

The Book of Judges

Lesson One

Introduction to the Book

by Dr. John L. May

I. The Historical Background - Authorship

Dates of the events of the book are uncertain. It is a book about and to the children of Israel (Judges 1:1). Since the book is a continuation of history following the book of Joshua, many scholars believe that it was written after the death of Joshua (after 1421 BC). However, others think that it was written even later than this, for Judges 18:1 and 19:1 imply that there was a king in Israel at the time of writing. That would necessitate a date of 1095 BC or later. If you base your belief upon Judges 1:21, 29, a date of approximately 1000 BC would be a date that would place its writing during the time of Samuel and the reign of the kings. This would tie in nicely with the Jewish tradition that the author was Samuel. There is neither an inspired statement nor an implication as to the place of composition

To determine the time span involved in this book, it is unlikely that the years each judge is said to have ruled could be added together, for the total would exceed 490 years. However, Wesley states in his notes on the Book of Judges that the total is only 299 years. The reason for this is that their years of service may coincide or overlap with the years of some or other of the judges and this allows Wesley to arrive at his figure.

II. The Overview

The book of Judges describes a time when Israel had adapted to a settled life in the Promised Land of Canaan. This is a time when Israel's spiritual commitment is declining, and as a result there is political, social and moral deterioration. The book of Judges is chiefly a book of the history of the Jews under 13 of the 15 judges, Eli and Samuel being found in the book of First Samuel. The book itself is most likely a collection of stories taken out of the period from the conquest of the promised land until the establishment of the monarchy, when many different judges ruled over local regions. No judge exhibited the same spiritual leadership as Moses or Joshua.

The book is divided into three parts or sections. Part one is comprised of chapters one and two and contain a repetition of one conquest by the tribe of Judah, which was achieved before Joshua died. Part two consists of chapters 3 through 16 which describes the cyclical condition wherein one tribe and sometimes many fall into idolatry; are subdued or harassed by their enemies until they repent and call upon God; are then delivered under the leadership of a Judge raised up by God for the purpose; are kept in the fear of God until the Judge dies; when the same series of events begin again up to the twelfth time. There was no central government; but to answer the purposes of such when necessity required, Judges were providentially raised up and the accounts which

we have of them here gave the name Judges to this book. The third part of the book, chapters 17 to 21, gives two incidents that have been passed over by the writer to avoid an interruption of the main thread of the history. The one shows how an idolatrous worship which was set up at Dan, and continued there for several centuries, was first inaugurated. The other incident shows how the whole nation came together at an early day to punish a great crime, when the city and the tribe within which it had been committed refused to do so.

III. The Conquest of Canaan

The history of Israel as a nation may be said to commence with their entrance into their own land. All previous to this--from the night of the Passover (Exodus 12) to the defeat of Sihon and Og (Numbers 21) who barred their way into the Promised Land--had been only preparatory. During the forty years of wanderings the people had been bonded together by the hand of God. But now Israel was faced with its grand mission, to possess the land and to dispossess the nations found there. In place of the heathenism of the surrounding nations, the kingdom of God was to take shape.

The Books of Joshua and Judges form the two first portions of what in the Hebrew Canon are designated as the "Former Prophets." This is not because their narratives are largely connected with the rise and activity of the prophets, nor because the authors were prophets, but rather because the character and content of these books are prophetic in nature. They give the history of Israel from the prophet's view--not a succinct and successive chronicle of the nation, but a history of the Kingdom of God in Israel. This also explains its peculiarities of form and style. For neither are the Judges mentioned in the order of their succession, nor must it be supposed that they ruled over all the tribes of Israel. Similarly, there are evidently large blanks left in the history of the times. The narration covers some events and persons which occupied the scene for only a comparatively short time. From the frequent references to authorities, and from their evident knowledge of details, the writers of these books must have had at command ample material for a full history. We conclude that the selection was divinely guided and made in accordance with the "Spirit of Prophecy" (Edersheim), to mark the progress of the Kingdom of God in connection with Israel.

Joshua and Judges recount the story of Israel's settlement in the land of Canaan and their first couple of centuries in the land. The first half of Joshua describes the actual entry into the land and the early battles for control of key cities. The second half of the book details how the land was divided among the tribes of Israel as well as a concluding ceremony in which the people committed themselves to the worship of God (23-24).

The Book of Judges tells us of continual struggles in the land as local tribal chieftains or warlords led isolated campaigns to free the Jews from recurrent oppression at the hands of surrounding people. The book is organized in regular cycles that mark the rise of new leaders, a cycle given in outline form early in the book (2:10-23). The stories of Gideon and the struggle against the

Philistines, as well as a general summary of Israel's' intertribal fighting that nearly destroyed them occupies one half of the book.

In a cursory examination, these two books appear as a sequential narrative of Israel's rise to power as a dominant force in Canaan. This has been the traditional view of the books, that they recounted an orderly chronological account of the conquest of Palestine by the Israelites. The very idea of a "conquest" of the land has become a traditional way of describing Israel's entry into the land.

Closer examination of the two books, however, reveals a much more complex situation that raises both historical and theological questions, not only about the reliability of the accounts of history but also about the very nature of Israel's entry into Palestine. Joshua presents the entry into the land as a rapid conquest in which the Israelites eliminated all opposition and possessed all of the land as they obeyed God and followed His leadership. They were led by a single leader appointed by God and achieved success because God fought for them and was with them. The impression given is that Israel is a tightly unified people working together as one, unified in their worship of God and in their goal of settling the land and eliminating the Canaanites from the land.

Yet within Joshua there is a minority voice, another memory that acknowledges the entry into the land was anything but smooth, and that Israel was not a unified people. It consistently acknowledges that there was a great deal of land left unconquered, and that the process of entry into the land could be seen more in terms of settlement rather than conquest (Judges 1-2).

Judges presents the Israelites as a minority, precariously holding onto small enclaves of land within a much larger and stronger Canaanite majority. Following the minority voice in Joshua, it acknowledges that many of the territories or cities reported as subdued under Joshua by all Israel were not taken until much later or by actions of individuals or alliances of tribes. The impression is given that Israel was a very loosely confederated collection of individual tribes who sometimes came together for a common cause. They were plagued by disunity both socially and religiously, lacked any stable leadership, and often fought among themselves.

This raises the primary historical questions of the two books. Was Israel's entry into the land by conquest or by settlement? Did Israel enter the land suddenly as a strongly unified, conquering people? Or did they migrate into the area over a period of time, gradually spreading over the land, as they were able to gain enough strength to challenge the Canaanite city-states? Or was it some combination of conquest and settlement, in which they fought some initial battles on the fringes of Canaanite territory to establish a foothold in the land, and then gradually infiltrated into Canaanite territory over a period of centuries? Or was there even a more complicated history in which they allied themselves with some Canaanite city-states and fought others, at the same time that they joined up with remnants of ancestral tribes who had remained in the central highlands around Shechem since the time of Abraham? Or was the whole entry into the land nothing more than a peaceful migration of people who were forced into fighting

battles as the original residents of the land resisted being overrun by newcomers, and the conquest stories are only tribal legend?

IV. The Four Major Views of the Conquest of Canaan

1. The conquest of Canaan was a literal conquest.

This view favors the majority voice of Joshua as being the historical core of the traditions. It also assumes the biblical books are primarily a historical record of Israel's entry into the land preserved within the community simply because they were historical records. Unless or until more information is found, judgment is suspended on anything that does not fit with the idea of a literal and absolute conquest of the land as portrayed in Joshua 1-11.

2. The conquest of Canaan was modified by tradition.

This perspective tries to balance Joshua and Judges as historical sources, but actually favors the evidence of archaeological data and historical reconstruction built from them as more reliable sources of historical evidence than the biblical texts. The tradition of the conquest of the land is a valid historical memory of Israel, but one that has been greatly modified by the retelling of the story within the community over the centuries. While the basic details of the biblical traditions need to be taken seriously as preserving that historical memory, they cannot be taken literally or at face value without some corroborating evidence that would lend support to them. In cases where archaeology cannot directly support the biblical traditions, they should not be taken as reliable history, although they may still preserve valid historical memory. We simply have no way to know in cases where there is no supporting evidence.

So this view tends to lean heavily on archaeology to support the basic history, assuming that the story line has been heavily schematized and simplified in the biblical accounts. This view would see Joshua as a leader in early Israel, but one that become a hero figure in later generations. As a result, the traditions expanded his role and attributed some of the actions of later figures (for example some of the conquests of David) to Joshua to validate his position as God's leader of the people.

3. The conquest of Canaan was a peaceful settlement.

This view leans towards Judges, as well as the minority voice of Joshua, as a more reliable source of early Israel's history. The majority voice of Joshua is rejected as being too idealized and too heavily influenced by theological and tribal agenda to be of much value. The methods employed are far more historical, trying to reconstruct history from ancient documents, artifacts, and preserved traditions in order to build a historical stage on which to set the biblical material. As a result, there is heavy dependence on comparative religion, as well

as logical interpretation and reconstruction of history, a technique common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Israel's movement into the land is seen as a relatively peaceful migration of tribes who gradually settled among the city-states of Canaan. After an extended period of consolidation, the settlement climaxed in a period of expansion under the leadership of David. The Israelites who first entered the land joined remnants of family units who had not joined the migration to Egypt with Jacob and had remained through the centuries in the central highlands around Shechem. They fought isolated battles as they expanded their territory and encroached into Canaanite controlled areas. But there were no "all Israel" wars, which was a romanticized nationalistic ideal projected back into this period from a much later time, reflected in the book of Joshua. Joshua himself was only a local Ephraimite leader who gradually became associated with the "all Israel" idea. There was no "people" until the tribal confederation portrayed in Joshua 24. This covenant ceremony became the focal point for the rise of the unified people that would become the nation of Israel.

4. The conquest of Canaan was a peasant revolt.

This perspective rejects both Joshua and Judges as reliable historical accounts, and rather depends on modern social theory to address the historical issues. The methods employed are a specific type of social theory that sees progression and development in society as the result of class struggle between the "haves" and the "have-nots." This view sees the biblical traditions as largely folklore that arose out of the social progression of a group trying to justify its own national identity. In this view, the idea of "tribe" is understood as a social unit, not a family unit. The relationships that appear as family relationships in the traditions are actually ways to describe social relationships and interactions. The conflict presented in the accounts between Jews and Canaanites should be understood as an internal class struggle between peasant villages (Jews) and the wealthy city dwellers (Canaanites). The struggle was precipitated in Canaan by an influx of a small core group of escaped slaves, the original Israelites, who rallied the people to rise up in rebellion against the oppression of the dominant class. The association of all the later Jews with the early events of the exodus, Sinai, and entry into the land is a projection back into history of the story of the group that emerged as a dominant "tribe" in the area. They simply adopted the story of the small group of escaped slaves that first entered the land and made it a national heritage.

V. Correlation of Truths Found in the Bible and Illustrated in Judges

Truth	Illustrated in Judges	Second Bible Reference
Obedience to God brings blessings	Judges 10:11-12	Deuteronomy 28:1-15
Disobedience to God brings oppression	Judges 2:20-23	Deuteronomy 28:16-48
Repentance restores fellowship with God	Judges 10:15-16	I John 1:9 Luke 24:47
We can fall from grace	Judges 8 Judges 16	I Samuel 10:9-10 II Timothy 4:10
Being used by God does not insure invincibility	Judges 8:27 Judges 11:29-31	II Samuel 11
If God calls you to do something, He will prepare the way for your success	Judges 4 Judges 6 Judges 11 Judges 14	Romans 8:28 I Samuel 17

The Book of Judges

Lesson Two

Deborah and Barak

by Dr. John L. May

I. A Brief Synopsis (chapter 4)

Ehud evidently judged Israel during 80 years of peace, but after his death Israel again turned from God, doing evil in His sight. They did three things: 1) they worshiped Baal; 2) they intermarried with the Canaanites (a violation of the Mosaic law); and

3) they forgot God. They adopted a mentality that said, "There is no king in Israel. Everyone does what is right in his own eyes." God had promised them (3:3-4), that if they didn't follow Him he would give the Gentiles the right to be "thorns in their side," and "a snare" to trap them. His prophetic word came to pass when they were delivered into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan (v.2).

Joshua defeated Jabin's grandfather 100 years earlier. Joshua had seen the iron chariots and "the people as the sand that is on the seashore." However, Joshua had a relationship with God that enabled him to soundly defeat the Canaanites. Joshua burned the city of Hazor, but one hundred years later, because Israel turned from God, the Canaanite dynasty surfaced again.

Jabin was living in Hazor. His army commander was named Sisera, a Philistine, and Israel was under bondage to them for 20 years (4:3). The Philistines had a monopoly on the making of iron. They had the secret of how to manufacture it, and they would not share it with the Israelites. So the Israelites were under Sisera's power, and they had to go all the way up to "the city of the Gentile ironworks" to get their plowshares sharpened. In addition, they were forbidden to own any iron weapons. They were severely oppressed by Sisera's chariots, his army, by the iron monopoly, and by Jabin's fortified cities. We read in chapter 5 (in the song of Deborah and Barak) that the joy of Israel was gone-- that the highways were deserted, and they had to travel through the crooked paths in the hills. This bondage continued until they cried out to God for deliverance.

There was no man in Israel able to take the place of judge among them, so that a woman, Deborah, had taken this responsibility (v.4). Deborah was the fourth person God raised up, and she was the only Judge of Israel that was also a prophet. Deborah held court under 'The Palm of Deborah', as the place became known. She sat in quiet retirement between Ramah (meaning "height") and Bethel ("the house of God"). In such a place she was able to give good advice to those who came to her for judgment.

There are four things to note about Deborah. First she is a judge. A judge is a person who calls the people back to the truth and deals out wisdom and justice. Second, she is called "a mother in Israel" (chapter 5), one who nourishes her children, encouraging them, building them up, bringing them into

maturity. Third, she is a wife, so she understands the relationship between man and woman. Fourth, she is a prophetess, "one who stands before the Word of God and makes it shine"--not telling people what she thinks but telling people what God thinks. That is where she obtained her authority, and that is why people came to her; they wanted to know who God was. She spoke for God and she led the people for God. She was also the spiritual leader of Israel for 40 years. Under her guidance, Barak provided Israel's military leadership.

Through Deborah God gave a message that she communicated to Barak, the son of Abinoam (v.6). The name Barak means "lightning," which is swift and effective. However, Barak was not so "swift to hear" when Deborah told him that the Lord had commanded that he assemble 10,000 troops from Naphtali to attack Sisera, with the assurance that God would deliver Sisera into his hand. Barak was from Kedesh, one of the cities of refuge located in the territory of Naphtali. His response to Deborah was either one of unbelief or humility (Judges 4:8-9 NKJV). And Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go!" So she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless there will be no glory for you in the journey you are taking, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." This was a true prophecy, though Deborah was not likely thinking of Jael (vs.17-21) when she spoke this.

Since the Lord had given the command, He also moved the 10,000 men to respond to the call of Barak to arms (v.10). At this point the report of verse 11 intervenes. Heber the Kenite (of the descendants of Moses' father-in-law) had separated himself from the Kenites, and was living now near Kadesh. The Kenites were not of the inhabitants of Canaan, though they were not Israelites, but Heber evidently decided in favor of identifying himself with Israel, no longer with the Kenites.

Sisera, hearing of the movement of Barak and his men, was well prepared with an army including 900 chariots of iron (vs.12-13). But this was nothing to the God of Israel, and Deborah's faith was undaunted. Her words to Barak were firm and decisive, telling him to act immediately, for this was the day the Lord had delivered Sisera into Barak's hand. "Has not the Lord gone out before you?" were words of strong encouragement to Barak (v.14).

Barak took 10,000 men and went up to Mount Tabor and hid in the forest on the mountainside. But it didn't do him any good because Sisera had spies all over the land. One of them told Sisera, "The men of Naphtali and Zebulun are all upset. It seems like we've got a little riot on our hands. About 10,000 of them went up to the Mount Tabor area, which is really silly because all we have to do is surround them. We'll get them one way or another." So Sisera called out his whole army, and his 900 iron chariots.

Deborah and the army of Barak are camped on the mountainside, and the ensuing conversation probably went something like this: "What do we do?" Deborah says, "Just relax. God says he is going to do something, so let's trust him. I don't know why we're here. I don't know everything. I'm just a prophetess, but I know we're supposed to be here, and Barak knows we're supposed to be here." Suddenly they hear the clank, clank, clank of the iron chariots, and they

look down into the Megiddo Valley (where the Battle of Armageddon is going to be fought), and see Sisera and his army advancing. Sisera is cocky, confident, in charge, while "Lightning" is up in the hills, watching. And right in the middle of all this silence, while everybody is just kind of taken back by this whole scene below, Deborah yells, "Charge!" You can hear Barak saying, "Would you be quiet! What do you mean charge? Charge what? Charge with what?" She says, "Listen. Listen. "

The Giboa mountain range was being drenched by a summer thunderstorm. The water from that storm started to run down the dry Kishon riverbed toward Sisera and his 900 iron chariots. Then Deborah understood what God was about to do: he would destroy Sisera with a flash flood, a wall of water-- five to six feet high rushing down those dry river beds. You can hear Sisera yelling "Whoa!" as he looked up at the wall of water coming toward him. Panic broke out in his army as his men tried to get to higher ground. It was at this moment that Deborah yelled "Charge!" Israel's army came down the mountain and defeated Sisera's panic-stricken army.

With the Lord going before, the victory was assured and decisive. Sisera, his chariots, and all his army were totally routed (v.15). Sisera himself left his chariot and fled on foot. He evidently escaped the observation of the Israelites, but otherwise "not a man was left of all the Canaanite army" (v.16). Sisera, the commander of the Canaanites, was able to escape alone, and to find the tent of Heber the Kenite (v.17), whom he thought to be friendly to him because there was no conflict at that time between Heber and Jabin. When Sisera approached, Jael, the wife of Heber, met him with welcoming words (v.18), inviting him into the tent, where she covered the weary man with a blanket. He asked for water to drink, and she gave him milk.

Then he instructed her to stand at the tent door while he slept, and to lie to anyone who might come to ask if any man was in the tent (v.20). But she had no such intention. Instead, while he was asleep, she took a tent peg and a hammer and drove the peg through his temple so powerfully that the peg pierced into the ground below (v.21). Cruel though this seems to us, we need to remember that it was an act of war, rather than simple murder.

Barak and his army had missed Sisera and were searching for him. When Barak approached the tent of Heber, Jael came out to meet him (v.22) and invited him into her tent to find the man he was looking for. There Barak would realize the truth of Deborah's prophecy that the Lord would sell Sisera into the hands of a woman (v.9). Thus God subdued Jabin, king of Canaan that day (v.32), and Israel was able to apply more and more pressure on him until he was destroyed. After this we read of no more military action of the Canaanites against Israel in the book of Judges. Following this victory, a long period (40 years) of peace ensued. It may be assumed that Deborah had a prominent role in the affairs of Israel during this time.

II. The Song of Deborah (chapter 5)

To celebrate God's great victory over Jabin and Sisera, Deborah and Barak sang a remarkable song. Since Deborah's name is mentioned first, it seems likely that she composed the song (v.7). It begins with leaders in Israel taking their proper place to provide leadership as ordered by God. But what rightly accomplishes this is the willing response of the people in offering themselves to engage in warfare for the Lord's sake. Kings and princes are summoned to hear the praises of the Lord for this great victory (v.3). Then the Lord is addressed in verse 4. He is seen as going out from Seir, marching from the field of Edom. He marches in majestic splendor, causing the earth to tremble and the heavens to pour torrents of water. The gentle rains speak of the blessing of the Word of God that brings forth fruit. But when rain is increased to a downpour, this pictures the Word of God bringing judgment. Just as bright sunshine can be a blessing and yet excessively hot sun a curse, so sufficient water is good, but excessive water an unwelcome affliction. God can easily use for judgment that which He first intended for man's good.

"The mountains quaked before the Lord" (v.5 --NASB). Mountains symbolize authorities, and this includes Mount Sinai, which expresses the authority of law over Israel. The awesome majesty of God was evident when the law was given. "Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly" (Ex.19:18). Who will not fear before a God of such magnificent power and splendor?

Verse 6 goes back to speak of the sad condition into which Israel had fallen before their victory over Sisera. "In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were deserted, and the travelers walked along the byways." This was because of Philistine and Canaanite oppression (3:31 and ch.4). Israelites were afraid to come into the open, walking on highways, because of the hostility of their enemies. So they sought the obscurity of the byways.

Also, "village life ceased." This too became endangered, for in the villages there was no protection. In times of peace and prosperity, village life can be very pleasant. Everyone knows everyone else, and life goes on without great trouble. But the Philistines and Canaanites would threaten any attempt to continue village life. These sad conditions in Israel continued until "I, Deborah, arose a mother in Israel" (v.7). How beautiful to read this! She does not say, "a leader in Israel," but "a mother." It was because of her mother's heart that she was moved as she was, out of care for the people as though they have been her children.

Israel had foolishly chosen new gods (v.8), and this was followed by losing their defense: "not a shield or spear was found among forty thousand in Israel." Thus Satan, in injecting his idolatrous religion into Israel, had divested Israel of any protection against the Philistines and Canaanites. These tactics are used by evil nations today. They urge other nations to disarm, telling them this is the way

to have peace, but when they do disarm, they find themselves exposed to the oppression of the enemy. But the Lord tells believers to "Put on the whole armor of God" (Ephesians 6:11), for the enemy is both deceitful and treacherous.

Yet, in spite of the lack of weapons, Deborah says her heart was with the rulers of Israel who offered themselves willingly to engage in battle with Sisera (v.9). Their good influence spread also to the people. But there were some who did not act on the call of God, instead, they were riding on white donkeys, sitting in the place of judges, walking far from the noise of the archers (vs.10-11). They chose not to be involved, yet were judges. Many today do the same.

People can stand back and criticize the way things are done, considering their judgment to be very wise, yet take no part in fighting against the enemy. They are bidden to speak. What can they say for themselves? However, in the end they would have reason to recount the righteous acts of the Lord, among the watering places. They would be refreshed and benefited by the Lord's blessing, though not part of the army. Instead of merely judging then, they would be subdued by the evidence of God's working, and would speak of this. For God's actions had liberated the villages in Israel, and the people would no longer fear to enter the gates.

"Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake utter a song! Arise, Barak" (v.12). Most translations do not translate the following words precisely as in the Hebrew language. The NIV renders it, "Take captive your captives, O son of Abinoam," but the margin of the Darby version says that this is literally, "Take captive your captivity." Ephesians 4:8 speaks similarly of Christ, "He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men." As Israel was in a state of captivity, Barak led captive this very state of captivity, thus releasing all who were in bondage. The Lord too, by His perfect sacrifice on Calvary, has led captive the state of captivity in which people were held, so that the people (believers) are set free. This is confirmed in Hebrews 2:14-15: "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." Christ has not taken these people (believers) captive, but has released them from captivity

The nobles and the mighty (v.13) were those who oppressed Israel, and the Lord came down against them. Ephraim, Benjamin and Zebulun are mentioned favorably (v.14) and also Issachar, taking their stand with Deborah and Barak (v.15), and willingly going with them into battle. But Reuben was evidently troubled by internal disunity and did not arrive at any decided conclusion. There were great resolves of heart, but these were apparently like New Year's resolutions that completely fail. How many there are who have apparent real concern, yet never take a decided stand for the Lord! Reuben sat among the sheepfolds to hear the bleatings of the flocks. Are we like them in any way? Instead of doing the work the Lord puts before us, do we just sit down to

hear the bleatings (the complaints) of the sheep? They had great searching of heart, but it seems to have borne no fruit in action (v.16).

Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan (v.17). This was the land they had chosen, and they were content not to involve themselves in helping the rest of Israel in their conflict. We too may find it easy to excuse ourselves from being involved in the conflict of the saints of God just because we are geographically at a little distance from them.

"And why did Dan remain on ships?" The ships speak of trade and commerce, so that the inference is that business was more important to Dan than conflict for the Lord's sake. "Asher continued by the seashore, staying "by his inlets." It seems Asher, like Dan, did not want his life disturbed, for he had inlets by which he was profited. "By the seashore" implies too that he was gaining from the Gentiles (of whom the sea speaks), and association with the world will often hinder true service for the Lord.

In commendable contrast to this, Zebulun was willing to risk its life for the Lord's sake (v.18), and Naphtali also chose the field of battle. There are always dangers in conflict, but when it is for the Lord, should we fear such dangers? Let us rather "put on the whole armor of God."

In this song of Deborah and Barak the battle is briefly described in graphic language in verses 19 to 22. When the kings of Canaan fought, they found that the heavens fought against them (v.30), and the stars. This signifies spiritual authority higher than an earthly level, and which Canaan was not prepared to meet. It was earthbound men who challenged the authority of the Lord Jesus in His acting for God on earth. They asked Him, "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?" (Mt.31:23). He asked them a most penetrating question in return, "The baptism of John where was it from? From heaven or from men?" (v.25). This defeated them, and they admitted that they were unable to answer. Thus too, heaven's authority defeated Sisera and his hosts. Without this, Barak and his men could not have gained the victory.

The river Kishon is also mentioned as having part in this victory (v.21). God had said He would influence Sisera to come to Kishon (4: 7), and it may be that many of his army were literally swept away by the torrent, possibly because trapped by Israel's army. A bitter curse is pronounced against Meroz for not coming to the help of the Lord (v.23). There must have been a special reason for this curse, for the curse is not pronounced against others who failed to come, Reuben, Gilead, Dan and Asher (vs.16-17). In contrast, Jael is said to be "most blessed among women" (v.24). When Sisera asked for water, she gave him milk (v.25). Jael did not hesitate to execute Sisera in his sleep (v.26). She illustrates the faith that is willing to act.

Deborah also thinks of how the women of Canaan would be affected at this time. The mother of Sisera looked through the window in anxious wonder as to why he took so long to come home (v.28), for Sisera and his armies were accustomed to winning their battles with no difficulty. Her wise friends, and she herself, thought the answer was that Sisera and his men were engaged in taking time to gather and divide the spoil taken from Israel, girls and garments, etc. What a shock it would be to these women to find that both Sisera and his armies were not only defeated, but also destroyed!

The Book of Judges

Lesson Three

Gideon

by Dr. John L. May

I. A Brief Synopsis (chapters 8-9)

The land rested for forty years after the victory over Sisera. Then the Israelites turned away from Yahweh. We are at the next example of the cycle of sin and loss that we see repeatedly in the book of Judges. "The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord," and the consequences descended upon them. The problem of Midianite oppression, however, is different from domination by neighboring Canaanites which we saw in the story of Deborah and Barak (**Judges 4-5**). The oppression of the Midianites is more like having asthma attacks in the spring. Raiders would arrive in Canaan at the time of harvest from some distance away and devastate the land. They stole everything that had been grown during the year and drove the Israelites into the mountains. The Israelites were forced to retreat to caves with only meager portions that they could carry with them. The Midianites and their allies would destroy everything in sight and leave, only to return at next year's harvest.

The Midianites were successful because, like the Canaanites of chs. 4 and 5, they had a weapon that was greater than any that Israel could muster against them. The iron chariots that served Jabin and Sisera have their counterpart in the camels of the Midianites. The invaders from the south could cross the desert regions very quickly on their camels, devastate the people, and leave. The text suggests not only the material problem of having their food stolen from them every year, but also the psychological debasement that took place each year. They were physically and psychologically living in caves. Even during the months of the year when no enemy could be seen, they knew that attack and defeat were coming. Such vulnerability is frightening. Verse 6 says "they were brought very low because of Midian."

The Israelites realized that they did, in fact, need Yahweh. The first response of the Lord to the cry for help of his forlorn people is to send a prophet. We saw this pattern in chapters 4 and 5 as well. When Deborah is introduced as a person who would be a turning point in breaking the bondage of the Canaanite coalition, the first attribute that is mentioned about her is that she is a prophetess. We don't know much about this prophet in chapter 6. He delivers the message and leaves the stage of history. But it's critical to note the importance of the word of God in times of trial, loss, and debilitation. God speaks to us when we need him. The truth found in God's word will strengthen us and set us upon a firm foundation. Faith comes from hearing the word of God, and with the Word comes hope of deliverance.

The prophet makes a very critical point in speaking to those who have lost hope. He says to them: "The Lord your God is a deliverer. 'I brought you out of Egypt; I brought you out of the house of slavery; I delivered you from the Egyptians and all of your oppressors.'" This reminder of God's commitment and power is a direct challenge to the might of the Midianites. God required, however, one thing of them--that in the

land of Canaan they should not worship the gods of the Amorites. While the Jews thought that the problem was Midian, the prophet realized that their problem was their worship of Baal. Their worship of this idol has caused them as a nation to become weakened before their enemies and unable to deal with their problems. They have placed their faith in something other than the true God. As a result, they have become hollow and ineffective and are easily overwhelmed by their enemies.

God responds to the cries of the people by sending an angel to commission Gideon, who was from the tribe of Manasseh. When we first meet Gideon, he describes himself to the angel of the Lord as the youngest member of the least significant family of the smallest tribe in Israel. He is living a defeated life--defeated by the Midianites and defeated by self-doubt. The setting of this encounter is very revealing of the conditions in Israel generally, and of the quality of Israel's leadership specifically.

The angel of the Lord came to Gideon who was standing in the winepress, which was a small, circular stone enclosure. He may have been in a stronghold where he would hide from the Midianites. He was trying to tread on grain, as you would with grapes, and separate the wheat from the chaff to produce a little handful of wheat. Animals on a hilltop in the open typically threshed wheat. But no one in Israel worked in the open like this because of the threat of the Midianites. We have a picture of an individual hiding somewhere, near a cave perhaps, treading out the grain with his own feet. And he's undoubtedly thinking about what the prophet had said: "The God of Israel is a God of power, deliverance, and authority." We can see that, as he's in the midst of this effort, he's looking at himself and feeling degraded. The angel of the Lord arrives, sits under a tree, and says to him, "Hail, valiant warrior. The Lord is with you." Gideon responds as a beleaguered victim, not as a valiant warrior: "Where is God? If the Lord is with us, where is he?" Verses 14-18:

And the Angel of the Lord looked at him and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?" And he said to Him, "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house." But the Lord said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man." So Gideon said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Thy sight, then show me a sign that it is Thou who speakest with me. Please do not depart from here, until I come back to Thee, and bring out my offering and lay it before Thee." And He said, "I will remain until you return."

Gideon said, "There are no miracles." The Angel of the Lord said, "I'm with you." Gideon responded, "You're not with us." He changes the object of God's attention from singular to plural. Gideon's response demonstrates that he doesn't understand that God's attention is directed at him as an individual, not at the entire nation. Gideon wanted miracles to descend on the nation as a whole to overthrow the Midianites. But God always begins with individuals.

Verses 19-24:

Then Gideon went in and prepared a kid and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour; he put the meat in a basket and the broth in a pot, and brought them out to him under the oak, and presented them. And the Angel of the Lord said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so. Then the Angel of the Lord put out the end of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. Then the Angel of the Lord vanished from his sight. When Gideon saw that he was the Angel of the Lord, he said, "Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face." And the Lord said to him, "Peace to you, do not fear; you shall not die." Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and named it The Lord is Peace. To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites."

The same night that Gideon received the peace of God in his heart and appreciated the message of hope, the Lord said, "Now go to your father's house and tear down the altar to Baal and build an altar to me there." Gideon was not to begin by raising an army. He first had to deal with the compromise in his own home, with the worship of false gods, and with the loss of integrity that had overtaken his own family (evidently, Joash, his father, was the priest of Baal worship for Abiezer). Gideon obeyed the Lord, albeit fearfully. During the night he and a few of his servants sneaked up to the high place and pulled down the altar and its associated Asherah symbol. Again, the insecurity of Gideon comes to our attention. He did it at night because he was afraid that someone might recognize and blame him. The next morning there are angry threats issued against Gideon. Interestingly, it is Joash who says to the angry neighbors, "If Baal is a god, let Baal fight for himself." Nothing happens to Gideon because Baal is a false god; he can't defend himself. Gideon takes on the name Jerubbaal, meaning "one who contends with Baal." And eventually it comes to mean "the one who conquers Baal" or in today's terms--the "Baal-buster." Having trusted God and found his courage to stand against false worship, Gideon becomes a man of character, authority, and strength in the eyes of the people around him.

The Spirit of Yahweh empowered Gideon, and he mustered troops from the northern tribes to fight against the Midianites. But in another act of insecurity he asked Yahweh for a sign to signal whether or not he would find victory. He himself proposed the test of the wet sheepskin. He laid out a fleece overnight. If it were wet while the surrounding ground was dry, then he would take that as a sign of victory. It was so, but Gideon still was not convinced. He asked for just the opposite the next night, and when it happened Gideon had no choice but to acknowledge that Yahweh was signaling victory and that he would have to get on with the campaign.

The fighting force Gideon assembled were, like Gideon, reluctant warriors. When the soldiers were given the opportunity to return home rather than fight, 22,000 out of 32,000 decided to leave. God told Gideon that this was still too many--He wanted to make clear that the victory would come from Him. So the army experienced further attrition after Gideon observed them drinking water from a spring. Only those who brought water hand to mouth rather than by directly lapping the water from the pool were enlisted for the battle. The story seems to dwell on the timidity and even incompetence of these early "warriors," on the way to making the point that Israel's fighting men were less than valiant defenders of the Israelite federation. Left with only three hundred men, Gideon devised a plan of attack that involved surprise and clever deception.

He and his men surrounded the Midianite camp in the middle of the night. Armed with ram's horn trumpets, jars, and torches, on Gideon's signal they shocked the enemy out of sleep by smashing the jars, blowing the trumpets, and holding high the torches. Disoriented, confused, and seemingly outnumbered, the Midianites tried to flee. Gideon's three hundred gave chase and killed many of them. The chase became the occasion for the writer to illustrate the lack of cooperation, and even distrust, among the various tribes. The Ephraimites felt slighted because they had not been invited to the originating attack, and only got to be a part of the mopping up. Then the Israelites in Transjordan at Succoth and Penuel refused to help Gideon. What happens next relates to the ideology of covenant and kingship. After he had killed the last kings of the Midianites, the Israelites begged Gideon to be their ruler. Although he took tribute from them--a share of the booty taken from the defeated Midianites--he refused to be king, saying, "Yahweh will rule over you."

Let's review the progress of the story from the middle of chapter 7 to verse 22 of chapter 8. What made the people of Israel want him to be king? The decisive battle was followed by significant leadership on Gideon's part--bringing in the Ephraimites, who were the most powerful tribe of the day, and enlisting them in the fight. He has to deal with their pride later because they want credit for what they do. They behead Oreb and Zeeb, the Midianite kings, and drag their heads by the hair across the Jordan River to Gideon and say, "We want credit for what we've done." Gideon, a savvy leader, says, "You've done much more than anyone else. You're Ephraimites, aren't you?" He mollifies them and puts them in place as part of the coalition. Then he leads his own 300 men in war against another band of Midianites. They fight the battle of Karkor where he captures "two kings of Midian." In this campaign two Israelite cities in the trans-Jordan region refused to help Gideon. They wouldn't give his men food as the 300 marched through wearily in pursuit of the enemy. Gideon promises to return and punish them. After he succeeds in battle and brings prisoners of war back, he returns to these cities, Succoth and Penuel. He kills the men of Penuel and mutilates, beats, and humiliates the people at Succoth. Everything he does raises him to a more powerful position of leadership, making his name greater in Israel and more feared by others. He is the key figure who takes the initiative and receives accolades for what happens.

But by reading carefully you can see Gideon beginning to turn from God. When the Ephraimites demand credit for the battle they fought, he doesn't say to them, "The credit belongs to the Lord alone." He gives the Lord credit, but also makes sure that their fleshly desires are mollified as well. When he is able to capture his enemies and punish the towns who refuse to support his men, you can see a concern for justice on his part, but angry revenge also motivates him. Over time Gideon begins to like the position of power to which he's been raised, using it for ends that aren't entirely right. He continues to credit God (most of the time) for what's done, but he also believes more and more that the human contribution should be rewarded.

This is the same man who flatly rejects the people's request that he be their king in verse 22 of chapter 8. He says that the Lord will be their king. And then he adds a very important note for the rest of the story, saying, "And neither shall my son be king." Yet in verse 24, Gideon says to them, "I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil." This seems like a fairly small request. It's just one earring each. The Ishmaelites wore earrings as part of their war paint. They had been despoiled in the battle, and everyone collected earrings from the slain Midianites. But Gideon is speaking to people who want to make him king in the place of God. They don't want to trust Yahweh; they want a human savior. His small request for earrings turns into an avalanche of gold--1700 shekels of gold. He refuses to be king formally, but he has opened the door for an informal testimony to his greatness.

He has some conscience in the matter so he decides to do something religious with some of the spoils. He takes some of the gold and makes it into an ephod. An ephod was a garment that was worn by the priests, the high priest especially. Gideon, a Benjamite, had no right to make such a garment. He didn't take the ephod to Shiloh where the ark was located and where the priests functioned. He took it to his own hometown. Small decisions build on one another to suggest that Gideon liked prestige and royal treatment, while continuing to claim, "the Lord shall rule over you." The ephod became an idol to him and the people.

Gideon had many wives as well. Kings established their greatness in the ancient Near East by having large harems, which called attention to their wealth and authority. He had seventy legal sons and at least one illegitimate son. Gideon said that he would not be king, yet he allowed himself to have all the perquisites of being king--riches, wives, and acclaim. He gave the right answer when the formal question was asked, but he lived as if he were the king. And the people lost their commitment to Yahweh--Gideon's golden ephod caused spiritual harlotry in Israel and became a snare for his family. His life deteriorated, and though he did not suffer most from it, the next generation suffered horribly because the son he left behind was an angry, godless man named Abimilech.

II. Abimilech -- the son of Gideon

Gideon's son Abimilech was the child of a Shechemite concubine. Shechem was a city that had come under the rule of Israel but was inhabited primarily by Canaanites. In addition, Gideon foolishly created unrealistic expectations in his illegitimate son by naming him Abimelech, which means, "my father is king." Abimelech never had the honor of his father's good name and grew up without roots--neither Canaanite nor Israelite. Chapter 9 tells the story of this angry and later violent man. Abimelech convinces the people of Shechem to attack the Israelites. When the Shechemites want to rebel later, he has the Israelite army attack them. Abimelech began his career by moving into Ophrah, the city of his father, and executing his seventy legitimate half-brothers, showing no remorse. He is finally killed without honor when a woman drops a millstone from a tower on his head. His story is sordid and further reveals Israel's slide into apostasy.

III. The Angel of the Lord

In the Old Testament we find numerous references to a heavenly messenger called "the Angel of the Lord." He is first mentioned in Genesis 16. After Hagar fled into the wilderness to escape from Sarah, the Angel of the Lord found her and admonished her to return to her mistress. He then promised to greatly multiply her descendants and prophesied the birth of Ishmael, who became the progenitor of the Arab nations. In Genesis 22, read every Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), it is the Angel of the Lord who called from heaven to stay the hand of Abraham as he took the knife to slay his son Isaac. In Exodus 14, he was in the pillar of cloud guiding the Israelites through the wilderness after their flight from Egypt. In Numbers 22:22-35, the Angel of the Lord appeared to Balaam, the non-Jewish prophet, and gave him orders. He instructed Gideon in Judges 6 to deliver Israel from Midian. He prophesied the birth of Samson (Judges 13), directed Elijah to Mt. Horeb (I Kings 19), and commanded King David to build an altar in Jerusalem which later became the site of the temple of Solomon (I Chronicles 21:18). The Angel of the Lord is also presented to us as an avenger of evil, a judge. When Assyria, which was one of the ancient super powers, threatened to destroy Israel (700's BC), it was the Angel of the Lord who killed the 185,000 Assyrian soldiers besieging Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:35). Yet this Angel, powerful in battle, was gentle enough to help a fleeing and frightened Hagar in the wilderness.

Who is this Angel? This Angel was perceived in a unique and remarkable way by those with whom he came in contact. In ancient times it was common knowledge that if one saw God, it meant death for the individual. God stated this directly to Moses on Mt. Sinai: "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exodus 33:20). After Hagar saw the angel of the Lord, it is recorded that she called him Lord and marveled that she was still alive after having seen him (Genesis 16:33). Jacob reacted in a similar fashion when he wrestled with a "man" during the night. The man blessed Jacob and changed the patriarch's name to Israel. Jacob responded by calling the place of this encounter Peniel, saying, 'it is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.' (Genesis 32:30). Jacob identified the "man" as God. Later in his

life, when Jacob blessed his son Joseph and his children, he said, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my Shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm..." (Genesis 48:15,16). The parents of Samson, likewise, recognized the angel of the Lord to be God, "We are doomed to die! We have seen God!" (Judges 13:22).

The Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in the midst of a burning bush (Exodus 3:2). But then in verse 4, "God called to him from within the bush. . . ." When the Lord delivered the children of Israel from Egypt, the Bible says, "By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light..." (Exodus 13:21). But we read again in Chapter 14, verse 19, that the "angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming in between the armies of Egypt and Israel" (Exodus 14:19,20). And then in verse 24 we are told that the Lord looked down on the Egyptian army through the pillar of fire and cloud, and fought against Egypt! Who is involved in this pillar? Is it the angel of the Lord or God Himself?

In Judges 6, the Angel of the Lord appeared to a timid Gideon and sat down under an oak tree to initiate a conversation with him (vss. 11,12). In verse 13, we see Gideon responding, but in verse 14 something strange happens: all of a sudden it is the Lord who is talking to Gideon! In verse 16, the conversation continues, but in verse 20, it is the Angel of God who is in conversation. The next verse tells how the angel performs a miracle. Then Gideon responds: 'Ah, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!' But the LORD said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die!" (Judges 6:22,23) Are there two or three characters in this passage? One, of course, is Gideon. In verses 11 and 12 we have the angel of the Lord, then the Lord in verses 14 and 16, then the angel of God in verse 20, and again the Angel of the Lord in verse 21. This writer maintains that the Angel of the Lord must be the Lord God. Yet in some sense, the Angel of the Lord, even though He Himself is deity, must be distinguished from the totality of the Godhead. For in Zechariah 1:12, the angel of the Lord is seen interceding on behalf of Israel, calling out to the Lord of hosts! The Holy Scriptures have given us a paradox: The Angel of the LORD is distinct from God, yet is Himself very God!

This paradox is consistent with God's very nature. God, who is involved with His creation and interested in our welfare (Psalm 139:3, 13) is also high above (Isaiah 55:8,9). God is a vengeful God to those who flout His revealed will (Deuteronomy 32:35), and yet He is merciful (Exodus 33:19). God is all-knowing (Psalm 139), and yet He willingly "forgets" (Jeremiah 31:34, Isaiah 64:9). God is an advocate, a defender of His people (Psalm 59:1, Job 16:19), but He is also a prosecutor and judge (Psalm 50:6, Ecclesiastes 3:17). When we study the nature of God, we find paradoxes. The Angel of the Lord, God Himself, revealed Himself in a visible, personal way, taking the form of a human being.

All scholars agree that this Angel of the Lord stands out among the angels and sometimes identifies Himself with God when He speaks. Some Bible scholars affirm that He is an angel through whom God manifested Himself in a unique way. Others are convinced that this Angel was the second person of the Trinity, making Himself visible long before He became a human baby who was born of the virgin Mary. That is why He could let Abraham call Him Lord and could speak with the authority of God (Genesis 18:16-33). That is why He could refer to His name as "wonderful," allow Samson's parents to offer a sacrifice to Him, and let them think they would die because they had seen God (Judges. 13:3-23). This perhaps also accounts for the fact that His appearances sometimes were terrifying and awesome--very similar to the portrayal of Christ in Revelation 1:12-19.

This author believes that "the Angel of the Lord" in the Old Testament is indeed the second person of the Trinity. He who is depicted in John 1:1 as the eternal Word, kept in close touch with His people during the Old Testament era. He appeared in human form. He spoke face to face with people. He showed them again and again that they were the objects of His love and care. Therefore the prophet could say, "In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old" (Isaiah 63:9). The Christian today does not need such visible tokens of His love, power, and presence. The New Testament Scriptures tell us the story of God's coming to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to show us what He is like, to prove His love, and to provide salvation. The Holy Spirit will use this record to make God and His presence very real to us if we read it, believe it, and obey it.

The Book of Judges
Lesson Four
Jephthah

by Dr. John L. May

I. A Brief Synopsis (chapter 11)

After the death of Gideon, the Israelites again turned from God. We read that they followed after seven sets of gods.

And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim, and Ashtaroath, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Sidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook the LORD, and served not him. And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and he sold them into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the children of Ammon. And that year they vexed and oppressed the children of Israel: eighteen years, all the children of Israel that were on the other side of the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. Moreover the children of Ammon passed over the Jordan to fight also against Judah, and against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim; so that Israel was sore distressed. And the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, saying, "We have sinned against thee, both because we have forsaken our God, and also served Baalim." (Judges 10:6–10)

This national punishment brought the Israelites to repentance. They now needed to organize and to appoint a strong leader to deliver them. "And the children of Israel said unto the LORD, We have sinned: do thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto thee; deliver us only, we pray thee, this day. And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the LORD: and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel" (Judges 10:15–16). The national threat from their enemies now loomed larger than ever. They found themselves beset on two fronts: the Philistines on the south and west and the Ammonites on the east. "Then the children of Ammon were gathered together, and encamped in Gilead. And the children of Israel assembled themselves together, and encamped in Mizpeh. And the people and princes of Gilead said one to another, What man is he that will begin to fight against the children of Ammon? he shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead" (Judges 10:17–18). In this crisis they needed a champion, someone who could rally all the people, some strong leader and warrior who could organize an army. Chapter 11 tells us of their selection.

"Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valour, and he was the son of an harlot: and Gilead begat Jephthah. And Gilead's wife bare him sons; and his wife's sons grew up, and they thrust out Jephthah, and said unto him, Thou shalt not inherit in our father's house; for thou art the son of a strange woman. Then Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob: and there were gathered vain men to Jephthah, and went out with him" (Judges 11:1–3). So, Jephthah became the leader of a band of malcontents and outcasts whose primary occupation was preying on the bands of these oppressors. When Israel was in trouble the elders knew where to go.

And it was so, that when the children of Ammon made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah out of the land of Tob: And they said unto Jephthah, Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Ammon. And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, Did not ye hate me, and expel me out of my father's house? and why are ye come unto me now when ye are in distress? And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, Therefore we turn again to thee now, that thou mayest go with us, and fight against the children of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead. And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the LORD deliver them before me, shall I be your head? And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, The LORD be witness between us, if we do not so according to thy words. Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and captain over them: and Jephthah uttered all his words before the LORD in Mizpeh (Judges 11:5–11).

The elders, no doubt, had to be embarrassed by this petition and the position they had been placed in. After all, they had done nothing for the wrong that was done to Jephthah, and he had a legitimate right to question their word. But they appeared honest and had humbled themselves by coming to him. Jephthah held them to their word and made them promise by an oath before the Lord at Mizpeh.

Jephthah was a mighty warrior, but he was not a fool. He chose the diplomatic route first of all. He sent a message to the king of Ammon. Let us notice this discourse in *The Living Bible*.

Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of Ammon, demanding to know why Israel was being attacked. The king of Ammon replied that the land belonged to the people of Ammon; it had been stolen from them, he said, when the Jews came from Egypt; the whole territory from the Arnon River to the Jabbok and the Jordan was his, he claimed. 'Give us back our land peaceably,' he demanded. Jephthah replied, 'Israel did not steal the land. What happened was this. When the people of Israel arrived at Kadesh, on their journey from Egypt after crossing the Red Sea, they sent a message to the king of Edom asking permission to pass through his land. But their petition was denied. Then they asked the king of Moab for similar permission. It was the same story there, so the people of Israel stayed in Kadesh. Finally they went around Edom and Moab through the wilderness, and traveled along the eastern border until at last they arrived beyond the boundary of Moab at the Arnon River; but they never once crossed into Moab. Then Israel sent messengers to King Sihon of the Amorites, who lived in Heshbon, and asked permission to cross through his land to get to their destination. But King Sihon didn't trust Israel, so he mobilized an army at Jahaz and attacked them. But the Lord our God helped Israel defeat King Sihon and all your people, so Israel took over all of your land from the Arnon River to the Jabbok, and from the wilderness to the Jordan River. So, you see, it was the Lord God of Israel who took away the land from the Amorites and gave it to

Israel. Why, then, should we return it to you? . . . And besides, just who do you think you are? Are you better than King Balak, the king of Moab? Did he try to recover his land after Israel defeated him? No, of course not. But now after three hundred years you make an issue of this. Israel has been living here for all that time, spread across the land from Heshbon to Aroer, and all along the Arnon River. Why have you made no effort to recover it before now? No, I have not sinned against you; rather, you have wronged me by coming to war against me; but Jehovah the Judge will soon show which of us is right—Israel or Ammon (*The Living Bible*, Judges 11:12–27).

Resuming the narrative from the KJV, we read that “the king of the children of Ammon hearkened not unto the words of Jephthah, which he sent him “ (Judges 11:28). "Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed over Gilead, and Manasseh, and passed over Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed over unto the children of Ammon" (Judges 11:29). Jephthah now mobilized his army and started the attack. But first he made a vow. "And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering" (Judges 11:30–31). We will return to look at this vow and its tragic consequences, but first let us consider another event which followed the defeat of the Ammonites.

"So Jephthah passed over unto the children of Ammon to fight against them; and the LORD delivered them into his hands. And he smote them from Aroer, even till thou come to Minnith, even twenty cities, and unto the plain of the vineyards, with a very great slaughter. Thus the children of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel" (Judges 11:32–33). So, God granted a great victory to Israel. He used Jephthah, a seasoned warrior, to bring about this victory. Then Jephthah returned to his house.

But this victory did not please the Ephraimites who lived on the west side of the Jordan River. "And the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, and went northward, and said unto Jephthah, Wherefore passedst thou over to fight against the children of Ammon, and didst not call us to go with thee? We will burn thine house upon thee with fire. And Jephthah said unto them, I and my people were at great strife with the children of Ammon; and when I called you, ye delivered me not out of their hands. And when I saw that ye delivered me not, I put my life in my hands, and passed over against the children of Ammon, and the LORD delivered them into my hand: wherefore then are ye come up unto me this day, to fight against me?" (Judges 12:1–3).

The Ephraimites were spoiling for a fight. They refused to be appeased. Perhaps they were angry because they did not get any war booty or recognition. Whatever the reason, "Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead, and fought with Ephraim: and the men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they said, Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites, and among the Manassites" (Judges 12:4). "And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead

said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand" (Judges 12:5–6). Jephthah had found a foolproof way to separate friend from foe. He knew that the Ephraimites could not pronounce the "sh" sound, but the Gileadites could. Therefore, every soldier who approached the fords was asked to identify himself, and then say "shibboleth." If the person responded by saying "sibboleth," he was slain on the spot.

II. Jephthah's Sacrifice

Prior to the war with the Ephraimites, a situation had arisen when Jephthah returned to his house—a situation he did not anticipate. We will recall that Jephthah had made a vow to make a burnt offering out of whatever came out of his house first, if God would give him the victory over the Ammonites (11:30). On his return, here is what that vow led him to do:

And Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances: and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the LORD, and I cannot go back" (Judges 11:34–35).

There are two main views pertaining to this sacrifice found in Judges. Many scholars believe that the sacrifice was a consecration to God's service and not a human sacrifice. There are a number of reasons why this assumption is made. First, the account, in verses thirty-six through forty, does not clearly indicate that the daughter was sacrificed. She went to the mountains to bewail her virginity, as she knew no man. It makes no sense to think that if she were to die she would bewail her virginity. Second, sacrifices and vows had to be made at the Tabernacle (Deuteronomy 12:26), and any human sacrifice there would have been a terrible affront to God. Third, the Tabernacle was located in the territory of Ephraim, and Jephthah had just engaged in a terrible slaughter of the Ephraimites. It is unlikely he would have gone to their territory so soon. Fourth, no Levite would have participated in a sacrifice away from the Tabernacle. Fifth, it would have been a double sin to sacrifice or perform a vow away from the Tabernacle by acting as a priest in such a circumstance. And sixth, Jephthah's righteousness precludes such an act, as Hebrews 11:32 indicates.

It can also be deduced that if she was dedicated to the service of God, it would likely involve service similar to that of a male Nazarite, and she was not released from that service for the entirety of her life. This is why we read, "That the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year" (Judges 11:40). This does not imply she had been sacrificed, but that her service to

God insured she would never know the joy of having a husband or bearing children, something which all Jewish women dreamed of.

There are other scholars, however, who see the above interpretation as being an example of feelings and sentiment interfering with sound Biblical interpretation. They believe that the Biblical Hebrew is quite explicit. Jephthah vowed to sacrifice the first person to come out of his house, and specifically stated that he would "*offer him up as a burnt offering*" (Judges 11:31). The Hebrew word in this passage, *olah*, means "whole burnt offering or burnt sacrifice." Its is used for this specific purpose 285 times in the Old Testament. There is no reason to think that the same word would take on a different meaning here. The whole burnt offering is a special type of sacrifice in the Bible. It is used only for solemn occasions or very serious transgressions. The blood of the sacrifice is completely drained and poured on the ground around the altar, and unlike the more common peace offering, the fire consumes the entire body.

Additionally, human sacrifice in Israel was not unheard of. The Israelites of that time period often performed mass human sacrifice in the name of their God, Yahweh when they conquered enemy cities. The Hebrew word for this ritual is "charem", or "the ban." This meant they would destroy the whole town, killing all the inhabitants. Men, women, and children, regardless of age, would be slaughtered for God along with all their animals. Even their valuable possessions would be burned. Any Israelite caught taking something from a town consecrated for this "ban" would be executed along with his family. See Joshua 7:19-26 for an instance. There are numerous stories of God commanding his people to perform "the ban" upon another tribe of Canaanite peoples. Joshua 10:20-40 presents some examples.

The writer of this material believes that Jephthah "did to his daughter as he had vowed." It is very clear that Jephthah fully expected to sacrifice a person--he just did not expect it to be his daughter. Jephthah felt that he had no alternative. God kept his end of the bargain; now Jephthah had to pay up. In the Mosaic laws given to the Israelites by God, there are numerous laws concerning sacrifices made to God, and Leviticus 27:29 states that "no person *devoted to destruction (charem)* may be ransomed; he must be put to death." Jephthah is never punished, never condemned. The great rabbinical commentators can only call his vow foolish. Even in the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews praises Jephthah for his faithfulness to God (Hebrews 11:32-33). Of course part of the tragedy is that Jephthah's greatness would never be passed down; his only child was put to death for his moment of folly. This is why the daughters of Israel bewail her squandered virginity. Jephthah is the only Judge who dies without an heir, while the others are reported to have many children.

"And Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then died Jephthah the Gileadite, and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead" (Judges 12:7). When we look at Jephthah, we find a man who under disadvantaged circumstances as an illegitimate son, and one whose inheritance had been denied him, bore no hatred or ill-will against those who had deprived him. At a time of national crisis he set the past aside and did what needed to be done. He was a man who rose above his handicap at birth, a man who knew God and was devoted to Him. He was a valiant warrior who did not shirk the responsibility

given him. But, at the same time he knew his success depended upon God. He was a man who kept his word regardless of the cost to himself and his family. He truly ranks as one of the better of the Judges, despite his rash vow.

The Book of Judges

Lesson Five

Samson and His First Love

by Dr. John L. May

I. The Birth of Samson

Following the death of Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon became Judges over Israel. They reigned seven, ten, and eight years respectively. After the death of Abdon, the Lord raised up Samson as Judge and he reigned twenty years. The high priest during this time was Eli and the events of Samson's life occurred approximately 1½ years before the ark was taken by the Philistines in the battle recorded in I Samuel 4. As we begin this lesson the cycle of apostasy has begun anew.

13:1-7 And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years.

And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren, and bare not.

And the angel of the LORD appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not: but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son.

Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean thing:

For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head: for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.

Then the woman came and told her husband, saying, A man of God came unto me, and his countenance was like the countenance of an angel of God, very terrible: but I asked him not whence he was, neither told he me his name:

But he said unto me, Behold, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and now drink no wine nor strong drink, neither eat any unclean thing: for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb to the day of his death.

There are a number of subtle indicators in the opening paragraphs of this story that something is not quite right, suggesting that we should begin asking deeper questions about what the point is. Consider the introduction. We are told that the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, as they had done before. Rebellion is part of the typical cycle we see in Judges, in which the people are rescued by God, have a time of peace, fall into sin, are conquered by an enemy, and so on. But every other time a judge was introduced at this point in the cycle, we would read that there was repentance, a national outcry to God begging him to deliver them from their suffering. And there is no repentance here. Never once in this story is there a cry for help, recognition of their downfall,

or a public acknowledgement of the need for God. This story immediately proceeds to God's action to create a deliverer.

NAZIRITE RESTRICTIONS

In Numbers 6 God provided a special opportunity for Jews who wanted to dedicate a period of time in their life to prayer and service to God, to spiritual cleansing, to doing something that would allow them uninterrupted focus on the person and work of God. The Nazirite vow served that purpose. We find an example of it in Acts, at the end of Paul's second missionary journey, when he makes a vow and doesn't cut his hair until the purpose of the vow is completed. Those who took vows as Nazirites were not to touch a dead body or any unclean thing. They were not to drink any alcoholic beverage (abstaining from all products of the vine, in fact). And they were not to cut their hair. Generally, however, Nazirite vows were meant to be temporary. They were to be made because somebody loved God and wanted life to be focused on him, with the recognition that it should be a time of cleansing and then should come to an end.

But nobody in Samson's story showed an interest in the things of God. There is no mention of previous prayer or a cry for help on the part of the parents, and certainly none in Samson's life until the very end. So God brought about this Nazirite vow on his own initiative, rather than it being the response of someone's heart, and it was for a lifetime rather than temporary. It says in verse 5 that as a judge Samson would begin to deliver the children of Israel from the Philistines. That, too, makes him different. The other judges accomplished deliverance for their generations, but Samson wouldn't. He was only a partial deliverer.

Judges 13:8-23 Then Manoah intreated the LORD, and said, O my Lord, let the man of God which thou didst send come again unto us, and teach us what we shall do unto the child that shall be born.

And God hearkened to the voice of Manoah; and the angel of God came again unto the woman as she sat in the field: but Manoah her husband was not with her.

And the woman made haste, and ran, and shewed her husband, and said unto him, Behold, the man hath appeared unto me, that came unto me the other day.

And Manoah arose, and went after his wife, and came to the man, and said unto him, Art thou the man that spakest unto the woman? And he said, I am.

And Manoah said, Now let thy words come to pass. How shall we order the child, and how shall we do unto him?

And the angel of the LORD said unto Manoah, Of all that I said unto the woman let her beware.

She may not eat of any thing that cometh of the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing: all that I commanded her let her observe.

And Manoah said unto the angel of the LORD, I pray thee, let us detain thee, until we shall have made ready a kid for thee.

And the angel of the LORD said unto Manoah, Though thou detain me, I will not eat of thy bread: and if thou wilt offer a burnt offering, thou must offer it unto the LORD. For Manoah knew not that he was an angel of the LORD.

And Manoah said unto the angel of the LORD, What is thy name, that when thy sayings come to pass we may do thee honour?

And the angel of the LORD said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret?

So Manoah took a kid with a meat offering, and offered it upon a rock unto the LORD: and the angel did wondrously; and Manoah and his wife looked on.

For it came to pass, when the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar. And Manoah and his wife looked on it, and fell on their faces to the ground.

But the angel of the LORD did no more appear to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was an angel of the LORD.

And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God.

But his wife said unto him, If the LORD were pleased to kill us, he would not have received a burnt offering and a meat offering from our hands, nor would He have shown us all these things, nor would He have let us hear things like this at this time.

A MIRACLE BABY

There are a number of places in the Bible where childless couples are by God's miraculous intervention allowed to have children. That is an important theme that runs through the Bible. And this is in some ways the most remarkable of all these stories. An angel came to Abraham and told him when Isaac would be born, in answer to their prayer. It also happened to Zacharias in the New Testament when an angel appeared to him, answering his prayers for a child. But this is a longer story than either of those. There are more miraculous details--this angel's doing wonders and ascending in the flames. The story's content, length, and everything about it suggest that something important is happening. God is going to send a baby, and you would expect the baby to turn out to be somebody especially wonderful. But it turns out that he was exactly the opposite.

Samson was a very powerful, threatening, out-of-control, and self-centered man. The Nazirite restrictions (mentioned repeatedly in this chapter) were not connected to any kind of relationship with the Lord; they were given merely as externals. The angel didn't tell the parents to teach the child to walk in a loving relationship with his God, but merely to teach him to observe the external aspects of the ritual, which, except for not cutting his hair, he broke throughout his life, whether it was drinking, killing people, or whatever. This story of how he came into being suggests one thing, but we're given something else. Again, it makes us wonder why.

Manoah appears as a person whose elevator is stuck halfway between floors. That God should pick this man to be the father of the hero says something about the hero, doesn't it? Proverbs 4 describes a father who raises his child to know wisdom and teaches and encourages him from youth to know the

things of God and to care about and follow what's true. But Manoah had very little sense of what it meant to be a father. He asked in verse 8 and again in verse 12 that he be taught what to do for the boy who was to be born. That surely is a legitimate and praiseworthy prayer, but it also gives us the sense that Manoah really didn't know what to do, that he didn't have a spiritual foundation that he could impart to his child.

It is significant that the heavenly visitor appeared directly to Manoah's wife twice, and appeared to him only with her introduction. And it wasn't until verse 21 that Manoah realized he was dealing with an angel. Up to this time he had assumed the individual was a man, though his wife could tell he was an angel from the beginning. You can imagine her impatience when she had to correct his frightened analysis of what would happen next. "Look, we've just been told we're supposed to have a child. God wouldn't have accepted our sacrifice if he was going to kill us!" The angel's presence in this story suggests something remarkable was to come and Manoah's contribution was to make us wonder why.

When the angel appeared to Zacharias and said, "You shall have a son" (who would be John the Baptist), he said of that boy, "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God." But why the remarkable birth of Samson? God picked these people and orchestrated these events. And the man he chose to be the last of the heroes in the book of Judges is as oafish and bad an example of what it means to be a mature man as you can find anywhere, let alone in the Bible.

Judges 13:24-25 And the woman bare a son, and called his name Samson: and the child grew, and the LORD blessed him.

And the Spirit of the LORD began to move him at times in the camp of Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol.

The Hebrew word translated "move" can also be translated "stir." It originally meant to tap or agitate something. It could be used of the way a cowboy in a rodeo gouges his bronco with his spurs to try to make him buck harder and higher so he gets more points for riding him. This is not a word that suggests God was wooing Samson, teaching him, and persuading him. Samson was stirred into action, but not as a partner in God's plans.

II. Samson's First Love

Judges 14:1-3 And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines.

And he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife.

Then his father and his mother said unto him, Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou

goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines? And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well.

Timnah was a little town about four miles from where Samson was living at Zorah. Now we get the first indication of this man's spirit, and of the problem which plagued him throughout his life. He was a very willful young man, particularly in the area of sex. He was never willing to deal with this issue in his life.

Three things were wrong about this relationship:

1. It is evident from this paragraph that he really cared nothing for this girl as a person. He simply saw her and wanted her. She was an object to be used, to be possessed. There was no recognition that she was a person with needs, a person of worth and value.

2. The Old Testament scriptures were very clear about God's prohibition of intermarriage between the Israelites and surrounding pagan nations. This provision stemmed from God's love. He knew that if they married into these idolatrous peoples the nation of Israel itself would become idolatrous. Heathen wives would pollute the households with their idols. And God knew that wives chosen out of these nations would be miserable as well. To be unequally yoked in this way would result in a relationship which would chafe both parties. So because he loved his people, and because he loved the world, God had commanded that they were not to intermarry with unbelievers. But Samson cared nothing for this. He saw the girl and he wanted her.

3. He disobeyed his parents. Again, the Scriptures were very clear. Children were to obey their parents so that they might live long in the land, which the Lord had given to them. God never stuttered at that point. It is clear that God interposed these parents between this girl and their son in order to save Samson from a disaster. But he would not listen; he disobeyed. He insisted on having his own way. So he said to his father, "Get her for me, for she pleases me well." His passions reigned. This was the area of his life that ultimately brought him to defeat, because he would not deal with it.

The following verse seems unusual:

Judges 14:4: But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the LORD, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines: for at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.

But the writer is not implying here that God condoned Samson's rebellion. He is saying that God was going to overrule in this

situation for a good purpose. God never condoned the sins of this young man.

Judges 14:5-9 Then went Samson down, and his father and his mother, to Timnath, and came to the vineyards of Timnath: and, behold, a young lion roared against him.

And the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand: but he told not his father or his mother what he had done.

And he went down, and talked with the woman; and she pleased Samson well.

And after a time he returned to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcase of the lion: and, behold, there was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcase of the lion.

And he took thereof in his hands, and went on eating, and came to his father and mother, and he gave them, and they did eat: but he told not them that he had taken the honey out of the carcase of the lion.

Having begun his rebellion against Jehovah, he now appears to treat his Nazirite vows very lightly. It seems from this account that he broke two of them. First he went alone into the vineyard at Timnah. His father and mother were not there because they knew nothing of the incident with the lion. One wonders why he would even go near it because as a Nazirite he was forbidden to have any contact with grapes, which are difficult to avoid in a vineyard.

It is also clear that he violated a second condition of his vows. He handled a dead body; the carcass of the lion. And not only did he break the vow himself, but he also caused his mother to break it. She too was a Nazirite, according to chapter 13, and she consumed some of the unclean honey taken from the body of the dead lion. So you can see the process of degeneration in his life starting to set in. In fact, it is significant that the account says "He went down to Timnah." Although it is talking about the geographical location of Timnah with respect to his hometown, it is clear that this is a reference to the beginning of his decline. From this point on, the slope is away from the Lord.

Judges 14:10-12 So his father went down unto the woman: and Samson made there a feast; for so used the young men to do.

And it came to pass, when they saw him, that they brought thirty companions to be with him.

And Samson said unto them, I will now put forth a riddle unto you: if ye can certainly declare it me within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty sheets and thirty change of garments:

These were very expensive items of apparel. A man might expect to own one in his entire lifetime. Now he is obligating himself to give each companion two such garments, a total of sixty, if he should lose.

Judges 14:13-17 But if ye cannot declare it me, then shall ye give me thirty sheets and thirty change of garments. And they said unto him, Put forth thy riddle, that we may hear it.

And he said unto them, Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness. And they could not in three days expound the riddle.

And it came to pass on the seventh day, that they said unto Samson's wife, Entice thy husband, that he may declare unto us the riddle, lest we burn thee and thy father's house with fire: have ye called us to take that we have? is it not so?

And Samson's wife wept before him, and said, Thou dost but hate me, and lovest me not: thou hast put forth a riddle unto the children of my people, and hast not told it me. And he said unto her, Behold, I have not told it my father nor my mother, and shall I tell it thee?

And she wept before him the seven days, while their feast lasted: and it came to pass on the seventh day, that he told her, because she lay sore upon him: and she told the riddle to the children of her people.

This was his weakness. He could overcome lions. He could overcome Philistines. But in the modern idiom, he couldn't overcome the Philistine woman with the red dress on.

Judges 14:18 And the men of the city said unto 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 unto them, If ye had not plowed with my heifer, ye had not found out my riddle.

One wonders what the result of this whole story would have been had he not plowed with *their* heifer. He had no right to her because she was part of an alien nation. And yet in willful disobedience he had determined to have her. But notice what happens:

Judges 14:19-20 And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon, and slew thirty men of them, and took their spoil, and gave change of garments unto them which expounded the riddle. And his anger was kindled, and he went up to his father's house.

But Samson's wife was given to his companion, whom he had used as his friend.

Ashkelon was a seacoast town about thirty miles away, far enough so that news would not travel back right away and they would not connect this event with Samson. Chapter 15 records Samson's vengeance. He went back to reclaim his wife and discovered that her father had given her to his best man. Reading again at verse 4:

Judges 15:4-5: And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes (probably jackals), and took firebrands, and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails.

And when he had set the brands on fire, he let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines, and burnt up both the shocks, and also the standing corn, with the vineyards and olives.

There is a very significant omission here. It does not say that the Spirit of God either moved him or empowered him to do this. This was not divine judgment; it was the venting of Samson's personal resentment and anger. It grew out of his pique and had nothing to do with God's will. It was a very cruel and inhumane thing to do.

Judges 15:6: Then the Philistines said, Who hath done this? And they answered, Samson, the son in law of the Timnite, because he had taken his wife, and given her to his companion. And the Philistines came up, and burnt her and her father with fire.

How ironic! That is what they said they would do if she did not tell them what the riddle was.

Judges 15:7-8 And Samson said unto them, Though ye have done this, yet will I be avenged of you, and after that I will cease.

And he smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter: and he went down and dwelt in the top of the rock Etam.

Then the Philistines made a raid against the Israelite city of Lehi. Samson was camped in the mountains behind Lehi. Because the nation of Israel was so completely dominated by the Philistines, the men of the city agreed to take Samson captive. I am sure they were frightened half to death, but they agreed to bind him and bring him down to them if the Philistines would spare their city. Samson willingly permitted this, and they carried him down to the Philistine host.

Judges 15:14-16 And when he came unto Lehi, the Philistines shouted against him: and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands.

And he found a new jawbone of an ass, and put forth his hand, and took it, and slew a thousand men therewith.

And Samson said, With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men.

That is an interesting expression because it is a play on words. The Hebrew word for "heaps" also means "asses." It can be translated, "with the jawbone of an ass, I made great heaps of asses." (Compare the NIV: "With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them.")

Judges 15:17-20 And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking, that he cast away the jawbone out of his hand, and called that place Ramath-lehi.

And he was sore athirst, and called on the LORD, and said, Thou hast given this great deliverance into the hand of thy servant: and now shall I die for thirst, and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?

But God clave an hollow place that was in the jaw, and there came water thereout; and when he had drunk, his spirit came again, and he revived: wherefore he called the name thereof En-hakkore, which is in Lehi unto this day.

And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.

If the story had just ended there it would be a story of triumph, because Samson learned at this point that God was adequate to meet any need he had, that the Spirit of God could be to him a well of water springing up to eternal life, satisfying every desire, giving him the capacity to slay the Philistines right and left. After he learned this principle, he judged Israel for twenty years, and these were days of prosperity and peace, and the Philistines were held at bay.

We can chart the progress of his decline, however, in chapter 16:

Judges 16:1-3 Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot, and went in unto her.

And it was told the Gazites, saying, Samson is come hither. And they compassed him in, and laid wait for him all night in the gate of the city, and were quiet all the night, saying, In the morning, when it is day, we shall kill him.

And Samson lay till midnight, and arose at midnight, and took the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts, and went away with them, bar and all, and put them upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of an hill that is before Hebron.

Again the Lord delivers him miraculously. He escapes through the midst of the Philistines at night and rips the gates off the city walls and carries them on his back all the way to Hebron, which is 38 miles from Gaza--again evidence to him of the immense strength that was his in the Lord. But note verse 4:

Judges 16:4 And it came to pass afterward, that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.

Thus the stage is now set for the fall and rise of one of the most interesting Judges.

III. The Lesson of Samson's Life

I am convinced that the Lord intended Samson to be an object lesson for everyone who would read his story and to anyone in his generation who would look clearly at him. The nation's character was distilled to a single person in Samson; he was living out the thinking and the spiritual insensitivity of the entire nation of Israel. The fact that God would choose this man to be their leader was saying something about the people: that they were out of control, that they were protected by the power of God who was faithful to a faithless people, that they did not love righteousness nor live it. He was teaching them to see themselves by focusing on this individual. That is why the Lord brought Samson into being, to be a picture of what the nation of Israel was really like. This will be more fully revealed in the next two lessons.

The Book of Judges

Lesson Six

Samson and Delilah

by Dr. John L. May

I. The Fall of Samson

Judges 16:1 places us right back into the middle of Samson's life: "Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot, and went in unto her." There are three major stories of Samson's adult life. One begins with his saying to his father, "I've seen a woman in Timnah. Get her for me, she looks good to me." Samson's physical desire for this Timnite woman led to the long story (in chapters 14 and 15) of his marriage, the wager and its aftermath, ending with a thousand Philistines killed by Samson with a donkey's jawbone. The second story is this short paragraph about his traveling to Gaza to see a prostitute. The third and most famous story is that of Samson and Delilah. Each story is introduced with Samson's sexual desire as his motivation to act:

Judges 16:2-3: And it was told the Gazites, saying, Samson is come hither. And they compassed him in, and laid wait for him all night in the gate of the city, and were quiet all the night, saying, In the morning, when it is day, we shall kill him.

And Samson lay till midnight, and arose at midnight, and took the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts, and went away with them, bar and all, and put them upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of an hill that is before Hebron.

The gates of Gaza had heavy beams studded with metal that were sunk into the ground as posts to support them. Samson arose in the middle of the night and ripped the whole gate structure out of the ground. He terrified the guards who were stationed on every side, and marched off forty miles to Hebron with this great weight on his shoulders. Everything about him was larger than life and out of control. This short story of the night in Gaza was evidently typical of him. We're not told much here, just enough to be reminded of the kind of life he lived.

Every time we meet Samson in any of the events of his life, he was alone; he never had a brother or a friend. He was a man who got to do everything he ever wanted to do in life. If he wanted a wife, he demanded that his father get him a wife. He destroyed those who angered him for good reasons or bad. He traveled freely among his kinsmen and his enemies with complete fearlessness. In this story, he strode into the enemy city of Gaza, saw a prostitute he liked, enjoyed her, and took off with the gates of the city on his shoulders, terrifying everybody around him. No one ever forbade Samson to do whatever he wanted. But Samson's problem was that his desires were misguided; the desires that drove him were all aimed at the wrong things.

Judges 16:4-5 And it came to pass afterward, that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.

And the lords of the Philistines came up unto her, and said unto her, Entice him, and see wherein his great strength lieth, and by what means we may prevail against him, that we may bind him to afflict him: and we will give thee every one of us eleven hundred pieces of silver.

Delilah was the first individual with whom Samson created a relationship that made him truly vulnerable. The scriptures say that he “loved her,” and that word is not used of him anywhere else. His life of sexual adventures and short-term relationships had finally weakened his thinking process to the point that he was not only attracted to this woman, but now he had become emotionally enthralled by her. She was as cold-blooded and calculating a person as you could find. She was utterly uninterested in Samson's welfare. The five men who were heads of the major cities of the Philistines were sick and tired of Samson ripping gate posts up, terrorizing the countryside, and killing everybody who got in his way. They wanted him done away with; they offered her an extraordinary price if she would use her emotional control of this man to find out how he could be taken advantage of. She apparently had no qualms whatever about going along with their plan.

Judges 16:6: And Delilah said to Samson, Tell me, I pray thee, wherein thy great strength lieth, and wherewith thou mightest be bound to afflict thee.

If her approach was not more original than what is shown in the scriptures, Samson truly was a chip off Manoa's side of the tree. At any rate, his response was to lie to her, repeatedly.

Judges 16:7-14 And Samson said unto her, If they bind me with seven green withs that were never dried, then shall I be weak, and be as another man.

Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven green withs which had not been dried, and she bound him with them.

Now there were men lying in wait, abiding with her in the chamber. And she said unto him, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he brake the withs, as a thread of tow is broken when it toucheth the fire. So his strength was not known.

And Delilah said unto Samson, Behold, thou hast mocked me, and told me lies: now tell me, I pray thee, wherewith thou mightest be bound.

And he said unto her, If they bind me fast with new ropes that never were occupied, then shall I be weak, and be as another man.

Delilah therefore took new ropes, and bound him therewith, and said unto him, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And there were liars in wait abiding in the chamber. And he brake them from off his arms like a thread.

And Delilah said unto Samson, Hitherto thou hast mocked me, and told me lies: tell me wherewith thou mightest be bound. And he said unto her, If thou weavest the seven locks of my head with the web.

And she fastened it with the pin, and said unto him, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awaked out of his sleep, and went away with the pin of the beam, and with the web.

The Philistines hid in an inner room to see if it was going to work; they didn't want to risk their lives by being there when she ran the experiment. She tied him up just as he said. Of course, as soon as she woke him up and said, "The Philistines are upon you!" he snapped the cords, and presumably the Philistines slipped out the back door and ran down the hill.

Notice how persistent Delilah was: "Oh, Samson, you made a fool of me the first time. Now really tell me your secret." So they went through the charade again. He told her another lie. And again the Philistines were hiding in the back room and took off when it didn't work.

Then a third time: "Samson, this is really getting boring. If you really love me as much as I love you, tell me the secret of your strength." And he lied to her for the third time. But he was beginning to weaken; for the first time he began to talk about his hair, although he didn't tell her the truth.

The Philistine leaders gave up on the deal because it didn't look like it was going to work. They left her behind. But she could not forget the fifty-five hundred pieces of silver that had been promised her, and she wasn't going to give up on the project. She began to turn up the heat of her pleading.

Judges 16:15-17 And she said unto him, How canst thou say, I love thee, when thine heart is not with me? thou hast mocked me these three times, and hast not told me wherein thy great strength lieth.

And it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death;

That he told her all his heart, and said unto her. There hath not come a razor upon mine head; for I have been a Nazarite unto God from my mother's womb: if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man.

Delilah realized that this time God's name had been brought into the story, and she could tell by Samson's countenance that he had finally told her the truth.

Judges 16:18-20 And when Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called for the lords of the Philistines, saying, Come up this once, for he hath shewed me all his heart. Then the lords of the Philistines came up unto her, and brought money in their hand.

And she made him sleep upon her knees; and she called for a man, and she caused him to shave off the seven locks of his head; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went from him.

And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the LORD was departed from him.

Samson had been the instrument of God from his mother's womb. God had chosen him to be the fearsome opponent of the Philistines. God continued to use Samson, and the power of the Spirit of God would come upon him, enabling him to do extraordinary things. Throughout his life we can imagine the Lord waiting for Samson, urging him, calling him, wanting him to respond not just as an instrument of God's power, but as someone who had a relationship with him. What Samson did here was to give the story of his Nazirite beginnings into the hands of a Philistine courtesan, making him completely vulnerable to her. And the Lord finally departed from Samson. When his hair was shaved and the last vestige of the vow that he was to keep was gone, God's patience with Samson was at an end and judgment fell.

Samson made choices over and over again that compromised him and his relationship to God. He was a man whose sexuality in particular led him to relationships that took away his strength, his manhood. Nothing would ever destroy Samson from the outside; he was invulnerable to attack. But he could destroy himself. So we find him having lost his ability to know or to choose what was right, and he began to make choices that were destructive. Delilah was as bad a partner as you could pick. She lived for herself, and she was willing to sell him down the river at a moment's notice.

It was the accumulation of the choices Samson had made that brought him to the point where he found himself wanting to be with a woman who wanted nothing but to use him. But look carefully at why Samson chose Delilah: he was trying to use her as he had always used women. Women were there for his pleasure, for his amusement, for parties. Women were there to sleep with. They existed to serve him, and she was just the current one. He was more emotionally attached to her, but he was using her nonetheless.

If Samson had been the kind of a man who approached Delilah with sacrificial love and reached out to her in her hardness, if he had tried to understand her and the hurts she had suffered that made her the way she was, then he would not have been so vulnerable to being used by her. But his interest was all-selfish. He was going to use Delilah to his advantage, but the trouble was that she was a better user than he was. Because he hadn't learned to love sacrificially and to enjoy giving in a relationship, he was a taker who got taken. Samson was like Jacob when he first met Laban, totally out of his league.

Samson finally gave up the last vestige of whatever he had been taught about separation unto God. He gave it away to Delilah, and at that point the Lord departed from him. Beyond looking at the way Samson related to women, perhaps the most important thing we can ask about Samson is, what did he believe about God? That is ultimately what determined what he did, where he went, and how he lived. And what he believed about God was based on superstition. His hair was his rabbit's foot, a talisman, some kind of magic dust that kept him protected in all circumstances. When in verse 17 he finally told Delilah, "If [my hair] is shaved my strength will leave me," he seemed to believe that the strength of his body would drain itself out of his head as the locks of his hair were cut off.

Judges 16:20 And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the LORD was departed from him.

It was not any magic found in his hair that departed from him. It was the Lord God himself. That's what Samson never understood. The presence of God in his life had just been removed, and he didn't even realize it because he had never been sensitive to the personal God who cared for him. He had assumed that his strength was there by superstitious refusal to cut his hair, that it was magic. Thus he became vulnerable to what would follow next.

II. The Death of Samson

Judges 16:21-25 But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house.

Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven.

Then the lords of the Philistines gathered them together for to offer a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god, and to rejoice: for they said, Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand.

And when the people saw him, they praised their god: for they said, Our god hath delivered into our hands our enemy, and the destroyer of our country, which slew many of us.

And it came to pass, when their hearts were merry, that they said, Call for Samson, that he may make us sport. And they called for Samson out of the prison house; and he made them sport: and they set him between the pillars.

It so happened when they were in high spirits that they said, "Call for Samson, that he may amuse us." So they called for Samson from the prison, and he entertained them. And they made him stand between the pillars. Then Samson said to the boy who was holding his hand, "Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them. " Now the house was full of men and women, and all the lords of the Philistines were there. And about 3,000 men and women were on the roof looking on while Samson was amusing them.

We probably ought to imagine this temple as having a ground floor crowded with Philistines, Samson in some kind of open place, and then an upper story or roof that was creaking under the weight of thousands more Philistines. It was supported by a pair of pillars in the middle, and Samson would pull those out. The roof would fall, and the people above would die in the fall, and those underneath would die by being crushed.

Judges 16:26-31 And Samson said unto the lad that held him by the hand, Suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house standeth, that I may lean upon them.

Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport.

And Samson called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord GOD, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.

And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left.

And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.

Then his brethren and all the house of his father came down, and took him, and brought him up, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the burying place of Manoah his father. And he judged Israel twenty years.

Samson was captured by the Philistines in his weakness, blinded, brought to Gaza, and used as an amusement piece. He was set to do women's work with a mortar and pestle grinding grain, humiliated in his captivity. Then at the festival, they brought him out to ridicule him in public, to amuse themselves with the indignities they hurled at him. It's very clear, however, that the context in which this ridicule was taking place was praise of Dagon and denouncement of Yahweh. "Our god has defeated their god," the leaders said, and the people repeated it. This is an arena in which the God of Samson was being mocked, not just Samson himself.

The events that took place the day he died are the reasons that he is mentioned in the New Testament as a man of faith. God's grace was at work immediately upon his capture. Even before Samson could fully assimilate what had happened to him, his hair began to grow back. You can imagine Samson in his captivity beginning to think of all that he'd done, all that he'd been, and the life that he'd lived, and realizing as he touched his head that God still cared about him, that his hair wouldn't stay shaved forever. So he had been reflecting on his life, and then in this moment when the name of God was being ridiculed, he called out in prayer, "Lord, please strengthen me one more time and avenge me for my eyes." I believe that he understood at this point that the loss of his eyes was intended to also ridicule and mock the God of Israel. He was asking not only for personal vengeance, but that the name of God be upheld in the temple of Dagon. For that reason we see him as a man of faith.

Remember the prayer Samson prayed at the end of chapter 15: He had just killed a thousand men, he was thirsty, and he yelled at God, "Shall I die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised? Do something!" But this prayer is very different. He said, "Lord, please..." There's contrition and humility in it--it's a request. He had no certainty that it would be granted; God had the right not to grant requests if he chose. Every other time Samson killed Philistines it was because he was mad at them. They got in his way, they killed his wife, or they did something else that made him furious. But here God was being mocked, and because of this we can assume that Samson for the first time began to care about something other than himself. So he called out for strength to act and act he did.

III. Review of the Reign of the Judges

Judge	The Enemy They Faced	The Action They Took	What They are Noted For	Why They Are Considered Great?
Deborah	King Jabin and Sisera	Defeated the enemy	Only woman judge	She acted in faith
Gideon	Midianites	Defeated the enemy	His fleece, his polygamy	He acted in faith
Jephthah	Ammonites	Defeated the enemy	Rash vow	He fulfilled his vow to God regardless of the cost
Samson	Philistines	Individual battles and incomplete victory over his enemy	Strength and lapse of moral values.	The prayer of repentance which again brought the power of God into his life.

The Book of Judges

Lesson Seven

Religious Apostasy and Civil War

by Dr. John L. May

I. Religious Apostasy

Judges 17-21 report a number of incidents which perhaps occurred earlier, rather than after Samson. In these last chapters there is no external enemy coming against Israel. You may recall that whenever a judge was raised up to save his people, it was because somebody from outside the covenant people had attacked them and made their life miserable. Instead, these chapters show the Israelites making their own contributions to their misery!

Judges 17:1-6:

And there was a man of mount Ephraim, whose name was Micah.

And he said unto his mother, The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from thee, about which thou cursedst, and spakest of also in mine ears, behold, the silver is with me; I took it. And his mother said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my son.

And when he had restored the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, his mother said, I had wholly dedicated the silver unto the LORD from my hand for my son, to make a graven image and a molten image: now therefore I will restore it unto thee.

Yet he restored the money unto his mother; and his mother took two hundred shekels of silver, and gave them to the founder, who made thereof a graven image and a molten image: and they were in the house of Micah.

And the man Micah had an house of gods, and made an ephod, and teraphim, and consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest.

In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

The tone of this narrative is positive enough in its beginning. You have Micah returning the money to his mother, the mother invoking God's blessing, and so on. The tone suggests reconciliation to both God and family. However, this is really the story of all kinds of treachery, double-dealing, and manipulation. You must realize that this narrative begins in the middle of the story with Micah returning the money to his mother. What we do not see is Micah stealing the money from her in the first place.

At the real beginning of the story, Micah steals eleven hundred pieces of silver from his mother. When she finds out it was stolen, she pronounces a resounding curse, in the presence of her son (perhaps staring him in the eye). As the author implies, we ought to assume that she suspects it was her son who stole the money. Micah becomes frightened; he is superstitious enough to believe that if God is going to act on this curse, then he may be in big trouble. So he returns the money to her. Her pronouncement of blessing on him is really removing the curse. The current belief in

those times was that the person who uttered a curse could cancel it with a blessing. Furthermore, she says nice things about God in the course of all this and decides to commit idolatry in his name. She creates an idol that is to honor him, against the express statements by the Lord that idolatry was anathema, and never to be considered an option in any circumstance.

After Micah and his mother work out this business about the money and the making of the idol, we are told in verse 5 that Micah then has this shrine in his house. He consecrates one of his sons to be a priest; that is, he simply selects one of his sons to be priest. Worship is to go on at the shrine in his backyard, using the idol he has made, the ephod, the household gods, and his very own priest.

Verse 6 makes the point: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." This is the first time we encounter this statement in the book of Judges. The fact that there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes, was the problem. No one was greater than the individual. They had not bowed the knee either before a king who was the representative of God or before God himself. Every person consulted only his own heart, only his own interests, in determining what was right. Spiritual apostasy and moral anarchy was the norm.

Judges 17:7-13

And there was a young man out of Bethlehemjudah of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there.

And the man departed out of the city from Bethlehemjudah to sojourn where he could find a place: and he came to mount Ephraim to the house of Micah, as he journeyed.

And Micah said unto him, Whence comest thou? And he said unto him, I am a Levite of Bethlehemjudah, and I go to sojourn where I may find a place.

And Micah said unto him, Dwell with me, and be unto me a father and a priest, and I will give thee ten shekels of silver by the year, and a suit of apparel, and thy victuals. So the Levite went in.

And the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man was unto him as one of his sons.

And Micah consecrated the Levite; and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah.

Then said Micah, Now know I that the LORD will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest.

You gain insight into the driving force of Micah's life in the final sentence in verse 13. Everything he has done up to this point has been for his own prosperity. He stole money from his mother to gain prosperity. He has ordained his son as priest, knowing he was really violating God's commands when he did that. Then a good deal comes along in the Levite, one of the people who are supposed to be priests. He throws his son out of the priesthood and installs this man, saying, "Now that I have a Levitical

priest serving at my shrine in the back yard, God will be forced to prosper me." Prosperity or money was his great desire in life.

One of the things we can easily see in this story is that relationships in which you would expect trust, beauty, and nurturing are either missing entirely or are the opposite of what they should be. Everyone in this passage of scripture is a user. To begin with, the mother is going to use her son Micah for her advantage. He steals money from her, she suspects his guilt and pronounces this frightening curse that terrifies him into giving the money back. She never once confronts him with the theft or goes to him with any kind of honest appeal. She does not expect him to change his ways. She just scares him into giving the money back. Once he has done that, although she takes the curse off by announcing the blessing, she then uses Micah to gain nine hundred pieces of silver for herself. She says all the money will be dedicated to the Lord, but she only takes two hundred of it and has an idol made. Then she gives Micah the idol, and keeps nine hundred pieces of silver for herself. She has brought God into the picture and handed Micah the responsibility of keeping him happy by having a shrine in the back yard, and thus she is protected from having to worry about Micah or anyone else taking the money again. There is nothing loving, honest, or nurturing about her relationship with Micah.

What do we know about Micah from this story? Well, he is a thief to start with. We do not know how he does it, but he sees his mother's wealth and makes off with the money. When he has to give the money back, he gets an opportunity to create a worship center in his back yard. He not only erects the shrine but he ordains his son as priest in this place of worship. As soon as he has a chance to get a better priest, he throws his son out and installs this other man. He would use his mother, his son, the Levite from Judah--whomever and whatever he can get his hands on--all for the business of creating prosperity for himself. That is his goal as we see in verse 13. So he is a user; he probably learned it as his mother's knee from an early age.

What about the third person in the story, the Levite? He is a man who has the mantle of spiritual leadership because of his heritage. The Levites were the tribe in Israel who received no territory as an inheritance; they were to be sown throughout the nation to serve as spiritual leaders for their people. Some would serve in the temple and take care of the sacrificial system. Others would live out in the countryside and be a pastoral encouragement to people. This man, whose name we will finally discover at the end of this story, has absolutely no sense of serving God. He has the religious vocation, the name Levite, the opportunity, and the standing to do it, but all he is interested in is finding a place of security for himself. He has not been called by God to act; he also is acting in his own self-interest. He jumps at the opportunity to live in Micah's house: "Oh sure, I'll run your idol worship in the back yard. I'm glad to do that." But you can imagine him striking for higher wages later on if it would be to his advantage. He is there for the money. He will later abandon Micah, steal all of his religious articles, and take off with the group that offers him a better deal in chapter 18.

There is nothing healthy about the relationships they have with each other. The greatest tragedy in this, perhaps, is that every one of them invokes God to help them use the other people. Everybody is talking about God all the time. The mother is calling

on God to curse and to bless, and she builds an idol in God's name. Micah gets his shrine and wants to make God happy, installs priests and takes out priests, and makes ephods and more household gods. He has a molten image and a graven image. He is really interested in God and talks about God all the time. There are prophecies, priests, and shrines throughout the story. The Levite is a God-person and he is supposed to do God-things. And they are all serving themselves in the name of the Lord. They are not just using each other, but in the process they are trying to use God.

Perhaps most sadly of all, every one of them is doing what is right in their own eyes. None of them sets out to be a liar or cheat. They did not wake up in the morning and say, "I'm going to do something terrible today." Every one of them was trying to do what occurred to them was the best thing to do. You can imagine Micah, for example, thinking of his mother. Micah is old enough to have grown children, and his mother is probably much older. He thinks, "Ah, she's going to die pretty soon, and I'm going to inherit the money anyway. I can use it. She hasn't treated me very well. I might as well just steal the money and make off with it now. She'll never miss it. It's going to be mine and I deserve it." With a little imagination you can hear him running this whole argument through his mind as he takes the money. He is a thief, but presumably he is doing it because it is right in his eyes; it makes sense for him to do it. If you faced each of these people with their actions and told them that what they were doing was sinful and antagonistic to the purposes of God, they would just give you a blank look, just as our modern day politicians do when they are caught doing something wrong.

Judges 18:1-6

In those days there was no king in Israel: and in those days the tribe of the Danites sought them an inheritance to dwell in; for unto that day all their inheritance had not fallen unto them among the tribes of Israel.

And the children of Dan sent of their family five men from their coasts, men of valour, from Zorah, and from Eshtaol, to spy out the land, and to search it; and they said unto them, Go, search the land: who when they came to mount Ephraim, to the house of Micah, they lodged there.

When they were by the house of Micah, they knew the voice of the young man the Levite: and they turned in thither, and said unto him, Who brought thee hither? and what maketh thou in this place? and what hast thou here?

And he said unto them, Thus and thus dealeth Micah with me, and hath hired me, and I am his priest.

And they said unto him, Ask counsel, we pray thee, of God, that we may know whether our way which we go shall be prosperous.

And the priest said unto them, Go in peace: before the LORD is your way wherein ye go

When the Israelites had conquered the land, the Danites were told to occupy a region between Ephraim and Judah. It was filled with enemies, and the tribes of Ephraim and Judah were much more powerful than the Danites. The Danites did not

like the deal they were given and were never very successful in taking it over. So now they have decided that they want a different inheritance. They send out spies heading north to look for a different place for themselves.

On their way, these five spies hear a man with an accent that suggests that he is not an Ephraimite, and they strike up a conversation with him. Once they realize he is a priest for hire, they say, "Oh, go inquire for us and find out if our way is going to be successful." Now, if they really wanted to find out, they would ask somebody who knew them better--a Levite or a prophet in their own region who would ask some hard questions of them. But they realize that this man is a mercenary, and so he is the one they ask the question of. He does not even bother to go into the back yard and consult the idol or do anything else. He immediately says, "Oh sure, go on your way. You have the Lord's approval." So they go trotting off to the north. As the story unfolds, they find a region (at the foot of what is now known as the Golan Heights) that is terrific and well watered, and there is an undefended city there. They go back and do not even allow for discussion, but talk six hundred men into forming a war party. They are going to take this new region and move the tribe up there.

Look at verses 19 and 20 from the middle of that account. These six hundred warriors are now on their way north to take the city and land they have found.

And they said to [the Levite], "Be silent, 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 to be priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?" And the priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod and household idols and the graven image, and went among the people.

They steal all of Micah's religious articles, and the Levite falls in with these six hundred Danite warriors heading north. Of course it is a better deal: a whole tribe rather than just one man. Micah comes after him and says, "What do you think you're doing?" They laugh at him and say, "There are six hundred of us, Micah. If you want to get rough, we'll be glad to." So Micah, instead of prospering as he hoped, ends up with less than he had.

The Danites go north with this priest and Micah's idols. Beginning with verse 27:

And they took the things which Micah had made, and the priest which he had, and came unto Laish, unto a people that were at quiet and secure: and they smote them with the edge of the sword, and burnt the city with fire.

And there was no deliverer, because it was far from Zidon, and they had no business with any man; and it was in the valley that lieth by Beth-rehob. And they built a city, and dwelt therein.

And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father, who was born unto Israel: howbeit the name of the city was Laish at the first.

And the children of Dan set up the graven image: and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land.

And they set them up Micah's graven image, which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh.

The story of the Danite migration ends here by making a number of tragic statements. It is clear that the author is sympathetic to the cause of the people in Laish. In the wars of conquest, when Joshua led the people into the land of Canaan, it was said that the iniquity of the Canaanites had risen to the point that God himself brought judgment upon them. They had acted wickedly and deserved the treatment they got during the conquest. They were armed cities, people who could fight back, and God led His people (when they obeyed him) in either destroying or thrusting out the Canaanites who were in the land. This group of people far in the north was not part of the territory of conquest. They are, as the author describes them here, "a people quiet and secure." Their city is undefended, and they are causing no one any trouble. The Danites ruthlessly kill them, not because God sent them on that errand, but because they did not like the deal they had in the south, which involved fighting tough enemies like the Philistines and Ammonites. So they lay waste these innocent people in Laish. And then in their pride at what they have done, they name the city after their great ancestor Dan. It is as if they do not see what they are doing in the light of history. They think they have done something to be proud of.

In the NIV and NRSV of 18:30, we are told that the leader in the idol worship in Dan was a descendant of Moses. The KJV (quoted above) reads "Manasseh" instead of Moses. Apparently ancient scribes who copied the scrolls were so embarrassed by this mention of Moses that they actually stuck in a little letter at one point to make it look like the name was Manasseh. It is clear to every scholar who has ever looked at it, however, that the name is really Moses. Our author does not give us this information until the very end. This Levite is Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses. He is a direct descendent of Moses himself, and he is the one who is leading this people in the godless use of religion for self-benefit.

The last statement here is a frightful and sad note as well. It says that all the time that these things are taking place, the house of God or the tabernacle is at Shiloh. Now, Shiloh is in the hill country of Ephraim. Micah's house could not be more than a few miles from Shiloh. There the idol is made, the Levite who has no place to go sets up his initial business as a priest for hire, and the events at the beginning of this tragic story take place: theft, manipulation, and naming God while denying his value in their lives. All of that happens within just a few miles of the very place the tabernacle is located. If Micah's name, "Yahweh the Incomparable," represented his heart, if anybody really cared about God, they could easily go and worship God in the place where He said He should be worshiped, but everyone was too busy doing what was right in their own eyes.

II. The Tragedy of Civil War

Judges 19:1-4

And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite sojourning on the side of mount Ephraim, who took to him a concubine out of Bethlehemjudah.

And his concubine played the harlot against him, and went away from him unto her father's house to Bethlehemjudah, and was there four whole months.

And her husband arose, and went after her, to speak friendly unto her, and to bring her again, having his servant with him, and a couple of asses: and she brought him into her father's house: and when the father of the damsel saw him, he rejoiced to meet him.

And his father in law, the damsel's father, retained him; and he abode with him three days: so they did eat and drink, and lodged there.

This three-day festival carries on to a fourth and then a fifth day as the story unfolds. Finally the Levite and his concubine are able to leave only toward the end of the fifth day and travel a short distance before they must spend the night. Now, as so often is the case with the stories in the book of Judges, if we just read the introduction, both the tone and the details are encouraging and upbeat. This story begins with an errand of reconciliation; the Levite comes to "speak friendly" (v3) and win back the woman from whom he had become estranged.

The term concubine here means essentially a secondary wife. Concubinage was a form of marriage with a recognized commitment between the man and the woman; it is not just cohabitation. But it was a less honorable commitment than formal marriage would be, and the reason typically was that either the woman was a slave and unable to enter into a marriage, or she had no dowry, or had some other mark against her.

Notice in verse 2 that it says she "played the harlot" against him. That may, in fact, mean that she was unfaithful to him, but it also may mean that she was merely insolent in her behavior, a hothead. The reason this is suggested is that the Septuagint does not say that she was unfaithful but that she became angry with her husband. That seems to fit the story better, because he is taking the initiative to go find her and patch up the relationship. The father is delighted to have his daughter, who may be a little hard to live with anyway, married. So the mood is positive as the Levite comes to patch up this relationship, and everything seems well. However, note verses 11-15:

And when they were by Jebus, the day was far spent; and the servant said unto his master, Come, I pray thee, and let us turn in into this city of the Jebusites, and lodge in it.

And his master said unto him, We will not turn aside hither into the city of a stranger, that is not of the children of Israel; we will pass over to Gibeah.

And he said unto his servant, Come, and let us draw near to one of these places to lodge all night, in Gibeah, or in Ramah.

And they passed on and went their way; and the sun went down upon them when they were by Gibeah, which belongeth to Benjamin.

And they turned aside thither, to go in and to lodge in Gibeah: and when he went in, he sat him down in a street of the city: for there was no man that took them into his house to lodging.

The last phrase in verse 15 gives you a hint that something bad is about to happen. It was an enormous breach of convention for a community in the ancient world to refuse to offer hospitality to a stranger. We find this standard recognized throughout the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. The ancient peoples were nomads before they settled; the Israelites, of course, wandered in the wilderness before they settled in Palestine.

Our author comments on the refusal of the travelers to enter the Jebusite city because of its uncertainties. They do not want to take a chance on entering the town of the unrighteous! Rather, they will go on to the town of their brothers, to Gibeah, and there no one offers them shelter. Verse 16:

And, behold, there came an old man from his work out of the field at even, which was also of mount Ephraim; and he sojourned in Gibeah: but the men of the place were Benjamites.

The Ephraimite farmer, who is living in Gibeah, is not from there originally. Meeting him for the first time, we might suspect that he is a rescuer, a person wearing a white hat. We have a Levite who has reconciled with tender speech to his concubine and a father-in-law who throws long parties. Now we are in the town of the Benjamites who have shown no hospitality. Thankfully, our travelers have found a kindly, sweet old man coming in from the fields who invites them into the rich hospitality of his home. Although things look promising, look at verses 22-26:

Now as they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, certain sons of Belial, beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house, the old man, saying, Bring forth the man that came into thine house, that we may know him.

And the man, the master of the house, went out unto them, Nay, my brethren, nay, I pray you, do not so wickedly; seeing that this man is come into mine house, do not this folly.

Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you: but unto this man do not so vile a thing.

But the men would not hearken to him: so the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go.

Then came the woman in the dawning of the day, and fell down at the door of the man's house where her lord was, till it was light.

Sometime between the hours of early dawn and full daylight, she crawled to the doorway, and died with her hands on the threshold, having been raped and abused all night.

Verse 27

And her lord rose up in the morning, and opened the doors of the house, and went out to go his way: and, behold, the woman his concubine was fallen down at the door of the house, and her hands were upon the threshold

After throwing his concubine out to a gang of rapists, the Levite sleeps in a little late, having spent a comfortable night. He feels good, ready to travel for the next day. Yawning, stretching, scratching, he steps out the door and there he "finds his concubine lying at the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold." She had crawled that far, hoping that someone in the house, either the Ephraimite or her husband, might save her life. Look now at verses 28-30.

And he said unto her, Up, and let us be going. But none answered. Then the man took her up upon an ass, and the man rose up, and gat him unto his place.

And when he was come into his house, he took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, together with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel.

And it was so, that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds.

All the twelve tribes of Israel are supposed to be outraged by what they hear and see and are called on to punish Gibeah.

You will look in vain in this story for anything edifying. First we find the Ephraimite host who is graphic in his description of what ought to be done to his own daughter---"Here, take her and ravish her and do whatever you please to her." The Levite's concubine is cruelly sacrificed to the mob. The Levite wakes up in the morning without a twinge of conscience or concern for his concubine's ordeal. (This is the woman whom just days before he had sought out for a loving reconciliation.) This Levite's hardness of heart defies description. The Benjamites are rapists. When all facades are removed we see only wickedness. There is no redemptive or hopeful note anywhere.

The concubine's body parts have been sent out, and everybody meets together in Mizpah to punish the unrighteous.

Chapter 20:1-4

Then all the children of Israel went out, and the congregation was gathered together as one man, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, with the land of Gilead, unto the LORD in Mizpeh.

And the chief of all the people, even of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand footmen that drew sword.

(Now the children of Benjamin heard that the children of Israel were gone up to Mizpeh.) Then said the children of Israel, Tell us, how was this wickedness?

And the Levite, the husband of the woman that was slain, answered and said, I came into Gibeah that belongeth to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to lodge at Gibeah which belongs to Benjamin.

The phrase "that belongeth to Benjamin" is not added to be informative; everyone knew which Gibeah was in view (although there was another Gibeah in Judah). The Levite is isolating the Benjamites, making them responsible: "This Gibeah belongs to Benjamin." He is putting Benjamin on the defensive. This outraged Levite whose concubine died, who has been wronged, this upright man who gave her to a bunch of rapists to save his own life, is inciting a riot against the Benjamites.

Verse 5:

And the men of Gibeah rose against me, and beset the house round about upon me by night, and thought to have slain me: and my concubine have they forced, that she is dead.

Is he omitting anything? What about his passive complicity in her rape and murder?

20:6: And I took my concubine, and cut her in pieces, and sent her throughout all the country of the inheritance of Israel: for they have committed lewdness and folly in Israel.

So now there is a great puffing up of chests and angry denunciations. "Those Gibeonites--and if the Benjamites defend them, then those Benjamites--are going to get what they deserve! Who do they think they are, anyway?" Oaths are sworn and sabers are rattled. A war starts and Benjamin, with the smaller force, wins the first two battles. And then the people want to know why they are not winning, except they do not ask the right question. They just say, "God, should we keep fighting?" They never ask God what He is doing in the process. When Joshua lost a battle at Ai, he wept before the Lord and said, "What about your name? Why have we lost this battle? What is your purpose in these things?" These folks never asked God whether this war should be fought, or for his understanding of events. If they had asked, I believe the Lord would have said, "May judgment fall on everybody--on the self-righteous and on the wicked!" But they never asked; they just keep making requests of him as to how the battle should be fought. Finally, after two defeats, the Lord says, "I will give the Benjamites into your hand."

The Gibeonites and their defenders deserved to be punished, and God gave them into the hands of the larger force. However, instead of just winning the war, the Israelites decide to massacre anyone they find alive. They cut down Benjamite soldiers who were trying to retreat and burned their cities. Look at verse 48:

And the men of Israel turned again upon the children of Benjamin, and smote them with the edge of the sword, as well the men of every city, as the beast, and all that came to hand: also they set on fire all the cities that they came to.

Having come to punish a town, they carry it to the last degree and destroy not only soldiers but cities, families, economic structures, and everything else.

They become killers, violent destroyers themselves who claim the lives of women and children. The scale is far beyond the original loss of the one life. They are trying to set matters right, and, like the sorcerer's apprentice, they cannot stop what they set in motion, and the destruction is growing exponentially.

In chapter 21 they are going to have another solemn meeting to see if they can figure a solution to the new problem. The tribe of Benjamin is reduced to six hundred men; everybody else is dead. Look at verse 3:

And said, O LORD God of Israel, why is this come to pass in Israel, that there should be to day one tribe lacking in Israel?

"We are about to lose all of Benjamin. Lord God, how could it have happened?" You have heard of the proverbial dumb question. Well here it is! They have just killed them all; that is how it happened! The tribe is nearly extinct; six hundred soldiers whose wives and children have been massacred are all that are left.

The same "wise counselors" who loosed the destructive fury of chapter twenty are going to come up with another plan. "I know," says someone. "I've got a great idea. The region of Jabesh-Gilead didn't send any fighters to the first war." "Let's go massacre everybody in Jabesh-Gilead and take all the marriageable young girls." So they destroy another whole region, gathering up women for the six hundred remaining Benjamite soldiers to marry.

They only find four hundred women in Jabesh-Gilead, so they are short two hundred. "Well, we have a good solution for that," you can hear them saying. They send the Benjamites out in the night to a "coming out" party for young maidens in Shiloh, and they kidnap two hundred innocent, unsuspecting girls. The end of the book of Judges is the refrain that we have highlighted more than once:

Judges 21:25: In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

The Book of Judges

Lesson Eight

Ruth, Naomi and Boaz

by Dr. John L. May

I. Naomi's Bitterness and Ruth's Faith

The book of Ruth opens with grief, loss, hardship, and suffering. Note what the scriptures say:

Ruth 1:1-5 Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehemjudah went 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 Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehemjudah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there.

And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons.

And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years.

And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.

The opening sentence tells us that it was during the time of the judges when this story took place. That was a time of moral chaos and national humiliation for Israel. It was a terrible time to be an Israelite. Further, we're told that famine struck. And it was a famine that lasted ten years including the region of Bethlehem.

Then we enter the personal story of this family, a man named Elimelech, which means, "My God is King," and a woman named Naomi, which means "Pleasant." With such names we can assume they were good people. Buffeted by circumstances, they moved to Moab so that they could survive the famine. Then in the land of Moab both the husband and the two sons who married there died, tragically, for reasons we don't know.

Naomi's tragedy was compounded because she had two sons who also died, not as older men who had lived full lives and accomplished much, but as young men, recently married. Neither of them had been able to produce children. The emotional pain and loss of seeing her family die we can well imagine, but to be a woman alone was to face ruin in that culture. There was no social security, no safety net, no way for a woman to predict good things for her future if she didn't have a man in her life. Naomi's future was filled with threat, fear, and difficulty.

The rest of chapter 1 gives us two views or voices describing similar events. These two voices are very different from each other. One of the helpful

literary devices of this book is that what Naomi's daughter-in-law went through paralleled what Naomi herself went through. Ruth was also a widow, childless, and poor; Ruth would also live a life in a land that was not her own, being dislocated and an immigrant. Yet Ruth's response to it was completely different. She saw the facts differently. Seeing the two of them side by side will help us understand much of what God has to say to us in this passage.

Ruth1:6-22: Then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab: for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread.

Wherefore she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters in law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah.

And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother's house: the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.

The LORD grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.

And they said unto her, Surely we will return with thee unto thy people.

And Naomi said, Turn again, my daughters: why will ye go with me? are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?

Turn again, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have an husband. If I should say, I have hope, if I should have an husband also to night, and should also bear sons;

Would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye stay for them from having husbands? nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD is gone out against me.

And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her.

And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law.

And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:

Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.

When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her.

So they two went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi?

And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.

I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.

Now, let's look at what Naomi regarded as the truth of the matter. It's helpful and important to realize that the first thing Naomi did was pray. Twice she called on God to do good to these two young women. I believe that Naomi prayed habitually. This is implied in this scripture section. She seems absolutely certain that the biggest presence in the universe was the presence of God. Nothing happened outside his will, so he was responsible for everything that happened. He was powerful enough to do whatever he chose. Only a fool would not pray, given that. God deserved to be prayed to, and Naomi took him seriously. Verse 6 is an interesting statement. At the end of the famine, it says that she heard that God had visited his people. It doesn't say that she heard that the rains came back. She heard simply that the Lord had visited his people. The reason there was no more famine was that he did something about it.

A woman whose first comment in the current situation was about her prayer life must have prayed and prayed during those ten years. She must have prayed that the famine would be over quickly, and that they could go back to their home. And when her husband got sick she must have prayed. When her first son got sick she must have prayed. Burying her husband, burying the first son, burying the second son, she must have prayed, asking for relief from the God who was in charge of everything, because she was a woman of prayer. Over and over again the things she asked for were withheld, and yet she didn't stop praying. But it's significant that she said to these two young women, "May the LORD deal kindly with you," not, "May the LORD deal kindly with us." Had she stopped praying for herself? Maybe she had concluded that God had turned His back on her. It was his prerogative to bless or curse whom he wanted. So perhaps she had stopped asking for her own future. God's power was certain, but his love was not, it seemed.

Secondly, Naomi gave advice, and her advice is an interesting statement of her perspective on what was true. She was almost sarcastic at points in her realism. Only a fool would not pray, but once you're done praying you have to live as if you can count on nobody but yourself. You've got to face the facts as they are, calculate the possibilities, maximize the opportunities for yourself. That's the only way reasonable people survive in this world.

Her daughters-in-law made an important statement in verse 10: "We should surely return with you to your people." Her people were the covenant people of God, the ones who were given the promises and the Law, the ones God had chosen especially to work through in all of history. They wanted to go and join the community of those who knew the Lord.

But Naomi said, "Don't be a fool. Who's going to marry a woman of Moab in Israel in the time of the judges, when everybody is selfish and lawless? You

have no hope of getting a husband if you come back to Israel with me. Return to your own homes. At least you have a chance there." Then she says, "Yes, maybe if I had sons, but I'm too old to have more children. Even if I were to get married and have sons today"--and she makes the whole thing seem preposterous. What she was basically saying was, "We've petitioned God, now forget that. If I were rich, I'd help you. If I had sons, I'd help you. But I don't have anything I can do for you. Therefore, you have to help yourself."

In verse 15, when Naomi couldn't persuade Ruth to leave, she said, "Orpah has gone back to her gods." That is one of the heart-breaking statements in this book. Naomi sent that young woman back to the worship of Chemosh in Moab. Chemosh was a demon worshiped by placing living children into fire kindled in his open mouth. Naomi urged Ruth to go back to that also. It's heart wrenching to realize how little hope Naomi had. After years and years of praying to God and seeing people die, she was even willing to send Orpah and Ruth back there, because all they could do was "play the hand they were dealt."

Finally, we have two statements of Naomi's convictions about herself. In verse 13 she said, "...It is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me." She had been at this a lot longer, and she knew for sure that God had it in for her. Things would be different if that weren't true. Then in verse 20, she came back to the town of Bethlehem, and when the people come out to see her, she changed her name from Naomi to Mara. "There's nothing pleasant about me. Call me wretched, bitter, angry. God has dealt bitterly with me. I went out full, and I've come back empty." Given the facts, this was what she saw as her truth.

But did Naomi come back empty? Was she truly alone when she came back to Bethlehem? No, there was a young woman with her. But as far as Naomi was concerned she came back with no one. As far as God was concerned, she came back with the whole future of the human race holding onto her arm. She came back with a young woman who would be the mother of Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David, the king of Israel, the father of the Messiah of Israel and the Lord of the nations, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. That's whom she came back with. Not empty, but fuller than she had ever been. Yet in her bitterness she couldn't see it. The facts became distorted for her: "I'm empty, nothing, nobody, God-forsaken."

What was Ruth's declaration of the truth? It's interesting what she didn't say. She didn't say, "I'm going to go back with you to Bethlehem because God will surely provide a husband for me there." She had listened to Naomi give her all the reasons why that wasn't going to happen, and she basically agreed with her. There is no evidence that she believed she would ever have a husband again. One of the interesting interpretive questions from the first paragraph is how soon in the ten-year period she and her husband were married. If it was early on, and she had lived for some years with a husband and had not had a child, there may have been some question in her mind as to whether she would ever be able to have children. And she was certainly no catch for other reasons:

she wasn't an Israelite, and she had no money or property. She had nothing to offer--why would anyone marry her?

But what Ruth did say was, "God has given us each other." What she believed that Naomi couldn't believe was that they loved each other and that was worth something. Orpah cried when Naomi sent her away. When Naomi came back to the town of Bethlehem, all the people came rushing out to see her. There was something marvelously attractive about Naomi. She was charismatic and energetic, and she probably overshadowed her husband when he was alive. She was one of those people who fought life, fought with God, wanted the best, had a deep heart and a deep love for people, and they loved her back. It's just that she had quit hoping in the Lord by this time. But Ruth said, "You know, I may never have anyone but you. But you're enough for me. The relationship that God has given us as mother and daughter, as sisters, as friends, is enough for me. God has not been bad to us; he's been good to us in ways that we didn't expect. So don't send me away and forbid me to make my future with you. Where you go I will go. Where you lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God. Where you die I will die and be buried."

The way we must read Ruth's speech in this setting is that at the heart of it was gratitude. Naomi had chosen to focus on what she didn't have, and had grown angry and bitter and had assumed God didn't love her. Ruth had chosen to focus on what she did have and was thankful, because everything had changed. She had grown up as a worshiper of a demon and she now knew the God of Israel. She had grown up among a people who had no future, and she now had the possibility of joining the people of God, the heirs of the promise, the ones to whom the Law had been given, the ones from whom Messiah would come. She had the opportunity to have what she had never had: status in Israel, intimacy with God, a true friend. She didn't have a husband, but that was okay. She was grateful for what she had. She analyzed life 180 degrees opposite of the way Naomi analyzed life.

Naomi was frustrated, angry, and bitter because she had decided that God didn't love her. Ruth, given essentially the same hand in life except that she was younger, concluded that God did love her. And what made Ruth able to see that is that she saw what she had as a gift from God, and she was grateful for it. Ruth said, "I have no idea what will happen, but I can be committed to you and your God and your people, and let him deal with the future." Naomi said, "The future will come only as you calculate it and make it happen." She was frightened, angry, and withdrawn.

One of the great things about this book is that God doesn't leave Naomi here. When people are frustrated and angry, and they pray with their fists clenched at God, yell at people, and struggle with life, they don't get left behind. Naomi is going to be changed.

II. The Kinsman Redeemer

We begin this section with the birth announcement in the last paragraph of the book of Ruth. This is a long-awaited child, on whom the hopes of an entire family rest. Ruth 4:13-22:

Ruth 4:13-22 So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife: and when he went in unto her, the LORD gave her conception, and she bare a son.

And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the LORD, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel.

And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him.

And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it.

And the women her neighbours gave it a name, saying, There is a son born to Naomi; and they called his name Obed: he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now these are the generations of Pharez: Pharez begat Hezron,

And Hezron begat Ram, and Ram begat Amminadab,

And Amminadab begat Nahshon, and Nahshon begat Salmon,

And Salmon begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Obed,

And Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.

Obed's birth so wonderfully transformed the life of Naomi that the women proclaimed that a son was born to her.

Once again we are invited by the text to differentiate between Ruth and Naomi. A son was born to each of them, in effect, although it was Ruth who gave birth to him. Each of these two women had her life changed by the birth of this child. But the differences between the younger, whose faith filled everything about her, and the older, who struggled to trust God, will once again be instructive to us. They were bound together by love, but they experienced life differently.

Let's first look at verse 13, the one verse devoted to Ruth in this account. It doesn't give us much detail, but we don't need much. Verse 13 makes five short statements, one right after the other: (1) Boaz took Ruth, (2) she became his wife, (3) he went in to her, (4) the Lord enabled her to conceive, and (5) she gave birth to a son.

The first announcement is that Boaz took Ruth. The point of saying that is to make it clear that Ruth was able to leave her past behind. Ruth began this story as an idolater, a daughter of Moab. She proceeded into childless

widowhood, an extremely difficult circumstance that landed her in poverty. She was a foreigner. She had a past that was filled with personal struggle; Boaz took her from it. The past didn't dominate the future. She became the honored wife of an honorable man, a daughter of Israel, a progenitor of Messiah.

Second, we are told that Ruth and Boaz were married. The law of Moses required that someone in the family acquire the widow, bring her into their home, give her an honored place there, and have a child by her. It was not required that loving marriage take place; the law could have been fulfilled in some sort of external, legal fashion. But in Boaz' and Ruth's case, he loved her, and she became his wife, and she walked through the city on his arm. She was given the highest possible status in his world. He didn't just do the minimum of fulfilling the law, he did the maximum of embracing the woman.

Third, we're told that they were lovers. That is clearly what this phrase "he went in to her" means. It is used that way many times in the Old Testament. And that may be obvious; after all, they were married. But once again we are told that part of the story because we are supposed to think of them as intimates, as near one another. We're supposed to reflect on the fact that though he was older and she was foreign and there might have been barriers between them, there were none for these two.

Fourth, it is shown that it was God who was doing all these things. They made choices and took actions, and results followed, but the one who was behind all this was Yahweh. The use of the name Yahweh, God's personal name, tells us he is the God of personal knowledge of the individuals involved. And supremely, we are to take note that it was God himself who enabled Ruth to conceive. Ruth had been married once and hadn't had a child. Boaz was an older man. That they should be able to conceive was not something taken for granted.

Fifth, it says that Ruth bore a child. Now taking a wife, getting married, and having a child all fit with the progress we've seen in Ruth's and Boaz' life. God prepared them for each other, he brought them together, he taught them to speak to one another, they took risks trusting him, and he honored their risk-taking.

We've talked about Ruth's story. But a son was also born to Naomi. What is Naomi's story? Naomi's story requires a little more discussion. With Ruth, what happened was completely in line with everything else that happened to her. But Naomi had been struggling through this entire account, wrestling with God, railing at God, managing God, and measuring God, asking for help, and refusing help. Yet a son was born to her as well, and that is great good news.

The women in chapter 4 spoke a word of blessing to Naomi that was the exact counterpart of Naomi's own words in chapter 1. These are the same women in the same town, probably sitting in the same public square. When Naomi came back from Moab she had said to them in 1:20-21, "Do not call me Naomi [Pleasant]; call me Mara [Bitter], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has

afflicted me?" And now at the end of the story the same women were there and Naomi was quiet. This is the first time for that, by the way. It's significant that Naomi ends up in this story holding a baby but not saying anything. And the women spoke to Naomi in direct reply to her earlier complaint: "Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today. You said his hand had gone forth against you, but it never did. This child will be a restorer of life to you, and he will be the provider of your future, the sustainer of your old age. This boy will grow up someday and his grandmother will never have to worry about where she will have a home or who will care for her." Obed would sustain her in the future and be a life-restorer in the present.

The rays of light were breaking through the darkness that Naomi had surrounded herself with, because she had this baby. But these women added another word to their speech. They said, "Look back at the past. It's not just holding a baby now, it's not just knowing the baby will someday be a man. All of the time you spent being discouraged, calling yourself Bitter, accusing God, concluding that you were empty instead of full, that he had forgotten you, that he had turned against you, do you know who was standing beside you? Ruth, the woman who is better than seven sons. She didn't just show up at the end. She was there before your sons died, before Elimelech died. She loved you in the midst of it all. She loved you on the way back to Israel from Moab. She gleaned to provide for you. She loved you every day. You wanted men--a son, a husband, a brother, somebody--because you thought life could be secure only if there was a man there to take care of you. Do you know what God did? He gave you a woman, and you couldn't see it. God was there for you the whole time, and you never gave him credit for it." So here was Naomi with the gift of God in her arms, a life-restoring son, and a future being provided for her. So she looked back at her past and said, "Yes, God was good to me then, too." The women of the town made her conclude what she had struggled to believe the whole time.

III. Prophecy Fulfilled

Ruth 4:11-12--The men said to Boaz, "May your house expand in Israel's history." The women said, "May this boy's name become famous in Israel." And those prayers were answered as only God could answer them. The progeny of Boaz and Ruth included the greatest child of Abraham's line, the most remarkable king in all of Israel's history, David. Their son Obed had a son, and they named him Jesse. When Jesse grew up, another boy was born in Bethlehem, the eighth of Jesse's sons, who went almost unnoticed in that family. Remember the story of how Samuel came looking for a son of Jesse, and the first seven were paraded by him. The eighth one, the forgotten one, was left in the field with the sheep and was fetched only because Samuel insisted. But the little boy David would become one of the most remarkable human beings in history.

But it doesn't end there. This book ends with a genealogy: "Now these are the generations of Perez: to Perez was born Hezron, and to Hezron was born Ram, and to Ram, Amminadab, and to Amminadab was born Nahshon, and to Nahshon, Salmon, and to Salmon was born Boaz, and to Boaz, Obed, and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David." And who was the greater son of David who would one day be born in Bethlehem? There is another name on this list. It doesn't end with David, as great a king as he was. David would have a son who would be infinitely greater. This genealogy that ends the book is an ascent; it's telling us that there was one coming who hadn't been born yet, the Messiah. And one day there would be one last birth announcement in Bethlehem. In a stable two people, rejected and unknown, would welcome a newborn. That child would be the Savior of the world.

So, in summary, there are two wonderful lessons that come from this last paragraph of the book of Ruth. One is that you can either grow in grace or you can be captured by grace. We have the opportunity to live lives of productivity like Ruth, or we can fight against our circumstances like Naomi. Either way God is still going to love us. And the other lesson is that simple, obedient, yielded, honest, caring people who can't see significance in themselves, their world, or their choices can be picked up by the hand of God to create the future, to change the world.