Sin promises protection and pays in ruin. She tried to save herself by betraying her husband, and it did not save her.

15:7-8 *And Samson said to them, "If you do like this, then surely I will be avenged on you, and after* ***that*** *I will cease." And he struck them leg on thigh, a great striking; and he went down and dwelt in the cleft of the rock of Etam.*

Samson answered, "If you do like this, then surely I will be avenged on you, and after that I will cease." He would strike back once more, and then stop. That is what everyone in a cycle of revenge says. It never stops with one more.

"He struck them leg on thigh, a great striking." This was a Hebrew saying, something like our saying that someone was beaten soundly, thoroughly. Then he went down and lived "in the cleft of the rock of Etam," a cave or crack in the rock, likely in the hills of Judah.

Notice that the Philistines are the enemy, and God had raised up Samson to fight them. But everything Samson does here is personal: his wife, his anger, his revenge. Judges never says Samson led an army or called Israel together. He fought alone, for his own reasons, and God used it anyway to wear down the oppressor.

15:9-10 *And the Philistines went up and encamped in Judah, and they spread themselves out at Lehi. And the men of Judah said, "Why have you come up against us?" And they said, "To bind Samson we have come up, to do to him as he did to us."*

The Philistines came up and camped in Judah, spreading out at Lehi. The men of Judah asked why. The Philistines said, "To bind Samson we have come up, to do to him as he did to us." They wanted Judah to hand him over.

15:11-13 *And three thousand men from Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and they said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines are ruling over us? And what **is** this you have done to us?" And he said to them, "As they did to me, so I have done to them." And they said to him, "To bind you we have come down, to give you into the hand of the Philistines." And Samson said to them, "Swear to me, lest you yourselves fall upon me." And they said to him, saying, "No, but we will surely bind you and give you into their hand, and we will surely not put you to death." And they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.*

"Three thousand men from Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam." Three thousand men, not to fight the Philistines, but to capture their own deliverer. Their words to Samson are some of the saddest in the book: "Do you not know that the Philistines are ruling over us? And what is this you have done to us?"

They had accepted their slavery. They did not want to be rescued. They wanted to be left alone under their masters. This is why there was no cry to the LORD in 13:1. Judah, the tribe of the coming king, the tribe that led the way in 1:2, had given up.

Samson answered, "As they did to me, so I have done to them." He agreed to be tied up if they would swear not to kill him themselves. They promised, "we will surely not put you to death," bound him with two new ropes, and brought him up from the rock.

It is a sad picture, and it is not the last time God's people would hand their Deliverer over to their oppressors. Many years later the chief priests and elders of the people would bind Jesus and hand Him over to Pilate, the Roman governor (Matthew 27:1-2). That is only a picture, and Samson was nothing like Jesus in his character. But it shows how people can come to love their chains more than the One God sends to break them.

15:14-15 *He was coming to Lehi, and the Philistines shouted to meet him. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and the ropes that **were** on his arms became like flax that they have burned with fire, and his bonds melted from off his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and he stretched out his hand and took it, and he struck down with it a thousand men.*

As Samson came to Lehi, "the Philistines shouted to meet him." They thought they had him. "And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that they have burned with fire, and his bonds melted from off his hands." Flax was the plant used to make linen. Burnt flax falls apart at a touch.

"And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey." A fresh jawbone was still heavy and hard, not dry and brittle. Once again Samson touched something dead, though he was a Nazirite. "And he struck down with it a thousand men."

How could one man do that? The text answers the question before we ask it: "the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him." It was God's power, not Samson's. Joshua had told Israel that one of them would chase a thousand, because the LORD fights for them (Joshua 23:10; compare Deuteronomy 32:30).

15:16-17 *And Samson said, "With the jawbone of the donkey, a heap, two heaps; with the jawbone of the donkey I have struck down a thousand men." And it was, when he had finished speaking, he threw the jawbone from his hand, and he called that place Ramath-lehi.*

Samson made up a little victory song. "With the jawbone of the donkey, a heap, two heaps." In Hebrew the words for donkey and heap sound alike, so it is a play on words, something like saying that with a donkey's jaw he made donkeys of them. He ends, "with the jawbone of the donkey I have struck down a thousand men."

Notice whose name is missing. Samson says "I." He does not mention the LORD. Then he threw the jawbone away and named the place Ramath-lehi, which means the hill of the jawbone.

15:18-19 *And he was very thirsty, and he called out to the LORD and said, "You have given this great salvation by the hand of Your servant; and now shall I die with thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?" And God split open the hollow that **is** at Lehi, and water came out from it, and he drank, and his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore he called its name En-hakkore, which **is** at Lehi to this day.*

"And he was very thirsty, and he called out to the LORD." This is the first time in Samson's story that he prays. "You have given this great salvation by the hand of Your servant; and now shall I die with thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?"

At last he gives God the credit. "You have given this great salvation." His thirst humbled him. He was the strongest man in Israel, and he could not make himself a drink of water. Sometimes God lets us come to the end of ourselves so that we will remember who gave us the victory in the first place.

"And God split open the hollow that is at Lehi, and water came out from it." Samson drank, "and his spirit returned, and he revived." He named the spring En-hakkore, which means the spring of the one who called. The name remembers his prayer, not his strength. It was still there "to this day," when the book was written.

That is a lovely detail. God answered the first real prayer of a man who had done almost everything wrong. God is patient with weak and foolish servants. He hears when they call. David put it this way: "This afflicted one called, and the LORD heard" (Psalm 34:6). When we are spent and dry, we can still call on Him.

15:20 *And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.*

"And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years." Notice how the writer puts it. Not twenty years of rest, as with earlier judges. Samson judged "in the days of the Philistines." Their rule did not end under him. He only began to save Israel, just as the angel said (13:5). The same line is repeated at the end of his life (16:31), so this may be a summary of his whole time as judge, placed here before the story of his fall.

Summary

When Samson went back to his wife in Timnah, her father told him he had given her to his companion and offered him her younger sister instead. Samson took revenge by tying torches between pairs of three hundred foxes and burning the Philistines' grain, vineyards and olive groves. The Philistines burned his wife and her father, and Samson struck them in return and went to live in the cleft of the rock of Etam. When the Philistines came to Lehi, three thousand men of Judah went to Samson, complaining that the Philistines ruled over them, and bound him with two new ropes to hand him over. At Lehi the Spirit of the LORD rushed on Samson, the ropes melted off, and he struck down a thousand men with a fresh jawbone of a donkey. Afterward he was very thirsty and called on the LORD, and God split open a hollow and gave him water. He named the spring En-hakkore. Samson judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.

Study Questions

1. Why would Samson's father-in-law not let him see his wife, and what did he offer instead? (15:1-2)

2. What did Samson do with the three hundred foxes? (15:4-5)

3. What did the Philistines do in return, and how did that fulfill their earlier threat? (15:6; 14:15)

4. What did the three thousand men of Judah say to Samson, and what did they do? (15:11-13)

5. What happened to the ropes when the Spirit of the LORD rushed on Samson? (15:14)

6. What did Samson say in his victory song, and whose name was missing? (15:16)

7. What did Samson pray when he was thirsty, and how did God answer? (15:18-19)

8. Samson said he would take revenge once more "and after that I will cease." Why does revenge almost never stop where we say it will? Where have you seen that in your own life?

9. The men of Judah had grown so used to their masters that they turned on their deliverer. Is there something in your life you have grown so used to that you resist God's help to break free?

10. Samson's first prayer came when he was spent and thirsty. Has God used a dry or weak time in your life to bring you back to Him?

Judges 16: Samson and Delilah

Scripture

16:1-14 And Samson went to Gaza, and he saw there a woman, a prostitute, and he went in to her. ***It was told*** to the Gazites, saying, "Samson has come here." And they surrounded ***him*** and lay in wait for him all the night at the gate of the city; and they kept silent all the night, saying, "Until the light of the morning; then we will kill him." And Samson lay until the middle of the night; and he arose in the middle of the night and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two doorposts, and he pulled them up with the bar, and he put ***them*** on his shoulders and carried them up to the top of the mountain that ***is*** in front of Hebron. And it was after this, and he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, and her name ***was*** Delilah. And the rulers of the Philistines went up to her and said to her, "Entice him, and see in what his great strength ***lies***, and by what we may prevail against him and bind him to humble him; and we will give you each man eleven hundred ***pieces*** of silver." And Delilah said to Samson, "Tell me, please, in what your great strength ***lies***, and with what you may be bound to humble you." And Samson said to her, "If they bind me with seven fresh cords that have not been dried, then I will become weak and be like one of mankind." And the rulers of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh cords that had not been dried, and she bound him with them. And the ambush ***was*** sitting for her in the chamber. And she said to him, "The Philistines ***are*** upon you, Samson!" And he tore apart the cords as a thread of tow is torn apart when it smells fire. And his strength was not known. And Delilah said to Samson, "Look, you have deceived me and spoken lies to me. Now tell me, please, with what you may be bound." And he said to her, "If they indeed bind me with new ropes with which work has not been done, then I will become weak and be like one of mankind." And Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, and she said to him, "The Philistines ***are*** upon you, Samson!" And the ambush ***was*** sitting in the chamber. And he tore them apart from off his arms like a thread. And Delilah said to Samson, "Until now you have deceived me and spoken lies to me. Tell me with what you may be bound." And he said to her, "If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web." And she fastened ***it*** with the pin, and said to him, "The Philistines ***are*** upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and pulled out the pin of the loom and the web.

16:15-22 And she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' and your heart ***is*** not with me? These three times you have deceived me, and you have not told me in what your great strength ***lies***." And it was, when she pressed him with her words all the days and urged him, his soul became impatient to the point of dying. And he told her all his heart and said to her, "A razor has not come up on my head, for I ***am*** a Nazirite of God from the womb of my mother. If I am shaved, then my strength will depart from me, and I will become weak and be like all mankind." And Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, and she sent and called the rulers of the Philistines, saying, "Come up this time, for he has told me all his heart." And the rulers of the Philistines came up to her, and they brought up the silver in their hand. And she made him sleep on her knees, and she called for the man, and she shaved off the seven locks of his head; and she began to humble him, and his strength departed from on him. And she said, "The Philistines ***are*** upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and said, "I will go out as time after time, and shake myself free." And he did not know that the LORD had departed from on him. And the Philistines seized him and

gouged out his eyes, and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze fetters; and he was grinding in the house of the prisoners. And the hair of his head began to grow again when it had been shaved.

16:23-31 And the rulers of the Philistines gathered together to sacrifice a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, and for rejoicing; and they said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand." And the people saw him, and they praised their god, for they said, "Our god has given into our hand our enemy, and the one who laid waste our land, and who multiplied our slain." And it was, when their heart was merry, and they said, "Call for Samson, that he may make sport for us." And they called for Samson from the house of the prisoners, and he made sport before them; and they made him stand between the pillars. And Samson said to the young man who was holding him by his hand, "Allow me, and let me feel the pillars on which the house is set, that I may lean on them." And the house was full of the men and the women, and all the rulers of the Philistines ***were*** there; and on the roof ***were*** about three thousand, man and woman, who were looking on while Samson made sport. And Samson called out to the LORD and said, "Lord GOD, remember me, please, and strengthen me, please, only this time, O God, that I may be avenged ***with*** one vengeance for my two eyes on the Philistines." And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house was set, and he braced himself on them, one with his right ***hand*** and one with his left. And Samson said, "Let my soul die with the Philistines!" And he stretched out with strength, and the house fell on the rulers and on all the people who ***were*** in it. And the dead whom he put to death in his death were more than those whom he had put to death in his life. And his brothers and all the house of his father came down, and they lifted him and brought ***him*** up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. And he had judged Israel twenty years.

Preview

Samson's last chapter begins in Gaza, the strongest Philistine city, where he goes in to a prostitute. The men of the city wait to kill him at dawn, but he rises at midnight and carries off the city gate on his shoulders. Then he falls in love with Delilah in the valley of Sorek. The Philistine rulers offer her a fortune to find the secret of his strength. Three times he lies to her, and three times she tries to hand him over. At last, worn down by her pressure, he tells her all his heart. She has his hair shaved while he sleeps, and the LORD departs from him, though he does not know it.

The Philistines gouge out his eyes and set him grinding grain in prison in Gaza. But his hair begins to grow again. At a great feast to their god Dagon, the Philistines bring Samson out to mock him. He prays one last time, "remember me," pushes on the two middle pillars of the temple, and the house falls on the rulers and the people. Samson dies with them. It is a story of a gifted man who threw his gift away, and of a God who heard him at the end.

Study

16:1-3 *And Samson went to Gaza, and he saw there a woman, a prostitute, and he went in to her. **It was told** to the Gazites, saying, "Samson has come here." And they surrounded **him** and lay in wait for him all the night at the gate of the city; and they kept silent all the night, saying, "Until the light of the morning; then we will kill him." And Samson lay until the middle of the night; and he arose in the middle of the night and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two doorposts, and he pulled them up with the bar, and he put **them** on his shoulders and carried them up to the top of the mountain that **is** in front of Hebron.*

"Samson went to Gaza, and he saw there a woman, a prostitute, and he went in to her." Gaza was the southernmost Philistine city, deep in enemy land. The writer does not dress this up. Samson's eyes led him again (14:1), and this time into plain sexual sin. A Nazirite, set apart to God, walked into the enemy's capital to sleep with a prostitute.

The men of Gaza heard he was there. They surrounded the place and waited quietly at the city gate all night, planning to kill him "Until the light of the morning." But Samson rose in the middle of the night, took hold of the city gate, its two doorposts and the bar, pulled the whole thing up, and carried it "to the top of the mountain that is in front of Hebron." Hebron was about forty miles away and uphill the whole way. Whether he carried it all the way to Hebron or to a hill facing Hebron, it was an amazing feat.

Notice what the text does not say here. It does not say the Spirit of the LORD rushed on him. God still had not taken his strength away. But a man can go on using God's gifts for a long time after he has stopped walking with God, and think everything is fine. That is what makes the next scene so frightening.

16:4-5 *And it was after this, and he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, and her name **was** Delilah. And the rulers of the Philistines went up to her and said to her, "Entice him, and see in what his great strength **lies**, and by what we may prevail against him and bind him to humble him; and we will give you each man eleven hundred **pieces** of silver."*

"He loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, and her name was Delilah." This is the only time we are told Samson loved a woman. The valley of Sorek ran from the hills near Zorah toward the Philistine coast, on the border between the two peoples. We are not told whether Delilah was a Philistine or an Israelite. Her name may come from a word meaning to bring low or to weaken.

The rulers of the Philistines, the lords of their five cities, came to her with an offer: "Entice him, and see in what his great strength lies." Each of them would give her eleven hundred pieces of silver. Five rulers, eleven hundred each, was five thousand five hundred pieces of silver. Micah, in the next chapter, hired a priest for ten pieces of silver a year (17:10). This was a fortune. Delilah was paid to betray the man who loved her.

16:6-9 *And Delilah said to Samson, "Tell me, please, in what your great strength **lies**, and with what you may be bound to humble you." And Samson said to her, "If they bind me with seven fresh cords that have not been dried, then I will become weak and be like one of mankind." And the rulers of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh cords that had not been dried, and she bound him with them. And the ambush **was** sitting for her in the chamber. And she said to him, "The Philistines **are** upon you, Samson!" And he tore apart the cords as a thread of tow is torn apart when it smells fire. And his strength was not known.*

Delilah did not hide what she wanted. She asked him straight out what made him strong and "with what you may be bound to humble you."

Samson lied: seven fresh bowstrings or cords, not yet dried, would make him "like one of mankind." The rulers brought the cords, she tied him up, and with men hidden in the room she cried, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" He snapped the cords like a burnt string.

Why did Samson stay? Delilah had just tried to hand him over to his enemies, and he knew it. Here is the blindness of sin. Samson seems to have thought it was a game he could always win. He played with the thing that would destroy him.

16:10-12 *And Delilah said to Samson, "Look, you have deceived me and spoken lies to me. Now tell me, please, with what you may be bound." And he said to her, "If they indeed bind me with new ropes with which work has not been done, then I will become weak and be like one of mankind." And Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, and she said to him, "The Philistines **are** upon you, Samson!" And the ambush **was** sitting in the chamber. And he tore them apart from off his arms like a thread.*

"Look, you have deceived me and spoken lies to me," Delilah complained. That is an odd thing to say from someone who had just tried to sell him. But sin turns everything upside down. She acted as if she were the one wronged.

Samson lied again. This time it was new ropes that had never been used. Those were exactly what the men of Judah had tied him with at Lehi (15:13), and he had broken them then. Again she tied him, again she called out, and again he tore the ropes off "like a thread."

16:13-14 *And Delilah said to Samson, "Until now you have deceived me and spoken lies to me. Tell me with what you may be bound." And he said to her, "If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web." And she fastened **it** with the pin, and said to him, "The Philistines **are** upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and pulled out the pin of the loom and the web.*

The third time, Samson got closer to the truth. He mentioned his hair: "If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web." He was talking about a loom, the frame used to weave cloth. She wove his long hair into the cloth on the loom while he slept and fastened it with the pin. When she cried out, he woke and pulled up the pin, the loom and all.

Notice how close he came. Each time, Samson moved nearer to telling her the secret. First fresh cords, then new ropes, then his hair. Temptation works this way. Each time we play with it and get away, we feel a little safer, and we let it come a little closer.

16:15-17 *And she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' and your heart **is** not with me? These three times you have deceived me, and you have not told me in what your great strength **lies**." And it was, when she pressed him with her words all the days and urged him, his soul became impatient to the point of dying. And he told her all his heart and said to her, "A razor has not come up on my head, for I **am** a Nazirite of God from the womb of my mother. If I am shaved, then my strength will depart from me, and I will become weak and be like all mankind."*

"How can you say, 'I love you,' and your heart is not with me?" Delilah used the same weapon Samson's bride had used in Timnah: if you loved me, you would tell me (14:16). "These three times you have deceived me."

"And it was, when she pressed him with her words all the days and urged him, his soul became impatient to the point of dying." She wore him down day after day until he was sick of it.

"And he told her all his heart." He told her he was "a Nazirite of God from the womb of my mother," and that if his head was shaved, his strength would leave him.

Was his strength really in his hair? No. His strength came from the Spirit of the LORD. But his uncut hair was the one sign of his Nazirite vow that he still had left. He had touched the dead and sat at the drinking feast. His hair was the last mark that he belonged to God. When he gave that away, he gave away the last outward sign of his calling. He was trading his whole relationship with God for a woman's approval.

16:18-20 *And Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, and she sent and called the rulers of the Philistines, saying, "Come up this time, for he has told me all his heart." And the rulers of the Philistines came up to her, and they brought up the silver in their hand. And she made him sleep on her knees, and she called for the man, and she shaved off the seven locks of his head; and she began to humble him, and his strength departed from on him. And she said, "The Philistines **are** upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and said, "I will go out as time after time, and shake myself free." And he did not know that the LORD had departed from on him.*

Delilah knew this time it was the truth. She sent for the rulers: "Come up this time, for he has told me all his heart." They came with the money in their hands.

"She made him sleep on her knees, and she called for the man, and she shaved off the seven locks of his head." The man who could break ropes and carry city gates went to sleep with his head in the lap of the woman selling him. "And she began to humble him, and his strength departed from on him."

Then came the cry for the fourth time: "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" He woke up and said, "I will go out as time after time, and shake myself free."

"And he did not know that the LORD had departed from on him." This is one of the saddest sentences in the Bible. Samson thought it would be like always. He had gotten away with it so many times. He did not notice that God had gone.

That should sober every one of us. It is possible to keep going through the motions after God's blessing has lifted. Paul warns, "let the one who thinks he stands watch, lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). The Holy Spirit lives in every believer and will never leave us (John 14:16-17; Ephesians 1:13-14). But we can grieve Him (Ephesians 4:30), and we can lose our usefulness, our joy and our witness by trifling with sin.

16:21-22 *And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes, and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze fetters; and he was grinding in the house of the prisoners. And the hair of his head began to grow again when it had been shaved.*

"The Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes." The eyes that had led him all his life, the eyes that said "she is right in my eyes" (14:3), were taken from him. They brought him down to Gaza, the same city whose gate he had carried off, bound him with bronze chains, "and he was grinding in the house of the prisoners." Grinding grain at a mill was the work of slaves and of animals. The strongest man in Israel was now a blind slave turning a millstone.

Sin always does this. It promises freedom and pleasure, and it ends in blindness, chains and grinding.

"And the hair of his head began to grow again when it had been shaved." The Philistines did not notice. But the writer wants us to notice. It is a small sign of hope. God was not finished with Samson. The God of second chances was quietly at work in the dark.

16:23-24 *And the rulers of the Philistines gathered together to sacrifice a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, and for rejoicing; and they said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand." And the people saw him, and they praised their god, for they said, "Our god has given into our hand our enemy, and the one who laid waste our land, and who multiplied our slain."*

The rulers of the Philistines gathered for "a great sacrifice to Dagon their god." Dagon was a main god of the Philistines, probably a god of grain and harvest. They sang, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand."

This is the real battle in the chapter. The Philistines thought their god had beaten the LORD. Samson's sin had brought shame on God's name among the nations. That is one of the gravest results of sin in a believer's life. It gives the enemies of God a reason to mock Him (2 Samuel 12:14; Romans 2:24). But God would not let that boast stand.

16:25-27 *And it was, when their heart was merry, and they said, "Call for Samson, that he may make sport for us." And they called for Samson from the house of the prisoners, and he made sport before them; and they made him stand between the pillars. And Samson said to the young man who was holding him by his hand, "Allow me, and let me feel the pillars on which the house is set, that I may lean on them." And the house was full of the men and the women, and all the rulers of the Philistines* ***were*** *there; and on the roof* ***were*** *about three thousand, man and woman, who were looking on while Samson made sport.*

"When their heart was merry," they called for Samson "that he may make sport for us." They brought him out to entertain them, a blind man stumbling about, and stood him between the pillars.

Samson asked the boy who led him by the hand to let him feel the pillars the house rested on so he could lean on them. The temple was packed. All the Philistine rulers were there, and about three thousand men and women were on the roof watching. Archaeologists have found Philistine temples with a roof held up by two central wooden pillars on stone bases, set close together, which fits this story well.

16:28-30 *And Samson called out to the LORD and said, "Lord GOD, remember me, please, and strengthen me, please, only this time, O God, that I may be avenged* ***with*** *one vengeance for my two eyes on the Philistines." And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house was set, and he braced himself on them, one with his right* ***hand*** *and one with his left. And Samson said, "Let my soul die with the Philistines!" And he stretched out with strength, and the house fell on the rulers and on all the people who* ***were*** *in it. And the dead whom he put to death in his death were more than those whom he had put to death in his life.*

"And Samson called out to the LORD." This is his second recorded prayer, and his last. "Lord GOD, remember me, please, and strengthen me, please, only this time, O God, that I may be avenged with one vengeance for my two eyes on the Philistines."

His prayer is not perfect. He still speaks of his two eyes and his own revenge. But he calls on the LORD by name, and he asks for strength from God and not from himself. He knows now that his strength was never his own. This is a humbled man.

"And Samson grasped the two middle pillars," one with his right hand and one with his left, and said, "Let my soul die with the Philistines!" He pushed with all his strength, "and the house fell on the rulers and on all the people who were in it." The writer gives the summary: "the dead whom he put to death in his death were more than those whom he had put to death in his life."

How should we understand Samson's death? It was not a suicide in the way we usually mean the word. Samson was a soldier in a war, a judge God had raised up against Israel's oppressors, and he gave his life in battle to strike down the rulers of the enemy and the temple of their false god. God answered his prayer and gave him the strength, and so God used it as an act of judgment on the Philistines. It was not a man taking his own life out of despair. The Philistine boast that Dagon had beaten the LORD died with them.

If you are reading this and you have been having thoughts of ending your own life, please hear me. Samson's story is not about that kind of pain, and it does not point you that way. God sees you, He cares for you, and your life matters to Him (Psalm 34:18). Please talk to someone today: a pastor, a trusted friend, a doctor, or a crisis line where you live. If you are in danger right now, call your local emergency number. You do not have to carry this alone.

And one more thing. Samson died because of his own choices, in the dark, with his eyes gone. But he died calling on God, and God remembered him. Hebrews 11:32 lists Samson among those who acted by faith, and verse 34 says some of them "out of weakness were made strong." That is Samson at the end. God's grace reaches even a man who wasted almost everything. It reaches us too.

There is a far greater picture here as well. Samson won his greatest victory in his death, with his arms stretched out between two pillars. Jesus Christ won the greatest victory of all in His death, with His arms stretched out on the cross. But the difference matters more than the likeness. Samson died because of his own sins, seeking his own revenge. Jesus died for the sins of others, praying for those who killed Him (Luke 23:34). Samson destroyed his enemies. Jesus died to save His enemies (Romans 5:8, 10).

16:31 *And his brothers and all the house of his father came down, and they lifted him and brought* ***him*** *up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. And he had judged Israel twenty years.*

His brothers and all his father's family came down to Gaza, took his body, and "buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father." His story ends where it began, between Zorah and Eshtaol, where the Spirit first stirred him (13:25). "And he had judged Israel twenty years."

Samson had more natural advantages than any judge in the book: a miracle birth, praying parents, a lifelong calling, and the Spirit of the LORD. He did great things against the Philistines. But he never led Israel, never called the people back to God, and never mastered himself. He is a warning to everyone God has gifted. The gift is not the same as the walk. What matters in the end is not how strong we were, but whether we walked with God.

Summary

Samson went in to a prostitute in Gaza, and when the men of the city waited to kill him at dawn, he rose at midnight and carried off the city gate to a hill in front of Hebron. He loved Delilah in the valley of Sorek, and the Philistine rulers each promised her eleven hundred pieces of silver to learn the secret of his strength. Three times he lied to her, about fresh cords, new ropes and weaving his hair into the loom, and three times she tried to hand him over. She pressed him daily until he told her all his heart, that he was a Nazirite from the womb and would lose his strength if shaved. She had his head shaved while he slept, and the LORD departed from him without his knowing. The Philistines gouged out his eyes and set him grinding in prison at Gaza, but his hair began to grow again. At a great sacrifice to Dagon they brought him out to mock him. Samson prayed for strength one more time, pushed on the two middle pillars, and the temple fell, killing

more Philistines in his death than in his life. His family buried him in his father's tomb. He had judged Israel twenty years.

Study Questions

1. What did Samson do at Gaza, and how did he escape the men waiting for him? (16:1-3)

2. What did the Philistine rulers offer Delilah, and what did they want from her? (16:4-5)

3. What three lies did Samson tell Delilah? How did each one come closer to the truth? (16:6-14)

4. How did Delilah finally get Samson to tell her his secret? (16:15-17)

5. What does verse 20 say Samson did not know? (16:20)

6. What did the Philistines do to Samson, and what small sign of hope does verse 22 give? (16:21-22)

7. What did Samson pray in the temple of Dagon, and how did God answer? (16:28-30)

8. Samson kept going back to the thing that would destroy him because he always seemed to get away with it. Is there a sin you have been playing with because nothing bad has happened yet?

9. Samson "did not know that the LORD had departed from on him." How can a believer keep from going through the motions while drifting from God?

10. God heard Samson's prayer at the very end, after years of wasted gifts. What does that tell you about God's grace for someone who feels it is too late?

Judges 17: Micah's Idols

Scripture

17:1-13 And there was a man from the hill country of Ephraim, and his name ***was*** Micah. And he said to his mother, "The eleven hundred ***pieces*** of silver that were taken from you, and ***about which*** you uttered a curse, and also spoke ***it*** in my ears, look, the silver ***is*** with me; I took it." And his mother said, "Blessed ***be*** my son by the LORD." And he returned the eleven hundred ***pieces*** of silver to his mother; and his mother said, "I wholly consecrate the silver to the LORD from my hand for my son, to make a carved image and a molten image; and now I will return it to you." And he returned the silver to his mother, and his mother took two hundred ***pieces*** of silver and gave it to the silversmith, and he made it ***into*** a carved image and a molten image; and it was in the house of Micah. And the man Micah had a house of God, and he made an ephod and teraphim, and he consecrated one of his sons, and he became his priest. In those days ***there was*** no king in Israel; each man did what ***was*** right in his own eyes. And there was a young man from Bethlehem of Judah, from the clan of Judah, and he ***was*** a Levite, and he ***was*** sojourning there. And the man went from the city, from Bethlehem of Judah, to sojourn wherever he might find ***a place***; and he came ***to*** the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, making his way. And Micah said to him, "Where do you come from?" And he said to him, "I ***am*** a Levite from Bethlehem of Judah, and I am going to sojourn wherever I may find ***a place***." And Micah said to him, "Dwell with me, and be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten ***pieces*** of silver a year, and a set of garments, and your sustenance." And the Levite went ***in***. And the Levite was willing to dwell with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. And Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and he was in the house of Micah. And Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will do good to me, for the Levite has become my priest."

Preview

With Samson's death, the stories of the judges are over. The last five chapters of the book are different. There are no foreign enemies and no deliverers. Instead the writer shows us what life inside Israel had become when there was no king and everyone made up their own religion. Most Bible teachers believe these events happened early in the period of the judges, not after Samson (18:30; 20:28), and that the writer put them at the end on purpose, as a picture of where Israel's heart really was.

The first story begins with a man named Micah in the hill country of Ephraim. He steals silver from his mother, gives it back when she curses the thief, and she uses part of it to make an idol "to the LORD." Micah sets up a shrine in his house with an ephod and household gods and makes one of his sons a priest. Then a wandering Levite from Bethlehem comes by, and Micah hires him as his own priest for ten pieces of silver a year. "Now I know that the LORD will do good to me," Micah says. He could not have been more wrong.

Study

17:1 *And there was a man from the hill country of Ephraim, and his name **was** Micah.*

"There was a man from the hill country of Ephraim, and his name was Micah." The name Micah means who is like the LORD. It is the same name as the later prophet. The irony is sharp. A man whose name asks who is like the LORD is about to make an idol to stand for Him.

Notice where he lived: the hill country of Ephraim, the same region where the tabernacle stood at Shiloh (18:31). The true place of worship was only a short trip away.

17:2 *And he said to his mother, "The eleven hundred **pieces** of silver that were taken from you, and **about which** you uttered a curse, and also spoke **it** in my ears, look, the silver **is** with me; I took it." And his mother said, "Blessed **be** my son by the LORD."*

Micah confessed to his mother that he had taken her "eleven hundred pieces of silver." That is the same amount each Philistine ruler paid Delilah (16:5), a large sum. His mother had put a curse on whoever stole it, and Micah seems to have been afraid of the curse more than sorry for the theft.

His mother's answer is strange: "Blessed be my son by the LORD." She did not correct him or call it sin. She tried to undo her curse with a blessing. Already we see a family that uses the LORD's name like a charm, a word to say to get good luck and avoid bad luck.

17:3-4 *And he returned the eleven hundred **pieces** of silver to his mother; and his mother said, "I wholly consecrate the silver to the LORD from my hand for my son, to make a carved image and a molten image; and now I will return it to you." And he returned the silver to his mother, and his mother took two hundred **pieces** of silver and gave it to the silversmith, and he made it **into** a carved image and a molten image; and it was in the house of Micah.*

Micah gave back the silver, and his mother said, "I wholly consecrate the silver to the LORD from my hand for my son, to make a carved image and a molten image." A carved image was carved from wood or stone and covered with metal. A molten image was cast from melted metal.

This is the heart of the problem. She thought she was honoring the LORD. But the second of the Ten Commandments says plainly, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image" (Exodus 20:4). She dedicated the silver to the LORD and then used it to break His law. And notice that after "wholly" dedicating eleven hundred pieces, she only gave two hundred to the silversmith. Even her devotion was half-hearted.

"And it was in the house of Micah." The idol had a home, and it was not the tabernacle.

17:5 *And the man Micah had a house of God, and he made an ephod and teraphim, and he consecrated one of his sons, and he became his priest.*

"The man Micah had a house of God." The name in Hebrew is Beth-elohim. He had his own private shrine. He made "an ephod and teraphim."

An ephod was a priest's garment, often worn when asking God for guidance. Gideon had made one too, and it became a snare to Israel (8:27). Teraphim were household idols, small figures that people believed brought protection and could be asked for guidance. Rachel stole her father's teraphim in Genesis 31:19.

Then Micah "consecrated one of his sons, and he became his priest." The Law said only the descendants of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi, could serve as priests (Numbers 3:10). Micah was from Ephraim. He made up his own house of God, his own idols, his own priesthood. It was a religion built to his own taste, and he called it worship of the LORD.

17:6 *In those days **there was** no king in Israel; each man did what **was** right in his own eyes.*

"In those days there was no king in Israel; each man did what was right in his own eyes." Here is the key to the last five chapters. The writer says it four times in different forms (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

What does it mean? It does not mean simply that Israel had no government. God was supposed to be their King (8:23), and His law was supposed to be their guide. Moses had warned them, "You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, every man all that is right in his own eyes" (Deuteronomy 12:8). When people stop listening to God, they do not stop being religious. They make up a religion that suits them.

That is not only an ancient problem. Many people today say they believe in God, but the God they believe in is shaped by their own feelings and wants. They keep the parts of the Bible they like and leave the rest. That is Micah's house of God. The question is never whether something feels right to us. The question is whether it is what God has said.

17:7-8 *And there was a young man from Bethlehem of Judah, from the clan of Judah, and he **was** a Levite, and he **was** sojourning there. And the man went from the city, from Bethlehem of Judah, to sojourn wherever he might find **a place**; and he came **to** the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, making his way.*

"There was a young man from Bethlehem of Judah, from the clan of Judah, and he was a Levite." A Levite was a member of the tribe of Levi, the tribe God set apart to serve at the tabernacle. Levites did not receive a block of land like the other tribes. They were given forty-eight towns scattered through Israel (Joshua 21) and lived on the tithes of the people. Bethlehem was not one of the Levite towns. Some think this young man's family had settled there, which is why he is called "from the clan of Judah."

He left Bethlehem "to sojourn wherever he might find a place." To sojourn means to live somewhere as a stranger, without land of your own. He was looking for work. If Israel had been faithful with its tithes, the Levites would have been cared for. A wandering, job-hunting Levite is a sign that Israel had stopped supporting the worship of God.

Remember that this Levite came from Bethlehem. So did the concubine in chapter 19. And Ruth's story is set in Bethlehem as well. The writer is drawing our eyes to that town for a reason.

17:9-10 *And Micah said to him, "Where do you come from?" And he said to him, "I **am** a Levite from Bethlehem of Judah, and I am going to sojourn wherever I may find **a place**." And Micah said to him, "Dwell with me, and be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten **pieces** of silver a year, and a set of garments, and your sustenance." And the Levite went **in**.*

Micah asked where he was from. "I am a Levite from Bethlehem of Judah," he said, looking for a place to settle.

Micah saw an opportunity. "Dwell with me, and be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, and a set of garments, and your sustenance." "Father" here is a title of respect for a spiritual leader or adviser (compare 2 Kings 6:21). Micah offered a salary, clothes and food. "And the Levite went in."

The Levite never asked whether this shrine pleased God. He did not mention the idols. He asked about the pay. This is ministry for hire, a man who serves wherever the money is good.

17:11-12 *And the Levite was willing to dwell with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. And Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and he was in the house of Micah.*

"The Levite was willing to dwell with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons." Micah had first called him "father" and then treated him like a son. Then "Micah consecrated the Levite," which means Micah ordained him. An Ephraimite installing a Levite as priest is upside down. Only God, through the line of Aaron, could make priests. And this Levite was not of the line of Aaron, as we learn in 18:30. He was a descendant of Moses, not of Aaron.

17:13 *And Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will do good to me, for the Levite has become my priest."*

"Now I know that the LORD will do good to me, for the Levite has become my priest."

This is the saddest line in the chapter. Micah had an idol, an ephod, household gods, and now a real Levite. He was sure he had God on his side. He thought the right religious trappings would buy God's blessing. But he had broken God's commands at every step.

Many people still think this way. They think that if they have the right church, the right ceremony or the right religious person on their side, God must bless them. But God is not won by trappings. He looks at the heart and at whether we obey His Word (1 Samuel 15:22). In the next chapter Micah will lose every one of the things he trusted in, in a single afternoon.

Summary

A man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim admitted to his mother that he had taken her eleven hundred pieces of silver, which she had cursed. She blessed him in the LORD's name and dedicated the silver to the LORD to make a carved image and a molten image, giving two hundred pieces to a silversmith. Micah set up a house of God with the idol, an ephod and teraphim, and made one of his sons his priest. The writer explains that in those days there was no

king in Israel and each man did what was right in his own eyes. A young Levite from Bethlehem of Judah, wandering to find a place to live, came to Micah's house. Micah hired him as father and priest for ten pieces of silver a year, clothing and food, and ordained him. Micah then said he knew the LORD would do him good because he had a Levite for his priest.

Study Questions

1. What did Micah take from his mother, and how did she respond when he confessed? (17:1-2)

2. What did Micah's mother do with the silver she dedicated to the LORD? Which commandment did that break? (17:3-4; Exodus 20:4)

3. What did Micah put in his house of God, and whom did he make his priest? (17:5)

4. What phrase does the writer use in verse 6 to explain these chapters? Where else does it appear? (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25)

5. Why was the young Levite traveling, and where was he from? (17:7-9)

6. What did Micah offer the Levite, and what did the Levite not ask about? (17:10-11)

7. Why was Micah so sure the LORD would do him good? (17:13)

8. Micah's mother dedicated silver "to the LORD" and then used it to make an idol. How can people today honor God with their words and disobey Him with their actions?

9. "Each man did what was right in his own eyes." Where do you see this attitude in our culture? Where do you see it in your own heart?

10. Micah thought having the right religious trappings would guarantee God's blessing. What things are people tempted to trust in instead of a real relationship with God?

Judges 18: The Danites Move North

Scripture

18:1-13 In those days ***there was*** no king in Israel; and in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in, for it had not fallen to it until that day in the midst of the tribes of Israel as an inheritance. And the sons of Dan sent from their clan five men from their whole number, men, sons of valor, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to explore it; and they said to them, "Go, explore the land." And they came ***to*** the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and they spent the night there. They ***were*** near the house of Micah, and they recognized the voice of the young man, the Levite; and they turned aside there and said to him, "Who brought you here? And what are you doing in this ***place***? And what ***is there*** for you here?" And he said to them, "Like this and like this Micah has done for me, and he hired me, and I have become a priest for him." And they said to him, "Inquire, please, of God, and let us know whether our way on which we are going will succeed." And the priest said to them, "Go in peace; your way on which you go ***is*** before the LORD." And the five men went and came to Laish, and they saw the people that ***was*** in its midst dwelling in security, according to the custom of the Sidonians, quiet and secure; and ***there was*** no one in the land putting ***them*** to shame ***in*** anything, possessing restraint; and they ***were*** far from the Sidonians, and they had no dealings with anyone. And they came to their brothers ***at*** Zorah and Eshtaol; and their brothers said to them, "What ***about*** you?" And they said, "Arise, and let us go up against them; for we have seen the land, and look, ***it is*** very good. And you ***are*** keeping silent? Do not be sluggish to go, to enter, to take possession of the land. When you go, you will come to a people secure, and the land ***is*** broad on both sides; for God has given it into your hand, a place where there is no lack of any thing that ***is*** in the land." And ***there*** set out from there, from the clan of the Danites, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, six hundred men girded ***with*** weapons of war. And they went up and camped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah; therefore they called that place Mahaneh-dan until this day; look, ***it is*** behind Kiriath-jearim. And they passed on from there ***to*** the hill country of Ephraim, and they came to the house of Micah.

18:14-31 And the five men who had gone to spy out the land ***of*** Laish answered and said to their brothers, "Do you know that there are in these houses an ephod and teraphim and a carved image and a molten image? And now, consider what you will do." And they turned aside there and came to the house of the young man, the Levite, the house of Micah, and they asked him about ***his*** welfare. And the six hundred men girded ***with*** their weapons of war, who ***were*** of the sons of Dan, ***were*** standing ***at*** the entrance of the gate. And the five men who had gone to spy out the land went up; they went in there, they took the carved image and the ephod and the teraphim and the molten image; and the priest ***was*** standing ***at*** the entrance of the gate, and the six hundred men girded ***with*** the weapons of war. And these went into the house of Micah and took the carved image, the ephod, and the teraphim and the molten image. And the priest said to them, "What are you doing?" And they said to him, "Keep quiet; put your hand over your mouth and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. ***Is it*** better for you to be a priest to the house of one man, or for you to be a priest to a tribe and to a clan in Israel?" And the heart of the priest was glad, and he took the ephod and the teraphim and the carved image, and he went into the midst of the people.

And they turned and went, and they put the little ones and the livestock and the valuables before them. They had gone far from the house of Micah, and the men who ***were*** in the houses that ***were*** near the house of Micah were called together, and they overtook the sons of Dan. And they called out to the sons of Dan; and they turned their faces and said to Micah, "What ***is the matter*** with you, that you have been called together?" And he said, "My gods which I made you have taken, and the priest, and you have gone; and what more ***is there*** for me? And what ***is*** this ***that*** you say to me, 'What ***is the matter*** with you?'" And the sons of Dan said to him, "Do not make your voice heard among us, lest men bitter of soul fall upon you, and you lose your life and the life of your household." And the sons of Dan went on their way; and Micah saw that they ***were*** stronger than he, and he turned and went back to his house. And they took what Micah had made, and the priest who had belonged to him, and they came upon Laish, upon a people quiet and secure, and they struck them by the mouth of ***the*** sword, and the city they burned with fire. And ***there was*** no deliverer, for it ***was*** far from Sidon, and they had no dealings with anyone; and it ***was*** in the valley that ***belongs*** to Beth-rehob. And they built the city and dwelt in it. And they called the name of the city Dan, by the name of Dan their father, who was born to Israel; but Laish ***was*** the name of the city at first. And the sons of Dan set up for themselves the carved image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the exile of the land. And they set up for themselves the carved image of Micah which he had made, all the days that the house of God was in Shiloh.

Preview

The tribe of Dan has never taken the land God gave it near the coast. So the Danites send five spies to look for somewhere easier. On the way they stop at Micah's house, recognize the young Levite, and ask him to inquire of God for them. He tells them what they want to hear. Far to the north they find Laish, a quiet town that feels safe and has no allies nearby, and they go home and urge the tribe to take it.

Six hundred armed men of Dan march north. At Micah's house they steal his idol, his ephod and his household gods, and they talk the Levite into coming with them as priest to a whole tribe. He is glad to go. When Micah chases them, they threaten him, and he goes home with nothing. Then the Danites fall on the peaceful people of Laish, burn the city and rebuild it as Dan, and they set up Micah's idol with the Levite's family as its priests. Only now does the writer tell us the Levite's name and family, and it is a shock.

Study

18:1 *In those days **there was** no king in Israel; and in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in, for it had not fallen to it until that day in the midst of the tribes of Israel as an inheritance.*

"In those days there was no king in Israel." The writer repeats the refrain from 17:6. "And in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in, for it had not fallen to it until that day."

That is not quite true, and the writer knows it. Dan had been given land by lot (Joshua 19:40-46), in the low hills and the coastal plain west of Benjamin and Judah. Zorah and Eshtaol, Samson's home towns, were in it. But the Amorites had pushed Dan back into the hills (1:34), and later the Philistines held the plain. Dan had a land. They had not taken it. Rather than trust God to fight for them where He had put them, they went looking for an easier place.

18:2-3 *And the sons of Dan sent from their clan five men from their whole number, men, sons of valor, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to explore it; and they said to them, "Go, explore the land." And they came **to** the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and they spent the night there. They **were** near the house of Micah, and they recognized the voice of the young man, the Levite; and they turned aside there and said to him, "Who brought you here? And what are you doing in this **place**? And what **is there** for you here?"*

The Danites sent five brave men from Zorah and Eshtaol "to spy out the land and to explore it." It sounds like the spies Moses and Joshua sent (Numbers 13; Joshua 2). But those spies went out at God's command to the land God had promised. These went out to find something easier.

They came to the hill country of Ephraim and spent the night at Micah's house. There "they recognized the voice of the young man, the Levite." Perhaps they knew him from before, or perhaps they noticed his southern accent from Judah. They asked three sharp questions: "Who brought you here? And what are you doing in this place? And what is there for you here?" Those are good questions for anyone in ministry, and the Levite had no good answer.

18:4-6 *And he said to them, "Like this and like this Micah has done for me, and he hired me, and I have become a priest for him." And they said to him, "Inquire, please, of God, and let us know whether our way on which we are going will succeed." And the priest said to them, "Go in peace; your way on which you go **is** before the LORD."*

He told them, "Like this and like this Micah has done for me, and he hired me, and I have become a priest for him." That was the whole story. He was a hired hand.

The Danites asked him, "Inquire, please, of God, and let us know whether our way on which we are going will succeed." The text does not say how he inquired. There was an ephod and household gods in the house, so he may have used them. He answered, "Go in peace; your way on which you go is before the LORD."

His words sound spiritual, but they say very little. "Before the LORD" can mean that God approves, or only that God sees it. He gave them a blessing that could fit whatever happened. False religion often works like that. It tells people what they want to hear and uses God's name to make it sound holy.

18:7 *And the five men went and came to Laish, and they saw the people that **was** in its midst dwelling in security, according to the custom of the Sidonians, quiet and secure; and **there was** no one in the land putting **them** to shame **in** anything, possessing restraint; and they **were** far from the Sidonians, and they had no dealings with anyone.*

The five men went north "and came to Laish." Laish was near the springs at the foot of Mount Hermon, at the very north of the land, where one of the main sources of the Jordan River flows out.

They found the people "dwelling in security, according to the custom of the Sidonians, quiet and secure." The Sidonians were the people of Sidon, a trading city on the coast. Laish lived like them, peaceful and prosperous. There was no one in the land to trouble them, "and they were far from the Sidonians, and they had no dealings with anyone." In other words, they were wealthy, peaceful and alone. No ally would come to help them. To the spies, that made them an easy target.

18:8-10 *And they came to their brothers **at** Zorah and Eshtaol; and their brothers said to them, "What **about** you?" And they said, "Arise, and let us go up against them; for we have seen the land, and look, **it is** very good. And you **are** keeping silent? Do not be sluggish to go, to enter, to take possession of the land. When you go, you will come to a people secure, and the land **is** broad on both sides; for God has given it into your hand, a place where there is no lack of any thing that **is** in the land."*

The spies went home and reported. "Arise, and let us go up against them; for we have seen the land, and look, it is very good." They scolded their brothers for sitting still: "Do not be sluggish to go, to enter, to take possession of the land."

Those words sound like Joshua and Caleb urging Israel to trust God and take Canaan (Numbers 14:7-9). They even said, "God has given it into your hand." But no one had asked God. They had asked a hired priest at an idol shrine, and he had told them what they wanted. They used the language of faith to cover a plan that was really about finding the softest target.

18:11-13 *And **there** set out from there, from the clan of the Danites, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, six hundred men girded **with** weapons of war. And they went up and camped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah; therefore they called that place Mahaneh-dan until this day; look, **it is** behind Kiriath-jearim. And they passed on from there **to** the hill country of Ephraim, and they came to the house of Micah.*

Six hundred men of Dan "girded with weapons of war" set out from Zorah and Eshtaol, with their families and livestock (18:21). This was a whole clan on the move, not just an army.

They camped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah, and the camp gave its name to the place, Mahaneh-dan, "until this day." Samson's story also mentions a Mahaneh-dan near Zorah (13:25). The camp of Dan may have been a name used for more than one place where the Danites camped. Then they passed on into the hill country of Ephraim "and they came to the house of Micah."

18:14-17 *And the five men who had gone to spy out the land **of** Laish answered and said to their brothers, "Do you know that there are in these houses an ephod and teraphim and a carved image and a molten image? And now, consider what you will do." And they turned aside there and came to the house of the young man, the Levite, the house of Micah, and they asked him about **his** welfare. And the six hundred men girded **with** their weapons of war, who **were** of the sons of Dan, **were** standing **at** the entrance of the gate. And the five men who had gone to spy out the land went up; they went in there, they took the carved image and the ephod and the teraphim and the molten image; and the priest **was** standing **at** the entrance of the gate, and the six hundred men girded **with** the weapons of war.*

The five spies told their brothers what was in Micah's house: "an ephod and teraphim and a carved image and a molten image. And now, consider what you will do." It was not a hard decision for them. They planned to take it.

While the six hundred armed men stood at the gate, the five went in and greeted the Levite. Then they took the carved image, the ephod, the household gods and the molten image, "and the priest was standing at the entrance of the gate" with the six hundred armed men. The man who was supposed to guard the shrine stood and watched it being carried off.

18:18-20 *And these went into the house of Micah and took the carved image, the ephod, and the teraphim and the molten image. And the priest said to them, "What are you doing?" And they said to him, "Keep quiet; put your hand over your mouth and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. **Is it** better for you to be a priest to the house of one man, or for you to be a priest to a tribe and to a clan in Israel?" And the heart of the priest was glad, and he took the ephod and the teraphim and the carved image, and he went into the midst of the people.*

The priest said, "What are you doing?" They answered, "Keep quiet; put your hand over your mouth and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest." Then they made him an offer: "Is it better for you to be a priest to the house of one man, or for you to be a priest to a tribe and to a clan in Israel?"

"And the heart of the priest was glad." He did not defend Micah, who had taken him in like a son. He did not ask what God wanted. He took a better job. He even carried the idols himself and went "into the midst of the people," so he would be safe in the middle of the crowd.

This is what happens when ministry becomes a career instead of a calling. A man who serves for money will go wherever the money is better. Peter told church leaders to shepherd God's flock "nor for shameful gain but eagerly" (1 Peter 5:2).

18:21-23 *And they turned and went, and they put the little ones and the livestock and the valuables before them. They had gone far from the house of Micah, and the men who **were** in the houses that **were** near the house of Micah were called together, and they overtook the sons of Dan. And they called out to the sons of Dan; and they turned their faces and said to Micah, "What **is the matter** with you, that you have been called together?"*

The Danites "turned and went," putting the little ones, the livestock and the goods in front of them. They expected trouble from behind, so they put the fighters at the rear.

When they were a good way off, Micah's neighbors were gathered, and they caught up with the Danites. The Danites turned and asked Micah, "What is the matter with you, that you have been called together?" They asked it as if they had done nothing.

18:24-26 *And he said, "My gods which I made you have taken, and the priest, and you have gone; and what more **is there** for me? And what **is** this **that** you say to me, 'What **is the matter** with you?'" And the sons of Dan said to him, "Do not make your voice heard among us, lest men bitter of soul fall upon you, and you lose your life and the life of your household." And the sons of Dan went on their way; and Micah saw that they **were** stronger than he, and he turned and went back to his house.*

Micah's answer is both sad and foolish: "My gods which I made you have taken, and the priest, and you have gone; and what more is there for me?"

Read those words slowly: "My gods which I made." That is the whole problem with idols. A god you can make, someone else can steal. A god you have to protect cannot protect you. Isaiah later mocked the man who cuts down a tree, burns half of it to cook his dinner, and makes the other half into a god and bows to it (Isaiah 44:14-17). Micah had built his life around something he made, and when it was gone he had nothing left.

The Danites threatened him: keep quiet, "lest men bitter of soul fall upon you, and you lose your life and the life of your household." Micah saw they were stronger, "and he turned and went back to his house." He went home empty. In 17:13 he was sure the LORD would do good to him. Now he had lost it all.

18:27-28 *And they took what Micah had made, and the priest who had belonged to him, and they came upon Laish, upon a people quiet and secure, and they struck them by the mouth of **the** sword, and the city they burned with fire. And **there was** no deliverer, for it **was** far from Sidon, and they had no dealings with anyone; and it **was** in the valley that **belongs** to Beth-rehob. And they built the city and dwelt in it.*

"They took what Micah had made, and the priest who had belonged to him, and they came upon Laish, upon a people quiet and secure." The writer repeats that phrase on purpose. The people of Laish had done nothing to Dan. "And they struck them by the mouth of the sword, and the city they burned with fire."

"And there was no deliverer, for it was far from Sidon." In a book full of deliverers, the people of Laish had none.

How should we read this? Some say Laish was part of the land God promised to Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, so the Danites were within their rights. But the writer does not tell it that way. He never says God sent them or gave them Laish. He tells us twice that the people were quiet and secure, and that they had no one to help them. He shows us a tribe that refused to fight for the land God gave it, then fell on a peaceful town far away because it was easy. And they did it with a stolen idol and a hired priest. This is not the conquest under Joshua. It is the kind of thing that happens when every man does what is right in his own eyes.

Then "they built the city and dwelt in it."

18:29 *And they called the name of the city Dan, by the name of Dan their father, who was born to Israel; but Laish **was** the name of the city at first.*

"They called the name of the city Dan, by the name of Dan their father." Joshua 19:47 gives a short note of the same event, where the city is called Leshem. From then on, Dan was Israel's northernmost city, and the phrase "from Dan to Beersheba" (20:1) came to mean the whole land, from north to south.

18:30 *And the sons of Dan set up for themselves the carved image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the exile of the land.*

"The sons of Dan set up for themselves the carved image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the exile of the land."

At last we learn the Levite's name. He was Jonathan, the son of Gershom. Moses had a son named Gershom (Exodus 2:22; 18:3). So who was this Manasseh? In the Hebrew text, the name Manasseh is written with one small letter, the letter n, lifted above the line. Without that letter, the name reads Moses. Many scholars believe the original said Moses, and that later Jewish scribes added the raised letter to protect Moses' name from the shame of having a grandson lead Israel into idolatry. Some Greek and Latin copies of the Old Testament read Moses here. The SLB follows the Hebrew text as it stands and prints Manasseh.

If that is right, the young Levite was Moses' own grandson, or a descendant a few generations down, since "son of" can mean descendant. Think about that. The founder of this family had received the Ten Commandments, including "You shall not make for yourself a carved image" (Exodus 20:4). Within a few generations, his family was running an idol shrine for a tribe. Godliness is not passed down by blood. Every generation has to know the LORD for itself (2:10).

"Until the day of the exile of the land" is read in two ways. Some take it as the Assyrian conquest of the northern tribes, finished in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 15:29; 17:6), which would make this line a note added to the book later. Others take it as the time the Philistines captured the ark and Shiloh was destroyed (1 Samuel 4), which matches the next verse and fits the early date of the book. Either way, this idolatry lasted a long time. Later, Jeroboam set up one of his golden calves at Dan (1 Kings 12:29), so the city stayed a center of false worship.

18:31 *And they set up for themselves the carved image of Micah which he had made, all the days that the house of God was in Shiloh.*

"They set up for themselves the carved image of Micah which he had made, all the days that the house of God was in Shiloh."

The writer ends with a contrast. The real house of God was at Shiloh, with the ark and the true priesthood, not far away. The Danites had their own house of God with a stolen idol, and they kept it going the whole time the true one was standing. They chose the god they could carry over the God who had carried them.

Dan's choice cast a long shadow. When John lists the tribes of Israel sealed in Revelation 7:5-8, Dan is not named. Scripture does not tell us why. Some connect it with Dan's early turn to idols. We should not build too much on that. But it is a solemn reminder that the choices of one generation can mark a family for a long time.

Summary

The tribe of Dan, which had not taken the land God allotted it, sent five spies to find a new place to live. At Micah's house they recognized the Levite, who told them Micah had hired him, and he said their journey was before the LORD. They found Laish in the far north, a quiet and secure people with no allies, and urged their tribe to take it. Six hundred armed Danites marched north with their families. At Micah's house they took his carved image, ephod, teraphim and molten image, and persuaded the Levite to become priest to their tribe, and he went gladly. When Micah and his neighbors pursued them, Micah cried that they had taken the gods he made, and the Danites threatened him, so he went home. The Danites struck the people of Laish with the sword, burned the city, rebuilt it and named it Dan. They set up Micah's idol with Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh (or Moses), and his sons as priests until the exile of the land, all the days the house of God was at Shiloh.

Study Questions

1. Why was the tribe of Dan looking for land? What had really happened to the land God gave them? (18:1; 1:34; Joshua 19:40-48)

2. What three questions did the spies ask the Levite, and how did he answer? (18:3-4)

3. What did the Levite tell the spies when they asked him to inquire of God? (18:5-6)

4. How does the writer describe the people of Laish, and why does he repeat it? (18:7, 27-28)

5. What offer did the Danites make the Levite, and how did he respond? (18:19-20)

6. What did Micah say when the Danites asked what was the matter with him? (18:24)

7. Who was the Levite, according to verse 30? Why is that so shocking? (18:30; Exodus 2:22)

8. The Danites used the language of faith to cover a plan that was about finding the easiest way. Have you ever used spiritual words to justify a decision you had already made?

9. Micah said, "My gods which I made you have taken." What are some things people build their lives around today that can be taken from them in a day?

10. Moses' own descendants turned to idols within a few generations. What are you doing to pass on real faith, not just a family name, to the next generation?

Judges 19: The Crime at Gibeah

Scripture

19:1-15 And it was in those days, and ***there was*** no king in Israel, and there was a man, a Levite, sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim; and he took for himself a woman, a concubine, from Bethlehem of Judah. And his concubine played the prostitute against him, and she went from him to the house of her father, to Bethlehem of Judah, and she was there ***some*** days, four months. And her husband arose and went after her, to speak to her heart, to bring her back; and his young man ***was*** with him and a pair of donkeys. And she brought him ***into*** the house of her father; and the father of the young woman saw him, and he was glad to meet him. And his father-in-law, the father of the young woman, took hold of him, and he stayed with him three days; and they ate and drank and spent the night there. And it was on the fourth day, and they rose early in the morning, and he arose to go; and the father of the young woman said to his son-in-law, "Sustain your heart ***with*** a morsel of bread, and afterward you will go." And they sat down, and the two of them ate together and drank; and the father of the young woman said to the man, "Be willing, please, and spend the night, and let your heart be glad." And the man arose to go, and his father-in-law urged him, and he turned back and spent the night there. And he rose early in the morning on the fifth day to go; and the father of the young woman said, "Sustain your heart, please." And they lingered until the day declined, and the two of them ate. And the man arose to go, he and his concubine and his young man; and his father-in-law, the father of the young woman, said to him, "Look, please, the day has sunk toward evening; spend the night, please. Look, the day is coming to an end; spend the night here, and let your heart be glad; and you will rise early tomorrow for your way, and you will go to your tent." And the man was not willing to spend the night, and he arose and went and came to opposite Jebus, that ***is*** Jerusalem; and with him ***were*** a pair of saddled donkeys, and his concubine ***was*** with him. They ***were*** near Jebus, and the day had gone down greatly; and the young man said to his master, "Come, please, and let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites and spend the night in it." And his master said to him, "We will not turn aside to a foreign city, where they ***are*** not of the sons of Israel; and we will pass on to Gibeah." And he said to his young man, "Come, and let us draw near to one of the places, and we will spend the night in Gibeah or in Ramah." And they passed on and went, and the sun set on them beside Gibeah, which ***belongs*** to Benjamin. And they turned aside there to go in to spend the night in Gibeah; and he went in and sat down in the open square of the city, and ***there was*** no one taking them into the house to spend the night.

19:16-30 And look, an old man ***was*** coming from his work, from the field, in the evening; and the man ***was*** from the hill country of Ephraim, and he ***was*** sojourning in Gibeah; and the men of the place ***were*** Benjaminites. And he lifted up his eyes and saw the man, the traveler, in the open square of the city; and the old man said, "Where are you going? And where do you come from?" And he said to him, "We ***are*** passing from Bethlehem of Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim; I ***am*** from there, and I went to Bethlehem of Judah; and ***to*** the house of the LORD I am going; and ***there is*** no one taking me into the house. And there is both straw and fodder for our donkeys, and there is also bread and wine for me and for your maidservant and for the young man with your servants; there is no lack of any thing." And the old man said, "Peace ***be***

to you; only, all your lack ***is*** upon me; only do not spend the night in the open square." And he brought him into his house and gave fodder to the donkeys; and they washed their feet and ate and drank. They ***were*** making their hearts glad, and look, the men of the city, men, sons of worthlessness, surrounded the house, beating on the door; and they spoke to the man, the master of the house, the old man, saying, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may know him." And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not do evil, please; since this man has come into my house, do not do this disgraceful folly. Look, my daughter, the virgin, and his concubine; let me bring them out, please, and humble them, and do to them what ***is*** good in your eyes; but to this man you shall not do this thing of disgraceful folly." And the men were not willing to listen to him; and the man took hold of his concubine and brought ***her*** out to them outside; and they knew her and abused her all the night until the morning; and they let her go when the dawn came up. And the woman came at the turning of the morning, and she fell ***at*** the entrance of the house of the man where her master ***was***, until the light. And her master arose in the morning and opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way; and look, the woman, his concubine, ***was*** fallen ***at*** the entrance of the house, and her hands ***were*** on the threshold. And he said to her, "Get up, and let us go." And ***there was*** no one answering. And he took her on the donkey, and the man arose and went to his place. And he came to his house and took the knife and took hold of his concubine and cut her in pieces, according to her bones, into twelve pieces; and he sent her into all the territory of Israel. And it was ***that*** everyone who saw ***it*** said, "***A thing*** like this has not happened and has not been seen from the day the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt until this day. Set ***your hearts*** on it for yourselves, take counsel, and speak."

Preview

This is the darkest chapter in Judges, and one of the darkest in the whole Bible. A Levite from the hill country of Ephraim goes to Bethlehem to bring back his concubine, a secondary wife, who has left him. Her father keeps him there with food and drink for days. When the Levite finally leaves late in the day, he will not stop in Jebus, a city of foreigners, and goes on to Gibeah, a town of Israel in the tribe of Benjamin. No one takes them in except an old man who is himself a stranger there.

That night the men of the town surround the house and demand the Levite, just as the men of Sodom once surrounded Lot's house. The old man offers his own daughter and the concubine instead. The Levite pushes his concubine out the door, and the men abuse her all night. In the morning she lies dead at the door. The Levite takes her home, cuts her body into twelve pieces, and sends them through all Israel. Everyone who sees it says nothing like this has happened since Israel came out of Egypt.

I want to say plainly before we begin: what happens in this chapter is evil. The writer does not approve of it, and neither does God. He tells it so we will see what God's people become when they forget Him. We will read it carefully, without dwelling on the details, and we will stop at the end to speak to anyone who has suffered abuse.

Study

19:1 *And it was in those days, and **there was** no king in Israel, and there was a man, a Levite, sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim; and he took for himself a woman, a concubine, from Bethlehem of Judah.*

"It was in those days, and there was no king in Israel." The writer reminds us of the refrain again (17:6; 18:1). What follows is what life looked like when everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

"There was a man, a Levite, sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim; and he took for himself a woman, a concubine, from Bethlehem of Judah." A concubine was a wife of lower rank. She was legally bound to her husband, but she did not have the full rights of a first wife, and her children did not usually inherit as fully. The text calls him her husband (19:3) and her father his father-in-law (19:4).

Like the Levite in chapter 17, this man has ties to Bethlehem of Judah. Both of the last two stories in Judges start with a Levite and Bethlehem. Both go terribly wrong.

19:2 *And his concubine played the prostitute against him, and she went from him to the house of her father, to Bethlehem of Judah, and she was there **some** days, four months.*

"His concubine played the prostitute against him, and she went from him to the house of her father." The Hebrew text says she was unfaithful to him. The old Greek translation reads that she was angry with him, and many scholars think that fits the story better, since her husband went after her to win her back, not to accuse her. Either way, there was trouble in the marriage, and she went home to her father in Bethlehem. She stayed there "four months."

19:3 *And her husband arose and went after her, to speak to her heart, to bring her back; and his young man **was** with him and a pair of donkeys. And she brought him **into** the house of her father; and the father of the young woman saw him, and he was glad to meet him.*

"Her husband arose and went after her, to speak to her heart, to bring her back." To speak to someone's heart is a Hebrew way of saying to speak kindly, to win someone back with tender words. It is the same phrase used when Boaz comforts Ruth (Ruth 2:13). At this point the Levite seems to be doing the right thing, going after a wife who had left.

She brought him into her father's house, "and the father of the young woman saw him, and he was glad to meet him."

19:4-9 *And his father-in-law, the father of the young woman, took hold of him, and he stayed with him three days; and they ate and drank and spent the night there. And it was on the fourth day, and they rose early in the morning, and he arose to go; and the father of the young woman said to his son-in-law, "Sustain your heart **with** a morsel of bread, and afterward you will go." And they sat down, and the two of them ate together and drank; and the father of the young woman said to the man, "Be willing, please, and spend the night, and let your heart be glad." And the man arose to go, and his father-in-law urged him, and he turned back and spent the night there. And he rose early in the morning on the fifth day to go; and the father of the young woman said, "Sustain your heart, please." And they lingered until the day declined, and the two of them ate. And the man arose to go, he and his concubine and his young man; and his father-in-law, the father of the young woman, said to him, "Look, please, the day has sunk toward evening; spend the night, please. Look, the day is coming to an end; spend the night here, and let your heart be glad; and you will rise early tomorrow for your way, and you will go to your tent."*

The father-in-law made the Levite welcome, and kept him. "He stayed with him three days; and they ate and drank and spent the night there." On the fourth morning the Levite got up to leave, and his father-in-law said, "Sustain your heart with a morsel of bread, and afterward you will go." So they sat and ate and drank again, and the father urged him to stay another night.

On the fifth day it happened again. They lingered until late afternoon. When the Levite finally got up with his concubine and his servant, his father-in-law pleaded, "the day has sunk toward evening; spend the night, please."

Why does the writer give us all this? Partly to show how warm and generous hospitality was supposed to be. That will stand out by contrast with what happens in Gibeah. But notice who is talking in these verses. The two men eat and drink and make plans. The young woman says nothing. Her father and her husband decide for her. She is never once asked what she wants, and she never speaks a word in the whole chapter.

19:10-13 *And the man was not willing to spend the night, and he arose and went and came to opposite Jebus, that **is** Jerusalem; and with him **were** a pair of saddled donkeys, and his concubine **was** with him. They **were** near Jebus, and the day had gone down greatly; and the young man said to his master, "Come, please, and let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites and spend the night in it." And his master said to him, "We will not turn aside to a foreign city, where they **are** not of the sons of Israel; and we will pass on to Gibeah." And he said to his young man, "Come, and let us draw near to one of the places, and we will spend the night in Gibeah or in Ramah."*

The Levite refused to stay another night. He set out late in the day and came "to opposite Jebus, that is Jerusalem." Jebus was still held by the Jebusites, a Canaanite people. David would not capture it until many years later (2 Samuel 5:6-9). It was about six miles from Bethlehem.

The servant said, "Come, please, and let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites and spend the night in it." It was getting dark, and travel at night was dangerous. But the Levite said, "We will not turn aside to a foreign city, where they are not of the sons of Israel; and we will pass on to Gibeah." He thought they would be safer among their own people.

That is the terrible irony of this chapter. He feared the foreigners. The real danger was among God's people.

19:14-15 *And they passed on and went, and the sun set on them beside Gibeah, which **belongs** to Benjamin. And they turned aside there to go in to spend the night in Gibeah; and he went in and sat down in the open square of the city, and **there was** no one taking them into the house to spend the night.*

"The sun set on them beside Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin." Gibeah was a few miles north of Jerusalem. Later it would be the home town of Saul, Israel's first king (1 Samuel 10:26).

They sat down in the open square of the city, the place where travelers waited for someone to offer them a place to stay. "And there was no one taking them into the house to spend the night." In that part of the world, taking in a traveler was a basic duty. The Law told Israel to love the stranger, because they had been strangers in Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:19). Gibeah's cold welcome was the first sign that something was badly wrong in that town.

19:16-21 *And look, an old man **was** coming from his work, from the field, in the evening; and the man **was** from the hill country of Ephraim, and he **was** sojourning in Gibeah; and the men of the place **were** Benjaminites. And he lifted up his eyes and saw the man, the traveler, in the open square of the city; and the old man said, "Where are you going? And where do you come from?" And he said to him, "We **are** passing from Bethlehem of Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim; I **am** from there, and I went to Bethlehem of Judah; and **to** the house of the LORD I am going; and **there is** no one taking me into the house. And there is both straw and fodder for our donkeys, and there is also bread and wine for me and for your maidservant and for the young man with your servants; there is no lack of any thing." And the old man said, "Peace **be** to you; only, all your lack **is** upon me; only do not spend the night in the open square." And he brought him into his house and gave fodder to the donkeys; and they washed their feet and ate and drank.*

Finally "an old man was coming from his work, from the field, in the evening." He was not from Gibeah either. He was "from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was sojourning in Gibeah." The writer adds, "and the men of the place were Benjaminites." The only one in town who showed kindness was an outsider.

The old man asked where they were going. The Levite explained that they were going home to the hill country of Ephraim and "to the house of the LORD I am going." He may have meant the tabernacle at Shiloh, which was on the way. He said they had everything they needed, straw and food for the donkeys, bread and wine for themselves. They only needed a roof.

The old man said, "Peace be to you; only, all your lack is upon me; only do not spend the night in the open square." He knew it was not safe. He brought them in, fed the donkeys, "and they washed their feet and ate and drank."

19:22 *They **were** making their hearts glad, and look, the men of the city, men, sons of worthlessness, surrounded the house, beating on the door; and they spoke to the man, the master of the house, the old man, saying, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may know him."*

"They were making their hearts glad, and look, the men of the city, men, sons of worthlessness, surrounded the house, beating on the door." "Sons of worthlessness" is a Hebrew expression for wicked, lawless men. The Hebrew word is belial, which later became a name for evil itself (2 Corinthians 6:15).

They demanded, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may know him." The word "know" here means to have sexual relations with. They meant to abuse him by force.

These are almost the same words the men of Sodom spoke at Lot's door: "Bring them out to us, and let us know them" (Genesis 19:5). The writer wants us to see it. Sodom was the city God destroyed for its great wickedness. Now a town of Israel, in the land God gave His people, has become Sodom.

19:23-24 *And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not do evil, please; since this man has come into my house, do not do this disgraceful folly. Look, my daughter, the virgin, and his concubine; let me bring them out, please, and humble them, and do to them what **is** good in your eyes; but to this man you shall not do this thing of disgraceful folly."*

The old man went out and pleaded: "No, my brothers, do not do evil, please." He called what they wanted "this disgraceful folly," a phrase used in Israel for a shameful, sinful act that broke the bonds of the community.

Then he did something horrible. "Look, my daughter, the virgin, and his concubine; let me bring them out, please." He offered two women to the mob to protect a man. Lot had done the same thing in Sodom (Genesis 19:8).

We must say this plainly. That offer was evil. The old man knew that what the mob wanted to do to the Levite was wrong. He did not see that doing it to his daughter or to the concubine was just as wrong. Hospitality to a guest mattered more to him than the safety of the women in his own house. The text reports what he said. It does not approve it, and the rest of Scripture shows us how God sees women: made in His image, as fully as men (Genesis 1:27), and equally heirs of His grace (1 Peter 3:7).

19:25 *And the men were not willing to listen to him; and the man took hold of his concubine and brought **her** out to them outside; and they knew her and abused her all the night until the morning; and they let her go when the dawn came up.*

"The men were not willing to listen to him; and the man took hold of his concubine and brought her out to them outside." The "man" here is the Levite. In Sodom, the angels pulled Lot inside and struck the men blind (Genesis 19:10-11). In Gibeah, no one rescued her. Her own husband, who had gone to Bethlehem to speak to her heart, pushed her out the door to save himself.

"And they knew her and abused her all the night until the morning; and they let her go when the dawn came up."

I will not say more about what happened than the Bible says. It is enough to call it what it was: a terrible crime of violence against a helpless woman, done by many men, through a whole night. It was evil. And her husband handed her over to it.

19:26-28 *And the woman came at the turning of the morning, and she fell **at** the entrance of the house of the man where her master **was**, until the light. And her master arose in the morning and opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way; and look, the woman, his concubine, **was** fallen **at** the entrance of the house, and her hands **were** on the threshold. And he said to her, "Get up, and let us go." And **there was** no one answering. And he took her on the donkey, and the man arose and went to his place.*

"The woman came at the turning of the morning, and she fell at the entrance of the house of the man where her master was, until the light." She came back to the door of the house where her husband was sleeping and fell there. Notice that the writer now calls the Levite "her master," not her husband.

"Her master arose in the morning and opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way." He was leaving. He was not looking for her. And there she was, "fallen at the entrance of the house, and her hands were on the threshold." Her hands were reaching for the door, the door that had been shut against her all night.

He said to her, "Get up, and let us go." There is no grief in his words, no tenderness, no sorrow. "And there was no one answering." She was dead. He put her on the donkey and went home.

The writer does not tell us what to feel about this man. He does not need to. He shows us a husband who handed his wife to a mob, slept through the night, and spoke to her in the morning as if she were luggage. The narrator condemns him by showing him to us as he was.

19:29-30 *And he came to his house and took the knife and took hold of his concubine and cut her in pieces, according to her bones, into twelve pieces; and he sent her into all the territory of Israel. And it was **that** everyone who saw **it** said, "**A thing** like this has not happened and has not been seen from the day the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt until this day. Set **your hearts** on it for yourselves, take counsel, and speak."*

When he got home, he "took the knife and took hold of his concubine and cut her in pieces, according to her bones, into twelve pieces; and he sent her into all the territory of Israel." Twelve pieces, one for each tribe. It was a summons, a shocking message that demanded the whole nation respond. Saul would later do something similar with a pair of oxen to call Israel to war (1 Samuel 11:7).

Even in this, he did not honor her. He used her body to make his point, after he had failed to protect her life.

"And it was that everyone who saw it said, A thing like this has not happened and has not been seen from the day the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt until this day." The people were horrified, and they were right to be. The writer turns to us as readers with the last words: "Set your hearts on it for yourselves, take counsel, and speak." Stop and think. Do not look away.

Centuries later the prophet Hosea looked back on this night as the low point of Israel's history: "they have acted corruptly as in the days of Gibeah" (Hosea 9:9; compare 10:9). Gibeah became a name for the depth of Israel's sin.

Why is this in the Bible? Not to shock us for its own sake. It is here to show us the end of the road that started in chapter 1, when Israel made peace with the Canaanites and began to live like them. By chapter 19, Israel was worse than the Canaanites. This is what happens when a people loses the fear of God: the weakest suffer most. The book is showing us that Israel needed a king, and more than a king. They needed new hearts.

A word to anyone who has suffered abuse. Maybe as you read this chapter, it stirred up memories of what someone did to you. If that is you, please hear this. What was done to you was evil, and it was not your fault. The concubine did nothing to deserve that night, and neither did you. God saw her, even when no one else did, and He wrote her story into His Word so that it would never be forgotten. God sees you too. "The LORD is near to the broken of heart, and the crushed of spirit He saves" (Psalm 34:18). Jesus came "to bind up the broken of heart" (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18).

If you are in danger now, please get help today from someone you trust, from your pastor, or from the police or an abuse hotline where you live. If you have never told anyone, it is not too late to tell someone safe. And to every church and every leader reading this: the old man and the Levite protected themselves and handed over the weak. We must do the opposite. God's people are called to protect the vulnerable, to believe them and to bring evil into the light (Ephesians 5:11).

Summary

In the days when there was no king in Israel, a Levite from the hill country of Ephraim went to Bethlehem to bring back his concubine, who had left him and gone home to her father. Her father kept him there eating and drinking for several days, and when the Levite finally left late on the fifth day, he refused to stop in Jebus because it was a foreign city and went on to Gibeah of Benjamin. No one in Gibeah took them in except an old man from Ephraim who lived there. That night wicked men of the city surrounded the house and demanded the Levite, as the men of Sodom had done at Lot's house. The old man offered his virgin daughter and the concubine instead, and the Levite pushed his concubine out to them. They abused her all night, and at dawn she fell at the door of the house with her hands on the threshold. In the morning the Levite told her to get up, but she was dead. He took her home, cut her body into twelve pieces, and sent them through all Israel, and everyone who saw it said nothing like this had happened since Israel came out of Egypt.

Study Questions

1. Why did the Levite go to Bethlehem, and what does "to speak to her heart" mean? (19:2-3)

2. Why did the Levite refuse to stop at Jebus? Where did they go instead? (19:10-14)

3. Who finally took the travelers in at Gibeah, and where was he from? (19:16-21)

4. What did the men of Gibeah demand? What earlier story in the Bible does this match? (19:22; Genesis 19:4-5)

5. What did the old man offer, and what did the Levite do? What does the writer show us about both men? (19:23-25)

6. How did the Levite speak to his concubine in the morning? What does that tell us about him? (19:27-28)

7. What did everyone who saw the pieces say? What does the writer ask the reader to do? (19:30)

8. The Levite feared the foreign city, but the real danger was among God's people. Why is it that sin among God's people can be so much worse than we expect?

9. The concubine never speaks in the whole chapter. Who are the people in our churches and communities whose voices are not heard? How can you help protect them?

10. Hosea used "the days of Gibeah" as a picture of Israel's deepest sin (Hosea 9:9). What does this chapter teach you about where a people ends up when it forgets God, and what is the only real answer?

Judges 20: War Against Benjamin

Scripture

20:1-17 And all the sons of Israel went out, and the congregation was assembled as one man, from Dan to Beersheba, and the land of Gilead, to the LORD at Mizpah. And the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand men on foot drawing ***the*** sword. And the sons of Benjamin heard that the sons of Israel had gone up to Mizpah. And the sons of Israel said, "Speak, how did this evil happen?" And the man, the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, "To Gibeah, which ***belongs*** to Benjamin, I came, I and my concubine, to spend the night. And the lords of Gibeah rose up against me and surrounded the house against me at night; me they intended to kill, and my concubine they humbled, and she died. And I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces and sent her throughout all the country of the inheritance of Israel; for they have done lewdness and disgraceful folly in Israel. Look, all of you, sons of Israel, give for yourselves a word and counsel here." And all the people arose as one man, saying, "We will not go, any man to his tent, and we will not turn aside, any man to his house. And now this ***is*** the thing which we will do to Gibeah: ***we will go up*** against it by lot. And we will take ten men to the hundred from all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred to the thousand, and a thousand to the ten thousand, to take provisions for the people, so that they may do, when they come to Geba of Benjamin, according to all the disgraceful folly which it has done in Israel." And every man of Israel was gathered to the city, as one man, united. And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribes of Benjamin, saying, "What ***is*** this evil that has happened among you? And now give up the men, the sons of worthlessness who ***are*** in Gibeah, and let us put them to death and purge evil from Israel." And the sons of Benjamin were not willing to listen to the voice of their brothers, the sons of Israel. And the sons of Benjamin gathered from the cities to Gibeah to go out to battle with the sons of Israel. And the sons of Benjamin were mustered on that day from the cities, twenty-six thousand men drawing ***the*** sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who were mustered, seven hundred chosen men. From all this people ***there were*** seven hundred chosen men restricted ***in*** their right hand; every one of these ***was*** slinging with a stone at a hair, and he would not miss. And the men of Israel were mustered, besides Benjamin, four hundred thousand men drawing ***the*** sword; every one of these ***was*** a man of war.

20:18-28 And they arose and went up ***to*** Bethel and inquired of God, and the sons of Israel said, "Who shall go up for us first to the battle with the sons of Benjamin?" And the LORD said, "Judah first." And the sons of Israel arose in the morning and camped against Gibeah. And the men of Israel went out to the battle with Benjamin, and the men of Israel set the battle in array against them at Gibeah. And the sons of Benjamin went out from Gibeah and destroyed in Israel on that day twenty-two thousand men to the ground. And the people, the men of Israel, strengthened themselves, and they again set the battle in array in the place where they had set ***it*** in array on the first day. And the sons of Israel went up and wept before the LORD until the evening, and they inquired of the LORD, saying, "Shall I again draw near for battle with the sons of Benjamin my brother?" And the LORD said, "Go up against him." And the sons of Israel drew near to the sons of Benjamin on the second day. And Benjamin went out to meet them from Gibeah on the second

day, and they destroyed among the sons of Israel again eighteen thousand men to the ground; all these ***were*** drawing ***the*** sword. And all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came ***to*** Bethel, and they wept and sat there before the LORD, and they fasted on that day until the evening, and they offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. And the sons of Israel inquired of the LORD, and the ark of the covenant of God ***was*** there in those days, and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, ***was*** standing before it in those days, saying, "Shall I yet again go out for battle with the sons of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease?" And the LORD said, "Go up, for tomorrow I will give him into your hand."

20:29-48 And Israel set ambushers against Gibeah all around. And the sons of Israel went up against the sons of Benjamin on the third day, and they set ***themselves*** in array against Gibeah as at the other times. And the sons of Benjamin went out to meet the people; they were drawn away from the city; and they began to strike down slain from among the people as at the other times, on the highways, of which one goes up ***to*** Bethel and one to Gibeah in the field, about thirty men in Israel. And the sons of Benjamin said, "They ***are*** defeated before us as at the first." And the sons of Israel said, "Let us flee, and we will draw him away from the city to the highways." And every man of Israel rose up from his place, and they set ***themselves*** in array at Baal-tamar; and the ambush of Israel ***was*** bursting forth from its place, from the open area of Geba. And there came from opposite Gibeah ten thousand chosen men from all Israel, and the battle was heavy; and they did not know that the calamity ***was*** touching them. And the LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel, and the sons of Israel destroyed in Benjamin on that day twenty-five thousand and one hundred men; all these ***were*** drawing ***the*** sword. And the sons of Benjamin saw that they were defeated. And the men of Israel gave place to Benjamin, for they trusted in the ambush which they had set against Gibeah. And the ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; and the ambush moved forward and struck all the city by the mouth of ***the*** sword. And the appointed signal of the men of Israel with the ambush was, "Make great their sending up of the rising of smoke from the city." And the men of Israel turned in the battle, and Benjamin began to strike down slain among the men of Israel, about thirty men, for they said, "Surely he is utterly defeated before us, as ***in*** the first battle." And the rising began to go up from the city, a pillar of smoke; and Benjamin turned behind him, and look, the whole of the city went up toward the heavens. And the men of Israel turned, and the men of Benjamin were terrified, for they saw that the calamity had touched them. And they turned before the men of Israel toward the way of the wilderness, and the battle overtook them; and those who ***were*** from the cities ***were*** destroying them in their midst. They surrounded Benjamin, they pursued him; ***at his*** resting place they trod him down, as far as opposite Gibeah toward the rising of the sun. And ***there*** fell of Benjamin eighteen thousand men; all these ***were*** men of valor. And they turned and fled toward the wilderness, to the rock of Rimmon; and they gleaned of them on the highways five thousand men, and they pursued closely after them as far as Gidom, and they struck down of them two thousand men. And all who fell of Benjamin on that day were twenty-five thousand men drawing ***the*** sword; all these ***were*** men of valor. And they turned and fled toward the wilderness, to the rock of Rimmon, six hundred men; and they dwelt at the rock of Rimmon four months. And the men of Israel turned back against the sons of Benjamin and struck them by the mouth of ***the*** sword, from the city, entirely, to the beast, to all that was found; also all the cities that were found they set on fire.

Preview

The pieces the Levite sent through the land did what he meant them to do. All Israel gathers at Mizpah "as one man," from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south. The Levite tells his story, and the tribes vow not to go home until Gibeah is punished. They ask Benjamin to hand over the guilty men. Benjamin refuses and gathers its army to defend Gibeah. Now it is not Israel against Canaan. It is Israel against one of its own tribes.

Israel asks the LORD who should go first, and He says Judah. But Benjamin wins the first day and the second, and forty thousand men of Israel fall. The people weep, fast and offer sacrifices before the LORD at Bethel, where the ark is, and Phinehas the priest asks again. This time the LORD promises victory. With an ambush like the one Joshua used at Ai, Israel defeats Benjamin. Then they go further than justice, destroying the towns of Benjamin until only six hundred men are left alive at the rock of Rimmon.

Study

20:1-2 *And all the sons of Israel went out, and the congregation was assembled as one man, from Dan to Beersheba, and the land of Gilead, to the LORD at Mizpah. And the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand men on foot drawing **the** sword.*

"All the sons of Israel went out, and the congregation was assembled as one man, from Dan to Beersheba, and the land of Gilead, to the LORD at Mizpah." Dan was the far north and Beersheba the far south, so the phrase means the whole nation, and Gilead adds the tribes east of the Jordan. Mizpah was a town in Benjamin's own territory, a few miles north of Gibeah, where Israel often gathered (1 Samuel 7:5-6).

This is the only time in Judges that all Israel acts together "as one man." Sadly, they did not unite to drive out the Canaanites or to put away their idols. They united to go to war against their own brothers.

The army numbered "four hundred thousand men on foot drawing the sword." That is a huge force. I take the number as written. Some scholars think the Hebrew word for thousand can also mean a clan unit or troop, which would make the army much smaller.

20:3-7 *And the sons of Benjamin heard that the sons of Israel had gone up to Mizpah. And the sons of Israel said, "Speak, how did this evil happen?" And the man, the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, "To Gibeah, which **belongs** to Benjamin, I came, I and my concubine, to spend the night. And the lords of Gibeah rose up against me and surrounded the house against me at night; me they intended to kill, and my concubine they humbled, and she died. And I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces and sent her throughout all the country of the inheritance of Israel; for they have done lewdness and disgraceful folly in Israel. Look, all of you, sons of Israel, give for yourselves a word and counsel here."*

Benjamin heard about the gathering but did not come. The tribes asked, "Speak, how did this evil happen?" The Levite told his story.

Listen carefully to how he tells it. "The lords of Gibeah rose up against me and surrounded the house against me at night; me they intended to kill, and my concubine they humbled, and she died." He says the men meant to kill him. That is not what they said; they wanted to abuse him (19:22). And he leaves out the most important fact of all: that he himself pushed her out the door. He tells the truth about the crime of Gibeah and hides his own part in it.

He ends with, "they have done lewdness and disgraceful folly in Israel," and asks the people for their "word and counsel." What Gibeah did was truly evil, and it needed to be judged. But the man who called for justice was hiding his own guilt. People are often very good at seeing the sins of others and very poor at seeing their own (Matthew 7:3-5).

20:8-11 *And all the people arose as one man, saying, "We will not go, any man to his tent, and we will not turn aside, any man to his house. And now this **is** the thing which we will do to Gibeah: **we will go up** against it by lot. And we will take ten men to the hundred from all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred to the thousand, and a thousand to the ten thousand, to take provisions for the people, so that they may do, when they come to Geba of Benjamin, according to all the disgraceful folly which it has done in Israel." And every man of Israel was gathered to the city, as one man, united.*

"All the people arose as one man." They vowed that no one would go home until Gibeah was dealt with. They would choose by lot who would go up against it, and a tenth of the men would gather food for the army. "Every man of Israel was gathered to the city, as one man, united."

Their anger was right. A town in Israel had done what Sodom did, and the Law required that such evil be punished (Deuteronomy 13:12-15; 22:21). But notice that they made their plan first. They did not ask God what to do. They only asked Him later who should go first.

20:12-13 *And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribes of Benjamin, saying, "What **is** this evil that has happened among you? And now give up the men, the sons of worthlessness who **are** in Gibeah, and let us put them to death and purge evil from Israel." And the sons of Benjamin were not willing to listen to the voice of their brothers, the sons of Israel.*

The tribes did the right thing next. Before going to war, they sent men through Benjamin saying, "What is this evil that has happened among you?" Hand over the guilty men, "the sons of

worthlessness who are in Gibeah, and let us put them to death and purge evil from Israel." The Law used that phrase, purge evil from among you, many times (Deuteronomy 17:7; 22:22).

This was a fair offer. The nation was not asking to punish all of Benjamin. It asked only for the men who did the crime. "And the sons of Benjamin were not willing to listen to the voice of their brothers." Benjamin chose to protect the guilty because they were family. When we cover for evil because it is one of our own, we make ourselves partners in it.

20:14-17 *And the sons of Benjamin gathered from the cities to Gibeah to go out to battle with the sons of Israel. And the sons of Benjamin were mustered on that day from the cities, twenty-six thousand men drawing **the** sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who were mustered, seven hundred chosen men. From all this people **there were** seven hundred chosen men restricted **in** their right hand; every one of these **was** slinging with a stone at a hair, and he would not miss. And the men of Israel were mustered, besides Benjamin, four hundred thousand men drawing **the** sword; every one of these **was** a man of war.*

Benjamin mustered "twenty-six thousand men drawing the sword," plus seven hundred chosen men from Gibeah. Among them were "seven hundred chosen men restricted in their right hand," that is, left-handed, like Ehud, the Benjaminite judge (3:15). The name Benjamin means son of the right hand, so a company of left-handed Benjaminites is a small irony. These men could sling a stone "at a hair, and he would not miss." A sling was a deadly weapon in skilled hands, as David would show against Goliath (1 Samuel 17:49).

Israel mustered four hundred thousand men, "every one of these was a man of war." Benjamin was outnumbered about fifteen to one.

20:18 *And they arose and went up **to** Bethel and inquired of God, and the sons of Israel said, "Who shall go up for us first to the battle with the sons of Benjamin?" And the LORD said, "Judah first."*

"They arose and went up to Bethel and inquired of God." Bethel was a few miles north of Mizpah. Verse 27 tells us the ark of the covenant was there "in those days." The ark was the gold-covered chest that held the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the sign of God's presence with Israel.

They asked, "Who shall go up for us first to the battle with the sons of Benjamin?" Notice the question. They did not ask whether to go. They had already decided that. They only asked who should lead. "And the LORD said, Judah first." Judah had led the way in the first chapter too (1:1-2). But the first chapter was a war against Canaanites. This one was a war against a brother.

20:19-21 *And the sons of Israel arose in the morning and camped against Gibeah. And the men of Israel went out to the battle with Benjamin, and the men of Israel set the battle in array against them at Gibeah. And the sons of Benjamin went out from Gibeah and destroyed in Israel on that day twenty-two thousand men to the ground.*

Israel camped against Gibeah and set the battle in order. "The sons of Benjamin went out from Gibeah and destroyed in Israel on that day twenty-two thousand men to the ground."

The larger army lost. God had told them who should go first, and they were still beaten. Why? The text does not give the reason yet. But the next verses show us what was missing.

20:22-23 *And the people, the men of Israel, strengthened themselves, and they again set the battle in array in the place where they had set **it** in array on the first day. And the sons of Israel went up and wept before the LORD until the evening, and they inquired of the LORD, saying, "Shall I again draw near for battle with the sons of Benjamin my brother?" And the LORD said, "Go up against him."*

The men of Israel "strengthened themselves," and they drew up again in the same place. This time "the sons of Israel went up and wept before the LORD until the evening." They asked a new question: "Shall I again draw near for battle with the sons of Benjamin my brother?"

That is a better question. They were now asking whether, not only who. And they called Benjamin "my brother." Grief was starting to soften them. "And the LORD said, Go up against him."

20:24-25 *And the sons of Israel drew near to the sons of Benjamin on the second day. And Benjamin went out to meet them from Gibeah on the second day, and they destroyed among the sons of Israel again eighteen thousand men to the ground; all these **were** drawing **the** sword.*

On the second day Benjamin came out of Gibeah again "and they destroyed among the sons of Israel again eighteen thousand men to the ground." In two days Israel had lost forty thousand men.

Why would God tell them to go up and then let them lose? Bible teachers have given a few answers, and they fit together. First, God was disciplining all Israel, not only Benjamin. Gibeah's sin was the fruit of a whole nation that had turned from Him. The tribes that came to judge Benjamin had their own idols, Micah's and Dan's among them. Second, Israel came to God with their minds made up, trusting their numbers more than the LORD. Third, God was bringing them low so that they would seek Him with their whole hearts. And that is what happens next.

20:26-28 *And all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came **to** Bethel, and they wept and sat there before the LORD, and they fasted on that day until the evening, and they offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. And the sons of Israel inquired of the LORD, and the ark of the covenant of God **was** there in those days, and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, **was** standing before it in those days, saying, "Shall I yet again go out for battle with the sons of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease?" And the LORD said, "Go up, for tomorrow I will give him into your hand."*

"All the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came to Bethel, and they wept and sat there before the LORD, and they fasted on that day until the evening." This time they also "offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD." A burnt offering was wholly burned on the altar, an offering of complete devotion and atonement. A peace offering was shared, part burned to God and part eaten by the worshipers, a sign of fellowship restored with Him.

For the first time in this story, Israel came the right way: weeping, fasting, offering sacrifice and seeking the LORD through His priest.

The writer adds two details that help us date these events. "The ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, was standing before it." Phinehas was Aaron's grandson, the zealous priest of Numbers 25 and Joshua 22. So this war happened early in the time of the judges, within a generation or two of Joshua. Israel's slide had begun almost as soon as Joshua was gone.

Phinehas asked, "Shall I yet again go out for battle with the sons of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease?" And now the LORD gave a promise, not only a command: "Go up, for tomorrow I will give him into your hand."

20:29-36 *And Israel set ambushers against Gibeah all around. And the sons of Israel went up against the sons of Benjamin on the third day, and they set **themselves** in array against Gibeah as at the other times. And the sons of Benjamin went out to meet the people; they were drawn away from the city; and they began to strike down slain from among the people as at the other times, on the highways, of which one goes up **to** Bethel and one to Gibeah in the field, about thirty men in Israel. And the sons of Benjamin said, "They **are** defeated before us as at the first." And the sons of Israel said, "Let us flee, and we will draw him away from the city to the highways." And every man of Israel rose up from his place, and they set **themselves** in array at Baal-tamar; and the ambush of Israel **was** bursting forth from its place, from the open area of Geba. And there came from opposite Gibeah ten thousand chosen men from all Israel, and the battle was heavy; and they did not know that the calamity **was** touching them. And the LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel, and the sons of Israel destroyed in Benjamin on that day twenty-five thousand and one hundred men; all these **were** drawing **the** sword. And the sons of Benjamin saw that they were defeated. And the men of Israel gave place to Benjamin, for they trusted in the ambush which they had set against Gibeah.*

"Israel set ambushers against Gibeah all around." This is the plan Joshua used at Ai (Joshua 8:3-22). On the third day the main army drew up as before. Benjamin came out, was drawn away from the city, and began to strike down men on the highways as before, about thirty men. The Benjaminites said, "They are defeated before us as at the first." The Israelites said, "Let us flee, and we will draw him away from the city."

Then the trap closed. The main army turned and formed up at Baal-tamar, and the ambush burst out from its place near Geba. Ten thousand chosen men came against Gibeah, "and the battle was heavy; and they did not know that the calamity was touching them."

The writer gives the outcome first, then tells it again in more detail: "the LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel," and Israel struck down "twenty-five thousand and one hundred men." The victory belonged to the LORD.

20:37-41 *And the ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; and the ambush moved forward and struck all the city by the mouth of **the** sword. And the appointed signal of the men of Israel with the ambush was, "Make great their sending up of the rising of smoke from the city." And the men of Israel turned in the battle, and Benjamin began to strike down slain among the men of Israel, about thirty men, for they said, "Surely he is utterly defeated before us, as **in** the first battle." And the rising began to go up from the city, a pillar of smoke; and Benjamin turned behind him, and look, the whole of the city went up toward the heavens. And the men of Israel turned, and the men of Benjamin were terrified, for they saw that the calamity had touched them.*

Now the writer tells the same battle from the inside. The ambush rushed into Gibeah and struck the city. The signal was a great column of smoke. When the Benjaminites, still chasing the fleeing Israelites, looked back, "the whole of the city went up toward the heavens." The men of Israel turned, "and the men of Benjamin were terrified, for they saw that the calamity had touched them."

Benjamin had trusted in winning twice. They were sure it would happen a third time. But God had said, "tomorrow I will give him into your hand" (20:28), and He kept His word.

20:42-46 *And they turned before the men of Israel toward the way of the wilderness, and the battle overtook them; and those who **were** from the cities **were** destroying them in their midst. They surrounded Benjamin, they pursued him; **at his** resting place they trod him down, as far as opposite Gibeah toward the rising of the sun. And **there** fell of Benjamin eighteen thousand men; all these **were** men of valor. And they turned and fled toward the wilderness, to the rock of Rimmon; and they gleaned of them on the highways five thousand men, and they pursued closely after them as far as Gidom, and they struck down of them two thousand men. And all who fell of Benjamin on that day were twenty-five thousand men drawing **the** sword; all these **were** men of valor.*

Benjamin ran toward the wilderness, and the battle caught up with them. They were surrounded and trodden down. Eighteen thousand men of valor fell, then five thousand more on the highways, then two thousand at Gidom. "All who fell of Benjamin on that day were twenty-five thousand men drawing the sword."

Verse 35 gave twenty-five thousand one hundred, and verse 46 rounds it to twenty-five thousand. Benjamin had about twenty-six thousand seven hundred men (20:15). With six hundred escaping (20:47), the numbers come out close; the rest may have fallen in the first two days, which the text does not count for Benjamin.

20:47 *And they turned and fled toward the wilderness, to the rock of Rimmon, six hundred men; and they dwelt at the rock of Rimmon four months.*

"Six hundred men" escaped to "the rock of Rimmon," a rocky height in the wilderness east of Bethel. They stayed there four months. Out of a whole tribe, six hundred men were left.

20:48 *And the men of Israel turned back against the sons of Benjamin and struck them by the mouth of* ***the*** *sword, from the city, entirely, to the beast, to all that was found; also all the cities that were found they set on fire.*

Then the men of Israel "turned back against the sons of Benjamin and struck them by the mouth of the sword, from the city, entirely, to the beast, to all that was found; also all the cities that were found they set on fire."

This went far beyond what justice required. Israel had asked for the guilty men of Gibeah (20:13). Now they destroyed whole towns of Benjamin, women and children and animals, as if Benjamin were a Canaanite city under the ban. God had not commanded this. They had asked Him whether to fight, and He promised them victory in battle. He did not tell them to wipe out the tribe. Their anger, once let loose, kept going.

This is a sobering lesson. Even a right cause can turn into a wrong war when people act in anger and stop listening to God. James says that "the anger of a man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). By the end of the day, Israel had punished Gibeah's evil with an evil of its own. In the next chapter they will weep over what they have done.

Summary

All Israel gathered as one man at Mizpah, four hundred thousand armed men, and the Levite told what happened at Gibeah, leaving out his own part. The tribes vowed not to go home until Gibeah was punished and asked Benjamin to hand over the guilty men, but Benjamin refused and gathered twenty-six thousand seven hundred men, including seven hundred left-handed slingers. Israel asked God at Bethel who should go first, and He said Judah. Benjamin killed twenty-two thousand Israelites the first day. Israel wept before the LORD and asked whether to go again, and He said to go up, but Benjamin killed eighteen thousand more. Then all Israel wept, fasted and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings at Bethel, where the ark was and Phinehas the grandson of Aaron served, and the LORD promised to give Benjamin into their hand. Using an ambush, Israel burned Gibeah and killed twenty-five thousand men of Benjamin. Six hundred escaped to the rock of Rimmon and stayed there four months. Israel then struck the towns of Benjamin with the sword and set them on fire.

Study Questions

1. Where did all Israel gather, and how is their unity described? (20:1-2, 8, 11)

2. How did the Levite tell his story? What did he leave out? (20:4-7; 19:25)

3. What did the tribes ask Benjamin to do, and how did Benjamin answer? (20:12-13)

4. What question did Israel ask the LORD the first time, and how was it different from the question they asked the second and third times? (20:18, 23, 28)

5. What did Israel do at Bethel before the third battle? Who was the priest there? (20:26-28)

6. How did Israel finally defeat Benjamin? What earlier battle does this remind you of? (20:29-41; Joshua 8)

7. How many men of Benjamin were left, and what did Israel do to the towns of Benjamin? (20:47-48)

8. The Levite called for justice while hiding his own guilt. Why is it so easy to see others' sins and miss our own? (Matthew 7:3-5)

9. Benjamin protected the guilty because they were family. Have you ever been tempted to cover for someone's wrong because they were one of your own? What should you do instead?

10. Israel came to God with their plan already made, and only later came weeping and fasting. How can you learn to seek God before you decide, not after?

Judges 21: Wives for Benjamin

Scripture

21:1-14 And the men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah, saying, "No man of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife." And the people came ***to*** Bethel and sat there until the evening before God, and they lifted up their voice and wept a great weeping. And they said, "Why, O LORD, God of Israel, has this happened in Israel, that today one tribe should be missing from Israel?" And it was on the next day, and the people rose early and built there an altar, and they offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings. And the sons of Israel said, "Who ***is there*** who did not come up in the assembly from all the tribes of Israel to the LORD?" For the great oath had been concerning him who did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death." And the sons of Israel had compassion for Benjamin their brother, and they said, "One tribe has been cut off from Israel today. What shall we do for them, for those who remain, for wives? And we have sworn by the LORD not to give them ***any*** of our daughters as wives." And they said, "Which one ***is there*** of the tribes of Israel that did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah?" And look, no man had come to the camp from Jabesh-gilead, to the assembly. And the people were mustered, and look, there was not a man there of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead. And the congregation sent there twelve thousand men of the sons of valor, and they commanded them, saying, "Go, and you shall strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead by the mouth of ***the*** sword, and the women and the little ones. And this ***is*** the thing which you shall do: every male and every woman who has known the lying of a male you shall devote to destruction." And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead four hundred young women, virgins, who had not known a man by the lying of a male; and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which ***is*** in the land of Canaan. And all the congregation sent and spoke to the sons of Benjamin who ***were*** at the rock of Rimmon, and they proclaimed peace to them. And Benjamin returned at that time, and they gave them the women whom they had kept alive of the women of Jabesh-gilead; and they did not find ***enough*** for them so.

21:15-25 And the people had compassion for Benjamin, because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. And the elders of the congregation said, "What shall we do for those who remain, for wives, since the women have been destroyed from Benjamin?" And they said, "A possession of escaped ones ***belongs*** to Benjamin, and a tribe shall not be wiped out from Israel. And we, we are not able to give them wives of our daughters, for the sons of Israel have sworn, saying, 'Cursed ***be*** he who gives a wife to Benjamin.'" And they said, "Look, ***there is*** the festival of the LORD in Shiloh from year to year, which ***is*** north of Bethel, east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah." And they commanded the sons of Benjamin, saying, "Go, and you shall lie in wait in the vineyards. And you shall see, and look, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then you shall come out from the vineyards and seize for yourselves each man his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and you shall go ***to*** the land of Benjamin. And it shall be, when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, that we will say to them, 'Be gracious to us ***concerning*** them, for we did not take each man his wife in the battle; for you yourselves did not give ***them*** to them; ***otherwise*** at this time you would be guilty.'" And the sons of Benjamin did so, and they carried off wives according to their number

from the dancers whom they seized; and they went and returned to their inheritance, and they built the cities and dwelt in them. And the sons of Israel went away from there at that time, each man to his tribe and to his clan; and they went out from there, each man to his inheritance. In those days ***there was*** no king in Israel; each man did what ***was*** right in his own eyes.

Preview

The war is over, and Israel wakes up to what it has done. One of the twelve tribes is nearly gone. Only six hundred men of Benjamin are left, and every man of Israel has sworn at Mizpah never to give his daughter to a Benjaminite as a wife. The people weep before God at Bethel and ask why this has happened, as if it were not their own doing.

Their solution is to fix one wrong by doing another. They remember another oath, that anyone who did not come to Mizpah must die. The town of Jabesh-gilead had not come, so they send twelve thousand men to destroy it, sparing only four hundred young virgins, whom they give to Benjamin. That is not enough. So the elders tell the remaining Benjaminites to hide in the vineyards at Shiloh during a festival of the LORD and carry off girls who come out to dance. The book ends with its sad refrain one last time: "In those days there was no king in Israel; each man did what was right in his own eyes."

Study

21:1 *And the men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah, saying, "No man of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife."*

"The men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah, saying, No man of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife." This oath was made in the heat of anger, before the war, back in chapter 20. It was another rash vow, like Jephthah's (11:30-31). Now, with most of Benjamin's women dead (20:48), it meant the tribe could not go on.

21:2-4 *And the people came **to** Bethel and sat there until the evening before God, and they lifted up their voice and wept a great weeping. And they said, "Why, O LORD, God of Israel, has this happened in Israel, that today one tribe should be missing from Israel?" And it was on the next day, and the people rose early and built there an altar, and they offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings.*

"The people came to Bethel and sat there until the evening before God, and they lifted up their voice and wept a great weeping." Their question was, "Why, O LORD, God of Israel, has this happened in Israel, that today one tribe should be missing from Israel?"

It is a strange question. The answer was right in front of them. It happened because Gibeah did evil, Benjamin protected the guilty, and Israel's anger went far beyond justice. But they asked God why, as if He had done it. People often blame God for the results of their own choices.

The next day they built an altar "and they offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings." Notice that they never ask God what to do in this chapter. They offer sacrifices, but they make every decision themselves.

21:5-7 *And the sons of Israel said, "Who **is there** who did not come up in the assembly from all the tribes of Israel to the LORD?" For the great oath had been concerning him who did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death." And the sons of Israel had compassion for Benjamin their brother, and they said, "One tribe has been cut off from Israel today. What shall we do for them, for those who remain, for wives? And we have sworn by the LORD not to give them **any** of our daughters as wives."*

Israel recalled a second oath: whoever did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah "shall surely be put to death." That oath does not appear in chapter 20, but it was made then.

Then the writer says, "the sons of Israel had compassion for Benjamin their brother, and they said, One tribe has been cut off from Israel today." Their grief was real. They had not meant to wipe out a tribe. But they had sworn by the LORD not to give them wives. They were trapped by their own words.

What should they have done? The Law made a way for rash oaths to be confessed and atoned for (Leviticus 5:4-6). They could have repented of a foolish vow before God. Instead they looked for a way to keep the letter of their oath while getting around its meaning.

21:8-9 *And they said, "Which one **is there** of the tribes of Israel that did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah?" And look, no man had come to the camp from Jabesh-gilead, to the assembly. And the people were mustered, and look, there was not a man there of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead.*

"Which one is there of the tribes of Israel that did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah?" They counted, "and look, no man had come to the camp from Jabesh-gilead." Jabesh-gilead was a town east of the Jordan in Gilead, in the land of the half tribe of Manasseh.

They had found a way to use one oath to solve the other.

21:10-12 *And the congregation sent there twelve thousand men of the sons of valor, and they commanded them, saying, "Go, and you shall strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead by the mouth of **the** sword, and the women and the little ones. And this **is** the thing which you shall do: every male and every woman who has known the lying of a male you shall devote to destruction." And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead four hundred young women, virgins, who had not known a man by the lying of a male; and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which **is** in the land of Canaan.*

"The congregation sent there twelve thousand men of the sons of valor." Their orders were to strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead "by the mouth of the sword, and the women and the little ones." Every man and every woman who had been married was to be devoted to destruction, the same word used for the ban on the Canaanites in Joshua.

They found "four hundred young women, virgins," and brought them to the camp at Shiloh, "which is in the land of Canaan." That last phrase is chilling. The writer reminds us that Shiloh was in Canaan, as if to say Israel was now acting like the Canaanites it was supposed to replace.

We must call this what it is. It was a massacre. A town of Israel was wiped out, including its children, for not coming to the assembly at Mizpah, and its young women were taken by force to be given as wives to men they had never met. God did not command it. Israel did it to get around an oath they never should have made. It was one more evil piled on the evils of the last three chapters.

It is worth knowing that Jabesh-gilead appears again later. When Nahash the Ammonite threatened the town (1 Samuel 11:1-11), it was Saul, a man of Gibeah of Benjamin, who came to rescue it. Later the men of Jabesh-gilead risked their lives to recover and bury the bodies of Saul and his sons (1 Samuel 31:11-13). Some think the bond between Benjamin and Jabesh-gilead went back to this chapter, since many Benjaminite families now had mothers from that town.

21:13-14 *And all the congregation sent and spoke to the sons of Benjamin who **were** at the rock of Rimmon, and they proclaimed peace to them. And Benjamin returned at that time, and they gave them the women whom they had kept alive of the women of Jabesh-gilead; and they did not find **enough** for them so.*

The congregation sent word to the six hundred Benjaminites at the rock of Rimmon "and they proclaimed peace to them." Benjamin came back, and the four hundred women of Jabesh-gilead were given to them. "And they did not find enough for them so." Two hundred men were still without wives.

21:15-18 *And the people had compassion for Benjamin, because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. And the elders of the congregation said, "What shall we do for those who remain, for wives, since the women have been destroyed from Benjamin?" And they said, "A possession of escaped ones **belongs** to Benjamin, and a tribe shall not be wiped out from Israel. And we, we are not able to give them wives of our daughters, for the sons of Israel have sworn, saying, 'Cursed **be** he who gives a wife to Benjamin.'"*

"The people had compassion for Benjamin, because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel." A breach is a gap or a hole, like a broken place in a wall. The people speak as if the LORD had done this. He had allowed it as a judgment, but the breach came through Israel's own sin and anger.

The elders asked again what to do for wives. They said, "a tribe shall not be wiped out from Israel." That was right. God had promised that the twelve tribes would remain, and Benjamin would later give Israel its first king and, much later, the apostle Paul (Romans 11:1; Philippians 3:5). But the elders were still bound by their oath: "Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin."

21:19-22 *And they said, "Look, **there is** the festival of the LORD in Shiloh from year to year, which **is** north of Bethel, east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah." And they commanded the sons of Benjamin, saying, "Go, and you shall lie in wait in the vineyards. And you shall see, and look, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then you shall come out from the vineyards and seize for yourselves each man his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and you shall go **to** the land of Benjamin. And it shall be, when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, that we will say to them, 'Be gracious to us **concerning** them, for we did not take each man his wife in the battle; for you yourselves did not give **them** to them; **otherwise** at this time you would be guilty.'"*

So they came up with a plan. "There is the festival of the LORD in Shiloh from year to year." Shiloh was where the tabernacle stood. The writer gives careful directions to find it, north of Bethel, east of the road to Shechem, south of Lebonah, as if most people had forgotten where the house of God was.

The elders told the Benjaminites to hide in the vineyards. When "the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances," they were to rush out and "seize for yourselves each man his wife," and take her home to Benjamin.

And if the girls' fathers and brothers complained, the elders would answer for them. Be gracious to us, they would say. We did not take these wives in battle, and you did not give them yourselves, so you are not guilty of breaking the oath.

This is the worst kind of reasoning. It keeps the letter of the oath while trampling everything the oath was about. It treats young women at a worship festival as prizes to be grabbed. And it does it at the very feast of the LORD, at His house. The festival may have been one of the yearly feasts the Law commanded, perhaps the Feast of Booths at the end of the harvest, when the grapes were gathered. Scripture doesn't tell us which one it was.

21:23-24 *And the sons of Benjamin did so, and they carried off wives according to their number from the dancers whom they seized; and they went and returned to their inheritance, and they built the cities and dwelt in them. And the sons of Israel went away from there at that time, each man to his tribe and to his clan; and they went out from there, each man to his inheritance.*

"The sons of Benjamin did so, and they carried off wives according to their number from the dancers whom they seized." They went home, rebuilt their towns and lived in them. Then everyone else went home too, "each man to his tribe and to his clan," "each man to his inheritance."

On the surface, the problem was solved. Benjamin survived, the oath was kept, and everyone went home. But think about what it took: a civil war, tens of thousands dead, a town destroyed, and six hundred young women taken from their families against their will. The writer tells it flatly, without a word of praise. He wants us to see how far Israel had fallen, that this is what passed for a solution.

21:25 *In those days **there was** no king in Israel; each man did what **was** right in his own eyes.*

"In those days there was no king in Israel; each man did what was right in his own eyes."

That is how the book ends. It is the fourth time we have heard it in five chapters (17:6; 18:1; 19:1). Look back over these chapters. A man made an idol for the LORD. A Levite sold his services to the highest bidder. A tribe slaughtered a peaceful town. A town of Israel became Sodom. A husband handed his wife to a mob. A nation nearly destroyed one of its own tribes, then destroyed a town and took its daughters, then seized girls from a festival of the LORD. Every one of those people thought he was doing what was right.

What was the answer? The writer points to a king. And God would give Israel a king. Ruth, the next book, ends with the name of the king God was preparing: David (Ruth 4:22). But Israel's kings would fail too. The deepest need was not just a king on a throne, but a righteous King who would change His people's hearts. God promised that King to David (2 Samuel 7:16), and He came: Jesus Christ, the Son of David, who will one day reign over Israel and the whole earth in righteousness (Luke 1:32-33; Revelation 19:16).

Until then, the question for each of us is the same one Judges asks. Who is king in my life? If the answer is me, if I do what is right in my own eyes, I will end up where Israel did. But if Jesus is King, He gives a new heart and leads us in the right way.

Summary

The men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah not to give their daughters to Benjamin as wives. After the war they wept before God at Bethel, asking why a tribe was missing from Israel, and offered sacrifices. Remembering a second oath that anyone who did not come to Mizpah would be put to death, they found that no one had come from Jabesh-gilead. They sent twelve thousand men to destroy the town, sparing four hundred virgins, whom they brought to Shiloh and gave to the six hundred Benjaminites at the rock of Rimmon. That was not enough, so the elders told the remaining Benjaminites to hide in the vineyards at the yearly festival of the LORD at Shiloh and seize wives from the young women who came out to dance, and they promised to answer the fathers and brothers. Benjamin did so, rebuilt their towns and lived in them, and the rest of Israel went home. The book ends: in those days there was no king in Israel, and each man did what was right in his own eyes.

Study Questions

1. What oath had the men of Israel sworn at Mizpah, and why did it become a problem? (21:1, 7)

2. What question did the people ask God at Bethel? What was the real answer? (21:2-3)

3. What second oath did Israel use to solve the first one? (21:5, 8-9)

4. What did Israel do to Jabesh-gilead, and whom did they spare? (21:10-12)

5. What did the elders tell the Benjaminites to do at Shiloh? How did they plan to answer the fathers? (21:19-22)

6. How does the book of Judges end? How many times has that idea appeared in the last five chapters? (21:25; 17:6; 18:1; 19:1)

7. Who did Ruth 4:22 show to be the king God was preparing, and who is the greater King that came from his line? (Ruth 4:22; Luke 1:32-33)

8. Israel blamed God for what their own choices had caused. When have you been tempted to ask God "why" about something you brought on yourself?

9. Israel tried to keep the letter of their oath while breaking its meaning. Where are people today tempted to keep the rules on the outside while ignoring what is right?

10. "Each man did what was right in his own eyes." Who is king in your life right now? What would it look like to let Jesus be King in one area you have been keeping for yourself?

Overview of Ruth

Ruth is the eighth book of the Bible. In our English Bibles it comes right after Judges and right before 1 Samuel, and it fits there well. It is set "in the days of the judging of the judges" (1:1), and it ends with the name of David, whose story begins in 1 Samuel. In the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is placed among the Writings, in a group of five short books that Jewish people came to read aloud at their yearly feasts. Ruth is read at the Feast of Weeks, the feast at the end of the grain harvest, because so much of the book happens during the barley and wheat harvests.

Judges showed us a whole nation sliding into darkness. Ruth shows us, in the very same days, one small family in Bethlehem where faith and kindness were still alive. It is a short book, only four chapters, and it is one of the most loved stories in the Bible. A family flees a famine and goes to Moab. The husband and both sons die. Naomi, the widow, comes home bitter and empty, with only her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth, who has chosen to stay with her and to trust Israel's God. Ruth goes out to glean grain in the field of a man named Boaz, who turns out to be a close relative. In the end Boaz redeems the family's land, marries Ruth, and their son becomes the grandfather of King David.

God is never seen doing a miracle in Ruth. No angel appears, no prophet speaks, no sea divides. But God's hand is in every step: the end of the famine, the field Ruth happens to choose, the day Boaz happens to come by, the relative who happens to pass the city gate. The theme of Ruth is God's quiet, faithful care for His people, shown through people who are faithful to one another. The Hebrew word that runs through the book is hesed, steadfast love, the loyal, covenant kindness that keeps its commitments and goes beyond what duty requires (1:8; 2:20; 3:10). Ruth's great promise to Naomi is the key verse:

Ruth 1:16 (SLB)

"Do not urge me to forsake you, to turn back from after you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people ***will be*** my people, and your God my God."

Ruth has 4 chapters and 85 verses. Here is its structure:

Part One: Emptiness in Moab and the Return (chapter 1)

- Ruth 1: Naomi and Ruth Return to Bethlehem

Part Two: Kindness in the Harvest Field (chapter 2)

- Ruth 2: Ruth Gleans in the Field of Boaz

Part Three: A Request at the Threshing Floor (chapter 3)

- Ruth 3: Ruth at the Threshing Floor

Part Four: Redemption at the City Gate and the Line of David (chapter 4)

- Ruth 4: Boaz Redeems Ruth

Where this book points to Christ: the New Testament names Ruth in the family line of Jesus. Matthew writes that "Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth, and Obed fathered Jesse" (Matthew 1:5). A widow from Moab, a nation that began in shame (Genesis 19:36-37), became the great-grandmother of David and an ancestor of the Messiah, the promised Savior King. That is a picture of the gospel reaching out to the nations, just as God promised Abraham that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Boaz is also a picture of Christ our Redeemer. A kinsman-redeemer had to be a close relative, had to be able to pay the price, and had to be willing to do it. Jesus became our relative by taking on flesh and blood (Hebrews 2:14), paid the price of our redemption with His own blood (1 Peter 1:18-19), and did it willingly out of love. The New Testament does not call Boaz a type of Christ by name, so I hold this as a picture, but it is one that fits the whole Bible's teaching about redemption.

Background of Ruth

Author: The book does not name its writer. Jewish tradition names Samuel, the same as for Judges. The book ends with David's name (4:17, 22), so it was written after David was born and had become known. It does not mention Solomon, which suggests it was written before Solomon's name would naturally have been added to the line. The writer also explains an old custom, the giving of a sandal to confirm a deal, as something done "formerly" in Israel (4:7), so he was writing some time after the events. Samuel, who anointed David, fits these clues well, though he died before David became king (1 Samuel 25:1), so others suggest a writer in David's court. Many modern scholars date the book much later, after the exile, and read it as a quiet protest against the bans on foreign marriages in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. I take the book as an early, true record of real people, written in the time of David or shortly before.

When it was written: Most likely in the time of David, about 1010 to 970 B.C., or shortly before, when David was well known but before Solomon's reign.

Who it was written to: The people of Israel in the early days of the kingdom. It showed them where their king came from: not from a famous family in a great city, but from a faithful man of Bethlehem and a foreign widow who chose the LORD. It also reminded them that God had been at work in the dark days of the judges, preparing a king long before anyone asked for one.

Setting: The story moves from Bethlehem of Judah to the land of Moab and back again. Bethlehem was a small farming town about six miles south of Jerusalem. Its name means house of bread, which makes the famine at the start of the book all the more striking. Moab lay east of the Dead Sea. The Moabites were descended from Lot (Genesis 19:36-37). They had hired Balaam to curse Israel and led Israel into idolatry at Peor (Numbers 22-25), and Eglon, a king of Moab, had ruled over Israel for eighteen years in the time of the judges (Judges 3:12-14). The Law said that no Moabite should enter the assembly of the LORD, even to the tenth generation (Deuteronomy 23:3). So a Moabite woman coming to Bethlehem would not have been an easy fit.

When the events happened: In the days of the judges (1:1). The family line at the end of the book tells us that Boaz was the great-grandfather of David (4:21-22). David was born about 1040 B.C., so the events of Ruth most likely took place about 1100 B.C., perhaps a little earlier. Some Bible teachers think the famine came in the time of Gideon, when the Midianites stripped the land of its crops (Judges 6:3-6), but Scripture does not tell us which judge was ruling.

Laws behind the story: Three parts of the Law of Moses help us understand Ruth. Gleaning: farmers were not to harvest the edges of their fields or go back for what was dropped, but to leave it for the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-22). Redemption of land: if an Israelite became poor and sold his land, his nearest relative, called his redeemer, was to buy it back so it stayed in the family (Leviticus 25:23-28). Marriage of a dead man's widow: if a man died without a son, his brother was to marry the widow, and their first son would carry on the dead man's name and inheritance (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Boaz was not Mahlon's brother, but in Ruth the duty of a redeemer and the care of a dead man's widow come together in one close relative.

Words to know: Hesed means steadfast love, faithful kindness that keeps a covenant and goes beyond duty. The SLB translates it "steadfast love" (1:8; 2:20; 3:10). Go'el means redeemer, a close relative who had the right and the duty to buy back family land, to free a relative sold into slavery, or to protect a family's name and future. The word and its related forms appear more than twenty times in Ruth, most of them in chapters 3 and 4. Many Bibles call this person the kinsman-redeemer.

Purpose: Ruth was written to show God's faithful care for His people even in dark and ordinary days, to show what hesed looks like in the lives of real people, to show that God welcomes anyone, even a foreigner from a hated nation, who comes to Him by faith and takes refuge under His wings (2:12), and to trace the family of David back to Bethlehem. Through that family, God was preparing the way not only for David but for David's greater Son, Jesus Christ, who would be born in that same town.

Ruth 1: Naomi and Ruth Return to Bethlehem

Scripture

1:1-14 And it was in the days of the judging of the judges, and there was a famine in the land; and a man went from Bethlehem of Judah to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. And the name of the man ***was*** Elimelech, and the name of his wife ***was*** Naomi, and the name of his two sons ***was*** Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites from Bethlehem of Judah. And they came ***to*** the country of Moab and were there. And Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left, she and her two sons. And they took for themselves Moabite wives; the name of the one ***was*** Orpah, and the name of the second ***was*** Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. And both of them, Mahlon and Chilion, also died, and the woman was left without her two children and without her husband. And she arose, she and her daughters-in-law, and she returned from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited His people to give them bread. And she went out from the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law ***were*** with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each woman to the house of her mother. May the LORD do steadfast love with you, just as you have done with the dead and with me. May the LORD give to you ***that*** you find rest, each woman ***in*** the house of her husband." And she kissed them, and they lifted up their voice and wept. And they said to her, "Rather, with you we will return to your people." And Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why will you go with me? ***Do*** I still have sons in my womb, and they will become husbands for you? Return, my daughters, go; for I am too old to belong to a husband. If I said, 'There is hope for me,' even ***if*** I belonged to a husband tonight, and also bore sons, would you therefore wait until they grew up? Would you therefore shut yourselves off so as not to belong to a husband? No, my daughters; for it is very bitter for me, more than ***for*** you, for the hand of the LORD has gone out against me." And they lifted up their voice and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, and Ruth clung to her.

1:15-22 And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." And Ruth said, "Do not urge me to forsake you, to turn back from after you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people ***will be*** my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and thus may He add, for death ***alone*** will separate between me and you." And she saw that she was determined to go with her, and she ceased speaking to her. And the two of them went until they came ***to*** Bethlehem. And it was, when they came ***to*** Bethlehem, and all the city was stirred over them, and they said, "***Is*** this Naomi?" And she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has made ***it*** very bitter for me. I went full, and empty the LORD has brought me back. Why do you call me Naomi, and the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has done evil to me?" And Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, with her, who returned from the country of Moab; and they came ***to*** Bethlehem at the beginning of the harvest of barley.

Preview

In the days of the judges, a famine drives a family from Bethlehem to the land of Moab. There the father, Elimelech, dies. His two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, and then both sons die too. Naomi is left with no husband, no sons and no grandchildren, far from home. When she hears that the LORD has given His people bread again, she sets out for Bethlehem with her two daughters-in-law.

On the road, Naomi urges the young women to go back to their mothers' homes, where they might marry again. Orpah kisses her goodbye. Ruth clings to her and makes one of the most beautiful promises in Scripture: "your people will be my people, and your God my God." The two widows arrive in Bethlehem at the start of the barley harvest. The whole town is stirred, and Naomi tells them not to call her Naomi, which means pleasant, but Marah, bitter. She came home empty. But she did not come home alone.

Study

1:1 *And it was in the days of the judging of the judges, and there was a famine in the land; and a man went from Bethlehem of Judah to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.*

"It was in the days of the judging of the judges." With these words the writer sets Ruth in the same dark days we have just read about in Judges. Remember how that book ended: "each man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

"There was a famine in the land." In the Law, God had warned that if Israel turned from Him, the land would not give its crops (Deuteronomy 28:15-18, 38). A famine in Judges' days may well have been part of that discipline. The irony is that the family came from Bethlehem, which means house of bread. There was no bread in the house of bread.

"A man went from Bethlehem of Judah to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons." To sojourn means to live somewhere as a foreigner for a while. He meant it to be temporary. Moab was across the Jordan and the Dead Sea, about fifty miles away, on the high plateau where the rains may have been better.

Was it wrong for him to go? Scripture does not say so directly. Abraham and Isaac went to foreign lands in famines (Genesis 12:10; 26:1), and Jacob's family went to Egypt. But Moab was a land of other gods, and the story that follows is full of loss. Many Bible teachers see the move as a step away from trusting God in His land. Others point out that Scripture never blames him for it. Either way, the losses that follow make us stop and ask where we turn when times are hard.

1:2 *And the name of the man **was** Elimelech, and the name of his wife **was** Naomi, and the name of his two sons **was** Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites from Bethlehem of Judah. And they came **to** the country of Moab and were there.*

The names in this verse matter. "Elimelech" means my God is King. In a time when Israel had no king and every man did what he wanted, here was a man whose very name said God is King.

"Naomi" means pleasant or sweet. The names of the sons, "Mahlon and Chilion," may mean sickly and failing, though no one is sure. They were "Ephrathites from Bethlehem of Judah." Ephrathah was an old name for Bethlehem or for the clan that lived there (Genesis 35:19; Micah 5:2).

"And they came to the country of Moab and were there." A visit became a stay.

1:3-5 *And Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left, she and her two sons. And they took for themselves Moabite wives; the name of the one* ***was*** *Orpah, and the name of the second* ***was*** *Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. And both of them, Mahlon and Chilion, also died, and the woman was left without her two children and without her husband.*

"Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left, she and her two sons." The family had gone to Moab to escape death, and death found them there.

The sons "took for themselves Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the second was Ruth." Mahlon was Ruth's husband (4:10). The Law forbade Israel to marry the Canaanite peoples (Deuteronomy 7:3) and kept Moabites out of the assembly (Deuteronomy 23:3). Marrying Moabite women was at the very least risky for the faith of the family.

"They dwelt there about ten years." Then "both of them, Mahlon and Chilion, also died, and the woman was left without her two children and without her husband." Ten years of marriage, and no children were born. Naomi had lost everyone. In that world a widow with no sons had no one to provide for her and no one to carry on her husband's name. She was alone, poor and a foreigner.

Perhaps you know something of Naomi's grief. Loss can pile on loss until a person feels there is nothing left. Scripture does not hurry past her pain, and neither should we. But the story is not over.

1:6-7 *And she arose, she and her daughters-in-law, and she returned from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited His people to give them bread. And she went out from the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law* ***were*** *with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.*

"She had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited His people to give them bread." To visit, in the Bible, often means that God came to act on behalf of His people. The famine was over. God had not forgotten Bethlehem.

So "she arose, she and her daughters-in-law, and she returned." The word return runs all through this chapter. In Hebrew it is the same word often used for turning back to God in repentance. Naomi was going home, to the land and the people of the LORD.

1:8-9 *And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each woman to the house of her mother. May the LORD do steadfast love with you, just as you have done with the dead and with me. May the LORD give to you **that** you find rest, each woman **in** the house of her husband." And she kissed them, and they lifted up their voice and wept.*

On the road Naomi stopped and said to her daughters-in-law, "Go, return each woman to the house of her mother." Then she blessed them: "May the LORD do steadfast love with you, just as you have done with the dead and with me."

"Steadfast love" is the Hebrew word hesed. It means loyal love, kindness that keeps its commitments and goes further than it has to. It is one of the most important words in the Old Testament, used for God's covenant love for His people (Exodus 34:6). Naomi said these young women had shown hesed to their husbands and to her. Now she asked the LORD to show hesed to them.

She also prayed that the LORD would give them "rest, each woman in the house of her husband." Rest here means a settled, safe home, with a husband to provide and protect. She kissed them, "and they lifted up their voice and wept."

1:10-13 *And they said to her, "Rather, with you we will return to your people." And Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why will you go with me? **Do** I still have sons in my womb, and they will become husbands for you? Return, my daughters, go; for I am too old to belong to a husband. If I said, 'There is hope for me,' even **if** I belonged to a husband tonight, and also bore sons, would you therefore wait until they grew up? Would you therefore shut yourselves off so as not to belong to a husband? No, my daughters; for it is very bitter for me, more than **for** you, for the hand of the LORD has gone out against me."*

Both young women said, "Rather, with you we will return to your people." They loved her.

But Naomi pressed them. "Return, my daughters. Why will you go with me?" She had no more sons to give them as husbands. Even if she married that very night and had sons, would they wait years for those boys to grow up? The custom she has in mind is the one in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, where a brother married his dead brother's widow to carry on his name.

"No, my daughters; for it is very bitter for me, more than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone out against me." Naomi believed God was in control. She did not blame chance or the gods of Moab. But she believed God was against her. That is the honest cry of a hurting believer. She would learn that the hand she thought was against her was working for her all along.

1:14 *And they lifted up their voice and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, and Ruth clung to her.*

"They lifted up their voice and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, and Ruth clung to her."

Two young women, the same loss, the same choice. Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye and went home. We should not be hard on her. She did what Naomi urged her to do, and what made sense. But

Ruth "clung." It is the same word used in Genesis 2:24, where a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife. It is the word for a bond that holds.

1:15 *And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."*

Naomi tried one last time: "Look, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

Notice the words "to her gods." The god of Moab was Chemosh (Numbers 21:29). Going back to Moab meant going back to Moab's gods. Naomi saw that the choice was not only about where to live, but about whom to worship.

1:16-17 *And Ruth said, "Do not urge me to forsake you, to turn back from after you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people **will be** my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and thus may He add, for death **alone** will separate between me and you."*

Then Ruth spoke. "Do not urge me to forsake you, to turn back from after you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God."

This is a confession of faith. Ruth was not only choosing Naomi. She was choosing Naomi's God. She was leaving her people, her land and her gods to belong to the LORD and to His people Israel.

"Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried." She would not even go home to be buried. This was for life, and beyond.

Then she swore an oath in the name of the LORD: "Thus may the LORD do to me, and thus may He add, for death alone will separate between me and you." A Moabite woman called on the LORD, Israel's God, by His covenant name. She had come to trust Him.

What does this teach us? Saving faith is not just agreeing with facts. It is turning from other gods and giving yourself to the true God, whatever it costs. Jesus said that anyone who wants to follow Him must count the cost (Luke 14:26-33). Ruth counted the cost and chose the LORD. Years later Boaz would say that she had come to take refuge under the LORD's wings (2:12). This was the day she did it.

1:18 *And she saw that she was determined to go with her, and she ceased speaking to her.*

"She saw that she was determined to go with her, and she ceased speaking to her." Naomi stopped arguing. The two widows walked on together. We are not told that Naomi thanked her or rejoiced. Naomi was too deep in her grief to see yet what a gift God had given her in Ruth.

1:19-21 *And the two of them went until they came **to** Bethlehem. And it was, when they came **to** Bethlehem, and all the city was stirred over them, and they said, "**Is** this Naomi?" And she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has made **it** very bitter for me. I went full, and empty the LORD has brought me back. Why do you call me Naomi, and the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has done evil to me?"*

They came to Bethlehem, "and all the city was stirred over them, and they said, Is this Naomi?" It had been more than ten years. She must have looked very different from the woman who had left.

Naomi answered, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has made it very bitter for me." Naomi means pleasant, Mara means bitter. "The Almighty" translates Shaddai, a name for God that stresses His power, the name God used with Abraham (Genesis 17:1).

"I went full, and empty the LORD has brought me back." She had left with a husband and two sons. She came back with none of them. She said the LORD "has testified against me, and the Almighty has done evil to me." The word "evil" here means harm or trouble, not sin. Naomi felt that God had brought disaster on her.

Naomi's words are raw and honest. God does not condemn her for them. The Psalms are full of people pouring out their pain to God (Psalm 13; 88). It is better to bring our bitterness to God than to walk away from Him. And notice what Naomi missed. She said she came back "empty." But standing right beside her was Ruth, who had promised never to leave her. Naomi was not as empty as she thought.

1:22 *And Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, with her, who returned from the country of Moab; and they came **to** Bethlehem at the beginning of the harvest of barley.*

"Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, with her, who returned from the country of Moab." The writer keeps calling Ruth "the Moabite." He never lets us forget she is a foreigner. That makes what God does with her all the more amazing.

"And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the harvest of barley." Barley was the first grain harvest of the year, in the spring, about April. The chapter began with famine and ends with harvest. The land that was empty is about to be full. God is already turning Naomi's story around, though she cannot see it yet.

Summary

In the days of the judges, a famine drove Elimelech of Bethlehem, his wife Naomi and their sons Mahlon and Chilion to Moab. Elimelech died, the sons married Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth, and after about ten years both sons died, leaving Naomi without husband or children. When she heard that the LORD had given His people bread, she set out for Judah with her daughters-in-law. On the way she urged them to return to their mothers' houses and prayed that the LORD would show them steadfast love and give them rest with new husbands. Orpah kissed her and went back to her people and her gods, but Ruth clung to Naomi and promised that Naomi's people would be her people and Naomi's God her God, swearing by the LORD that only

death would separate them. When they reached Bethlehem the town was stirred, and Naomi told them to call her Marah, because the Almighty had dealt bitterly with her and brought her back empty. They arrived at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Study Questions

1. When did the events of Ruth take place, and why did Elimelech's family leave Bethlehem? (1:1)

2. What happened to Naomi's husband and sons in Moab? (1:3-5)

3. What news made Naomi decide to go home? (1:6)

4. What did Naomi pray for her daughters-in-law? What does "steadfast love" (hesed) mean? (1:8-9)

5. What did Orpah do, and what did Ruth do? (1:14)

6. What did Ruth promise Naomi? What does it show about her faith? (1:16-17)

7. What did Naomi ask the women of Bethlehem to call her, and why? (1:20-21)

8. Naomi said she came back "empty," but Ruth was right beside her. When have you been so focused on what you lost that you missed what God had given you?

9. Ruth chose Naomi's God even though it cost her her home and her people. What has following the LORD cost you, and was it worth it?

10. Naomi was honest with God about her bitterness. How can you bring your pain to God honestly instead of pulling away from Him?

Ruth 2: Ruth Gleans in the Field of Boaz

Scripture

2:1-13 And Naomi ***had*** a relative of her husband, a man mighty of wealth, from the clan of Elimelech; and his name ***was*** Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go, please, ***to*** the field, and let me glean among the ears of grain behind ***him*** in whose eyes I find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." And she went and came and gleaned in the field behind the harvesters; and her chance happened ***upon*** the portion of the field of Boaz, who ***was*** from the clan of Elimelech. And look, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and he said to the harvesters, "The LORD ***be*** with you." And they said to him, "May the LORD bless you." And Boaz said to his young man who was stationed over the harvesters, "Whose ***is*** this young woman?" And the young man who was stationed over the harvesters answered and said, "She ***is*** a Moabite young woman who returned with Naomi from the country of Moab. And she said, 'Let me glean, please, and I will gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' And she came and has stood since the morning and until now; this, her sitting ***in*** the house, ***has been*** little." And Boaz said to Ruth, "Have you not heard, my daughter? Do not go to glean in another field, and also you shall not pass on from this ***one***, and thus you shall cling to my young women. Your eyes ***be*** on the field which they harvest, and you shall go behind them. Have I not commanded the young men not to touch you? And ***when*** you are thirsty, you shall go to the vessels and drink from what the young men draw." And she fell on her face and bowed down to the ground, and she said to him, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, and I ***am*** a foreigner?" And Boaz answered and said to her, "It has surely been told to me, all that you have done with your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, and ***how*** you left your father and your mother and the land of your kindred, and came to a people whom you did not know yesterday ***or the day*** before. May the LORD repay your work, and may your wages be complete from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." And she said, "Let me find favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me, and for you have spoken to the heart of your maidservant, and I am not like one of your maidservants."

2:14-23 And Boaz said to her at the time of the meal, "Come near here, and you shall eat some of the bread and dip your morsel in the vinegar." And she sat beside the harvesters, and he held out roasted grain to her, and she ate and was satisfied and had ***some*** left over. And she rose to glean, and Boaz commanded his young men, saying, "Also between the sheaves she shall glean, and you shall not humiliate her. And also you shall surely pull out for her some of the bundles and leave ***them***, and she shall glean, and you shall not rebuke her." And she gleaned in the field until the evening, and she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was approximately 3/5 bushel (an ephah) of barley. And she lifted ***it*** up and came ***into*** the city, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned; and she brought out and gave to her what she had left over from her fill. And her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today, and where did you work? May the one who took notice of you be blessed." And she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and she said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today ***is*** Boaz." And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed ***is*** he by the LORD, who has not forsaken his steadfast love with the living and with the dead." And Naomi said to her, "The man ***is*** near to us; he ***is*** one of our redeemers." And

Ruth the Moabite said, "Also he said to me, 'You shall cling to the young men who ***are*** mine until they have completed all the harvest which ***is*** mine.'" And Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "***It is*** good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, and ***that*** they do not fall upon you in another field." And she clung to the young women of Boaz to glean until the completion of the harvest of the barley and the harvest of the wheat; and she dwelt with her mother-in-law.

Preview

Naomi and Ruth are home, but they are poor, and someone has to find food. Ruth asks to go out and glean, to gather the leftover grain behind the harvesters, as the Law allowed the poor and the foreigner to do. "Her chance happened" upon the field of Boaz, a wealthy and godly man who was a relative of Naomi's husband. Boaz notices her, learns who she is, and goes far beyond what the Law required. He tells her to stay in his fields, protects her from harm, gives her water and food, and quietly tells his workers to drop extra grain for her.

When Ruth comes home with more than half a bushel of barley, Naomi is amazed. When she hears the name Boaz, her bitterness begins to lift: "Blessed is he by the LORD, who has not forsaken His steadfast love with the living and with the dead." Then she tells Ruth something that changes everything. Boaz is one of their redeemers. Ruth keeps gleaning in his fields through the barley and wheat harvests, and hope begins to grow.

Study

2:1 *And Naomi **had** a relative of her husband, a man mighty of wealth, from the clan of Elimelech; and his name **was** Boaz.*

Before the story moves on, the writer lets us in on something Ruth does not know yet. "Naomi had a relative of her husband, a man mighty of wealth, from the clan of Elimelech; and his name was Boaz."

"Mighty of wealth" can mean a man of wealth, but the same Hebrew words are used for a mighty warrior, as with Gideon (Judges 6:12). It describes a man of strength, standing and good character. Later Boaz will call Ruth a woman of the same kind, "a woman of worth" (3:11). The name Boaz may mean in him is strength.

2:2-3 *And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go, please, **to** the field, and let me glean among the ears of grain behind **him** in whose eyes I find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." And she went and came and gleaned in the field behind the harvesters; and her chance happened **upon** the portion of the field of Boaz, who **was** from the clan of Elimelech.*

"Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, Let me go, please, to the field, and let me glean among the ears of grain behind him in whose eyes I find favor." Gleaning was God's way of caring for the poor in Israel. Farmers were not to harvest to the very edges of their fields or go back for grain they had dropped. They were to leave it "for the poor and for the sojourner" (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19). Ruth was both poor and a sojourner, a foreigner living among them.

Notice that Ruth did not sit at home and wait for help. She took the first step. She also knew that not every field owner would be kind to a foreign woman, so she hoped to find someone "in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said, "Go, my daughter."

"Her chance happened upon the portion of the field of Boaz." The writer says it with a smile. To Ruth it was chance. To the reader who knows God, it was not chance at all. Fields in Bethlehem were not fenced. They were strips of land side by side, marked by stones. Out of all the strips she could have chosen, she walked into the one that belonged to the man who could redeem her family. That is how God often works. He guides our ordinary steps without our knowing it (Proverbs 16:9).

2:4 *And look, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and he said to the harvesters, "The LORD **be** with you." And they said to him, "May the LORD bless you."*

"And look, Boaz came from Bethlehem." Just when Ruth was in his field, the owner came out from town.

His first words tell us a lot about him: "The LORD be with you." And the workers answered, "May the LORD bless you." This is a man whose faith shaped how he treated his workers, and whose workers respected him. In the days of the judges, when so much of Israel had forgotten God, here was a field where the LORD's name was honored in an ordinary workday greeting.

2:5-7 *And Boaz said to his young man who was stationed over the harvesters, "Whose **is** this young woman?" And the young man who was stationed over the harvesters answered and said, "She **is** a Moabite young woman who returned with Naomi from the country of Moab. And she said, 'Let me glean, please, and I will gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' And she came and has stood since the morning and until now; this, her sitting **in** the house, **has been** little."*

Boaz noticed the young woman right away and asked his foreman, "Whose is this young woman?" In that culture, the natural question was what family she belonged to.

The foreman answered, "She is a Moabite young woman who returned with Naomi from the country of Moab." He told Boaz she had asked permission to glean and gather among the sheaves, and that she had been working hard since morning with hardly a rest. Ruth had made an impression on the workers. Her reputation came from her work and her loyalty, not from her family or her nation.

2:8-9 *And Boaz said to Ruth, "Have you not heard, my daughter? Do not go to glean in another field, and also you shall not pass on from this **one**, and thus you shall cling to my young women. Your eyes **be** on the field which they harvest, and you shall go behind them. Have I not commanded the young men not to touch you? And **when** you are thirsty, you shall go to the vessels and drink from what the young men draw."*

Boaz spoke to Ruth directly: "Have you not heard, my daughter?" Calling her daughter suggests he was older than she was. He told her not to glean in any other field, but to stay close to his young women.

He also protected her. "Have I not commanded the young men not to touch you?" A foreign woman alone in a field in those lawless days could easily be harassed or harmed. Naomi says as much in verse 22. Boaz made sure she would be safe.

And he cared for her needs. When she was thirsty, she could drink from the water jars his workers had filled. Normally a gleaner would have to fetch her own water, or a foreign woman might be the one drawing water for Israelite men. Boaz turned that around.

2:10 *And she fell on her face and bowed down to the ground, and she said to him, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, and I **am** a foreigner?"*

"She fell on her face and bowed down to the ground." She was overwhelmed. "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, and I am a foreigner?"

That is the right question to ask about grace. Grace is favor we have not earned. Ruth knew she had no claim on him. She was a foreigner, a widow and a gleaner. When we come to see how God has taken notice of us, sinners with no claim on Him, we should ask the same question in wonder.

2:11-12 *And Boaz answered and said to her, "It has surely been told to me, all that you have done with your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, and **how** you left your father and your mother and the land of your kindred, and came to a people whom you did not know yesterday **or the day** before. May the LORD repay your work, and may your wages be complete from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."*

Boaz answered that he had heard everything: what she had done for her mother-in-law, how she "left your father and your mother and the land of your kindred, and came to a people whom you did not know." Her love for Naomi had spread through the town.

Then he blessed her: "May the LORD repay your work, and may your wages be complete from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

This is one of the most beautiful pictures in the book. A mother bird spreads her wings to shelter her young. Ruth had come to take refuge under the wings of the LORD. The Psalms use the same picture: "under His wings you will take refuge" (Psalm 91:4). Jesus used it too, when He wept over Jerusalem and said He longed to gather her children "the way a hen gathers her own chicks under the wings" (Matthew 23:37).

Boaz did not know it yet, but God was about to answer his prayer through him. In chapter 3, Ruth will ask Boaz to spread his "wing" over her (3:9).

2:13 *And she said, "Let me find favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me, and for you have spoken to the heart of your maidservant, and I am not like one of your maidservants."*

Ruth said, "Let me find favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me, and for you have spoken to the heart of your maidservant." To speak to the heart means to speak kindly and tenderly. Ruth had lost a husband, a home and a people. Boaz's kind words were medicine to her.

She added, "and I am not like one of your maidservants." She did not even count herself as high as his servant girls. Ruth was humble, and Boaz was kind. That is a good combination.

2:14 *And Boaz said to her at the time of the meal, "Come near here, and you shall eat some of the bread and dip your morsel in the vinegar." And she sat beside the harvesters, and he held out roasted grain to her, and she ate and was satisfied and had **some** left over.*

At mealtime Boaz invited her: "Come near here, and you shall eat some of the bread and dip your morsel in the vinegar." The vinegar was a sour wine or drink used to dip bread, refreshing in the heat.

She sat with the harvesters, and Boaz himself "held out roasted grain to her." The owner of the field served the foreign gleaner with his own hand. "She ate and was satisfied and had some left over." In chapter 1 Naomi said she came home empty. Now Ruth has more than enough, and she saved the leftovers for Naomi (2:18).

There is a picture of grace here too. The one who has every right to stay above us comes near and feeds us with his own hand. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), and He invites all who are hungry to come.

2:15-16 *And she rose to glean, and Boaz commanded his young men, saying, "Also between the sheaves she shall glean, and you shall not humiliate her. And also you shall surely pull out for her some of the bundles and leave **them**, and she shall glean, and you shall not rebuke her."*

When Ruth went back to work, Boaz gave his young men extra orders. Let her glean even "between the sheaves," where gleaners were not normally allowed, "and you shall not humiliate her." Then he went further: "you shall surely pull out for her some of the bundles and leave them, and she shall glean." He told them to drop grain on purpose and not to scold her for picking it up.

This is hesed in action. Boaz did more than the Law required. The Law said to leave the edges and the dropped grain. Boaz made sure there was extra to find. And he did it quietly, so Ruth could keep her dignity. She would think she was simply working hard, and she was, but Boaz was making her work fruitful. Real kindness often works like that. It helps without making the other person feel small.

2:17-18 *And she gleaned in the field until the evening, and she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was approximately 3/5 bushel (an ephah) of barley. And she lifted **it** up and came **into** the city, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned; and she brought out and gave to her what she had left over from her fill.*

"She gleaned in the field until the evening, and she beat out what she had gleaned." She threshed it herself, beating the stalks with a stick to separate the grain. It came to about an ephah of barley. An ephah was a dry measure of about three-fifths of a bushel (the SLB prints the modern measure in the verse itself), and this was a large amount for one day's gleaning, enough to feed two women for some time.

She carried it into town, and her mother-in-law "saw what she had gleaned." She also gave Naomi the roasted grain she had saved from her lunch.

2:19 *And her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today, and where did you work? May the one who took notice of you be blessed." And she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and she said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today **is** Boaz."*

Naomi was astonished. "Where did you glean today, and where did you work?" She knew no gleaner brought home that much without help. Before she even heard the answer, she said, "May the one who took notice of you be blessed."

Ruth told her where she had worked: "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz."

2:20 *And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed **is** he by the LORD, who has not forsaken his steadfast love with the living and with the dead." And Naomi said to her, "The man **is** near to us; he **is** one of our redeemers."*

"Blessed is he by the LORD, who has not forsaken His steadfast love with the living and with the dead."

Here is the turning point in Naomi's heart. In chapter 1 she said the hand of the LORD was against her (1:13, 21). Now she says He has not forsaken His steadfast love, His hesed. The grammar of the sentence can point to either Boaz or the LORD as the one showing that love. In a sense both are true. The LORD was showing His hesed through Boaz.

Then she told Ruth, "The man is near to us; he is one of our redeemers."

A redeemer, in Hebrew go'el, was a close relative who had the right and the duty to stand up for a family member in trouble. He could buy back family land that had been sold (Leviticus 25:25), buy back a relative who had sold himself into slavery because of debt (Leviticus 25:47-49), and make sure a family's name and inheritance were not lost. Naomi saw at once that Boaz might be the answer to their deepest need.

The Bible calls God Himself Israel's Redeemer (Isaiah 41:14; 44:6), and the New Testament says Jesus came to "redeem those under law" (Galatians 4:5). Boaz is a small picture of that great truth.

2:21-23 *And Ruth the Moabite said, "Also he said to me, 'You shall cling to the young men who **are** mine until they have completed all the harvest which **is** mine.'" And Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "**It is** good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, and **that** they do not fall upon you in another field." And she clung to the young women of Boaz to glean until the completion of the harvest of the barley and the harvest of the wheat; and she dwelt with her mother-in-law.*

Ruth added that Boaz had told her to stay close to his workers "until they have completed all the harvest." Naomi agreed. "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women." She knew that in another field Ruth might be harmed.

So Ruth "clung to the young women of Boaz to glean until the completion of the harvest of the barley and the harvest of the wheat." That was about seven weeks, from April into early June. And "she dwelt with her mother-in-law." She kept her promise to Naomi. Each day she went out and each night she came home.

The harvest ended, and the two women had food. But they still had no husband for Ruth, no heir for Elimelech's name, and no hold on the family land. The next chapter takes up those deeper needs.

Summary

Naomi had a wealthy and worthy relative through her husband, named Boaz, of the clan of Elimelech. Ruth asked to glean, and by what seemed to be chance she came to Boaz's part of the field. Boaz greeted his workers in the LORD's name, asked about the young woman, and learned she was the Moabite who had come back with Naomi and had worked hard all day. He told Ruth to stay in his fields with his young women, ordered his men not to touch her, and let her drink from his workers' water. When Ruth asked why he would notice a foreigner, he said he had heard of her kindness to Naomi and blessed her under the wings of the LORD, where she had come to take refuge. He fed her at mealtime and told his men to let her glean among the sheaves and to drop extra grain for her. She brought home about an ephah of barley. When Naomi heard the name Boaz, she blessed the LORD for His steadfast love and told Ruth that Boaz was one of their redeemers. Ruth gleaned in his fields through the barley and wheat harvests and lived with Naomi.

Study Questions

1. Who was Boaz, and how is he described? (2:1)

2. What was gleaning, and what did the Law say about it? (2:2; Leviticus 19:9-10)

3. How did Ruth come to the field of Boaz? What does the phrase "her chance happened" tell us about how God works? (2:3)

4. What did Boaz say to his workers, and what does that tell us about him? (2:4)

5. What three things did Boaz do for Ruth when he first spoke with her? (2:8-9)

6. Why did Boaz say he was showing her kindness, and what blessing did he speak over her? (2:11-12)

7. What did Naomi say when she heard the name Boaz, and what is a redeemer? (2:20)

8. Ruth was surprised that Boaz would "take notice" of a foreigner. How does that help you understand God's grace toward you? (2:10)

9. Boaz helped Ruth in a way that let her keep her dignity. How can you help someone in need without making them feel small?

10. Looking back, can you see a time when what seemed like chance was really God guiding your steps? How does that encourage you now?

Ruth 3: Ruth at the Threshing Floor

Scripture

3:1-18 And Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not seek for you a resting place, that it may go well for you? And now, ***is*** not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? Look, he is winnowing the threshing floor of the barley tonight. And you shall wash and anoint yourself, and put your garments on yourself, and go down ***to*** the threshing floor; do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. And let it be, when he lies down, that you shall take note of the place where he lies down there; and you shall go in and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what you shall do." And she said to her, "All that you say to me I will do." And she went down ***to*** the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her. And Boaz ate and drank, and his heart was good, and he went to lie down at the end of the heap; and she came in secrecy and uncovered his feet and lay down. And it was in the middle of the night, and the man trembled and twisted himself, and look, a woman ***was*** lying ***at*** his feet. And he said, "Who ***are*** you?" And she said, "I ***am*** Ruth your maidservant, and spread your wing over your maidservant, for you ***are*** a redeemer." And he said, "Blessed ***are*** you by the LORD, my daughter. You have made your latter steadfast love better than the former, in not going after the young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear; all that you say I will do for you, for all the gate of my people knows that you ***are*** a woman of worth. And now, for truly I ***am*** a redeemer, and also there is a redeemer near***er*** than I. Lodge tonight, and it shall be in the morning, if he will redeem you, good, let him redeem; and if he is not willing to redeem you, then I will redeem you, I, ***as*** the LORD lives. Lie down until the morning." And she lay ***at*** his feet until the morning, and she arose before a man could recognize his neighbor; and he said, "Let it not be known that the woman came ***to*** the threshing floor." And he said, "Give the shawl which ***is*** on you and hold it." And she held it, and he measured six ***measures*** of barley and put ***it*** on her; and he came ***into*** the city. And she came to her mother-in-law, and she said, "Who ***are*** you, my daughter?" And she told her all that the man had done for her. And she said, "These six ***measures*** of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, 'Do not go empty to your mother-in-law.'" And she said, "Sit, my daughter, until you know how the matter will fall, for the man will not rest unless he has finished the matter today."

Preview

The harvest is over, and Naomi, who once told Ruth to go home and find rest, now sets out to find rest for her. She knows Boaz is a redeemer, and she knows he will be winnowing barley at the threshing floor that night. She tells Ruth to wash, put on her best clothes, go down quietly, and after Boaz lies down, uncover his feet and lie down there. It was a bold and unusual way to ask a man to act as redeemer and to marry her.

At midnight Boaz wakes with a start to find a woman at his feet. Ruth tells him who she is and asks him to spread his wing over her, "for you are a redeemer." Boaz blesses her, praises her steadfast love, and promises to do all she asks, if a closer relative does not. He protects her name, sends her home before dawn with six measures of barley, and Naomi tells Ruth to wait, because

Boaz will not rest until the matter is settled. This chapter has been misunderstood by some readers. We will read it carefully and see that it is a story of honor, not of sin.

Study

3:1 *And Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not seek for you a resting place, that it may go well for you?*

"Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, My daughter, shall I not seek for you a resting place, that it may go well for you?"

Back in 1:9 Naomi had prayed that the LORD would give her daughters-in-law "rest" in the house of a husband. Now she sees she can be part of the answer to her own prayer. Rest here means a settled home with a husband to love and provide for her. The bitter woman of chapter 1 is now thinking not of herself but of Ruth's future. God was healing Naomi's heart.

3:2 *And now, **is** not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? Look, he is winnowing the threshing floor of the barley tonight.*

"Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? Look, he is winnowing the threshing floor of the barley tonight."

A threshing floor was a flat, hard surface, often of packed earth or rock, usually on higher ground outside the town where the wind could reach it. After the grain was beaten loose from the stalks, workers tossed it into the air with a fork or shovel. The evening breeze blew away the light chaff, and the heavier grain fell back to the floor. That was winnowing. At harvest time the owner often slept at the threshing floor to guard the grain from thieves.

3:3-4 *And you shall wash and anoint yourself, and put your garments on yourself, and go down **to** the threshing floor; do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. And let it be, when he lies down, that you shall take note of the place where he lies down there; and you shall go in and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what you shall do."*

Naomi gave Ruth careful instructions. "You shall wash and anoint yourself, and put your garments on yourself." To anoint here means to put on perfumed oil. Some think "your garments" means she was to set aside the clothes of a widow in mourning, a sign that she was ready to marry again.

She was to go down to the threshing floor but not let Boaz know she was there "until he has finished eating and drinking." When he lay down, she was to note the place, "go in and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what you shall do."

What was this? Naomi was not telling Ruth to tempt Boaz or to do anything immoral. She was telling her how to ask, in a private and respectful way, for Boaz to act as their redeemer and to take her as his wife. Uncovering his feet and lying at them was a humble act, the place of a servant. When he woke, he would find her there and know what she was asking. It allowed Ruth

to make her request without shaming Boaz in public, and allowed him to say no privately if he chose.

3:5-6 *And she said to her, "All that you say to me I will do." And she went down **to** the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her.*

Ruth answered, "All that you say to me I will do." She trusted Naomi, and Naomi was trusting the character of Boaz. Ruth "went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her."

3:7 *And Boaz ate and drank, and his heart was good, and he went to lie down at the end of the heap; and she came in secrecy and uncovered his feet and lay down.*

"Boaz ate and drank, and his heart was good." That means he was content and in good spirits after a hard day and a good harvest. The text does not say he was drunk; a very similar Hebrew phrase is used of people simply being glad (compare Judges 19:6). He went to lie down "at the end of the heap" of grain. Ruth "came in secrecy and uncovered his feet and lay down."

3:8 *And it was in the middle of the night, and the man trembled and twisted himself, and look, a woman **was** lying **at** his feet.*

"It was in the middle of the night, and the man trembled and twisted himself, and look, a woman was lying at his feet." Perhaps the cool night air on his feet woke him. He started up in the dark and found someone there.

3:9 *And he said, "Who **are** you?" And she said, "I **am** Ruth your maidservant, and spread your wing over your maidservant, for you **are** a redeemer."*

"Who are you?" he asked. "And she said, I am Ruth your maidservant, and spread your wing over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer."

This is the heart of the chapter. Ruth's words make clear what she was asking. To spread the wing, or the edge of a garment, over a woman was a way of saying to take her under your protection as your wife. God used the same picture for His covenant with Israel: "I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness; and I swore to you and entered into a covenant with you" (Ezekiel 16:8). Ruth was asking Boaz to marry her.

And notice the word "wing." It is the same Hebrew word Boaz used in 2:12 when he blessed her "under whose wings you have come to take refuge." In effect Ruth was saying, You prayed that I would find refuge under the LORD's wings. Be the answer to your own prayer. Spread your wing over me.

She gave the reason: "for you are a redeemer." She was not only asking for a husband. She was asking him to take up the duty of a go'el for Elimelech's family, to redeem the land and raise up a name for the dead (4:5, 10). Ruth was thinking of Naomi as well as herself.

3:10 *And he said, "Blessed **are** you by the LORD, my daughter. You have made your latter steadfast love better than the former, in not going after the young men, whether poor or rich.*

Boaz's answer shows us what kind of man he was. "Blessed are you by the LORD, my daughter."

He was not offended. He was moved. "You have made your latter steadfast love better than the former, in not going after the young men, whether poor or rich." Her first act of hesed was staying with Naomi. This latter one was even greater. Ruth was young and could have looked for a husband her own age. Instead she came to an older man who could redeem her dead husband's family and care for Naomi. She was putting the family's name and Naomi's future first.

3:11 *And now, my daughter, do not fear; all that you say I will do for you, for all the gate of my people knows that you **are** a woman of worth.*

"And now, my daughter, do not fear; all that you say I will do for you, for all the gate of my people knows that you are a woman of worth."

The "gate" was where the elders and the men of the town gathered to do business and judge cases. "All the gate" means the whole town. Everyone knew Ruth's character.

"A woman of worth" is the same Hebrew phrase used in Proverbs 31:10 for the "wife of strength" whose worth is far above jewels. In many Hebrew Bibles, Ruth comes right after Proverbs, so the woman described at the end of Proverbs is followed by a real woman who lived it out. And remember that Boaz was called "a man mighty of wealth" in 2:1, using the same word. Here were a worthy man and a worthy woman.

Boaz protected Ruth's reputation by speaking of it. He would not do anything that would stain the name of a woman the whole town respected.

3:12-13 *And now, for truly I **am** a redeemer, and also there is a redeemer near**er** than I. Lodge tonight, and it shall be in the morning, if he will redeem you, good, let him redeem; and if he is not willing to redeem you, then I will redeem you, I, **as** the LORD lives. Lie down until the morning."*

"And now, for truly I am a redeemer, and also there is a redeemer nearer than I." There was a closer relative, who had the first right and duty. Boaz would not go around him. He wanted it done properly, in the open, according to the Law.

"If he will redeem you, good, let him redeem; and if he is not willing to redeem you, then I will redeem you, I, as the LORD lives." He made a solemn promise in the LORD's name. Then he said, "Lie down until the morning." Sending a woman home alone through the dark fields in the middle of the night would have been dangerous. He kept her safe until it was nearly light.

3:14 *And she lay **at** his feet until the morning, and she arose before a man could recognize his neighbor; and he said, "Let it not be known that the woman came **to** the threshing floor."*

"She lay at his feet until the morning, and she arose before a man could recognize his neighbor." She left in the gray light before dawn.

Boaz said, "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor." Nothing wrong had happened, but people could easily have assumed something wrong. Boaz guarded her good name and his. This is the opposite of the men we met at the end of Judges, who used women for their own ends. Boaz treated a vulnerable woman with honor and kept her safe from harm and from gossip.

3:15 *And he said, "Give the shawl which **is** on you and hold it." And she held it, and he measured six **measures** of barley and put **it** on her; and he came **into** the city.*

"Give the shawl which is on you and hold it." She held it out, "and he measured six measures of barley and put it on her." We do not know exactly how much a measure was, but six of them was a generous gift, as much as she could carry. "And he came into the city," or by another reading of the Hebrew, she went into the city. Either way, the next scene is in town.

3:16-17 *And she came to her mother-in-law, and she said, "Who **are** you, my daughter?" And she told her all that the man had done for her. And she said, "These six **measures** of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, 'Do not go empty to your mother-in-law.'"*

When Ruth came home, Naomi asked, "Who are you, my daughter?" She meant, how did it go? Who are you now, still a widow or soon to be a bride? Ruth told her everything Boaz had done.

She showed her the barley and said, "These six measures of barley he gave to me." Boaz had told her, "Do not go empty to your mother-in-law."

Do you remember Naomi's words in 1:21? "I went full, and empty the LORD has brought me back." Now Boaz says, Do not go back empty. The barley was a message to Naomi as much as a gift to Ruth. Boaz was saying, I have not forgotten you. Your emptiness is about to be filled.

3:18 *And she said, "Sit, my daughter, until you know how the matter will fall, for the man will not rest unless he has finished the matter today."*

"Sit, my daughter, until you know how the matter will fall, for the man will not rest unless he has finished the matter today."

Ruth had done her part. Now she had to wait. That is often the hardest part of faith. Naomi knew Boaz well enough to know he would keep his word, and quickly.

There is a picture of Christ here too. Our Redeemer does not leave His work half done. Jesus said on the cross, "It has been finished" (John 19:30). We can rest in Him, because He has finished the work of our redemption and will not rest until He brings us home.

Summary

Naomi decided to seek rest for Ruth in a home of her own. She told Ruth that Boaz, their relative, would be winnowing barley at the threshing floor that night, and instructed her to wash, anoint herself, dress, go down quietly, and after he lay down, uncover his feet and lie there. Ruth did all that Naomi said. At midnight Boaz woke, startled to find a woman at his feet. Ruth told him who

she was and asked him to spread his wing over her, because he was a redeemer. Boaz blessed her for this greater act of steadfast love in seeking him rather than a younger man, and promised to do all she asked, since the whole town knew she was a woman of worth. But he told her there was a nearer redeemer, and swore by the LORD that if that man would not redeem her, he would. She stayed until just before dawn, and he guarded her reputation and sent her home with six measures of barley so she would not go to Naomi empty. Naomi told Ruth to wait, because Boaz would not rest until he had settled the matter that day.

Study Questions

1. What did Naomi want to find for Ruth? How had Naomi's attitude changed since chapter 1? (3:1; 1:9, 20-21)

2. What happened at a threshing floor at harvest time? (3:2)

3. What did Naomi tell Ruth to do? (3:3-4)

4. What did Ruth ask Boaz when he woke? What did she mean by "spread your wing over your maidservant"? (3:9; 2:12)

5. Why did Boaz call this act of steadfast love greater than the first? (3:10)

6. What did Boaz say the whole town knew about Ruth? (3:11; Proverbs 31:10)

7. What problem did Boaz mention, and what did he promise? (3:12-13)

8. Boaz protected Ruth's safety and her good name. How can you protect the dignity and reputation of others, especially those who are vulnerable?

9. Ruth asked Boaz to be the answer to his own prayer for her (2:12; 3:9). Is there a prayer you have prayed for someone that God may want you to help answer?

10. Naomi told Ruth to wait, trusting Boaz to finish the matter. What are you waiting on God for right now, and how does knowing Jesus has finished His work help you wait?

Ruth 4: Boaz Redeems Ruth

Scripture

4:1-12 And Boaz went up ***to*** the gate and sat down there; and look, the redeemer of whom Boaz had spoken was passing by. And he said, "Turn aside, sit here, so-and-so." And he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men from the elders of the city, and he said, "Sit here." And they sat down. And he said to the redeemer, "The portion of the field which ***belonged*** to our brother, to Elimelech, Naomi, who returned from the country of Moab, has sold. And I, I said ***that*** I would uncover your ear, saying, 'Acquire ***it*** before those sitting ***here*** and before the elders of my people. If you will redeem, redeem; and if he will not redeem, tell me, and let me know, for there is no one except you to redeem, and I ***am*** after you.'" And he said, "I will redeem." And Boaz said, "On the day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, and from Ruth the Moabite, the wife of the dead ***man***, you have acquired ***it***, to raise up the name of the dead ***man*** over his inheritance." And the redeemer said, "I am not able to redeem ***it*** for myself, lest I ruin my own inheritance. You, redeem for yourself my redemption, for I am not able to redeem ***it***." And this ***was*** formerly ***the practice*** in Israel concerning the redemption and concerning the exchange, to confirm every matter: a man drew off his sandal and gave ***it*** to his neighbor; and this ***was*** the attestation in Israel. And the redeemer said to Boaz, "Acquire ***it*** for yourself." And he drew off his sandal. And Boaz said to the elders and ***to*** all the people, "You ***are*** witnesses today that I have acquired all that ***belonged*** to Elimelech and all that ***belonged*** to Chilion and Mahlon from the hand of Naomi. And also Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, I have acquired for myself for a wife, to raise up the name of the dead ***man*** over his inheritance, and the name of the dead ***man*** shall not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his place. You ***are*** witnesses today." And all the people who ***were*** at the gate, and the elders, said, "***We are*** witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and like Leah, the two of whom built the house of Israel. And do worthily in Ephrathah, and proclaim a name in Bethlehem. And may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, from the seed which the LORD will give to you from this young woman."

4:13-22 And Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her; and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. And the women said to Naomi, "Blessed ***be*** the LORD, who has not caused a redeemer to cease for you today; and may his name be proclaimed in Israel. And he shall be for you a restorer of life and ***one*** to sustain your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you has borne him, she who is better to you than seven sons." And Naomi took the child and placed him in her bosom, and she became a nurse to him. And the neighbor women called him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." And they called his name Obed. He ***was*** the father of Jesse, the father of David. And these ***are*** the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, and Hezron fathered Ram, and Ram fathered Amminadab, and Amminadab fathered Nahshon, and Nahshon fathered Salmon, and Salmon fathered Boaz, and Boaz fathered Obed, and Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

Preview

Boaz goes straight to the city gate, where legal business was done, and waits. The nearer redeemer comes by, and Boaz calls him over and seats ten elders as witnesses. He tells the man that Naomi is selling Elimelech's field. The man is glad to redeem it. Then Boaz tells him the rest: whoever buys the field also takes Ruth the Moabite, to raise up a name for the dead man on his land. The man backs out. He takes off his sandal, the sign of the deal, and Boaz publicly buys everything that belonged to Elimelech and his sons and takes Ruth as his wife. The people bless him, praying that Ruth will be like Rachel and Leah, who built the house of Israel.

The LORD gives Ruth a son. The women of Bethlehem bless the LORD for not leaving Naomi without a redeemer, and Naomi holds the baby in her arms. They name him Obed. The book ends with a short family line from Perez to David. The bitter, empty widow of chapter 1 is full again, the foreign woman has a home, and the little town of Bethlehem has the family from which God will raise up His king, and in the end the King of kings.

Study

4:1 *And Boaz went up **to** the gate and sat down there; and look, the redeemer of whom Boaz had spoken was passing by. And he said, "Turn aside, sit here, so-and-so." And he turned aside and sat down.*

"Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there." The city gate was more than a doorway. It was the town square, the courthouse and the place of business all in one. The elders sat there to settle cases, and everyone going out to the fields passed through.

"And look, the redeemer of whom Boaz had spoken was passing by." Once again, the timing is God's. Boaz said, "Turn aside, sit here, so-and-so." The writer does not give the man's name. The Hebrew phrase means something like a certain someone. He had the first right to redeem, but he would not do it, and his name has been forgotten. Boaz did it, and his name is in the line of Christ.

4:2 *And he took ten men from the elders of the city, and he said, "Sit here." And they sat down.*

"He took ten men from the elders of the city, and he said, Sit here." Ten elders made the deal official and public. Later Jewish practice required ten men for certain legal and religious matters, and this may be an early form of that. Boaz did everything in the open, with witnesses. There was nothing hidden about how he would redeem Ruth.

4:3-4 *And he said to the redeemer, "The portion of the field which **belonged** to our brother, to Elimelech, Naomi, who returned from the country of Moab, has sold. And I, I said **that** I would uncover your ear, saying, 'Acquire **it** before those sitting **here** and before the elders of my people. If you will redeem, redeem; and if he will not redeem, tell me, and let me know, for there is no one except you to redeem, and I **am** after you.'" And he said, "I will redeem."*

Boaz began with the land. "The portion of the field which belonged to our brother, to Elimelech, Naomi, who returned from the country of Moab, has sold." "Brother" here means relative. Naomi,

a poor widow, needed to sell her husband's land, or rather the right to use it, and the Law said the nearest relative should buy it back so it stayed in the family (Leviticus 25:25).

Boaz gave the man the first right: "If you will redeem, redeem; and if he will not redeem, tell me, and let me know, for there is no one except you to redeem, and I am after you."

"And he said, I will redeem." It looked like a good deal. He would gain land, and Naomi was too old to have a son who might claim it later.

4:5 *And Boaz said, "On the day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, and from Ruth the Moabite, the wife of the dead* ***man****, you have acquired* ***it****, to raise up the name of the dead* ***man*** *over his inheritance."*

Then Boaz told him the rest. "On the day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, and from Ruth the Moabite, the wife of the dead man, you have acquired it, to raise up the name of the dead man over his inheritance."

Now the deal looked very different. The redeemer would also have to take Ruth as his wife. Their first son would carry the name of Mahlon, Ruth's dead husband, and the field would one day belong to that son, not to the redeemer's own family. This is the idea behind the law of Deuteronomy 25:5-6, that "his name shall not be wiped out from Israel."

4:6 *And the redeemer said, "I am not able to redeem* ***it*** *for myself, lest I ruin my own inheritance. You, redeem for yourself my redemption, for I am not able to redeem* ***it****."*

"I am not able to redeem it for myself, lest I ruin my own inheritance. You, redeem for yourself my redemption, for I am not able to redeem it."

Why would it ruin his inheritance? He would pay for land that would go to Ruth's son, and he would have another wife and child to support. It may also be that he did not want a Moabite wife or a son with a Moabite mother among his heirs. Scripture doesn't say exactly. What we can say is that he was willing to redeem when it cost little and brought gain, and unwilling when it cost him something. Boaz was willing either way.

That is the difference between a duty kept for profit and love that pays the price. A redeemer has to be a close relative, has to be able to pay, and has to be willing. This man was close and able, but not willing. Boaz was all three.

4:7-8 *And this* ***was*** *formerly* ***the practice*** *in Israel concerning the redemption and concerning the exchange, to confirm every matter: a man drew off his sandal and gave* ***it*** *to his neighbor; and this* ***was*** *the attestation in Israel. And the redeemer said to Boaz, "Acquire* ***it*** *for yourself." And he drew off his sandal.*

The writer stops to explain an old custom. "This was formerly the practice in Israel concerning the redemption and concerning the exchange, to confirm every matter: a man drew off his sandal and gave it to his neighbor." By the time the book was written, the custom was no longer common,

so it needed explaining. The sandal probably stood for the right to walk on and take possession of the land (compare Joshua 1:3). Giving it away meant giving up that right.

"The redeemer said to Boaz, Acquire it for yourself. And he drew off his sandal." The deal was done.

Deuteronomy 25:7-10 describes a different and shameful use of a sandal, when a brother refused to marry his brother's widow. There the widow pulled off his sandal and spat in his face. Here there is no shame or spitting. The two customs may be related, but this one seems to be a simple way of sealing a transfer.

4:9-10 *And Boaz said to the elders and* ***to*** *all the people, "You* ***are*** *witnesses today that I have acquired all that* ***belonged*** *to Elimelech and all that* ***belonged*** *to Chilion and Mahlon from the hand of Naomi. And also Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, I have acquired for myself for a wife, to raise up the name of the dead* ***man*** *over his inheritance, and the name of the dead* ***man*** *shall not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his place. You* ***are*** *witnesses today."*

Boaz spoke to the elders and all the people: "You are witnesses today that I have acquired all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon from the hand of Naomi."

Then he added, "And also Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, I have acquired for myself for a wife, to raise up the name of the dead man over his inheritance, and the name of the dead man shall not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his place."

Boaz did it all publicly, with witnesses, and with care for the dead man's name. He was not just marrying a young woman he admired. He was taking on the whole burden of a ruined family: their land, their widow, their name and their future. He paid the price himself.

That is what redemption means: to buy back what was lost, at a cost to the redeemer. And that is what Christ has done for us. We were lost in sin, with nothing to pay. He became our near relative by taking on flesh and blood, so that He could redeem us (Hebrews 2:14-17). "You were redeemed not with perishable things, silver or gold," Peter writes, "but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19). Boaz paid with silver. Jesus paid with His own life.

4:11-12 *And all the people who* ***were*** *at the gate, and the elders, said, "****We are*** *witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and like Leah, the two of whom built the house of Israel. And do worthily in Ephrathah, and proclaim a name in Bethlehem. And may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, from the seed which the LORD will give to you from this young woman."*

"All the people who were at the gate, and the elders, said, We are witnesses." Then they blessed Boaz and Ruth.

"May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and like Leah, the two of whom built the house of Israel." Rachel and Leah were Jacob's wives, the mothers, with

their servants, of the twelve tribes. To be compared to them was the highest blessing a bride in Israel could receive. And Rachel was buried on the road to Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19).

"Do worthily in Ephrathah, and proclaim a name in Bethlehem." Ephrathah is the old name for Bethlehem.

"May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." Perez was born from another strange family story about a widow who had been denied her right to a husband from her dead husband's family (Genesis 38). Perez's family became the leading clan of Judah, and Boaz belonged to it (4:18-21). Tamar, like Ruth, was probably not an Israelite. The people were praying that, as God built up Judah through Tamar, He would build up Boaz's house through Ruth. God answered that prayer beyond anything they could imagine.

What about Deuteronomy 23:3, which said a Moabite could not enter the assembly of the LORD? The elders of Bethlehem did not object. Bible teachers explain this in a few ways. Some note that the Hebrew word for Moabite there is masculine and was applied to men. Others say the law was about Moab as a nation that stayed hostile to Israel, not about a woman who left Moab and its gods and took refuge in the LORD. Ruth had chosen the LORD and His people (1:16), and God received her, as He received Rahab of Jericho (Joshua 6:25). Faith opened a door that birth had closed.

4:13 *And Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her; and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son.*

"Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her; and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son."

Notice the words "the LORD gave her conception." Ruth had been married to Mahlon for about ten years with no children (1:4-5). Now the LORD opened her womb. This is one of only two places in the book where the writer himself, and not one of the characters, tells us what the LORD did. The first was when He gave His people bread (1:6). At the beginning, God gave bread. At the end, God gave a son. In between, He worked quietly through ordinary people.

4:14-15 *And the women said to Naomi, "Blessed **be** the LORD, who has not caused a redeemer to cease for you today; and may his name be proclaimed in Israel. And he shall be for you a restorer of life and **one** to sustain your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you has borne him, she who is better to you than seven sons."*

The women of Bethlehem, who had heard Naomi say "call me Marah" (1:20), now came to her rejoicing. "Blessed be the LORD, who has not caused a redeemer to cease for you today; and may his name be proclaimed in Israel."

The redeemer they mean here is the baby. He would carry on the family name, care for Naomi in her old age, and keep the land in the family. "He shall be for you a restorer of life and one to sustain your old age." A restorer of life means one who brings life back, who makes the heart live again.

Then the women said something remarkable about Ruth: "your daughter-in-law who loves you has borne him, she who is better to you than seven sons." In Israel, seven sons was the picture of a perfect, complete family. The women were saying that Ruth's love was worth more than all of that. Naomi had said she came back empty. She had not been empty. She had Ruth all along.

4:16-17 *And Naomi took the child and placed him in her bosom, and she became a nurse to him. And the neighbor women called him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." And they called his name Obed. He **was** the father of Jesse, the father of David.*

"Naomi took the child and placed him in her bosom, and she became a nurse to him." Here is the last picture of Naomi in the book. She is holding a baby. She who lost her husband and two sons now cradles a grandson. She became his nurse, the one who cared for him and helped raise him.

The neighbor women said, "A son has been born to Naomi." Legally and in the eyes of the town, he was Naomi's heir, the son who carried on Elimelech's line.

"They called his name Obed." Obed means servant, or one who serves. Then the writer tells us why this story matters so much: "He was the father of Jesse, the father of David."

Suddenly the whole book opens up. This small story of a widow, a foreigner and a farmer in a little town was part of God's great plan. Obed would be David's grandfather. The God who seemed absent in the days of the judges was preparing Israel's king all along.

4:18-22 *And these **are** the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, and Hezron fathered Ram, and Ram fathered Amminadab, and Amminadab fathered Nahshon, and Nahshon fathered Salmon, and Salmon fathered Boaz, and Boaz fathered Obed, and Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.*

"These are the generations of Perez." The book ends with a family line of ten names: Perez, Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon, Boaz, Obed, Jesse and David. Genealogies in the Bible are not just lists. They show that God keeps His promises from generation to generation.

Perez was Judah's son by Tamar. Nahshon was the leader of the tribe of Judah in the wilderness in Moses' day (Numbers 1:7; 2:3). Salmon, according to Matthew, married Rahab of Jericho (Matthew 1:5). Boaz was the son of that marriage, or a descendant, since Hebrew family lines sometimes skip generations. That means a Canaanite woman from Jericho and a Moabite woman from Moab were both in David's family. God's grace reached outsiders long before the gospel went to the nations.

"And Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David."

Judges ended, "In those days there was no king in Israel" (Judges 21:25). Ruth ends with the name of the king. God answered the cry of that whole dark age not with a law or an army, but with a family and a baby boy in Bethlehem.

And this line does not stop with David. God promised David that his throne would be established forever (2 Samuel 7:16). Matthew's Gospel opens with this same family line and carries it on to

"Jesus, who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16). Matthew names Ruth by name: "Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth, and Obed fathered Jesse" (Matthew 1:5). More than a thousand years after Ruth gleaned in the fields of Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary went up to that same town, "to the city of David which is called Bethlehem" (Luke 2:4), and there Jesus was born, as Micah had foretold (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:6).

Jesus is the true Redeemer. Boaz bought back a field and gave a widow a home. Jesus bought us back from sin and death with His own blood, and He gives us a home forever with Him. Boaz took a foreign woman under his wing. Jesus welcomes people from every nation who take refuge in Him. And one day the Son of David will return and reign on David's throne over Israel and the whole earth (Luke 1:32-33). Then God's people will never again live in days when every man does what is right in his own eyes, because the righteous King will be on His throne.

Summary

Boaz went to the city gate, called over the nearer redeemer as he passed, and seated ten elders as witnesses. He told the man that Naomi was selling Elimelech's field, and the man agreed to redeem it. But when Boaz added that whoever bought the field must also take Ruth the Moabite to raise up the dead man's name, the man said he could not, or he would ruin his own inheritance, and he gave his right to Boaz. Following the old custom, he drew off his sandal. Boaz declared before the elders and the people that he had bought all that belonged to Elimelech, Chilion and Mahlon, and that he had taken Ruth as his wife to keep the dead man's name alive. The people blessed him, praying that Ruth would be like Rachel and Leah and his house like the house of Perez. The LORD gave Ruth a son. The women blessed the LORD for giving Naomi a redeemer, a restorer of life, and praised Ruth as better than seven sons. Naomi became the child's nurse, and the women named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. The book ends with the family line from Perez to David.

Study Questions

1. Why did Boaz go to the city gate, and whom did he gather there? (4:1-2)

2. What did the nearer redeemer first say he would do, and why did he change his mind? (4:3-6)

3. What did the sandal mean in this custom? (4:7-8)

4. What did Boaz say he had acquired before the witnesses? Why did he care about the dead man's name? (4:9-10)

5. What blessing did the people speak over Ruth and Boaz? Who were Rachel, Leah, Perez and Tamar? (4:11-12; Genesis 38)

6. What did the women of Bethlehem say to Naomi when the baby was born? What did they say about Ruth? (4:14-15)

7. Who was Obed's grandson, and who came from that line many generations later? (4:17, 22; Matthew 1:5-16)

8. The nearer redeemer was willing to help when it cost little, and unwilling when it cost him. Boaz was willing either way. What does it cost you to show real love to someone in need?

9. Boaz paid the price to redeem Ruth. Jesus paid the price to redeem you (1 Peter 1:18-19). How does knowing what your redemption cost change the way you live?

10. God was quietly preparing a king in Bethlehem during the darkest days of Israel's history. What does that tell you about what God may be doing in your life, or in our world, when He seems silent?

Conclusion

Judges and Ruth tell of the same years, but they feel like two different worlds. Judges is loud. It is full of armies, oppressors and deliverers, and it goes steadily downhill. Israel forgot the LORD, served the gods of the people around them, and cried out only when the pain got bad enough. God raised up judge after judge, Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, and each one saved for a while and then died. By the last chapters there are no judges at all, only idols for hire, a tribe that slaughtered a quiet town, a crime at Gibeah as wicked as Sodom, and a war that nearly wiped out one of the twelve tribes. The writer sums it up in the last line of the book: "In those days there was no king in Israel; each man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Ruth is quiet. In the same days, in the little town of Bethlehem, a widow came home bitter and empty, and a Moabite woman chose the God of Israel and refused to leave her. A godly farmer noticed a foreign gleaner, protected her, fed her and redeemed her family at his own cost. No angel appeared and no sea divided, but God was at work in every step. Judges shows us how far people fall when they forget God. Ruth shows us that even then He has not forsaken "His steadfast love with the living and with the dead" (Ruth 2:20). And Ruth ends where Judges could not: with the name of a king, "Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David" (Ruth 4:22).

As I said at the start of this study, the guiding principle throughout has been to read God's Word plainly, as it is written, and let Scripture explain Scripture. Read that way, these two books point beyond themselves. The judges were saviors who could not stay, and David would be a king who sinned and died. Israel needed a Deliverer who would never die and a King who would rule in perfect righteousness. God gave Him. Jesus Christ was born of David's line in Bethlehem (Matthew 1:5-16; Luke 2:4). He is the true Kinsman-Redeemer. He became one of us, took on our flesh and blood (Hebrews 2:14), and paid the price to buy us back, "not with perishable things, silver or gold" but with His own precious blood (1 Peter 1:18-19). He is coming again to sit on the throne of His father David and reign over Israel and the whole earth (Luke 1:32-33), and then no one will do what is right in his own eyes, because the righteous King will rule.

I hope this study has done what I set out to do: bring you closer to God, help you grow in your walk with Him, and give you hope when the days around you look like the days of the judges. The question these books leave with each of us is simple. Who is king in your life? Ruth made her choice on the road from Moab: "your people will be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). The only thing required of us to spend eternity with God is to receive His Son, Jesus, as our Lord and Savior.

If you haven't yet entered into a relationship with Jesus, or if you want to deepen the one you already have with Him, I invite you to pray this prayer with me:

Lord Jesus, You are the Savior of the world, and You forgive all who come to You. I come before You to confess that I have sinned against You. I have rebelled against You and put myself first above You and all others. I want to have a deep, meaningful relationship with You where I can show others by my demeanor and character that You are first in my life. I am asking for Your forgiveness for all my sins. You died for me on the cross so that I could be forgiven and made right with God.

Please help me not forget that You gave Your very life for me. I am asking that You take control of my life and make a new creature out of me and into the person You want me to be. I thank You, Lord, and I love You. Amen.

If you prayed this prayer, tell another believer, ask a pastor about being baptized, and find a church where you can grow and serve, and know that, like Ruth, you have come to take refuge under the wings of the LORD (Ruth 2:12).

Bibliography

The following source was consulted throughout this study. The commentary reflects my own study and convictions, and any direct quotation from an outside source is identified and cited at the point where it appears.

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