

# **JUDGES AND RUTH**

**by Robert C. Walton**



# JUDGES AND RUTH I

## Introduction; Judges 1:1-2:5

In the books of Judges and Ruth, we find the narrative of the period of time between the conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua and the rise of the monarchy. It is a time of political and spiritual chaos, and illustrates for God's people today important truths about faithfulness to the Lord in the midst of a pagan culture and the impact of one's spiritual condition on the outer circumstances of one's life. Today, we will spend a little time on a general introduction to the books and look briefly at the summary of the incomplete conquest at the beginning of Judges.

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. WHO WERE THE JUDGES?

The judges, though a few appear to have served a judicial function in the modern sense of the word (Deborah, Samuel, and some of the minor figures in the book), are pictured primarily as military deliverers. They were men (and one woman) of varied backgrounds, often of questionable spirituality, who were chosen by God and empowered by His Spirit to deliver His people from their oppressors when they cried out to Him. Their positions were not hereditary, and their deeds rarely produced any stability beyond their own lifetimes.

#### B. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The period of the judges runs from the beginning of the fourteenth century to the middle of the eleventh century BC. This period of 350 years was one of political chaos in Palestine. The leading powers of the region were in a state of transition. Egyptian power was waning in the south, the Hittite Empire in the north was on its last legs, and the Amorites in the southern hill country and Negev were soon to be displaced by the invading Sea Peoples, of whom the Philistines were to be the most prominent in the biblical narrative. Meanwhile, intertribal warfare and marauding by nomadic groups like the Midianites was commonplace.

The dating of the narrative is fairly clear if one places the Exodus in the mid-fifteenth century BC, but such a date still poses a few chronological problems. If one adds up the times given for the reigns of the judges in the book, one arrives at a total of 410 years. This is too long by any possible chronology of the Exodus and the monarchy. The solution to this problem is found in the fact that most of the judgeships are described as regional, and thus there must have been considerable overlap among their ministries (for example, it would have been entirely possible for Jephthah to have been active in Transjordan at the same time that Samson was battling the Philistines in the Shephelah).

#### C. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE OF COMPOSITION

The books of Judges and Ruth are anonymous, and speculation about their authorship is futile. The time of composition, however, is more easily pinned down. Both appear to have been written in the early part of the United Monarchy period. Judges 21:25 indicates that, when the book was written, Israel *did* have a king, Judges 1:21 indicates that at the time of writing David had not yet captured the city that was to become his capital, and the genealogy at the end of Ruth clearly points to composition during the reign of David.

## D. LITERARY FORM AND STRUCTURE

The narratives that make up the book of Judges have much in common with the heroic epics being created in the Hellenic world at about the same time. One might easily compare the exploits of men like Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson to tales from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The story of the hero as one chosen by the gods to do superhuman feats is transformed by the writers of Scripture into a vehicle for communicating spiritual truth concerning God's faithfulness to the covenant He made with His people.

As far as structure is concerned, the book of Judges has at its center the tales of the judges themselves, preceded by a prologue (today's passage) dealing with the partial conquest of the land of Canaan and followed by two appendices illustrating the moral bankruptcy of Israel during this time (chapters 17-21 - the Danite migration and the Benjamite civil war); the book of Ruth could easily be viewed as a third appendix, this time with the hopeful message that God was still at work to fulfill His promises during this time of darkness and infidelity.

## E. THEMES AND PURPOSES

The basic purpose of the book is to argue for the necessity of the monarchy. The author demonstrates that, unless God rules over His people by means of His chosen representatives, anarchy, immorality, and failure invariably ensue. One of the themes of the book is thus the need for godly leadership in order for His people to prosper. We should also note that the book presents a clear relationship between the spiritual condition of God's people and their outward circumstances - when they turn away from Him, they suffer, but when they call out to Him for mercy, He delivers them, and they prosper as long as they follow Him faithfully.

For us today, we should note the relevance of the narratives of God's people struggling against the temptations to compromise within a pagan environment. The extent to which they are caught up in the immorality of their world should serve as a warning to us, who are also easily desensitized by the paganism around us so that things which ought to horrify us are almost accepted as a matter of course.

## II. PROLOGUE - THE INCOMPLETE CONQUEST OF CANAAN

The book of Joshua made it very clear that, when Israel trusted God, they were victorious, and when they failed to do so, they faced defeat. Thus the failures recorded at the beginning of the book of Judges indicate something of the spiritual status of God's people after the death of Joshua. We should note that the Prologue is divided into two major sections that correspond to the eventual lines along which the kingdom was divided. This is not an indication of a late date of composition. Instead, it reflects the fact that the rivalry between Judah and Ephraim that was at the core of the division of the kingdom had existed long before the monarchy even began. The narrative before us tells of a mixed history of success and failure resulting in Israel living among the Canaanites whom God had ordered them to destroy. A few things should be noted as we look briefly at the passage.

### A. THE INCOMPLETE CONQUEST OF JUDAH (1:1-21)

1:3 - The offer of Judah to help Simeon with their conquest resulted in the eventual swallowing up of Simeon as a viable tribe. Their lands were within those allotted to Judah, and they eventually lost their tribal identity.

1:6-7 - The cutting off of thumbs and big toes was a fairly common form of mutilation inflicted by victors on the vanquished; the intent was both to humiliate and to render one incapable of future warfare. Since one so mutilated was incapable of grasping a sword or spear, he was reduced to beggary at the table of his conqueror.

1:8 - The conquest of Jerusalem must have been very temporary, since David had to drive the Jebusites out in order to make it his capital.

1:12-15 - This narrative introduces Othniel, who is to become the first of the judges. The brief story illustrates several Middle Eastern customs relating to marriage and property rights, as well as the importance of access to water in the exceedingly arid Near East (cf. Joshua 15:13-19, which gives the same account).

1:16 - The Kenites, a group of nomads descended from Moses' father-in-law, are to play an important part in the narrative in the person of Jael; the City of Palms was Jericho, which at this point was little more than an oasis for camel caravans - it would not be rebuilt after Joshua's destruction of the city until the time of Ahab.

1:18 - There is some textual confusion with this verse; the Masoretic text reads what the NIV and ESV say here, but the Septuagint inserts one important little word - *not*, probably to explain why, later in the book, these cities needed to be assaulted by Samson. Like Jerusalem above, the conquest of these towns appears to have been temporary; after the invasion of the Sea Peoples about a century later, these became three of the five chief cities of the Philistines.

1:21 - As already noted, this verse shows that the book was written before David conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital.

#### B. THE INCOMPLETE CONQUEST OF THE NORTHERN TRIBES (1:22-36)

1:22-26 - Bethel had been a prominent shrine during the patriarchal period (Jacob saw his ladder vision here), and would eventually become the site of one of Jeroboam's calf shrines after the division of the kingdom. The use of a spy echoes the conquest of Jericho. The comment that a nearby city was given the same name as the old one is the sort of practice that tends to drive modern archaeologists out of their minds.

1:27 - The cities mentioned here stretched across the Valley of Jezreel in the northern part of Canaan, and thus served to guard the Via Maris - the trade route than ran all the way from the Fertile Crescent northward, then down along the coastal plain.

1:34-36 - The Amorite stronghold was in the south; they controlled the Shephelah and the southern part of the coastal plain, and their power reached as far east as Petra (probably the town called Sela here), later the Edomite capital. The Amorites were displaced by the invasion of the Sea Peoples, and the Philistines were to become Israel's greatest enemies in the southern part of Canaan.

#### C. GOD CHASTISES INCOMPLETE OBEDIENCE (2:1-5)

This section presents the great spiritual lesson of the Prologue - that incomplete obedience is disobedience. In the same way that the Canaanites who were not driven out remained to become a perpetual snare to the Israelites, luring them away from their covenant with God, so sins in our own lives that are not

rooted out ruthlessly will remain to ensnare us, sapping our peace, our joy, and our ability to serve the God who delivered us from bondage.

## JUDGES AND RUTH II

Judges 2:6-3:6

Today's passage advances the narrative from the death of Joshua to the inception of the judges and describes the famous cycles of the period. More importantly, the author of the book tells us *why* these cycles occurred. There is much for us to learn as we examine the causes of the spiritual decline of God's people and the means by which He revived them and brought them back to Himself.

### I. THE DEATH OF JOSHUA (2:6-9)

One of the repeated themes of the book of Judges is the importance of godly leadership. Time and again, we find that the people serve God when they have a godly leader to follow, but soon lapse into idolatry after the leader dies. Here at the very beginning of the book, we find that this is the case with Joshua and the elders who served with him. As long as those men lived, Israel followed God, but after they died, the people quickly turned away. The image of the shepherd that appears so frequently in Scripture in connection with leadership is particularly apt in this case - sheep without a shepherd move about aimlessly, without purpose, and are soon lost. God, of course, is the real Shepherd of His people, but He uses human instruments, and the importance of those instruments cannot be overestimated. Thus, when the people sought a king as God had promised, their motives and criteria needed to be scrutinized - Saul was chosen for all the wrong reasons (he was big, strong, and handsome, and they wanted a king like all the other nations), and thus gave the people no lasting peace or success. It was David, the man after God's own heart, who proved to be a true shepherd of Israel.

### II. THE CYCLES OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES (2:10-19)

This section has much to teach us about spiritual decline and revival. Note the following:

2:10 - In the book of Judges, we face the quintessential second-generation syndrome. Those who grew up in the time of the judges knew neither the Exodus nor the Conquest firsthand, but had only heard about them from their parents and grandparents. Thus the work of God was not for them a matter of personal experience, but of family and tribal tradition. How do we see this same tendency at work in our own time, in our own churches, and even in our own families? How many of us are second-generation Christians, and see these same tendencies in our own lives?

2:11-13 - Baal (the name means *lord*) was a storm god, and thus a god of fertility associated with the cycles of the seasons. The Canaanites believed that he died in the fall with the end of the agricultural cycle and was reborn in the spring when new life came to the earth. Rites with which he was worshiped included ritual prostitution. The word here appears in the plural because there were many local manifestations of the deity worshiped in different villages throughout Canaan. Ashtoreth was Baal's consort. Why would the Israelites worship such degraded gods? The second-generation problem arises here again. What was an abomination to the earlier generation, who had clearly seen the contrast between the God of Israel and the idols of the Canaanites, had become a tolerable or even acceptable alternative to their children. After all, why not worship *both* God and Baal? We might be able to enjoy the benefits of both gods, both cultures.

2:14-15 - The result of such compromise with the values and practices of the surrounding culture is spiritual powerlessness. God's people find themselves overwhelmed by the surrounding world, unable to gain victory over it because God is judging them for their unfaithfulness. In noting the basis for judgment here, we must

observe that the problem was not full-blown idolatry, but syncretism. They had not stopped worshiping God, but had begun worshiping Baal as well. When God's people relegate Him to one part of their lives and set aside other parts for other gods, they will be a people without power, either in their own lives or in their ability to influence the surrounding world.

2:16-19 - Here we see the cycle - the people fall into idolatry and compromise, God gives them over to their enemies, they cry out to Him for deliverance, He responds to their cries and raises up a judge to deliver them, they follow the Lord throughout the lifetime of the judge (at least some of the time), but after the judge dies, they again fall into idolatry and compromise and the cycle begins all over again. We should note several things about this cycle:

- God responds to the cries of His people. Revival begins with prayer on the part of those who belong to God. It does not begin with strategies or techniques or programs, but with the people of God crying out to the only One who can deliver them.
- God is a merciful and forgiving God who keeps His covenant even when His people violate it time and again. There is always mercy to be found by turning to Him.
- Again, the importance of godly leaders is stressed. As we will see, these men were far from perfect themselves, but God sent them and the Spirit of God worked through them, so God's work was accomplished and His people were delivered despite the sins and failings of the leaders themselves.
- As the cycles continued, things got worse. The need for the stability of a monarchy became increasingly apparent. Yet, as we know, the monarchy was no panacea. The final deliverer of God's people was yet to come - the Good Shepherd, and the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

### III. THE CANAANITE INHABITANTS OF THE LAND (2:20-3:6)

2:20-23 - We see here that the Lord judged His people by exposing them to the temptations that eventually led to their downfall. Because they so persistently clung to the ways of the surrounding culture, God left that culture in place rather than destroying it, as it so richly deserved, in order to test the faithfulness of His people. In a sense, they made their own bed and God forced them to sleep in it. To what extent is this the case for Christians in America today? The pagan culture around us exists to a large extent because of the failure of the church in previous generations to be faithful to God. If we are to resist the temptations of that culture, we need to cry out to God and not so easily accept the ways and values of the world, as the church has done in America for generations.

3:1-5 - Today's section concludes with a listing of the tribal groups that remained in the land after the Conquest. Among these groups, the Philistines deserve special notice because of the role they play in this book, as well as in the early monarchy period. We should note that God also did this to teach His people to fight against the enemy. Encounters with the enemies of God either produce compromise, weakness, and failure, or else they produce battle-tested warriors who are able to stand against any opposition. Which will it be for us?

3:6 - The intermarriage that occurred with the Canaanite tribes shows the extent to which the Israelites had compromised. When such marriages occur, it is obvious that the worship of God is simply not seen as the overarching priority in the lives of the people. Sure, they say, it would be nice if my daughter married a



Christian, but it's more important that she be happy, successful, or comfortable. Are we communicating to our children that God must be at the center of everything they do, every decision that they make, so that it would be unthinkable to make a lifelong commitment to one who did not share those values?



## JUDGES AND RUTH III

### Judges 3:7-31

This week we begin to study the narratives of the judges themselves. Chapter three records the exploits of Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar - three very different sorts of “deliverers.”

#### I. OTHNIEL (3:7-11)

Othniel, the nephew of Caleb, was previously introduced into the narrative in chapter one, where he earned the hand of Caleb’s daughter Acsah (yes, he married his cousin!) by conquering the Canaanite village of Kiriath Sepher. This places him in the generation following that of Joshua; he is in some ways a natural choice for the first of the judges. We should note the typical cycle of the book initiated here, as the people fall into idolatry, God gives them over into the hands of their enemies, they cry out to Him, and He raises up a deliverer who liberates them from the oppressor and gives peace to the land for the remainder of his lifetime. Note the following:

2:7-9 - Aram Naharaim was located in what is now northeastern Syria. In the middle of the fourteenth century BC, this region, which had been ruled by the Hurrian Empire, was overrun by the Hittites. The name Cushan-Rishathaim is a hebraicized version of a name that appears frequently in the records left by the Hurrian Empire. In all probability, what is going on here is that a tribe of displaced Hurrians is seeking a new home and attempts to settle in southern Palestine.

2:10-11 - Othniel here serves as the prototype for the role of the judge - he is described using that term, and his deliverance of the people is said to be by the power of the Spirit of God.

#### II. EHUD (3:12-30)

The story of Ehud is of a very different sort than the story of Othniel. Ehud is described as a deliverer raised up by God, but he is never called a judge, nor is his activity ascribed to the power of the Holy Spirit. A glance at the narrative will indicate why this is the case.

3:12-14 - Idolatry again leads to bondage, but this time to neighbors rather than distant invaders. The three tribes mentioned all inhabited Transjordan, and each was distantly related to the Israelites. Moab and Ben-ammi were the children of Lot’s daughters that resulted from their incest with their father, while Amalek was one of the grandsons of Esau. The focal point of the invasion and conquest was Jericho (“the City of Palms”); though it had been left in ruins by Joshua and would not be rebuilt until the reign of Ahab, it continued to be a strategic location, both because of the oasis located there - one of the few sources of good water in the Dead Sea region - and because it lay at the intersection of major trading routes through the region - one along the Jordan Valley and one that knifed through the Judean wilderness into the highlands around Jerusalem (note that these descriptions are anachronistic, since Jerusalem was still a Jebusite settlement and Judah had just recently staked its claim to the territory that would eventually bear its name).

3:15-16 - The details here are significant. Left-handedness seems to have been a genetic trait that ran strong among the Benjamites (cf. 20:16), and Ehud used it to his advantage. He made a short, straight sword and strapped it under his clothing. Unlike the long, curved swords common in the period, which were used for hacking rather than stabbing, this was an assassin’s weapon, useless in a melee but deadly at close quarters. When guards would search a person for concealed weapons, they would typically give special attention to

the left side, which is where a right-handed man would hide a weapon intended to be drawn with his dominant hand.

3:17 - When one tribal group gained ascendancy over another, they would exact tribute - precious metals, gems, agricultural goods, or conscript labor. Ehud was chosen to bear the annual tribute to Eglon's headquarters. The corpulence of the king becomes an issue later, of course.

3:18-19 - After delivering the tribute, Ehud sent his companions on their way; this allowed them to reach safety should his plot fail and to summon the armies of Israel should it succeed. When he returned to Eglon on his own, the guards would have been even more lax in their precautions. After all, he was now alone, and he had already delivered the required tribute. His offer of a secret message would probably be interpreted as an oracle from the gods. When a subject people were attempting to curry favor, they would commonly produce messages from their gods that would flatter the conqueror. No doubt this was what Eglon expected. He orders his attendant to leave his audience chamber so that he might receive the oracle privately.

3:20-23 - The description of the action here is obscured by several unusual words and phrases the meaning of which is uncertain. What follows involves some educated guesswork, but is supported by both commentators and archaeological evidence from the era. It appears that the king's audience chamber was adjacent to an enclosed room that served as the king's private quarters. Eglon chose to receive Ehud in this chamber. Such a chamber frequently included an indoor toilet - a mark of wealth and distinction that consisted of a seat over an open pit, which would be cleaned out periodically by servants. When Ehud approached, Eglon rose as an act of respect to the god whose oracle he was about to hear - a move that left him completely exposed to Ehud's rapid sword thrust. The assassin drove the sword all the way into the king's stomach and left it there. Though the language is uncertain, it appears that Ehud then locked the door to Eglon's private chamber from the inside, escaped down the toilet, and went out the servant's entrance.

3:24-26 - Meanwhile, Eglon's attendants were wondering what was taking the king so long. They waited as long as they could for modesty's sake, then finally opened the door to the inner chamber and found the king dead on the floor. By that time, Ehud was safely gone.

3:27-30 - Ehud then gathered the troops that were no doubt waiting in the hills in the event that his attack was successful. They swept down and seized the fords of the Jordan, assuring that no reinforcements could come over from Moab and that those in the land would be unable to escape. The destruction of the Moabite invaders was complete, and the land enjoyed peace for the next eighty years.

### III. SHAMGAR (3:31)

Shamgar, whose exploits are described in a single verse, is not only not called a judge, but may not even have been an Israelite. Anath was a Canaanite goddess, and there are records from the era of "sons of Anath" who were mercenary soldiers, selling their services to the highest bidder. The Egyptians often employed such men against the invading Sea Peoples, for instance. In addition, the name *Shamgar* is not an Israelite name, but a Canaanite one. Whether he personally killed six hundred Philistines with an ox goad - a long, heat-treated or metal-tipped piece of wood used for driving oxen that could serve as a weapon in a pinch - or whether he led a group of mercenaries in an attack on a Philistine detachment is uncertain, but, in any case, the Israelites benefitted from his defeat of the invaders.

#### IV. THE MORALITY OF THE JUDGES

The assassination of Eglon brings before us for the first time an issue that will arise often in the narrative of the judges. Many of the incidents we will study - a political assassination, a grisly murder using a tent peg (next week's lesson), human sacrifice - vary from morally questionable to downright repugnant. How are we to evaluate these actions, especially when they are ascribed to men raised up by God to deliver His people? Several answers are possible.

Some argue that even individual acts like those performed by Ehud, Jael, and Samson are deeds done in the context of war, and are therefore as justifiable as the deaths of any enemy in wartime. While we cannot compare the tribal conflicts of the second millennium BC to formally declared war in the modern era, we must recognize that God sometimes called his people to carry out acts of violence against His and their enemies, including the slaughter of entire populations as a judgment on their idolatry.

Others argue that the end does not justify the means, and simply because God used certain actions to deliver Israel does not mean those actions were right. After all, God often uses wicked men and their wicked deeds to accomplish His purposes. Were not the vicious conquests of the Assyrians and Babylonians God's instruments to judge His people? Then why could not the evil deeds of Israelites be used by God to do His will without being condoned by Him?

Some might use each argument in turn, approving the acts of Ehud and Jael as acts of war and disapproving the deed of Jephthah as the overzealous folly of a spiritually ignorant man. It is worth noting that the response we have to these issues has considerable contemporary relevance. While noting the difference between the government of the United States and the tribal rulers of ancient Israel, what does this say to us about matters like the assassination of terrorists? When commandos slipped into the camp of Osama bin Laden and did the deed, was such an act justifiable? Is this a proper use of the power God has vested in governments to deal with those who do evil? This is not an easy question, though it is rendered somewhat clearer if we refuse to identify the cause of the United States with the cause of God in the world.



## JUDGES AND RUTH IV

### Judges 4-5

Today we encounter the story of Deborah and Barak and the victory over the Canaanites in the north of Palestine. Like last week's lesson, we find that it raises moral issues relating to the murder of Sisera, but it also must be viewed in the light of the way the role of Deborah has been exploited by modern feminists.

#### I. THE CONTEXT OF THE STORY (4:1-11)

All of the events discussed last week occurred in the southern part of Palestine. Today's narrative takes place in the north, above what was later called the Sea of Galilee. Note the following:

4:1 - The text gives us a relative chronological marker here - though the events surrounding the deeds of Ehud and Deborah occurred in different regions, and thus could possibly have been contemporaneous, the first verse tells us that this story happened after the death of Ehud.

4:2 - Hazor was an important city in the north of Palestine. It was one of several fortresses guarding the trade route from Damascus to the plain of Jezreel (or Megiddo). It had been destroyed over a hundred years before by Joshua during the Conquest, when an earlier king Jabin had led a northern confederation against the invading Israelites (Joshua 11:1, 10-11); in fact, the burn level is still visible at the archaeological dig going on at the tel today. Note that Sisera is not a Semitic name, so that he may have been another of the mercenaries that we have seen previously were active in the region during this time.

4:3 - Nine hundred iron chariots constituted an unbeatable military force. Foot soldiers had no chance against such powerful engines of war. We again see that God used the oppression of Israel's enemies to turn His people's hearts to Him.

4:4-5 - Deborah, the only female judge, is pictured here as serving a judicial rather than military function, in addition to being an instrument of God's revelation to His people. She held court along the busy road heading north out of Jerusalem in the territory given to Ephraim, settling disputes among the people.

4:6-7 - Deborah here functions in her role as a prophetess rather than as a judge. She, by the word of God, summons Barak to lead an army against the Canaanites to deliver Israel from their oppression. The army is to be drawn from the northern tribes and is to be mustered on Mount Tabor, which overlooks the plain of Jezreel, one of the great battle sites of the Ancient Near East. Note that the translation of the number of soldiers is uncertain - it could mean either "ten thousand" or "ten clans" or "troops" (see the treatment of the question of the number of Israelites involved in the exodus from Egypt in the course on Studies in Exodus). The plan is to lure Sisera's army toward the Kishon River; we will see why later on.

4:8-10 - Barak refuses to exercise the leadership demanded of him, insisting that Deborah accompany him to battle. Deborah agrees reluctantly, asserting that God will still deliver Israel, but that the glory for the victory will go to another - and a woman at that!

4:11 - We have been introduced to the Kenites previously (1:16), and it is because of their role in this story that they are included in the book. The Kenites were descendants of Moses' in-laws, and thus distant relatives of Israel (recall that Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, is described as a priest of Midian; Midian was

a son of Abraham by his second wife, Keturah). In the time of the judges, they lived among the Israelites, apparently scattered throughout the land.

## II. THE BATTLE AND ITS AFTERMATH (4:12-24)

In order to get a full picture of the battle, we need to draw information from chapter five as well as chapter four.

4:12-13 - The picture here is one of total confidence on the part of Sisera and his forces. Barak and his troops have the advantageous position because they occupy the high ground, but Sisera's chariots are useless on mountainous terrain. He therefore gathers his soldiers down in the valley and waits, knowing that Barak must bring the battle to him and that the Canaanites have an insuperable advantage on level ground.

4:14-16 - Deborah gives the signal, encouraging Barak and his men by assuring them that the Lord has given them the victory. They charge down Mount Tabor onto the level plain below and rout Sisera and his army. We're told that the Lord routed them, but we are not told how He did it. Chapter five, however, fills in the crucial gaps in the story. Verses 20-22 indicate that God sent a storm that filled the Kishon River (a wadi that normally only filled with water on a seasonal basis, but was subject to flash flooding) rapidly so that it overflowed its banks. The chariots of Sisera suddenly changed from being invincible weapons to being death traps for their occupants, who were now stuck in the mud and were sitting ducks for soldiers on horseback. The destruction of the Canaanite army was complete. Sisera himself was forced to abandon his chariot and flee on foot.

4:17-20 - Apparently the Kenites got along with everybody - a peace-loving tribe that had no enemies - so that Sisera expected to find a safe haven among them. In accord with the entire picture painted in the book of Judges that the entire society from top to bottom was out of kilter without a central leader, there are a number of aspects to this story that just aren't right in terms of the normal expectations for such a situation. Not only would it have been unthinkable for a woman to invite a man into her tent in the absence of her husband, but it was also contrary to the code of hospitality for him to ask his host for anything, let alone asking a woman to stand guard in order to protect him.

4:21-24 - Pitching tents was woman's work, so Jael would have been quite proficient at wielding a hammer on a tent peg. Sisera never knew what hit him, and Barak found that the ultimate victory over his enemy had been achieved at the hand of a non-Israelite woman.

## III. THE SONG OF DEBORAH AND BARAK (5:1-31)

The composing and singing of songs served two purposes in the ancient world. One was to celebrate a great occasion, and the second was to serve as a basis for oral transmission of the narrative (see the Song of Miriam in Exodus 15 and the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32).

4:1-5 - Introductory praise, remembering God's past deliverance.

4:6-9 - A description of the terrible condition of the land that resulted from the idolatry of the Israelites and the oppression of their enemies.



4:10-11 - A call for all, both rich and poor, to hear and remember the words sung by the traveling minstrels who repeat the songs at every oasis.

4:12-18 - An account of the gathering of Israel for battle. Note that those who fought came predominantly from the northern tribes; those in the south had little if any part in the battle.

4:19-23 - An account of the battle itself, centering on God's miraculous intervention on Israel's behalf. Note also the curse directed against those who refused to help.

4:24-27 - Jael is the heroine of the story, while Barak hardly gets mentioned (anyone who makes a big deal out of Mary being called "blessed among women" in the New Testament should note the description of Jael here).

4:28-30 - A touching description of Sisera's mother, waiting for her son to return from the wars and rationalizing the delay that was becoming increasingly painful.

4:31 - The moral of the story - those who trust in the Lord will ultimately triumph, while those who make themselves His enemies will be destroyed.

#### IV. THE ROLE OF DEBORAH

Contemporary feminists often cite Deborah to support their advocacy of women's ordination, noting that here is a situation where a woman exercised spiritual leadership. She undoubtedly was a prophetess, a bearer of God's revelation to the people, and a judge who was entrusted with the responsibility of settling disputes, but two aspects of her situation should be noted. First of all, she was not and could never be a priest, and it was the priests who performed the religious functions of the Israelite community, and were thus most closely analogous to the ordained ministry of the New Testament church (though not in the sense that the Catholic Church teaches). Secondly, the text clearly considers her involvement in military leadership to be an inappropriate embarrassment. It is more than anything else seen as another indication that things in Israel were not as they should have been. Certainly, we may not follow the feminist argument that because a woman may exercise some types of leadership that she may exercise any kind of leadership. Being a prophetess and a judge is not the same as being an elder in Christ's church.



# JUDGES AND RUTH V

## Judges 6

Today we begin the study of the career of Gideon, which will occupy us for the next three weeks. The narrative contains many lessons that can help us in our relationship with God.

### I. A NEW CYCLE BEGINS (6:1-10)

6:1-6 - The people used by God to punish the Israelites for their idolatry this time are the Midianites, distant relatives of Israel who were the descendants of Abraham through his second wife Keturah. They normally inhabited the region east of the Jordan River valley and the Dead Sea, where the remains of villages have been discovered by archaeologists. They were also nomadic, however, and brought their tents with them on their seasonal invasions. They would typically come each year just before the harvest had been taken in; this would create a situation where the invaders had access to all the food they needed, while those being invaded had none. The Midianites would take all the food they needed, then destroy the rest in order to deprive the Israelites of their sustenance.

The setting for this story is the same as last week - the region surrounding the fertile Valley of Jezreel in northwestern Galilee. We are told that the Midianites plundered the entire fertile coastal plain down as far as Gaza, but the best land was found in the Jezreel Valley, so this would be the focal point of their attacks. The Israelites would hide themselves, their families, and whatever food they could gather in the caves in the mountains surrounding the great plain, which is fifteen miles long and varies in width from five to ten miles. Despite their efforts, however, the annual plundering of their crops left the Israelites in desperate straits, and they cried out to the Lord (Why must the Lord reduce His people to desperation before they look to Him?).

6:7-10 - In response to the cries of the people, God sends an unnamed prophet to remind them of His covenant with them and to make it clear to them that they have violated that covenant. He brings no message of hope except the evidence that God has heard their cries. His character as a God of mercy who is faithful to His covenant even when His people are not is demonstrated by what He does next.

### II. THE ANGEL OF THE LORD (6:11-24)

The Angel of the Lord is an intriguing figure who appears a number of times throughout the Old Testament. Because He receives worship (such as the sacrifice in this passage) and is sometimes referred to as "the Lord," it is clear that He is no ordinary angel. In fact, a comparison of Judges 13:16 and Isaiah 9:6 has led many commentators to conclude that the Angel of the Lord represents a pre-incarnate appearance of the Second Person of the Trinity. Thus what we have here is God answering the cries of His people in the way He always does - by giving them Himself; He manifests His presence among them.

6:11 - The location of Ophrah is uncertain, but the other geographical markers in the passage place it somewhere in the Jezreel Valley. Trees were often gathering places, as well as favored locations for shrines. Wheat was typically threshed on a threshing floor - a large, flat area of rock or hardened soil where the grain was spread out, then trampled by men or cattle to separate the wheat from the chaff. The open area was essential to enable the wind to blow the chaff away, but it also made threshing floors conspicuous, ready targets for an invading enemy. Gideon was thus threshing in a winepress, which was normally a much smaller cavity hollowed out of a rock in which large rollers were mounted to crush the grapes; some

winepresses dug out of cave floors have still survived in the region. It may not have been very efficient to thresh wheat in such an installation, but it was clearly safer than doing so out in the open.

6:12 - The Angel of the Lord addresses Gideon with a title of honor; “mighty warrior” is a suitable translation in a military setting (which this was soon to become), while “man of stature” would be more appropriate in the setting of community life (see the description of Boaz in Ruth 2:1). Gideon here is described, not as man sees him, but as God sees him and as God will shape him.

6:13-16 - Gideon, like Moses before him, immediately begins to make excuses (note that he does not, at this point, know to whom he is speaking; the honorific “Lord” in verse 15 is *Adonai*, a common form of address when one was speaking to a superior). He expresses the people’s fear that they have been abandoned by God, and responds to the Angel’s commission by arguing that he is not a man of stature in his own family, let alone in all of Israel, so that he is incapable of leading the people; after all, who would follow him? Gideon at this point recognizes that the man speaking to him is the Lord’s representative (a prophet, perhaps), but does not yet understand the full magnitude of the encounter he is experiencing.

6:17-21 - Gideon then offers hospitality to his visitor - he goes to prepare a quick (by the standards of the second millennium BC) meal of goat meat and unleavened bread. When he brings the food to his visitor, the Angel does not eat it, but turns it into a sacrifice by incinerating it on a nearby rock, then disappearing.

6:22-24 - At this point, Gideon realizes the identity of his visitor and is terrified. God reassures him that he is not going to die, and he then builds an altar to commemorate the occasion, which apparently was still standing at the time the book of Judges was written over two centuries later. The name by which the Lord is called here is somewhat strange given the military context, but surely indicates that the Lord is at peace with His people and intends no longer to crush them under the feet of their enemies.

### III. DESTROYING THE PAGAN ALTAR (6:25-32)

The extent of the syncretism practiced by the Israelites is evident from the fact that Gideon’s father maintained a Baal shrine in addition to the worship of Yahweh. As we have already seen, Baal was a Canaanite storm god and Asherah was his consort, a fertility goddess.

6:25-26 - God’s people are not fit to serve Him until their idols have been cut down. Gideon is thus commanded to destroy his father’s shrine and build an altar to the Lord in its place. The “second bull” would have been valuable; only a few bulls were needed to maintain a herd, so most would have been slaughtered for food or sacrifice. One that had been kept for seven years was probably a breeding bull, and thus prime livestock. The “proper kind of altar” would have been one made from uncut stone (see Exodus 20:25), built on the prominent height on which such shrines were typically located.

6:27-30 - Gideon obeys the Lord, but does so at night to avoid detection (so much for our “mighty warrior”). The extent to which the people had succumbed to idolatry is indicated by the fact that they were ready to put Gideon to death for his act of desecration. Like the syncretism of our own day, insults to the Lord must be tolerated, but insults to pagan gods are unforgivable.

6:31-32 - Joash’s response is reminiscent of the later incident between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on nearby Mount Carmel. Gideon’s father asserts that if Baal is indeed a god, he can protect himself and avenge the insult that has been directed against him. Like those today who are all too eager to wreak vengeance in

the name of their gods against those who are alleged to have insulted them, these men from Ophrah were prepared to act as self-proclaimed representatives of their abused deity. Joash insisted, however, that Baal could take care of himself, so Gideon remains unmolested; there is no evidence to indicate that Baal ever took action against his attacker.

#### IV. PREPARATION FOR BATTLE BEGINS (6:33-40)

6:33-35 - The invasion was predictable, since the harvest had just begun. The Midianites and their allies cross the Jordan River and camp in the Valley of Jezreel, prepared to plunder the land as they had done for the last seven years. Gideon summons men from the tribes surrounding the Jezreel Valley to join him in fighting off the invaders.

6:36-40 - The chapter ends with the famous incident of the fleece. The use of oracles to determine the will of the gods was common during this era (see the use of the Urim and Thummim by the high priests of Israel). Oracles typically were read by the use of binary tests (the Urim and Thummim were thought to be two stones, one black and one white, drawn from a pouch in order to ascertain God's will in a given matter), though in some situations they involved the reading of signs, such as the entrails of sacrificed animals, by professional omen-readers. God did on occasion speak in this way, so Gideon's use of a binary oracle is not itself problematic. The problem, of course, lies in the fact that *God had already made His will clear to Gideon*. The oracle was thus an indication of his lack of faith in the word God had already provided.

Several points should be noted here. The first is that the use of such a test by Gideon does not legitimize methods of this sort for discerning God's will. His Word is still to be the basis for our decision-making, not some artificial test that we design for God. Reading God's will through circumstances can be very hazardous, as many have discovered over the years. "Putting God to the test," in fact, is explicitly forbidden in Deuteronomy 6:16, as Jesus pointed out to Satan when He was being tempted in the wilderness.

The second point to note here is that God is gracious to His people, even in their sin and weakness. He deigns to respond to Gideon's request for an oracle even though He had already spoken to him in person! God's faithfulness to His people is such that He meets us in our weakness and reassures those who are about to stumble and fall. Not only that, but, as we will see next week, He then takes such weak and sinful people as ourselves and uses them to accomplish great victories for His glory.



## JUDGES AND RUTH VI

### Judges 7

After discussing the calling of Gideon last week, along with the things God used to prepare him for the defeat of the Midianites, we arrive today at the description of the battle itself.

#### I. GOD'S ARMY (7:1-8)

7:1 - We find ourselves again in the Jezreel Valley. Gideon and his men are encamped at the spring of Harod, which is near the pass that serves as the eastern entrance to the valley and thus guards the exit route to the fords of the Jordan. The Midianites are camped below the hill of Moreh, somewhat to the north of Gideon's encampment.

7:2-3 - God is determined to reduce the size of Gideon's army so that it will be perfectly clear to whom the victory belongs when the Midianites are defeated. Of the 32,000 who responded to Gideon's summons, about two-thirds of the men decide to return home when invited to do so. The battle may belong to the Lord, but He needs courageous people to engage in the warfare against His enemies.

7:4-8 - God further reduces the size of the army by a test at the nearby spring. Much has been made of the nature of the test. Was it intended to separate the most capable soldiers, so that those who lapped the water drank in a posture of watchfulness, while those who knelt beside the spring left themselves open to enemy attack? Or was the test purely arbitrary, designed to cut the size of the force by a method that had no significance at all? Ultimately, the answer to this question is of little import - the significant issue is that God constructed Gideon's fighting force in such a way as to ensure that the glory belonged to Him alone.

#### II. GOD'S REASSURANCE (7:9-15)

7:9-12 - We saw last week that Gideon was a man who lacked self-confidence, and thus was in need of continual reassurance. Again here we find that God condescends to his weakness and confirms the promise that He had given to him when he was called to lead Israel. God tells Gideon to sneak down into the Midianite camp in the middle of the night and listen to some of the conversation among the soldiers.

7:13-15 - Dreams were considered to be omens at that time, and we know from other places in Scripture that God often spoke through dreams. Dreams often needed to be interpreted by gifted seers (e.g., Joseph and Daniel), but the meaning of this one was so obvious that it required little interpretation. The barley loaf crushing the tent was a clear reference to the farmers of Israel defeating the nomadic Midianites. When the Midianite soldier mentions Gideon by name, however, this is clearly a prophecy sent from God. Gideon then praises God and prepares to call his troops to battle.

#### III. GOD'S VICTORY (7:16-25)

7:16 - The battle strategy is interesting. Gideon begins by surrounding the Midianite camp on three sides - the hill of Moreh would have been on the east side of the Midianite encampment, so his three divisions would have been located on the north, south, and west sides. Each soldier was equipped with a torch, a pottery jar, and a ram's-horn trumpet, or *shofar*.

7:17-21 - The instructions were that, on the prearranged signal, each soldier was to break his pottery, blow his shofar, hold his torch aloft, shout, and *not attack!* They arrived at the Midianite camp at the beginning of the second watch (about 9:00 PM - the twelve hours of night were divided into four watches of three hours each - see Mark 6:48, where Jesus walked on the water at around 3:00 AM), just after the changing of the guard, when the previous watch would just be settling into their tents and the new watch would still be rubbing sleep out of their eyes. In a typical night attack, torches would be held by only a small number of soldiers so that the others would be free to fight; similarly, each company would need only one bugler, so that relatively few of the soldiers would carry shofars. While the ram's horns were sounded and the torches held aloft, the bulk of the fighting force would descend to the enemy's camp and engage the battle. What happens here, of course, is that the sleepy Midianites are aroused by this horrific noise and wake to find torches all over the place around their encampment. The number of trumpets and the number of torches would not only indicate the presence of a much larger fighting force, but would tell the Midianites that their camp was already under attack. In their sleepy condition, they struck out blindly at anyone they saw running through the camp, but since Gideon's men had held their ground around the encampment and had not attacked, the Midianites proceeded to slaughter one another in their panic.

7:22-25 - The Midianites then flee in panic, heading for the fords of the Jordan - a path that takes them right through the pass guarded by Gideon's men. Those held in reserve by Gideon cut down the fleeing Midianites, and the Ephraimites, summoned late to battle, guard the fords of the Jordan and further decimate the Midianite invaders, in the process capturing and executing the Midianite commanders Oreb and Zeeb (the names of the rock and winepress were given after the events described here in order to commemorate this great victory).

#### IV. LESSONS FROM THE BATTLE

What would God have us to learn from this narrative? A few things should be kept in mind:

##### A. GOD WORKS THROUGH WEAKNESS RATHER THAN STRENGTH

When we feel strong, we are tempted to rely on our strength rather than the strength of the Lord. God therefore graciously shows us our weakness so that we may learn to trust Him rather than ourselves. Furthermore, God brings glory to Himself by winning battles by means of weak human instruments.

##### B. THE LORD GIVES STRENGTH TO THE WEAK

The weak become strong when God is on their side. Gideon became a leader of men, and his men fought a good battle. They destroyed the Midianite invaders as God gave them the victory. Humbling ourselves before God is not a matter of passivity, but instead the channeling of all our energies in the direction of His leading, knowing that unless He fights for us, the cause is hopeless.

##### C. HUMAN STRATEGY MUST BE SUBMITTED TO GOD'S PURPOSES

Gideon's strategy was a sound one, but what they eventually pursued would have looked very different - and undoubtedly had very different results - had not Gideon listened to God's instructions concerning the composition of the army. The role of human strategy is not to make plans and then ask God to put His stamp of approval on them, but rather to follow in the direction in which God is leading, then ask, "How can we best carry out the task that God has given us to do?"



D. WHEN GOD FIGHTS FOR HIS PEOPLE, HE CAUSES HIS ENEMIES TO FEAR HIM

Overwhelming enemy forces become weak men fleeing in panic when God demonstrates His power. Too often, like the Israelite spies, we fear “giants in the land” when we ought to be recognizing that the great men of this world are puny in the eyes of God. The enemy may intimidate us, but it doesn’t intimidate God; we may not frighten those who oppose us, but we may have confidence that God will. The calm assurance of David is a much more appropriate stance for the believer than the bluster of Goliath.



## JUDGES AND RUTH VII

### Judges 8

Today we conclude our study of the career of Gideon. The passage has much to teach us about the hazards of victory and the need for continual watchfulness against the temptations to complacency and idolatry.

#### I. THE MOPPING-UP OPERATION (8:1-21)

We saw last week that Gideon's forces had witnessed the destruction of the bulk of the Midianite invaders at the hill of Moreh in the chaos surrounding the night attack, when the Lord caused the enemy to panic and slaughter one another in huge numbers. The retreating enemy was further decimated by Gideon's reserve troops at the pass guarding the Jezreel Valley and again by the Ephraimites, who were summoned to guard the fords of the Jordan. Some of the Midianites managed to escape, however, and Gideon and his weary 300 pursued them across the Jordan.

8:1-3 - One of the threads running through the entire history of Israel from the time they entered the land until the fall of the Northern Kingdom is the power struggle among the tribes, particularly between Judah and Ephraim. Judah, of course, had been promised the kingship in the blessing given by Jacob before his death. Ephraim, on the other hand, had received the right of primogeniture when Joseph was given a double blessing (both of his sons became the heads of tribes) and the younger was favored before the elder. The Ephraimites thus show a constant tendency to put themselves forward as deserving of special recognition. Instead of praising God for Gideon's marvelous victory, they become jealous, both for glory and for plunder. Gideon soothes their egos, and, for the moment at least, peace is restored.

8:4-7 - Succoth was located about three miles east of the Jordan and a mile north of the Jabbok River, a seasonal stream or wadi. Gideon asks for provisions for his troops, but is refused. It appears that the men of Succoth are reluctant to identify themselves with the rebels until the Midianite forces are completely eradicated. Gideon angrily informs them that he will deal with them after the victory has been completed (the language here is uncertain, but he is clearly threatening them with death; the reference to thorns and briars could indicate the means of execution or the disposal of the corpses afterward).

8:8-9 - Peniel was five miles east of Succoth, and again Gideon meets with refusal. His threat in this case is to tear down the city's tower - probably a central citadel within the walled enclosure that would serve as the last line of defense against invaders, though it could also refer to a watchtower at the gate of the city.

8:10-12 - Karkor is believed to be a reference to the Beqa'a Valley in present-day Lebanon. It is a secluded valley about five miles long and two miles wide that in recent years has often been a haven for terrorists. The Midianites thought they were finally safe - they were now about seventy miles from the site of the original battle - but Gideon sneaks up behind them, catches them by surprise, routs the Midianite forces and captures their remaining kings, Zebah and Zalmunna.

8:13 - Gideon begins the return journey with his captives and his plunder. The Pass of Heres is probably the southern entrance to the Beqa'a Valley.

8:14 - The literacy of the young man of Succoth is possible because, a few hundred years earlier, Semitic languages had made the transition from the complex pictographs and wedge patterns of hieroglyphics and

cuneiform to an alphabetic system, greatly expanding the potential for literacy in the general population. The city of Succoth covered only a little more than an acre of ground and contained 30-35 dwellings, suggesting a population of between 200 and 250 people. The elders were probably the two oldest males in each family, who would have made up the town council, thus the number 77 is appropriate.

8:15-17 - Gideon carries out his threats against the traitors of Succoth and Peniel, executing them and destroying Peniel's citadel (the word translated "punish" literally means "to thresh," and "with desert thorns" should read "along with . . .").

8:18-19 - Apparently Gideon had assigned members of his own family to guard the escape route on the far side of the hill of Moreh near Mount Tabor, and some of his brothers had been killed when Zebah and Zalmunna led their forces out of the Jezreel Valley.

8:20-21 - Gideon gives his eldest son the honor of slaying the captured kings, but Jether refuses, afraid to strike the mortal blows. The two kings then tell Gideon to do it himself - perhaps a final act of bravado, or maybe they preferred a quick death at the hands of an experienced warrior to a slow, painful demise at the hands of a clumsy, inexperienced executioner - and he obliges them, taking afterward the ornaments that decorated the necks of their camels.

## II. MONARCHY AND PRIESTHOOD (8:22-27)

The fact that the book of Judges was written in the early part of David's reign shows up clearly in the lessons brought out by the author in this brief section of text.

8:22-23 - Gideon's refusal to accept a hereditary monarchy demonstrates, not that monarchy is wrong - in fact, the whole book of Judges is intended to show the need for a monarchy - but that God is the King over His people. Their failure to acknowledge this very fact broke the heart of Samuel and led to the failure of the reign of Saul. But David, a king after God's own heart, was the right man for the throne precisely because he did acknowledge that God was the real ruler of His people. Gideon, of course, also did not qualify because he was not from the right tribal background (Manasseh rather than Judah).

8:24-27 - Gideon does, however, ask for an extra portion of the plunder, not for himself, but for the worship of God - he was not as successful in resisting the temptation to exercise the prerogatives of priesthood as he was those of kingship. The gold earrings of the Midianites weighed about half a shekel each, so Gideon received about 3400 earrings weighing 1700 shekels (about 20 kilograms - 43 pounds of gold). These he fashioned into an ephod - a priestly garment used for divination (the one worn by the High Priest contained the Urim and Thummim). This effort to worship God in a way that He had not commanded turned into a disaster, however. The Israelites worshiped the ephod rather than the God it was intended to honor, and the family of Gideon, who likely received money for consulting the oracle, were themselves drawn into this semi-pagan practice.

## III. THE DEATH OF GIDEON (8:28-35)

8:28 - Again, the theme of the second generation; as long as Gideon lived, the people remained faithful to God despite the looming cloud of the ephod-worship.

8:29-32 - Gideon did not abstain from all of the perquisites of monarchy, however - the multiple wives here indicate tribal alliances. The mention of Abimelech sets the stage for the next chapter. Family tombs were common, and usually consisted of caves in which the bodies of members of the clan, surrounded by personal possessions, were laid out on shelves carved into the cave walls.

8:33-35 - Apostasy again sets in after the death of Gideon. The worship of the people seems to have moved in the direction of syncretism - Baal-berith means "lord of the covenant," so that the Canaanite storm god and the God of the Israelites seem to have been identified in some way with one another. Gideon's family also is victimized by the "what have you done for me lately" syndrome.

#### IV. LESSONS FROM THE PASSAGE

There are many applications that could be drawn from this passage, among which are the following:

##### A. THE JEALOUSY OF EPHRAIM

How easy it is for God's people to fall into the trap of looking for wealth and glory for themselves rather than seeking the glory of God and the good of others! The Ephraimites didn't even mention the great victory God had given - all they were concerned about was their own piece of the pie. When we put our own comfort and our own preferences ahead of the prosperity of God's kingdom and His people, we bring about the same kind of destructive divisiveness in our churches.

##### B. THE BANDWAGON SYNDROME

Instead of casting in their lot with the people of God, the men of Succoth and Peniel chose to play a waiting game - they wanted to see who would come out on top before choosing which side to follow. A life of faith means we choose God's side, no matter what the personal cost. It is not those who take risks to follow God who are the losers, but those who hang back, playing things cautiously, who are destroyed.

##### C. THE SEDUCTIONS OF POWER

Gideon was a godly man who had become a great man by following the leading of God's Spirit fearlessly. And while he succeeded in resisting the temptation to become king, the perquisites of kingship - numerous wives and children - and the vision of himself as an oracle were too much for him to turn down. It seems that the incident of the fleece came back to haunt him in a way one never would have anticipated. When a leader begins to think too highly of himself as the voice of God, he is open to turning both himself and the people who follow him away from the Lord and toward a preoccupation with God's instrument.

##### D. THE SUBTLETY OF SYNCRETISM

How often have we heard in recent years that all the followers of the great religions worship the same God? This is not a new idea. The worship of Baal-berith among the Israelites shows the same tendency to identify all gods as one, and thus to corrupt the worship of the true God by opening the door to beliefs and practices that are contrary to His Word, while at the same time denying His uniqueness and the uniqueness of the Gospel He has revealed through His Son. The extent to which such practices rapidly lead people into the grossest forms of idolatry will be seen in the next chapter.



## JUDGES AND RUTH VIII

### Judges 9

At the end of Judges 8, we saw the nature of the syncretism into which Israel had fallen through the worship of Baal-berith. It is impossible for syncretistic worship to exist for long without compromising the moral standards of a people; this becomes obvious in the story of Abimelech. We should also note that this chapter further develops the theme of true versus false kingship that is one of the major ongoing purposes for the writing of the book of Judges.

#### I. THE RISE OF ABIMELECH (9:1-6)

This week's narrative takes place in and around Shechem. The city was an ancient one, and one of the more prominent towns in central Israel. Jacob had lived in the area at one time (it was in Shechem that the disgraceful incident involving Jacob's daughter Dinah had occurred in Genesis 34), and it was through the pass near Shechem between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim that Joshua and his army had passed after the destruction of Jericho on their way to the defeat of the northern confederation. By the New Testament period, the city was called Sychar; this was where Jesus met the Samaritan woman in John 4 (the Samaritan temple was located on Mount Gerazim). Archaeological ruins indicate a site of about six acres, which would have supported a population of around a thousand people with an available fighting force of 200-250 men.

We saw last week that Gideon rejected the idea of hereditary monarchy in no uncertain terms, but fell into the trap of accepting the prerogatives of kingship without the title. This failure on Gideon's part would come back to haunt his sons.

9:1-3 - Abimelech's name initially gives us a clue concerning the environment in which he was raised. His mother was a slave concubine, not one of Gideon's official wives. Thus she lived apart from the clan, unacknowledged by the rest of the family. In order to give some dignity and stature to her son, she gave him a name that means "my father is the king." Abimelech is therefore the stereotypical neglected child who grows up to hate his father and take his bitterness out on all around him by seeking power over others. If there had been a school in Shechem, Abimelech would have been the playground bully.

Abimelech gathers his mother's other sons and sends them out to spread discord in the town, taking advantage of the *de facto* acknowledgment of Gideon's family as deserving royal prerogatives to suggest that, if anyone were to rule over them, it should be someone who was at least partially of their own blood - namely, himself. The grapevine works as intended, and the citizens of Shechem join the conspiracy.

9:4 - What is happening here is that the temple of Baal-berith is supplying the funds needed to carry out an action considered to be the work of the god. Seventy shekels - one for each of Gideon's sons who was to be murdered - was an absurdly low price, considering that a slave could rarely be purchased for less than twenty shekels. The price is either an indication of the low value placed on the sons of Gideon by the citizens of Shechem, or else demonstrates the level of poverty prevalent among Abimelech and his followers. In any case, he uses the money to hire a group of thugs to carry out his intended dirty work (we saw earlier that mercenaries were readily available in this era of displaced tribal groups).

9:5 - The murder "on one stone" suggests ritual slaughter. If the stone was the standing stone of the temple of Baal-berith, it could even have been human sacrifice. In any case, the murder of real or perceived rivals

to the throne was common in the Ancient Near East, as many incidents throughout the historical books of Scripture indicate. Gideon's youngest son, Jotham, survives the slaughter, however.

9:6 - Archaeological work at the site of Shechem has uncovered a temple on an acropolis overlooking the city - this was probably the temple of Baal-berith. The walled enclosure around the temple, which was well-fortified and served as the last line of defense for the city below in the valley, was probably the Beth Millo referred to in this verse. The standing stone ("pillar") of the temple was in the outer courtyard, and would often be located near a sacred tree. Thus what occurs is a sacred ceremony, but the picture before us is that of a wicked king being consecrated in the name of a false god. Thus syncretistic worship leads to the elevation of wicked, self-seeking rulers.

## II. JOTHAM'S PARABLE (9:7-21)

The parable as a narrative form is most familiar, of course, from the teachings of Jesus, but we find it here in Scripture for the first time. As with the parables of Jesus, it is a mistake to seek significance in each detail of the parable. Instead, we should look for one central meaning, which is normally unmistakable.

9:7 - The valley between Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal is a natural amphitheater. It was here that the curses and blessings of the Mosaic covenant were read to the Israelites after they conquered the land (Joshua 8:33-34). Jotham thus could have been easily heard while telling this parable at a safe distance from the Shechemites.

9:8-15 - This parable differs from those told by Jesus in that it describes an unrealistic scenario, where all of those Jesus told were taken from everyday life. The obvious point of the parable is that the monarchy established by Abimelech was both worthless and destructive, since anyone who had anything worthwhile to contribute to society would be too busy to make himself king. As a sidelight, it is worth noting that the three trees that reject the crown represent the products that contributed most to the prosperity of the land, suggesting that, while a bad king was worthless and destructive, a good ruler would make the country prosperous.

9:16-21 - Jotham then curses Abimelech and the Shechemites, warning them that they would destroy each other as a result of their treachery toward his father and brothers. The town to which Jotham then fled is currently unidentified.

## III. THE FALL OF ABIMELECH (9:22-57)

This is one of the classic biblical examples of reaping what one sows. The attitude that Abimelech cultivated among the men of Shechem eventually leads to his destruction.

9:22-25 - Those who gain power by encouraging others to be treacherous against their masters can never know a good night's sleep, since those who have betrayed once can have few scruples about doing it a second time. We are told here that God sowed discord between Abimelech and the Shechemites as a judgment against their treatment of Gideon's family, but one suspects that their actions required little in the way of divine prompting. Within three years, they tired of Abimelech's arrogance and began to undermine his rule in subtle ways. Shechem, positioned as it was in the pass leading into central Palestine, enriched itself by trade. Posting bandits in the surrounding hills would have discouraged caravans from passing through



Shechem and thus put a crimp in Abimelech's cash flow, while at the same time enriching the bandits with the plunder taken from traders who did approach the town.

9:26 - Another demagogue now enters the picture. Again, the name is of interest - Gaal ("rejected, abhorred, or despised one") the son of Ebed ("slave"). His mother must have been in a wonderful frame of mind the day he was born! But those who turn their backs on God Almighty will fall for anything, even the rejected son of a slave.

9:27-29 - Gaal and his friends get drunk while celebrating on the acropolis after the grape harvest, and the bravado comes out in spades. Abimelech, who had sold himself to the Shechemites as a worthy king because he was half-Canaanite (the city of Shechem had never been conquered by Joshua, and thus continued to have a largely Canaanite population at this time), now is cursed by Gaal and his men because he is half-Israelite. Only men of pure Canaanite blood like this rejected son of a slave should rule over the great city of Shechem!

9:30-33 - Zebul, Abimelech's deputy, sends messengers to warn the "king" about the impending revolt and advises him to conceal men outside the city in preparation for a morning assault.

9:34-38 - When morning came, Abimelech and his men were in position. Gaal wakes up, probably with a significant hangover, and Zebul is able to convince him that he sees nothing but shadows on the mountains (the rising sun would have cast shadows over the near side of the surrounding hills, which lie on the east side of the city). Finally, Gaal realizes that troops are coming down from the acropolis against him and Zebul sarcastically challenges him to go into battle.

9:39-41 - The Shechemites are defeated in the battle and Zebul drives Gaal and his brothers out of the city.

9:42-45 - The next day Gaal (or perhaps simply the remainder of the Shechemites, who by this time were committed to the rebellion against Abimelech) reformed his troops and prepared to attack Abimelech's forces, but the latter hid his men and ambushed the Shechemite army. While two of Abimelech's divisions fought the Shechemites, the remaining body of men circled behind the Shechemite army and took the gate of the city, cutting off any possible retreat. The Shechemite army was then destroyed, the city taken and burned, and the people slaughtered. The sowing of salt was a symbol of infertility.

9:46-49 - Some of the city's population had fled to the acropolis (the temple of El-berith was probably another name for the temple of Baal-berith - El was the head of the Canaanite pantheon, and the name was often used interchangeably with Baal) and enclosed themselves within the fortress there. Abimelech orders his men to cut down branches from trees (Gaal shall never vanquished be till Shechem wood to high Zalmon hill shall come against him??), lay them at the base of the fortress, and set the structure on fire, killing all who are within. Archaeologists have discovered a burn layer on the acropolis from the period of this incident.

9:50-57 - Abimelech now turns his attention to Thebez, whose people must have been part of the conspiracy against him. The city has tentatively been identified with a site nine miles northeast of Shechem, but the site has not been excavated. The fortress in this case was located in the center of the walled city, probably on an elevated spot. Abimelech tries the same strategy he used on the acropolis of Shechem, but is foiled by a woman who drops a millstone on his head. He thus faces a similar ignominious end to that of Sisera, though he tries to minimize the shame by having his servant run him through with his sword. Thus ends the

reign of Abimelech the king - with God's judgment against him for his wickedness in murdering the sons of Gideon.

#### IV. LESSONS FROM THE STORY

##### A. GOD IS NOT MOCKED

We must always remember that the narratives of the Old Testament historical books are not primarily moral, but theological. They are not trying to tell us to be good, but to underscore the importance of being godly people. The character of God is paramount. Thus we see here that those who pervert the worship of God and think to commit evil with impunity will not escape God's judgment. While the execution of God's wrath may not always be as dramatic or as immediate as it was in this case, it is nonetheless sure.

##### B. THE CONSEQUENCES OF SYNCRETISM

Wrong worship leads inexorably to wrong living. Those who think all gods are the same soon come to believe that all forms of behavior are equally acceptable, leading them to rationalize even mass murder in order to achieve their ends. Does any of this sound familiar?

##### C. THE EVIL OF AN UNGODLY MONARCHY

For Israel, any king would not do - as they found to their regret with Saul later. Only a godly monarch, like David, could bring to the nation of Israel prosperity and peace rather than destruction. This is the primary message of the book.

## JUDGES AND RUTH IX

Judges 10:1-11:33

This week we begin the story of Jephthah. This narrative demonstrates clearly the toll that syncretism had taken on the Israelites in the land, diluting their understanding of God to the extent that even the leaders whom God raised up to deliver them knew so little of God that both their theology and their practice were far from biblical.

### I. TOLA AND JAIR (10:1-5)

The book of Judges lists a number of minor judges who are given little attention because they were not military leaders. In all likelihood, they served the same sort of judicial function specifically attributed to Deborah in Judges 4:5.

10:1-2 - The location of Tola's home is uncertain, though the hill country of Ephraim was on the west bank of the Jordan River.

10:3-5 - Jair lived in Gilead, the region on the east side of the Jordan River settled by the tribe of Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh, and bounded by the Yarmuk river on the north and the Jabbok river on the south, though again the specific locations mentioned in this passage cannot be pinpointed with any certainty. Jair's wealth is indicated by the number of sons he had, the number of donkeys they owned, and the towns he controlled. This is the same land in which the narrative of Jephthah takes place.

### II. SUBJUGATION BY THE AMMONITES (10:6-18)

10:6-9 - The cycle of the book of Judges recurs here, with all its familiar components. Note that the level of syncretism has become worse - not only has the list of gods worshiped by the Israelites gotten longer, but they no longer make any pretense of serving the Lord at all. The mention of subjugation at the hands of the Ammonites and the Philistines is significant and indicates that the stories of Jephthah and Samson probably occupy the same time period. While the Ammonites plagued the Israelites living in Transjordan, the Philistines were harassing those who lived along the southern coastal plain. The Ammonites even went so far as to cross the Jordan and invade the territory held by Ephraim, Judah, and Benjamin.

10:10-16 - The Israelites cry out to the Lord, but words of repentance will not suffice. God reminds them of their previous unfaithfulness and backsliding and challenges them to call out to their new gods for deliverance. Not until they put away their idols will God raise up a deliverer.

10:17-18 - The opposing armies faced one another in the region of Transjordan (there were several towns named Mizpah; this could not have been the one in Benjamite territory near Jerusalem). As we had already seen in the case of Gideon, the people were willing to recognize as their leader anyone who could take command and drive out the enemy.

### III. JEPHTHAH SUMMONED TO LEAD ISRAEL (11:1-11)

11:1-3 - Like Abimelech, Jephthah was the illegitimate son of a tribal leader (when he is described as a "mighty warrior," the phrase is the same one used by the Angel of the Lord in reference to Gideon in Judges 6:12). When we are told that his mother was a prostitute, the reference is probably to one of the cult

prostitutes associated with many of the pagan temples of the Canaanites. Jephthah is cast out by his half-brothers and flees to the wilderness, where he becomes the leader of a band of robbers.

11:4-7 - When the Ammonites gather for battle (now we're back to the situation described in 10:17-18), the elders of the Gileadites search out the only successful military leader they can think of - the local bandit chieftain. Jephthah is understandably reluctant to fight for people who have treated him so shabbily, however.

11:8-11 - The elders of Gilead make Jephthah an offer he can't refuse - if he leads them into battle and defeats the Ammonites, he would become their ruler. He at first doubts their sincerity, but the deal is finally confirmed by an oath sworn at Mizpah.

#### IV. PREWAR NEGOTIATIONS (11:12-28)

11:12 - Unlike the other judges in the book, Jephthah starts by negotiating rather than by attacking. He thinks that an airing of grievances might enable the contending parties to settle matters amicably.

11:13 - The Ammonite claim to Transjordan rests on the supposed fact that Israel had taken the land from them at the time of the Conquest. The territory they seek amounts to the entirety of Israelite possessions on the east bank of the Jordan.

11:14-22 - Jephthah argues the Israelite claim on several levels. First of all, he disputes the Ammonite description of the conquest of the land. He notes that, first of all, Israel tried to pass through the land in peace, but the inhabitants of the land refused to grant them passage and initiated warfare. Secondly, the people who possessed the land were not the Ammonites, but the Amorites; the Ammonites at the time of the Conquest were nomads much like Israel and had not as yet established any sort of territorial identity. Israel thus displaced the Amorites in land to which the Ammonites had no historical claim.

11:23-25 - The next argument Jephthah uses is that claim to land is connected with the work of the gods. The land that is given to you by the gods is yours by right, and if you can demonstrate that the gods have given you the land, it belongs to you, independent of historical precedent. The way in which Jephthah presents this argument indicates the extent to which syncretism had penetrated the mentality of the Israelites; they had adopted *henotheism* - a tribal god concept whereby people recognized the existence of many gods but only worshiped one. He then cites the example of Balak, who, when Balaam the prophet confirmed Israel's claim by the hand of the Lord, left them alone.

11:26-28 - Jephthah's final argument has to do with what one might call today the statute of limitations. He argues that Israel had possessed the land for three hundred years (an important argument in favor of the early date of the Exodus, since the Jephthah narrative could hardly have been later than 1100 BC, requiring a date for the Conquest of around 1400 BC), and that the Ammonites had made no claim to it during all that time, so that it was ridiculous for them to lay claim to it now. Jephthah then challenges the Ammonites to a contest of the gods - a battle in which the stronger god would reveal the right of the matter by giving the land to his followers. The king of the Ammonites ignores Jephthah's arguments and prepares for battle.

## V. THE DEFEAT OF THE AMMONITES (11:29-33)

Jephthah, under the power of the Spirit of the Lord, utterly defeats the Ammonites. The geographical references are obscure and, at this point, untraceable, but it is clear at least that the Israelites not only drove the Ammonites from the region of Transjordan, but also penetrated southward into Ammonite territory. As far as Jephthah's vow is concerned, we will leave that for next week's lesson. Suffice it to say at this point that we must look at the syncretism in which Israel was mired to understand what Jephthah was thinking and why he did what he did.

## VI. LESSONS FROM THE PASSAGE

### A. THE NATURE OF TRUE REPENTANCE

God's response to the cries of the Israelites indicates that true repentance is more than being sorry. It involves turning away from sin. Crying out for help while clinging to idols did no good. Similarly, we must be willing to give up the sins we cherish if we hope for the mercy of God in our lives.

### B. THE THIRD GENERATION PROBLEM

We have already discussed at considerable length the second generation problem as it manifests itself in the book of Judges. The children of those who have experienced the power of God in direct and obvious ways often fail to appreciate the experience of their parents, take God for granted, and fall into various forms of compromise. But what of the third generation? Compromise is followed by a religion so watered down, so devoid of spiritual truth, that God may hardly be said to be known at all. Jephthah was part of this third generation, and the missteps and tragedies of his career reflect the consequences of such a loose attachment to the Living God and the truth of His Word.

### C. SYNCRETISM, PRAGMATISM, AND LOUSY APOLOGETICS

The syncretism into which the Israelites had fallen has practical consequences. First of all, the elders of Gilead, even after they cry out to the Lord, seem to have no thought of spiritual qualifications for leadership. All they care about is finding the best military leader they can lay their hands on. When the church seeks to advance under such pragmatic considerations, it will get the leaders it deserves - ones who think like the world and seek to advance the church by the means that the world thinks suitable. God used Jephthah, certainly, but this does not mean that Jephthah was godly in his outlook on life or in his means for bringing about victory.

Secondly, the arguments Jephthah uses against the king of Ammon reek of the fruits of syncretism. Do we today seek to uphold the truth of the Christian faith by emphasizing its similarity with other religious systems, and thereby grant to those religious systems equal validity? If so, we have fallen into the same trap as that to which Jephthah succumbed. The result is a powerless apologetic. Only when we clearly affirm the uniqueness of God, His Son, and His truth can we truly confront the world in its error.

### D. LAND DISPUTES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

If the arguments advanced by Jephthah didn't sound familiar to you, you haven't been reading your newspaper lately. Palestinian and Israeli claims to disputed territories in the Middle East hinge on the same

types of arguments. Israelis claim that the land was given to them by God; Palestinians argue that they were displaced by the Israelis in 1948. Palestinians claim that they possessed the land for centuries prior to the Israeli settlements; Israelis claim that the Palestinians were nomads who had no legitimate claim, since the land was taken away from the Turks, not the Arabs. And so the debate goes on. . . .

## JUDGES AND RUTH X

Judges 11:34-12:15

In a book containing many unsavory incidents, the central one before us this week is perhaps one of the sorriest, yet it shows clearly what happens when God's people compromise with the values of the surrounding world.

### I. JEPHTHAH'S FOOLISH VOW (11:30-31, 34-40)

If the consequences of Israelite syncretism were clearly visible in the negotiations between Jephthah and the Ammonites before the battle, they are even more visible in the sad story of Jephthah and his daughter.

11:30-31 - While Scripture often includes examples of vows to the Lord, this one was completely outside the bounds of propriety. No excuse can be made for Jephthah in this circumstance. He had clearly accepted the pagan dictum that the shedding of human blood was an appropriate means of thanking the gods for their bounty and ensuring more of the same in the future (e.g., Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia prior to the Trojan War). Though animals were often kept in the house, they would hardly be described as "coming out of the door of my house to meet me." He clearly had human sacrifice in mind, though one of his servant girls would have been a more likely target (the idea of maidens streaming out to meet the conquering hero returning from the wars was common in that day, as in many times since); in any case, he was not expecting his daughter to become the victim of his promise.

11:34 - Much to his surprise, Jephthah's daughter emerges from the house to greet him on his return. The fact that she was an only child makes the situation even more pathetic, since offspring were counted upon to perpetuate the family name and inherit the family property. Without children, the inheritance from the Lord could not be maintained.

11:35 - While Jephthah's faithfulness to his vow may be admirable (see Psalm 15:4; Ecclesiastes 5:4-6), his knowledge of the Scriptures is not. God's hatred for human sacrifice (His command to Abraham notwithstanding) was such that provision was always made in the context of the law to allow an acceptable substitute for the offering of any human being. Passages such as Exodus 13:13-15 provide for the redemption of firstborn sons, while Leviticus 27:2-8 provides for a payment of money as a substitute for slaves given to the Lord as the result of a vow. Jephthah could thus have kept his vow without killing his daughter.

11:36-40 - The submissive attitude of Jephthah's daughter is remarkable; Jephthah had instilled in his family a strong sense of piety, though it was piety without knowledge. Even her request to roam the hills for two months mourning her lost fertility, however, betrays syncretism with Canaanite religion - in Canaanite mythology, the goddess Anat is said to have roamed the hills for the two darkest months of the winter season, mourning the death of Baal, the fertility god. The custom mentioned in verse 40 is recorded nowhere else in Scripture, nor does it appear elsewhere in Jewish tradition, though it appears to have lasted at least into the early part of the monarchy period.

The incident of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter is so horrific and offensive to human sensibilities that many commentators over the years have attempted to soften the blow of the passage by proposing alternative explanations. Most who have tried to do this have maintained that, rather than sacrificing his daughter, he devoted her to perpetual service in the sanctuary, so that she would live out the rest of her life as a virgin rather than being slain on an altar. Not only does the language of 11:31 prohibit such a

conclusion, however, but so does the practice of the age. When women were dedicated to the service of the temple in Canaanite culture, they were not lifelong virgins, but cult prostitutes. There is no parallel practice in Jewish law; even the example of Samuel, who was given to the Lord at an early age, had nothing to do with virginity - we know that he had sons, though they were a grief to him in his old age (I Samuel 8:1-3). Thus there is no possible justification, either in the text itself or in Canaanite or Jewish practice, for the conclusion that Jephthah's daughter was dedicated to a life of virginity in the service of God rather than being offered up to Him in unholy sacrifice.

## II. THE PRIDE OF EPHRAIM (12:1-7)

Phillies third baseman Mike Schmidt once said, "Philadelphia is the only city in which you can experience the thrill of victory and the agony of reading about it the next morning." Jephthah surely could have identified with these sentiments. Again we see the Ephraimites, as in the time of Gideon, striving for recognition and plunder after the battle is over. While Gideon was able to silence their complaints with flattery, Jephthah was unable to do so, and the result was civil war.

12:1 - The Ephraimites clearly consider Jephthah to be a usurper and view his position of authority as a threat to the clan structure that predominated in Israel at this time. They are thus prepared to overthrow and murder him.

12:2-3 - Jephthah defends himself and accuses the Ephraimites of failing to assist in the battle when summoned.

12:4 - Jephthah realizes that war is his only alternative and gathers his men for battle against the Ephraimites. The real motive of Ephraim is revealed in this passage; even more than glory and plunder, they seek land, claiming that the Gileadites have no tribal standing and thus are nothing more than "renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh." They therefore are attempting to lay claim to the land taken by Jephthah from the Ammonites.

12:5-6 - Jephthah's men seize the fords of the Jordan just south of the Sea of Galilee (the same fords that played such a prominent role in the Gideon narrative) and use regional pronunciation differences to identify fleeing Ephraimites, killing forty-two (probably *clans* or *troops*) of soldiers in the process.

12:7 - Jephthah only lives for six years after his victory. Since Samson was probably a contemporary of Jephthah, this brings us very close to the time of Eli and Samuel.

## III. IBZAN, ELON, AND ABDON (12:8-15)

Three different minor judges, three different regions - all were wealthy and made alliances through marriage, though their influence appears to have been short-lived (a total of twenty-five years if their judgeships were consecutive, as the text would seem to indicate).



#### IV. LESSONS FROM THE PASSAGE

##### A. THE SOLEMNITY OF VOWS

The sad incident of Jephthah's daughter sheds a different kind of light on the seriousness with which we should guard the words that we speak. Normally our words do not govern life and death in such a literal way, but the uniform testimony of the Scriptures is that the tongue can be a dangerous source of potential evil, so that we must guard it carefully. If it is true, as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, that our yeses and noes carry the same guarantee of truth as the most solemn of vows, we must indeed be careful about what we say.

##### B. THE DESTRUCTIVENESS OF SYNCRETISM ON OUR CHILDREN

People today don't sacrifice their daughters because of a misplaced sense of loyalty to God, but syncretism takes its toll in subtler ways. When the gods of our age - sports, entertainment, music - are given equal status with the true and living God, our children are sacrificed, more slowly but just as surely. How often are children taught, by the choices their parents make and the choices they themselves are permitted to make, that the gods of this age should be allowed to take precedence over the life of the church and its ministries? Are the consequences of such choices in the later lives of the children any less deadly than that made by Jephthah?

##### C. THE DESTRUCTIVENESS OF GREED AND ENVY

The tribe of Ephraim discovered, to its great cost, that jealousy is, as Iago said in Act III of *Othello*, "the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on." How many churches have been torn asunder by "civil wars" rooted in jealousy and envy - petty power plays among people who would never think of committing the more blatant sins for which they look down on others?



## JUDGES AND RUTH XI

### Judges 13-14

Today we begin the story of Samson, the last of the judges (with the exception of Samuel) and the one to whom the book devotes the most space. In this story, we find a paradox - a judge who willfully ignored the law, a Nazirite who repeatedly violated his vow, and a deliverer who never really delivered his people. In the portion of the story we are examining today, we will see the events surrounding his birth and his marriage.

#### I. THE BIRTH OF SAMSON (13:1-25)

The special circumstances surrounding the birth of Samson are reminiscent of those associated with the birth of Isaac, or even of Christ Himself.

13:1 - Another cycle of apostasy, this time simultaneous with the one connected with the Jephthah narrative.

13:2 - The geographical setting of the Samson story is the Shephelah, a region of rolling hills and forests (at least it was then) between the central mountains, where Jerusalem was located, and the coastal plain, the habitation of the Philistines. It was in this same general region that the battle between David and Goliath occurred. The tribe of Dan had been given this territory, but had been unable to hold it against the Philistines. As we will see in the narrative that follows the Samson story, a portion of the tribe had migrated northward and settled at the northern extremity of the Promised Land.

13:3-5 - The Angel of the Lord appears to Manoah's wife, as He had appeared to Gideon. Like Sarah and Hannah, she was barren; this serves to underscore the providential nature of the birth that was to follow (the same idea is seen in a much more extreme way with the virgin birth of Christ). The woman is told to keep the Nazirite vow on behalf of the child in her womb (the vow involved not drinking wine, cutting one's hair, or having contact with dead bodies). This is unusual because the Nazirite vow was generally temporary - a means of setting oneself apart to the service of God for a designated period of time. In Samson's case, however, it was to be lifelong. It is also worth noting that, if Samson was to be a lifelong Nazirite, the fact that his mother is instructed to keep the vow on his behalf while he is in the womb says something about the humanity of the child in the womb, and thus has a bearing on the abortion controversy. Note, too, that the NIV translation "from birth" is a little misleading; the phrase is literally "from the womb," and refers to something that begins at conception rather than birth.

13:6-8 - Manoah's wife tells him about her encounter, and he prays that the man of God would return to give further instructions about raising this special child (neither he nor his wife knows the identity of the visitor at this point).

13:9-14 - The angel reappears, Manoah's wife runs to get him, and the Angel repeats his instructions, but doesn't really answer Manoah's basic question - what the boy's life work is to be.

13:15-16 - Manoah makes a generous offer of hospitality - the offer of a meal would have been commonplace, but to include fresh meat, which was scarce, showed the esteem in which this special guest was held. The Angel refuses food - they still didn't know who He was - and asks that a sacrifice be made to God instead.

13:17-18 - Manoah asks the Angel's name and is told that it is "beyond understanding"; the word used here is the same one translated "Wonderful" in Isaiah 9:6, and thus provides one of many supporting evidences that the Angel of the Lord is in fact a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Second Person of the Trinity.

13:19-23 - Manoah offers the sacrifice, and the Angel of the Lord ascends to heaven in the flame, as he had done in the case of Gideon. Now the couple realize who their visitor has been and fall down in worship, fearful for their lives because they have seen God. Manoah's wife, however, realizes that God's intention toward them is gracious because He accepted their offering.

13:24-25 - Samson is born, and it is evident that the hand of the Lord is upon him in a special way.

## II. THE MARRIAGE OF SAMSON (14:1-20)

The fact that Samson was chosen by God to lead the people does not mean that he was a moral man, however, and his willfulness and lack of concern for spiritual things show up immediately.

14:1-4 - Marriages in those days represented the union of clans, and thus were normally arranged by the head of the clan, often without the consent, or sometimes even the knowledge, of those who were to marry (childhood betrothals were not uncommon). Such marriages were made for reasons of financial advantage or social status and gave no consideration to romantic feelings. Samson is thus arrogating to himself a privilege that belonged to his father, and in the process giving no heed to Israelite law, which forbid the marriage of Israelites to Canaanite women. In short, the young man was a spoiled brat with no concern whatsoever for the law of God. This is another example among many in the book of Judges that shows that the world of the Israelites was seriously out of kilter. We are told, however, that even this wickedness on Samson's part was something that God intended to use to forward His own purposes.

14:5-7 - Even though Samson himself was driving the arrangement, his father still had to undertake the negotiations over dowry, bride price, etc. As the family traveled to Timnah (only about five miles away), they were attacked by a lion - these were prevalent in the Near East at this time, as can be seen from numerous Egyptian and Assyrian inscriptions. The Spirit of the Lord comes upon Samson (this happens several times in the Samson narrative, always in connection with Samson attacking or being attacked), and he kills the lion with his bare hands (a similar feat was ascribed to Hercules in Greek mythology). They then continue to Timnah to conclude the negotiations for the marriage.

14:8-9 - On the way to the actual wedding ceremony - a seven-day feast climaxed by the consummation of the marriage in a tent provided for the purpose - they encountered the carcass of the lion, in which a swarm of bees had built a hive. Samson took some of the honey and shared it with his parents, but did not tell them where it had come from. They thus had no way of knowing the answer to the riddle he would tell later at the wedding feast.

14:10-11 - Samson paid for the wedding feast. The thirty companions were relatives or neighbors of the bride, who had the responsibility of making sure that the bride was treated well and also of caring for her should she be turned out by her husband. The size of the contingent indicates some doubts on the part of the woman's family concerning Samson.

14:12-13 - Samson, ever the entertainer and risk-taker, makes a large bet with his companions about a riddle he offers to tell them. The garments involved in the bet were costly - a fine suit of clothes for each of the companions. They readily agree - after all, the odds were thirty to one.

14:14 - The structure of a riddle typically involved language with a double meaning - a simple, obvious one and a more symbolic, obscure significance (cf. the riddle of the Sphinx - "What goes on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?") See also the riddles in the conversation between Bilbo Baggins and Gollum in *The Hobbit*. Sample riddles found at the end of the lesson). Samson's riddle referred to the honey he found in the lion's carcass; some have suggested that the plain meaning addressed in crude terms the results of excessive feasting at the wedding celebration.

14:15 - Samson's companions have no intention of putting out the money for a new set of clothes for the arrogant young groom, so they threaten the bride (some protectors they are!) and her family if she doesn't find out the answer to the riddle.

14:16-17 - This weakness for feminine wiles bodes ill for Samson's future.

14:18 - They answer Samson's riddle with one of their own - the answer is that the enticements of a woman are sweeter than honey and stronger than a lion. He understands their meaning and responds in kind, accusing them of interfering with his wife. If nothing else, Samson was clever and quick-witted besides being physically imposing.

14:19-20 - Samson then went to Ashkelon, one of the five cities of the Philistines (Ekron, Gath, Gaza, and Ashdod were the others), and killed thirty men, stripped them of their clothing, and gave the plunder to his companions. He then returned home, thus rejecting the woman he had just married. As was the custom, she was then given to one of the men of the village who had served as her guardians at the feast; after all, this was part of their responsibility.

### III. LESSONS FROM THE PASSAGE

#### A. GOD'S DIRECT INVOLVEMENT IN THE FULFILLMENT OF THE COVENANT

As is seen so often in the Pentateuchal narratives, God acts directly and obviously at key moments to make it clear that the fulfillment of the covenant is in His hands. Like the birth of Isaac, the miraculous birth of Samson leaves no question that he has been chosen by God.

#### B. GOD TAKES WHAT MAN INTENDS FOR EVIL AND USES IT FOR HIS GLORY

Samson was not a good or a godly man, but God uses even his sin to glorify Himself and advance the cause of His people. With such a God in charge of the events of our lives and the welfare of our church, how can we be anything other than confident?

## SAMPLE RIDDLES:

God made Adam out of dust,  
But thought it best to make me fust  
So I was made before the man,  
To answer God's most holy plan.

My body He did not make complete,  
But without legs or arms or feet;  
My ways and actions He did control,  
But I was born without a soul.

A living being I became  
'Twas Adam gave to me my name;  
When from his presence I withdrew,  
I no more of Adam ever knew.

I did my Maker's laws obey;  
From them I never went astray.  
Thousands of miles I roamed in fear,  
And seldom did on earth appear.

But God did something in me see,  
And put a living soul in me,  
A soul of me my God did claim,  
And took from me that soul again.

And when from me that soul had fled,  
I was the same as when first made;  
And without hands, or feet, or soul,  
I travel now from pole to pole.

I labor hard, both day and night;  
To fallen men I give great light;  
Thousands of people, young and old,  
May by my death great light behold.

To heaven I shall never go,  
Nor to the grave, nor hell below.

Now as these lines, my friends, you read,  
Just search the Scriptures with great heed,  
And if my name you do not find,  
It's very strange - I guess you're blind. [whale]

Thirty white horses on a red hill,  
First they champ,  
Then they stamp,  
Then they stand still. [teeth]

A box without hinges, key, or lid,  
Yet golden treasure inside is hid. [egg]

This thing all things devours:  
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;  
Gnaws iron, bites steel;  
Grinds hard stones to meal;  
Slays kings, ruins town,  
And beats high mountain down. [time]

The man who made it didn't want it,  
The man who bought it didn't use it,  
The man who used it didn't know it. [coffin]

## JUDGES AND RUTH XII

### Judges 15

We saw last week that, despite Samson's arrogant attitudes and ungodly motives, God intended to use him against Israel's Philistine oppressors. An inkling of the way in which Samson was to carry out that role appeared in last week's passage with the murder of thirty Philistines to cover the lost wager over the riddle told at the wedding feast. The consequences of that riddle will continue to multiply in this week's passage, as we see God using Samson's anger and lust for blood and vengeance to break the Philistine yoke.

#### I. SAMSON AND THE JACKALS (15:1-5)

15:1 - You may recall that last week, after the incident with the riddle, Samson had stormed out of the wedding feast, leaving his bride behind. The bride's father, assuming that Samson had no further interest in the marriage, had given the girl to one of the attendants provided by the bride's family. However, that was not the only possible interpretation that could be placed upon Samson's actions. It was not unusual in those days for a wedding feast, during which the marriage was consummated, to be followed by a probationary period during which the bride would continue to live with her own family. Often, the purpose of the probationary period was to see if she got pregnant, since during this time her new husband would visit her, bearing gifts and sleeping with his new bride in her father's house. If she failed to get pregnant in a reasonable time - often four to six months - the marriage might be called off. Apparently, it was this custom that Samson had in mind, since some time after the wedding feast he returned to his bride's house bearing a suitable gift and intending to share his wife's bed.

15:2-3 - The woman's father refused to admit Samson, and instead told him that he had given his daughter to one of the attendants ("friend" is a bit of a misnomer here, to say the least). Then, in the typical fashion of inter-clan marriage negotiations, he offers a substitute - a younger sister whom he describes as more attractive anyway. But Samson stomps away, vowing revenge.

15:4-5 - Samson took his revenge on the Philistines by setting fire to most of their year's crop (the shocks would be the grain that had already been harvested but not yet threshed, while the standing grain would not yet have been cut; the grape and olive crops would not yet be ready for harvesting, but by burning the vines and the trees Samson destroyed, not only that year's crops, but the potential for crops in future years). The way that he did this was to capture three hundred jackals (the term was used to describe a variety of small carnivores of the dog family; jackals, which hunt in packs and therefore might be captured in large number, are more likely than foxes, which hunt alone and are territorial, though both inhabited Palestine at this time), tie their tails together in pairs, and attach torches to each pair, setting them loose in the fields of the Philistines. The resulting devastation was no small matter, both regarding food supplies and commerce. While the destruction was probably local only, rather than applying to the entire crop of the Philistine confederation of five cities, it was enough to bestir the Philistines to put an end to Samson's guerilla warfare once and for all.

#### II. SAMSON IN HIDING (15:6-13)

15:6-7 - The Philistines then did a little detective work - very little, since Samson had made no secret of his anger, and thus their list of suspects must have been rather short - and discovered who was responsible for the destruction of the crops. They then took it out on Samson's erstwhile wife and her family - so much for being protectors of the bride!

15:8 - Violence begets more violence, and Samson was now determined to exact further revenge against his enemies. He slaughtered a large number of Philistines, then hid in a cave near his home (the exact location is uncertain).

15:9-10 - The Philistines then gathered an army to try to capture Samson and were prepared to take on the entire tribe of Judah if necessary. Since Samson was a Danite, the men of Judah wondered what the Philistines were upset with them about (remember, the tribes were nothing more than a loose confederation; there was no real sense of nationhood at this point). The Philistines offered the men of Judah a deal somewhat similar to what President Bush offered the Taliban during the search for Osama bin Laden - turn over our man and we won't attack you. Unlike the Taliban, however, the men of Judah agreed to turn Samson over in order to stave off a Philistine invasion.

15:11 - The men of Judah confront Samson for stirring their overlords up to violence, and he uses the same excuse the Philistines had used - "I was only doing to them what they did to me." Self-defense, apparently, covers a multitude of sins.

15:12-13 - Samson agreed to turn himself in if the men of Judah would not kill him themselves. They swore not to do so, and he allowed himself to be bound and led to the Philistine encampment.

### III. SAMSON AND THE JAWBONE (15:14-20)

15:14 - As Samson approached the Philistines, they came rushing toward him with a bloodthirsty war cry on their lips. At this point, the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he broke the ropes like they were charred pieces of cloth.

15:15-17 - He found the carcass of a donkey lying nearby and seized the jawbone, using it as a weapon against the charging Philistine soldiers. It would have been a formidable weapon in the hands of a strong man - lightweight, about nine inches long and at least half an inch thick, probably with teeth still embedded in it. With it, he killed a thousand Philistines, and, true to the love for words and literary turn of mind we saw last week, composed a little ditty to celebrate the occasion. As noted often in the Pentateuchal narratives, the incident gives rise to the naming of the location where the battle occurred.

15:18-19 - This little story is included simply for the purpose of giving the provenance of another place name. Sedimentary rock, of which much of the region consists, is highly porous and often contains pockets of water under the surface of the rock. God, in a way that the passage does not describe, opens up such a cavity to provide water for Samson; the name given to the location means *Caller's Spring*.

15:20 - We are told here that Samson led the Israelites for twenty years. Next week, we will see one more encounter with the Philistines followed by the climactic story of Samson and Delilah. In the final assessment, however, Samson may lead, but he does not deliver Israel. It is David, the true king who is the antithesis of the flawed leaders in the book of Judges, who finally delivers Israel from the Philistines.



#### IV. LESSONS FROM THE PASSAGE

##### A. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD - AGAIN

We see here, for the umpteenth time in the book of Judges, that God is able to deliver His people through the instrumentality of the weak and the sinful. Samson's burning anger becomes the vehicle for the burning of the Philistine crops and the destruction of a Philistine military detachment. Is there a calamity, and God has not done it? If God can choose to judge the Israelites by means of the wicked Assyrians and Babylonians, God can certainly choose to judge the wicked Philistines by using wicked Israelites. He is able to use the wicked and the righteous alike to execute His righteous judgments among men.

##### B. VIOLENCE BEGETS VIOLENCE

There is also a lesson on the level of human behavior to be derived from this passage. The cycle of violence and revenge found in the chapter is exactly what we would expect from the Bible's teaching concerning human nature. It is in our nature, not to "do unto others as we would have them do unto us," but instead to "do unto others as they have done to us." Such a spiral goes inevitably downward, and only the grace of God that changes the human heart can cause us to love our enemies and do good to those who have done violence to us, whether the violence be of a physical or a psychological nature.



## JUDGES AND RUTH XIII

### Judges 16

Today we finish the story of Samson with the famous account of Samson and Delilah. As has been the case previously, the Samson narrative underscores the pathetic spiritual condition of Israel in the time of the judges by revealing the spiritual bankruptcy of its leaders.

#### I. THE INCIDENT AT GAZA (16:1-3)

16:1-2 - The story told here is included largely to add to the accounts of Samson's prodigious feats of strength, but it also underscores his moral bankruptcy. Gaza was one of the five chief cities of the Philistines, and Samson is ready to take the risk of sneaking in right under the noses of the Philistines in order to gratify his lusts. This also indicates the extent of his arrogance. He was convinced of his own invincibility - a trait that will quickly lead to his downfall, as was the case in the Greek myths with their condemnation of *hubris*.

16:3 - The gate Samson ripped from its moorings would have been six to twelve feet wide, made of wood, with its posts planted in stone footings. The bars served to lock the gates at night; this was accomplished by means of a series of dowel rods inserted into the bars after they were slid into holes in the posts designed for that purpose. Samson simply ripped the entire thing out of the stone footings and carried it to the top of a nearby hill. Note that Hebron was forty miles away; the text does not say he carried the gates to Hebron, but only to the top of a hill facing in the direction of Hebron - still an incredible feat of strength.

#### II. SAMSON AND DELILAH (16:4-22)

16:4 - Again we find that Samson's inability to control his sexual desires gets him into trouble. The valley of Sorek was where he lived. There is no indication that Delilah was a prostitute, nor even that she was a Philistine. In fact, she has an Israelite name. Ironically, when Samson finally falls for one of his own people, she leads him to his downfall.

16:5 - The bribe here is enormous, indicating how desperate the Philistines were to get rid of Samson. The typical annual wage for a worker was ten shekels. Since there were five lords of the Philistines, they are making Delilah an offer she can't refuse - an amount of money that it would take the average worker 550 years to earn. In modern terms, the bribe would be somewhere in the range of fifteen million dollars. Notice also that they believe that Samson's strength has a supernatural source and are bribing Delilah to find the antidote that will overcome the powerful magic with which Samson has been destroying their people.

16:6-9 - According to ancient occult texts, certain fibers and colors had the property of being able to counteract the powers of magic. Samson is thus playing games with these well-known superstitions, while remaining confident of his own powers. The thongs referred to here were usually made from the dried intestines of cattle, or sometimes the tendons of bulls.

16:10-12 - Delilah continues to weave her feminine wiles, much as Samson's wife had done earlier. Samson continues to play the game, this time telling her that new ropes would neutralize his strength.

16:13-14 - As Delilah continues to plead, Samson begins to weaken. This time, he tells her that his strength can be neutralized if she weaves his long hair into a fabric being woven on a loom. While he is still playing off local superstitions - the hair was considered to be the seat of the life force, and such weaving would have

constituted a binding action - he is getting uncomfortably close to the truth by bringing his hair into the picture.

16:15-17 - Delilah continues to nag and Samson finally tells her the truth. Even then, his answer shows the low level of his own understanding. It was not his long hair, of course, that was the source of his strength, but the Lord. It is also worth noting that, in divulging this information, Samson is taking a serious step. In the past, he had often violated his Nazirite vow, but the cutting of the hair was the typical action used to terminate the vow. He was not now simply disobeying - he was renouncing the vow under which God had placed him for all his days. This is not merely sin; it is apostasy.

16:18-19 - Delilah then calls on the lords of the Philistines as before and proceeds to shave Samson's head. His strength deserts him, not because he is shorn, but because the Lord is no longer with him. Note that the Philistine rulers would have had no trouble believing that Samson's strength lay in his hair. In the Aegean region from which they had come, several myths have survived of men whose long hair made them invincible. For example, Nisus, king of Megara, had such hair; when his daughter Scylla fell in love with Minos, king of Crete, she cut off her father's hair in order to enable her lover to gain victory over him.

16:20 - Samson is so far from the Lord at this point that he believes the strength he possesses is an innate characteristic, so that losing his hair will make no difference. He knows when he awakes that his hair is gone, but thinks it won't matter. He is not even aware, however, that the Lord has departed from him.

16:21-22 - As we saw at the beginning of the book of Judges, it was common practice at the time to incapacitate captured enemies to keep them from doing damage in the future (cutting off thumbs and big toes, for instance). In this case, Samson is blinded. He is made to grind grain in the prison. Note that, unlike the way in which this scene is often illustrated, Samson would have used a small hand mill; the large millstones driven by donkeys, oxen, or slaves were not introduced into the region until after the Old Testament era.

### III. THE DEATH OF SAMSON (16:23-31)

16:23-24 - The Philistines worshiped Dagon, a fertility god that was portrayed as half man, half fish (natural for a coastal, seafaring people to associate fish with prosperity, though it appears that Dagon was not a god they brought with them from the Aegean region, but one borrowed from the local Canaanite population). Deplorably enough, Samson's downfall becomes an occasion for praise to be given to the false deity of the Philistines.

16:25 - They gathered for a religious feast and brought Samson out in order to mock him for their entertainment. In all likelihood, this "entertainment" amounted to placing objects before the blinded warrior, watching him trip and fall, and having assailants he could not see strike him from behind.

16:26-27 - The temple at Gaza has not been excavated, but similar ones in the region have been found. Such temples consisted of an open central courtyard surrounded by a roofed enclosure, supported by wooden two pillars mounted on stone pedestals and kept in place by the weight of the roof they supported. Dignitaries would sit in the shaded seats under the roof, while the common people would sit on the roof and enjoy the festivities from the cheap seats. Such a notable captive produced a standing room only crowd of three thousand Philistines.

16:28 - It is for this act, and probably this act alone, that Samson is included in the list of men of faith in Hebrews 11. He finally acknowledges God as the source of his strength and asks for it to be granted to him one more time, though even here his motives are less than godly.

18:29-31 - Samson twists the pillars off their stone pedestals and the roof collapses, killing those underneath as well as those seated on top, along with Samson himself. He is then taken away and buried in his family's tomb, leaving behind him no lasting deliverance. When we get to the book of I Samuel, the Philistines are still plaguing Israel.

#### IV. LESSONS FROM THE NARRATIVE

##### A. THE DECEPTIVENESS OF PRIDE

Samson was obviously a proud man. He had no problems with self-esteem, to say the least. There was no situation in which he did not feel capable of coming out on top. But "pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18), as the story of Samson well illustrates.

##### B. THE POWER OF SEXUAL DESIRES

It is not for nothing that Paul describes sexual desire as a fire in I Corinthians 7:9. Uncontrolled passion has been the downfall of many godly men and women. Samson, it would seem, saw little reason to control his desires, and they wound up destroying him. How many others, both inside and outside of Scripture, have followed the same path? Those who would serve Christ must guard themselves carefully against that which is in all of us.

##### C. THE DANGER OF FLIRTING WITH SIN

In the games Samson played with Delilah, he seemed to enjoy getting as close as he could to the edge of the cliff without falling over. As usually happens, he failed, and fell to his death. The wise man keeps as far away from the cliff edge as possible rather than seeing how close he can get to the brink. Samson's confidence in himself outweighed his desire to please God, so he trusted his own strength to keep him from disaster.

##### D. OUR GIFTS OR GOD'S?

Samson had little or no cognizance of the grace of God at work in his life. His strength was something he had always possessed, so he naturally assumed that it was inherent in who he was. How many of us are tempted to assume that the gifts we possess are ours by nature and by right, rather than recognizing that they have come from God and may be removed as easily as they have been given?



## JUDGES AND RUTH XIV

### Judges 17-18

The last five chapters of the book of Judges consist of a series of appendices. The narratives found there do not relate to the activity of the judges of Israel, but serve to illustrate that, among the lives of the people during the period of the judges, the fact of not having a strong central government led to religious and moral chaos. This week, we will look at the story of Micah and his personal shrine. Next week, we will finish the book of Judges by examining the gruesome narrative of the Levite and his concubine and the resulting Benjamite civil war.

#### I. MICAH'S UNAUTHORIZED SHRINE (17:1-13)

We have already seen that the Israelites in the time of the Judges fell frequently into syncretistic forms of worship, mixing the worship of Yahweh with local Canaanite cults. The story of Micah demonstrates, not only the spiritual ignorance of the common people, but also the extent to which the Levites - those entrusted with the oversight of the worship of God - were infected with the spirit of the age.

17:1-2 - We are first introduced to Micah when he returns money he stole from his mother. The amount is substantial - we saw last week that ten shekels was the common annual wage - and was probably the mother's dowry, which she was saving against future need to provide for her own support. When she discovered that her nest egg had been stolen, she uttered a curse against the thief. Micah, fearing the power of the curse, confessed his theft and returned the money. His mother then turned the curse into a blessing, much as Balaam had done under the constraint of God when Balak had paid him to curse Israel. The fact that Micah had stolen his own poor mother's sole source of support in her old age indicates something of the moral level to which Israel had sunk, however.

17:3-4 - Micah's mother, grateful for the return of her money, dedicated it to the Lord and gave part of it to a silversmith to manufacture images for use in worshiping the Lord. Such a practice was clearly contrary to the Second Commandment, but no one in the entire story seems to have been bothered by it. Much like the golden calves manufactured by Aaron and Jeroboam, these images represented syncretistic worship in that God was being venerated by means of the methods used by the pagan civilizations surrounding Israel.

17:5-6 - The Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant were by this time at Shiloh (as we see at the beginning of I Samuel), but apparently people all over the country felt free to establish local shrines for the worship of God. This is exactly what Micah now does, housing his new idols in his home and consecrating one of his sons to serve as the priest of the shrine. He even made an ephod (as Gideon had done earlier) for the purpose of divining the will of God. The writer of Judges again links this outrageously unbiblical behavior to the lack of a strong central government.

17:7-9 - The tribe of Levi, entrusted with maintaining the worship of God among the people, had received no inheritance of land. Instead, its members were to live among the other tribes and receive support from them, allowing them freedom to carry out their functions of serving God. Thus, there is nothing unusual, either about the fact that the Levite mentioned here had lived in Bethlehem, or that he is moving to a new location and seeking out a new area of service. It becomes quickly obvious, however, that his idea of what constituted an appropriate ministry was unacceptably broad.

17:10-12 - Micah then offered to hire the Levite to be the priest in his shrine (after all, the prestige of his new installation would increase immeasurably if he had a *real* Levite to officiate there, instead of just using one of his sons). The law makes no provision for the Levites to be paid, though they are to receive appropriate portions of what is offered in sacrifice. Micah, then, succeeds in turning religious service into a business proposition, offering the young man a standard salary and throwing in room and board in the bargain. The Levite agrees, and Micah consecrates him as his priest.

17:13 - One of the consequences of syncretism is that people become convinced that the mere observance of certain outward forms guarantees God's approval and blessing, even if the entire operation is contrary to God's law in almost every respect.

## II. THE DANITE MIGRATION (18:1-31)

The religious disorder found in the account of Micah is mirrored by the political disorder revealed by the Danite migration.

18:1 - The tribe of Dan had been assigned territory in the Shephelah between the central mountains and the coastal plain, and thus were nearest to the land occupied by the Philistines, as we saw when we studied the story of Samson. It appears, however, that some of the Danites, frustrated at their inability to dislodge the Philistines from their inheritance and not even considering the fact that their disobedience to God might have something to do with this, decided to search out greener pastures.

18:2-4 - These restless Danites then send out five spies to scout out new territory. As the men travel northward, they pass by Micah's shrine in Ephraim, where they spend the night. While they are there, they recognize the young Levite, whom they had apparently met previously. He then explains the arrangement under which he is living with Micah and caring for his shrine.

18:5-6 - Hearing that he is a priest and possesses an ephod, they ask him to inquire of the Lord for them, and he assures them that their journey will receive God's blessing (cf. I Kings 22:12).

18:7-10 - The men from Dan then continue on their journey, traveling about a hundred miles northward to the foot of Mount Hermon, where they find the small town of Laish, located in a fertile region without any noticeable means of protection (the town of Sidon, located far away on the Mediterranean coast, exercised nominal rule over the citizens of Laish). The Danites then returned to their fellow tribesmen and reported what they had found, encouraging the others to join them in falling upon and destroying the unsuspecting people of Laish.

18:11-13 - Six hundred foot soldiers then set out for Laish, and again stop on the way at Micah's house. The passage also notes in passing how Mahaneh Dan ("Dan's camp") had received its name from this migration.

18:14-17 - The spies then entered Micah's shrine and plundered its contents, while the six hundred soldiers from Dan guarded the gate of the house. They stole the idols, not only because of their monetary value, but also because they believed the images and the ephod bore supernatural power.

18:18-21 - When the priest objects, they offer him a promotion. Isn't it better, after all, to be the priest of an entire tribe (or at least the part of a tribe that undertook the migration) than to be the priest of one man's



family alone? The Levite, convinced by their argument, helps them to steal the sacred images and joins them in their journey.

18:22-23 - When Micah discovers the theft, he gathers some of his neighbors and pursues the Danites, intending to recover his images and his priest.

18:24-26 - Pathetically, Micah begs them to return his images, insisting that they have left him with nothing. They threaten violence if he continues to plead his case, and he, realizing that his cause is hopeless, returns home while the Danites abscond with his idols and his priest.

18:27-29 - The Danites then continue on to Laish, destroy the city and its unsuspecting populace, and settle themselves on the site, renaming the city for their ancestor and progenitor of their tribe.

18:30-31 - The Danites then established their own shrine, where Micah's gods became the objects of their worship and the Levite initiated an hereditary priesthood. The seriousness of Israel's apostasy is indicated here when the text finally gets around to identifying the Levite at the center of the story. He is Jonathan, a descendant of Moses (like many brief biblical genealogies of this type, this one is no doubt truncated; more than two generations had passed since the time of Moses). If the family of Moses himself could go so far astray in violating the law that God had given the people through him, what might one expect of the rest of the population? Secondly, it is worth noting that the city described in this narrative is the same one in which Jeroboam set up one of his golden calves after the division of the kingdom. The idolatry that had begun in the days of the Judges continued on in different forms until God destroyed the Northern Kingdom (note that the comment at the end of verse 30 must be an editorial insertion from a later period).

### III. LESSONS FROM THE STORY

#### A. A FORM OF GODLINESS WITHOUT ITS POWER

It is very clear in this narrative that both Micah and the Danites were convinced that the outward forms of religion were sufficient for their needs. That idolatrous worship would be blessed by God apart from any obedience or heart commitment as long as that worship was under the supervision of a Levite is utterly preposterous. God only blesses that worship that is offered to Him with a humble heart and in obedience to the commands He has given. Apostolic succession no more sanctifies idolatrous worship than does Levitical succession. Here one gets a glimpse of the point behind the Regulative Principle - that worship not done in God's way soon loses track of God altogether and becomes little more than empty form.

#### B. RELIGION ON THE BUSINESS MODEL

The Levite in this story is the classic hireling priest, much like Balaam the hireling prophet and the Pharisees in the New Testament, whom Jesus accused of being hireling shepherds. When religion becomes a business, God is dishonored. The Levite not only accepts a salary, but proceeds to move on as soon as someone else offers a better one, even if it means turning a blind eye to highway robbery. When the church stoops to using the practices of the secular business world, it is not long before it finds itself operating on the basis of the motives of that world.

### C. MICAH LEFT WITH NOTHING

Micah's plaintive cry in 18:24 is a real tragedy. He truly believed that, without his idols and his priest, he had nothing. What of God Himself? Micah clearly know nothing of His presence. Is our sense of well-being based on outward forms or prized possessions? Is there anything that we could lose that would make us feel like we were left with nothing, as Micah claimed? If so, that object, person, or relationship is the ground of our faith and security rather than the true and living God. Instead, may we be like Job, who after having lost everything, cried out, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him!"

## JUDGES AND RUTH XV

### Judges 19-21

The book of Judges has, in many ways, pictured the downward spiral of the Israelites as the cycles of apostasy, repentance, and deliverance have repeated themselves through the narrative. That downward spiral culminates in what may well be the most graphically revolting story in all of Scripture - the tale of the Levite and his concubine. Where, we may well ask ourselves, is the edifying purpose in a story such as this?

#### I. THE LEVITE AND HIS CONCUBINE (19:1-30)

19:1 - A concubine was a wife of lesser status - she might be a slave, a prize of war, or a woman who had entered into marriage without benefit of a dowry. In any case, such an arrangement would be recognized by all parties from the time of the marriage contract. Reasons for such arrangements might include the desire for a sex partner by a man whose wife was past her prime or the need to produce children in a case where the original wife proved infertile (e.g. Hagar and Sarah).

19:2-3 - We are not told the cause of the infidelity, but in any case it was inappropriate for the wife of a man in the priestly tribe (Leviticus 21:7). He thus is in no hurry to get her back, but finally decides to track her down; we are not told whether the cause for his change of heart was love, lust, embarrassment, or something else. In any case, her father is glad to see the Levite, preferring to have his daughter supported by someone else rather than having to care for her himself.

19:4-10 - We here get a glimpse of the convoluted nature of Middle Eastern hospitality. The responsibility of the host was to make the guest feel welcome, and the girl's father certainly played his role to the hilt. Finally, the Levite manages to pull himself away, but finds himself unable to make the return trip before sunset. Note that the entire narrative takes place within a region no more than a day's journey in size - none of the places in the story are more than thirty miles apart. Jerusalem here is still referred to as Jebus because it was still in the hands of the Jebusites.

19:11-15 - Uncertain of the kind of reception they might receive in a Canaanite city, the travelers go on to Gibeah, inhabited by Benjamites. Here, however, they find no hospitality at first and prepare to spend the night in the town square. Note that this was a serious breach of etiquette, since hospitality was (and still is) one of the fundamental values of Near Eastern culture, and speaks very badly of the moral condition of the Israelites.

19:16-21 - Finally, an old Ephraimite who was living in the city offers them the use of his home. They politely disclaim any need for his help, but then gratefully accept his further entreaties. Note that when they say they are on their way to the house of the Lord, they could be referring either to a local shrine such as the one we saw in the house of Micah last week, or to Shiloh, the nearby town where the Ark of the Covenant was then housed.

19:22 - Sodom and Gomorrah revisited - the inclusion of this incident is surely no accident, and indicates the depths to which the Israelites had sunk in their departure from the ways of God.

19:23-25 - The dreadful state of morality in Israel in the time of the judges is reflected here in a number of ways. The demand for homosexual gang rape is atrocious in its own right, but one should add to that the willingness of both the Ephraimite and the Levite to sacrifice women - daughter and wife, respectively - to

save their own skins (how different is the injunction of Ephesians 5:25!), and the breach of hospitality that occurred when the Ephraimite cavalierly offered the wife of his guest to the mob (she should have been under his protection as well). As occurred in Genesis 19, the guest saves his host from the lethal mob, but by quite different means.

19:26-28 - The concubine is abused all night by the mob and dies on the doorstep of the Ephraimite's home. Her husband tries to rouse her in the morning, but, finding her dead, slings her body over the back of his donkey and makes his way home.

19:29-30 - This disgusting action was a summons to war (see I Samuel 11:7). The implication was that anyone who did not answer the summons would be treated as the corpse had been treated.

## II. THE BENJAMITE CIVIL WAR (20:1-48)

Strangely, this is the only united action taken by the Israelites in the entire book of Judges. It seems they are moving toward a sense of nationhood in spite of themselves.

20:1 - Men from throughout Israel respond to the summons (who wouldn't have under the circumstances?). They gather at Mizpah, a central location in the territory of Benjamin often used as a gathering place before the conquest of Jerusalem (Joshua 18:26; I Samuel 7:16).

20:2-7 - The Israelites gather together (note again the uncertainty of the numbers involved, since the word translated *thousand* can also mean *clan* or *troop*) and hear the Levite's account of the incident. He tells the story selectively, exaggerating the threat to his life while leaving out the fact that he had *given* his concubine to the angry mob.

20:8-11 - The gathered assembly decides to punish Gibeah and chooses by lot those who will gather provisions for the army rather than fighting.

20:12-17 - The Israelite army advises the people of Benjamin to surrender the inhabitants of Gibeah, but they refuse to do so, instead taking up arms on behalf of the perpetrators (when the Taliban protected Osama bin Laden, they were doing nothing historically novel). The Benjamites, though badly outnumbered, boasted an elite troop of left-handed slingshot artists (remember Ehud's left-handedness?) and hoped to give the Israelite army all it could handle.

20:18 - The Israelites go to Bethel to ask the Lord about the plan for battle and receive the answer that Judah is to lead. Along with the reference in Judges 1:2, this little incident underscores the role for which God had chosen the tribe of Judah, and bookends the entire narrative with references to the kingly tribe that contrast with the chaotic state of the people without a godly monarch.

20:19-28 - The initial assaults on Gibeah are failures, as the Benjamites drive off the Israelite army, inflicting heavy casualties. God makes it clear, however, that the Israelites are to continue the attack. The weeping, prayers, fasting, and sacrifices indicate that the hearts of the Israelites were in the right place, at least. Note that the mention of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron, could mean one of two things - either this incident occurred relatively early in the period of the judges (unlikely, given the mention of Dan and Beersheba as the northern and southern boundaries of Israel; remember that Dan had only migrated

northward in Judges 18), or the Phinehas mentioned was the son of Eli, making the genealogy incomplete and placing the incident described during the childhood of Samuel.

20:29-46 - The battle strategy is similar to that used by Joshua at Ai. A frontal assault is followed by a planned retreat, in which the overconfident defenders of the city are drawn away from their gates. While the battle is being fought, a reserve force comes in behind the Benjamite army and burns the city to the ground, then turns and encircles the Benjamites, who are then totally overwhelmed. Note that the numbers in verse 25 could indicate the loss of twenty-five divisions (the details of the destruction of the Benjamite divisions are found in verses 44-45) along with one hundred of the elite troops, leaving only six hundred men behind (presumably one of the Benjamite divisions had been destroyed in the fighting of the first two days).

20:47-48 - The six hundred survivors flee to nearby caves, while the Israelite army subjects the entire territory of Benjamin to the ban - utter destruction like that visited on Jericho. The willingness of the troops to pass up the opportunity for slaves and plunder indicates the extent of their indignation against their Benjamite brothers for the treatment given to the Levite's concubine.

### III. THE RESTORATION OF BENJAMIN (21:1-25)

21:1 - Another foolish oath, indicating that even among those with what appear to be godly motives on the surface, the real understanding of God's ways is severely limited.

21:2-4 - They cry out to the Lord, but apparently He gives them no answer, for they quickly begin to develop strategies of their own for compensating for their dreadful lack of foresight.

21:5-14 - Strategy number one involves carrying out the curse implied in the original summons to battle. They decided to find out if anyone had not responded to the Levite's summons and discovered that the men of Jabesh Gilead had not done so. They then sent a detachment to slaughter the inhabitants of the town with the exception of the unmarried women, who were then taken and given to the Benjamites who remained in hiding in the caves of Rimmon. They were still two hundred women short, however. What were they to do now?

21:15-23 - Strategy number two involves arranging for the remaining Benjamites to kidnap wives for themselves. The festival at Shiloh mentioned here was syncretistic in character and apparently borrowed certain elements from the Canaanite fertility rites, during which virgins would dance outdoors in celebration of the harvest. The brazenness of the technicality cited here to allow the Israelites to get around their oath is merely one more indicator of the moral level to which the nation had fallen.

21:24-25 - Is it any wonder that, when these Israelites finally did decide that they needed a king, they wanted one that was "like the other nations"?

### IV. LESSONS FROM THE STORY

#### A. THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Feminists love Deborah, but one doesn't hear them refer too often to the other women in the book of Judges - Jephthah's daughter, Samson's wife, Delilah, the Levite's concubine, or the girls kidnaped into marriage at the end of the book. The degraded state of women here is not only a reflection of the sinful

condition of the Israelites; it was endemic in the culture. Note that, under Islam, things haven't changed much. Christianity, on the other hand, despite feminist claims to the contrary, has been the greatest force in the history of the world in uplifting the cause of women. Ephesians 5 could not have been penned by someone from any other religious tradition, and provides guidelines for a strong Christian testimony in a world where both men and women are confused about their gender roles and inclined to abuse one another.

#### B. BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER

The tendency of brothers to stop fighting with one another only long enough to unite against a common foe is proverbial. Such loyalty can be misplaced when it causes one to defend the indefensible. In the same way that the Benjamites had no business defending the inhabitants of Gibeah after their monstrous action, so those who seek to be godly must stand with God against those who sin, even if they are those closest to us. Do Christian parents try to defend their children when they have done wrong at school, or do they support the discipline that is needed? On a fundamental level, the principle is the same. Note that this section also could have been titled "My country, right or wrong!"

#### C. THE BATTLE BELONGS TO THE LORD

God ordered the Israelites into battle, but they were defeated the first two times they engaged the enemy. When God tells someone to fight, the victory will come, but in God's time and in God's way. For one of the few times in the book of Judges, the people responded rightly, seeking God's face. He doesn't promise that all will go smoothly, just that His people ultimately will triumph.

#### D. WHEN GOD IS SILENT, THIS IS NOT THE TIME TO WING IT

In Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*, Thomas More presents a classic argument in the courtroom scene where he attempts to defend himself against charges of high treason. More had refused to sign the Act of Supremacy declaring Henry VIII head of the Church of England. The petulant monarch insisted that refusal to sign implied rebellion against the king's authority, and thus constituted treason. More argued that, according to law, silence implies consent, and therefore his refusal to sign the act must legally be construed as consent to its provisions rather than opposition to its content. He lost both the argument and his head shortly thereafter.

The men of Israel in Judges 21 also seemed to assume that silence meant consent - since God did not answer their inquiries, they figured that they were free to follow their own strategies for resolving the problem into which they had foolishly gotten themselves. Too often, Christians do the same thing, arguing that, where the Bible is silent, they are on their own and able to follow their own inclinations. This makes rationalization of the things we want to do anyway fatefully simple. We must remember that, ultimately, there is nothing about which God is silent. He has revealed all we need for life and godliness in His Word, which must be consulted for the principles that govern all decisions of life.

## JUDGES AND RUTH XVI

### Ruth 1-2

Today we begin the study of what could easily be considered the third appendix to the book of Judges. The story of Ruth, unlike the other appendices, shows that there remained in the land some who were godly, and that God was continuing to watch over His faithless people and move among them to bring about the promised redemption. Not only does the story of Ruth connect the chaos of the period of the judges to the reign of David, the righteous king with whom the anarchy of the pre-monarchical period is so often contrasted, but it points further on, toward the incarnation of the Son of God through the line of David.

#### I. FAMINE AND TRAGEDY (1:1-7)

1:1-2 - The opening verse of the book locates the story in the time of the judges; the genealogy at the end of the book, if complete (we've already seen that many biblical genealogies contain gaps), would place the action in the latter part of the twelfth century BC - around the time of Jephthah and Samson, or perhaps a little earlier. The geographical setting is in Bethlehem, five miles south of Jerusalem, and part of the region allotted to the tribe of Judah. The region is dependent upon seasonal rainfall for its economic sustenance, and the lack of such rainfall for an extended period of time could easily lead to famine. In this case, Elimelech and his family travel north to Jerusalem, head eastward along the Jerusalem-Jericho road, cross the Jordan at the fords near Jericho, and then head southward along the King's Highway through the lands allotted to Reuben and into the territory of the Moabites, east of the Dead Sea, which was watered by a number of wadis that brought water from the highlands in which they originated.

1:3-5 - The narrative does not start off well. Elimelech, rather than trusting God to provide for them in the land He had given to them, leaves the Promised Land for the home of the Moabites. There, his sons marry Moabite women, contrary to God's command (note that, while the Moabites were not Canaanites, but descendants of Lot through his incestuous relationship with his daughters, they were undeniably pagan, worshipers of the god Chemosh). Within a decade, all three have died, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law without visible means of support. Note that widows in the economy of the Ancient Near East were virtually helpless, since they were without the protection of either father or husband. Since land was tied to family, they literally had nowhere to live, especially if, as in this case, there were no adult sons to take them in. These women thus faced the plight of those who, in modern society, would be called homeless.

1:6-7 - When Naomi hears that the famine in Judah has ended, she decides to return home - there, at least, she may find relatives willing to take her in and care for her. Her daughters-in-law prepare to accompany her. Having married, it would be a shame for them to return to their fathers' houses, where they would become an economic burden on the clan.

#### II. RETURN TO BETHLEHEM (1:8-22)

1:8-10 - Naomi at this point encourages Ruth and Orpah to return home (the phrase "mother's home" is significant - her advice is that they seek marriage, which the mother would play a significant role in arranging, not that they ask for permanent protection from their fathers). Both instead insist that they will accompany Naomi back to Judah. They have no desire to return to their fathers' households, but instead choose to cast in their lot with Naomi, seeking the protection of her relatives back in the land of Israel.

1:11-13 - What Naomi is citing here is the law of levirate marriage - the idea that a woman who is widowed without children is to cohabit with the husband's brother in order to raise up seed for the dead man, thus maintaining the land distribution established by God following the Conquest (commentators have often noted that she is citing it incorrectly, since any further sons she produced would not be eligible to marry their sisters-in-law because they would not have sprung from the same father). She clearly recognizes that her calamity has come from the hand of the Lord and, like Job, does not understand its cause. Also, like Job, she never will fully understand why God has put her through such turmoil and sorrow, though she will experience joy at the end of her suffering.

1:14-18 - Orpah finally gives in and returns home to Moab, but Ruth insists on staying with Naomi. Note that Naomi clearly has no evangelistic intention here - she does her best to convince the two girls to return to the worship of the gods of Moab. Similarly, when Ruth affirms her intention to accompany Naomi, we should not read into it any theological conviction about the superiority of Israelite monotheism. It was simply understood that affiliating herself with the clan of Naomi would involve a change of family, place, and cultus. She then affirms her intention by swearing an oath in the name of the Lord (for the first time in our study this quarter, we finally see an oath that is not a serious mistake!).

1:19-22 - Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, and the townspeople (never a large settlement, the town at this time probably had a population of no more than two hundred), many of whom remember Naomi, remark at her sudden appearance and the change in her circumstances. Naomi, though saddened, is not so much blaming God for her circumstances as acknowledging Him as the source of them. Their arrival at the beginning of the barley harvest fixes the time as late April - this was the earliest of the seasonal harvests in Israel.

### III. RUTH MEETS BOAZ (2:1-23)

Though the point of the book of Ruth is to demonstrate God's faithfulness to His faithless people in raising up a godly king for them, it also contains one of the tenderest romances in Scripture. This chapter narrates the circumstances under which Ruth and Boaz meet.

2:1 - Boaz was a relative of Elimelech (in a tribal society, almost everybody in town would have been related to Elimelech), and a man of standing in the community (the phrase here is the same one translated "mighty warrior" when the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, but the term need not have a military connotation).

2:2-3 - Ruth, a responsible, hard-working girl, offers to glean in the fields to provide support for Naomi and herself. The practice of gleaning had been incorporated into the Mosaic law as a means of providing for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-22). The idea was that those who harvested their crops were not to do too thorough a job. Instead, they were to leave corners untouched, allow what fell to the ground to remain there, and not go over their olive trees and grapevines a second time in order to pick every last piece of fruit. What remained was to be left for the poor. This not only provided a means of sustenance, but allowed for the poor to retain their dignity, since they had to work for what they got rather than simply getting a handout. The fact that Ruth found herself in the field owned by Boaz was, of course, no coincidence.

2:4-7 - Boaz "coincidentally" decides to visit his field on the very day Ruth arrives, and his attention is drawn to the newcomer, who is recognized by the harvesters as a diligent worker on behalf of her mother-in-law and herself.



2:8-9 - Boaz then speaks to Ruth, telling her to remain in his field and not seek out other places to glean (this would have been easy to do, since the fields outside the town were continuous and unfenced, with lands belonging to different families differentiated only by small stone boundary markers). In saying this, he is promising that she will be protected and adequately provided for if she remains.

2:10-13 - Ruth falls on her face before Boaz at such an unexpected act of kindness, and Boaz compliments her for her care for Naomi. He then blesses her in the name of the Lord; the image of taking shelter under His wings speaks of care and protection. Ruth again thanks Boaz, repeatedly voicing her astonishment that such a benefit should be conferred on one who was not even of the tribes of Israel.

2:14-16 - Boaz is certainly going beyond the call of duty here. It would be highly unusual for the owner of a field, a “man of standing” in the community, to invite a poor gleaner to eat dinner with him. On top of this, he orders his men to leave extra stalks for her to pick up, let her harvest among the standing grain if she so chooses, and tells them not to molest her.

2:17-19 - Ruth then gleans for the rest of the day, threshes her gatherings, and winds up with between thirty and fifty pounds of grain - about a month’s grain ration for the typical field hand. Naomi is amazed by how much Ruth brings home. Ruth then names the man in whose field she has been working.

2:20 - When Ruth tells her that she has been working in the field of Boaz, Naomi identifies him as a *goel* - a kinsman-redeemer who is responsible for dealing with legal issues within the clan. The kinsman-redeemer would be the man who would retrieve stolen property, settle disputes, or serve as the avenger of blood in cases of unlawful death.

2:21-23 - Naomi encourages Ruth to remain in the fields of Boaz, where she continues to glean for the next two months until the wheat harvest is over in June.

#### IV. LESSONS FROM THE STORY

##### A. GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY IN THE LIVES OF HIS PEOPLE

This story, like so many in Scripture, makes it clear that there are no coincidences with God. He clearly had His purposes in the journey of Elimelech and his family into Moab, the marriages of his sons to Moabite girls, and the deaths of the three men far from home. He just as clearly led Ruth to the field of Boaz and assured that the wealthy owner would be in his field at just that time. What was the purpose? Was it to get Ruth another husband? In the short run, yes, but in the long run the purpose was to move another step toward fulfilling His promise to bring the Messiah into the world. God is able to weave together the details of our lives in ways that we may never understand in order to fulfill His purposes. It is not important that we see what those purposes are; it is only important that we trust the God who is in control of all things.

##### B. TRUSTING IN THE GOD OF ISRAEL

After having noted the way in which God carried out His sovereign purposes, we must also note that Elimelech and his sons disobeyed God in the choices they made. Leaving the Promised Land and marrying pagan women were not acts of faith or obedience, and the fact that God uses them for His purposes does not make them any less sinful. On the other hand, Ruth’s act of loyalty to Naomi, though she might not have

fully recognized the consequences of it at the time, was an act of faith; she was entrusting herself to the only true and living God, placing herself under the shelter of His wings.

#### C. AN ALLEGORY OF CHRIST AND THE CHURCH?

As with the Song of Solomon, it has been difficult for commentators over the years to resist the temptation to allegorize the story of Ruth and Boaz. After all, here we have a stranger to the covenants of promise incorporated into the people of God by the unmerited, sacrificial love of one who is described as a redeemer. Is this Ephesians 2 in narrative form? The Bible gives us no warrant to conclude that this is so, and it is always dangerous to see symbolism where the Bible does not instruct us to do so. The comparison, therefore, may be interesting, but we can never go so far as to state that the connection was the true purpose for which the book of Ruth was written.

## JUDGES AND RUTH XVII

### Ruth 3-4

We conclude our series on the books of Judges and Ruth today by looking at the conclusion of the romance of Ruth and Boaz. The story is far more than a romance, of course - it is more centrally a record of God's faithfulness to His people, even in the depths of their sin. We find here where the book of Ruth is taking us - to the eventual birth of the king who would rule Israel justly and with a heart for God, in contrast to the chaos of the era of the judges.

#### I. RUTH PROPOSES MARRIAGE (3:1-18)

Without considerable understanding of the culture of the day, the incident in Ruth 3 seems very strange indeed.

3:1-2 - Naomi is without doubt plotting to marry Ruth to Boaz. She instructs her daughter-in-law to make herself as attractive as possible and go to Boaz on the threshing floor. A threshing floor was a large flat area, either of rock or hardened earth, out in the open. The harvested crop, after being beaten on the hard surface of the floor, would be thrown into the air with pitchforks, allowing the wind to carry away the chaff and leaving the grain to fall onto the floor to be gathered and stored away. Winnowing was typically done in the late afternoon or early evening when the wind picked up after the heat of the day.

3:3-4 - Naomi tells Ruth to make herself attractive, but not to approach Boaz until after the evening meal is over and he has lay down to sleep. The point here is timing. Ruth had private business to conduct and didn't want to make her proposal with all the other men looking on. The act that she is told to perform has definite sexual overtones - essentially she was to crawl into bed with Boaz - but there is no indication of actual sexual activity.

3:5-6 - Ruth does not seem to have been at all averse to Naomi's instructions and follows them to the letter (even going farther than Naomi instructed, as we shall see).

3:7-8 - After dinner, Boaz lay down by his grain pile - there would have been many men threshing on the floor, and thus each would have kept his own grain in a separate pile and guarded it until it could be moved to a barn for storage the next morning. Ruth waited until he was asleep (by then it would have been quite dark), and lay down next to him. In the middle of the night, something woke Boaz up (another one of the "coincidences" of the book), and he realized that he was not alone.

3:9 - Boaz asks the woman to identify herself, and she not only does so, but also asks Boaz to marry her - the phrase "Spread the corner of your garment over me" is a euphemism for marriage (cf. Ezekiel 16:8). Her action was thus even bolder than the one Naomi had envisioned. Recall from last week that one of the responsibilities if the kinsman-redeemer was to care for widows in the clan; this, however, was involvement in a direct manner that went beyond the call of duty, since Boaz was not a sufficiently close relative to bear the responsibility of levirate marriage.

3:10-13 - Boaz is pleased by Ruth's proposal, appreciative of her good character and grateful that she would desire to marry a mature man such as himself rather than running after men her own age. He agrees to clear the legal path for their marriage, but notes that there is another kinsman who is closer. Since land ownership is involved, the match depends on more than mere personal affinity. If the nearer kinsman wants to purchase

the land, and Ruth along with it, Boaz can do nothing to stop him. Note that his offer to Ruth to stay the night on the threshing floor does *not* have sexual connotations.

3:14-15 - Ruth leaves before sunrise, concerned that no hint of scandal mar the proceedings that would take place later in the day. Before she leaves, Boaz loads her shawl with grain (the measure used here is uncertain, but undoubtedly generous).

3:16-18 - Boaz heads for town to transact the necessary business while Ruth returns home to tell Naomi about the adventures of the evening. Naomi assures Ruth that the matter will be settled that very day.

## II. BOAZ ARRANGES THE MARRIAGE (4:1-17)

4:1 - The city gate was the place where business of all kinds was transacted. It consisted of an open space just inside the wall where merchants would gather to sell their wares, and where the elders of the town would meet to pass judgment on issues that came before them. Archaeologists have uncovered many such spaces, often with benches lining the walls on which the elders could sit and deal with the matters at hand. The city gate was also a good place to find someone for whom one was looking, since anyone leaving the city (to go out to the fields, for instance) would need to pass that way.

4:2-4 - Boaz gathers the elders to witness the legal transaction that was to follow (note that ten men, even in Jewish synagogues today, constitutes a *minyan* - the minimum number of men needed to conduct worship). Boaz presents the issue to his kinsman as a land transaction. It was necessary that the land remain in the family, and the nearest relative legally had the first option to buy the property. The man readily agrees to purchase the land. Such a purchase would have been economically advantageous to him, since Naomi was childless and the land would soon pass into his personal holdings. He thus saw it as a good investment.

4:5-6 - When Boaz mentioned that Ruth was part of the package, the kinsman saw matters differently. Now, the price paid for the land would not bring it into his family, but would merely allow it to be passed on to whatever sons Ruth would bear in the marriage. He would thus be paying for land that would not remain in his family, but would be passed on to someone else. Not only that, but any sons born to Ruth could conceivably have a claim on a portion of his current property, thus actually *decreasing* the inheritance of his children (presumably he already had a wife and children). He therefore declines the offer, passing the privilege on to Boaz.

4:7-8 - The passing of the sandal was a traditional symbol of land transactions. The reason for this was that land was marked out by walking its perimeters and placing piles of stones that served as boundary markers at its corners (normally such plots were triangular in shape). Placing one's feet on the land thus served as a mark of ownership. Thus the passing of the sandal became a recognized symbol of the transfer of ownership of land from one person to another. Note that this custom had passed out of use by the time of David three generations later and had to be explained to the readers of that time.

4:9-10 - Boaz then calls upon the elders gathered in the city gate to witness the transaction, which includes the transfer of the property of Elimelech and his sons and the acquisition of Ruth as Boaz' wife for the purpose of raising up seed to her dead husband Mahlon.

4:11-12 - The elders then confer a blessing upon Boaz in his new marriage, asking the Lord to give him many offspring. Note that the comparisons used in the blessing refer both to national and to tribal history. Perez

is mentioned because the inhabitants of Bethlehem came from the portion of the tribe of Judah of which Perez was the progenitor.

4:13 - Boaz marries Ruth, and they all live happily ever after. This, however, was no fairy tale. The main point of all this is that Ruth produces a son who was to become the grandfather of King David.

4:14-15 - The women bless Naomi as the men had blessed Boaz, noting that she now has a secure future because she has a grandson to care for her in her old age.

4:16-17 - Naomi cares for the child as if he were her own - doting grandparents are not restricted to the twenty-first century.

### III. THE GENEALOGY OF DAVID (4:18-22)

These last few verses really provide the climax of the entire body of literature from the era of the judges. Despite all of Israel's wickedness, despite all of their idolatry, God was working, even in the worst of times, to raise up for them a king after His own heart who would rule the people justly. God's faithfulness is greater than man's sin - and aren't we all thankful that is the case.