

Relentless

THE EPIC STORY OF A

HARDHEARTED PEOPLE,

THEIR WARRIOR GOD,

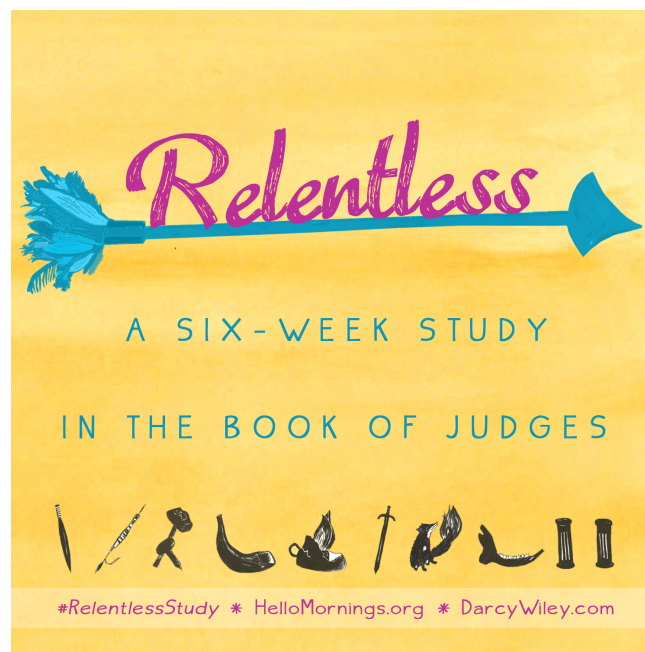
AND HIS UNSTOPPABLE LOVE



a six-week study in the book of Judges
by Darcy Wiley

Table of Contents

Page 1 - An Introductory Letter
Page 3 - Relentless Study Tips
Page 4 - About the Writer
Page 5 - Special Thanks
Page 6 - Week One: Background on the Book of Judges
Page 14 - Map of Territories and Enemies
Page 18 - Week Two: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah
Page 28 - Week Three: Gideon
Page 41 - Week Four: Abimelech, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon
Page 53 - Week Five: Samson
Page 65 - Week Six: Micah, Levite/Concubine, Relentless Review
Page 77 - Works Cited



Introduction

Dear Friend,

One of the things I value most in life and friendship is authenticity. I'd take someone's hot temper over a cold shoulder any day, because it gives me a real picture of a situation or relationship and allows me to address any issues head-on. Maybe that's why I did the crazy thing of taking on the book of Judges. This book tells us the good, the bad, and the ugly about the people of God. There are no whitewashed tombs here. Israel's decay is laid out in the open for all to see.

As a highly-sensitive person who can't watch violent movies without shielding my eyes the majority of the time, this book has been heavy lifting. I've stayed up late into the night for weeks on end tackling a text that, at times, has tackled me. Yet, I couldn't put this epic story down. First, I know that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16), which means God has something to benefit us even in the most difficult parts of His word. Second, the strange storylines are surprisingly relevant to my own life and culture.

In the Relentless study, you will consider how to....

- cultivate unity in your family and church*
- resist temptation and avoid the pitfalls of cultural trends*
- gain confidence to tackle the tasks God has assigned you*
- deal with narcissistic people*
- keep your faith intact even when trusted leaders fail*
- recover from disappointments like infertility, loneliness, career problems, and family dysfunctions*
- bring stress and trauma under the healing relief of the Holy Spirit*
- build in habits and safeguards to help you keep your commitments*
- deal with anger issues*
- develop a proper reverence for God*
- stand up for those who are victimized*

As Israel ignores God's instructions about steering clear of enemy groups and false gods, they put themselves under the oppression of various tyrants over the 400 years of the Judges era. Twice in this book, the author writes the reason for Israel's mess: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6, Judges 21:25). We see Israel continually reject the King of Kings as their leader and cast off His blessing, yet in these dark ages of perversion and sin, God's power and love shine through.

After a few months sojourn in Judges, I feel like I'm one soldier bonded to another in this epic story. Not only do the names and places not sound so much like a foreign language to me anymore, but I've seen how much I take after the flawed characters presented here.

*I get cold feet like Ehud.
I second guess myself like Gideon.
I overanalyze and get paranoid like Abimelech.
I take my boldness too far like Jephthah.
With my words as weapons, I rage like Samson.*

I know from watching God work with these people, that He can use me in any condition. Still, I'd rather Him use my obedience than my rebellion. That means I have to treat sin like the enemy it is and let my Warrior do away with it. This is not hypothetical for me. In the months that I've been working on this study, I've been scorched with the darts of spiritual warfare.

The resistance I've felt tells me there is something here worth fighting for. An imposter thinks he has a claim on our hearts. We've fallen for too many of his sweet-talking lies. But our Hero is fighting to win us back. Let's re-claim those pieces of ourselves that we've so foolishly given away. Join me in clearing out false affections and giving our hearts back to the One who loves us with an everlasting love. Gather yourself a group of faithful friends and join in the good fight. This is going to be epic.

"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul," (1 Peter 2:11). I don't know what you are facing these days, but I hope that you'll commit to this weighty study, and let God's word do its work, destroying the strongholds of the enemy in you so you can experience the peace of His presence. Let's do this.

Love, Darcy



A COMMITMENT: Like many of the best stories in life, this one is long and detailed. Judges is epic. Since this book is story-based, I've written each lesson to match the plot line of the text. While other books of the Bible might be shorter and easier to gulp down like a grab-and-go breakfast, this one is like a hot, hearty meal. I expect most lessons to take 25-30 minutes, but if a particular lesson hits a tender place for you, you may need to spend more time there. Consider setting aside some unnecessary habit for the next 30 days in order to commit yourself fully to the study of God's word. Because we will be confronting idols that compete with our devotion to the Lord, I urge you to recruit a group of brave friends to pray strong prayers against the attacks of the enemy on your body, mind, and spirit as you study. Please also make it a priority to eat well, exercise, and get adequate rest so you can be at your best in fighting this good fight.

ENGAGING WITH DAILY LESSONS: As you begin each lesson, take a moment to pray, welcoming the Holy Spirit to lead you through the heavy issues in Judges and in your own heart. In each lesson, I include background and illustrations to help you get acquainted and relate to the characters. I lead you in reading and studying portions of the text, using the ESV Bible in Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted. Then, I offer transformation questions to help you confront your own sin and struggles, and to point you in a healthier direction. If you have time after finishing the study each day, I would recommend that you listen to the text with an audio Bible so you can hear each passage in full and further reflect on it. As mentioned above, each lesson is approximately two pages and should take around 25-30 minutes to complete, depending on how long you linger. On days when you are pressed for time, you may want to just do the readings/activities in bold print. For further study, since the book of Judges is packed with so much rich material, I've included bonus lessons for those who don't want to miss a thing.

TOOLS AND TIPS: For this study, you will need the Relentless eBook, a journal or print-out of the study, a pen or electronic device for note taking, and a quiet place to ponder and pray. As you study, you may come up with difficult questions. I encourage you to keep a list of these in your journal, in a note-taking app, or on the pages of this study. At some point, you can use those questions to launch you into further study. You may want to do some research, ask a trusted leader, share your questions and thoughts in your Bible study group, or post in a comment to me on my blog at DarcyWiley.com.

SHARING: For encouragements and insights that you'd like to share online, please tag your posts #RelentlessStudy so we can connect and enrich one another's experience in this book. You'll also want to check the #RelentlessStudy hashtag as I plan to share resources and insights to complement your study of the book of Judges.

About the Writer



Want to know a little more about who's going to be walking alongside as you study the book of Judges? I'm a writer married to a literary agent, a world-traveler turned stay-at-home mom, and an occasional blogger capturing everyday mercies and wide-eyed wonder at DarcyWiley.com.

Sometimes my work looks like blogging about a game of marbles with my kids. Other times it looks like writing Bible studies or traveling with my husband to Europe to write stories for leaders in social justice. Ultimately, it's about keeping eyes and ears open to God's transforming work in the world, and writing it down for others to use in their own journey. I have a background in teaching and mentoring, and a Bachelor's Degree in English Studies/Creative Writing.

I'm an Idealist (INFP) who feels things super deeply, thrives on authenticity, analyzes human behavior, and enjoys listening, connecting, and comforting others in heart-to-heart chats. At church, I love befriending internationals in our congregation and community. I also enjoy singing on the worship team alongside my drummer husband. I'd love to get to know you and hear what you're learning through #RelentlessStudy, so please feel free to speak up on my blog or on Twitter ([@darcywileywords](https://twitter.com/darcywileywords)).

Special Thanks

As with any worthwhile project, there has been a whole team of people who've encouraged, offered insight, provided for practical needs, and prayed as I worked through the text of Judges to share it with you. I couldn't have done this without my husband, Craig, who allowed me the quiet space I needed to research and write this study, and who has endured the fiery darts of spiritual warfare along with me. I'm grateful for my kids, Elliot, Farah, and Gracia. While they had to deal with seeing my office door closed a little more than they'd like, they also pounced on opportunities to chat about the wild characters of Judges and work alongside me, doing their own art while I painted the illustrations for the cover.

I'm thankful for friends like Audri Witham and Holly Shaw, who cheerfully stepped in to have my kids over while I plowed through the toughest parts of the writing and revision stages. Thank you to my very attentive friends, Jennifer Derksen, Tristi Carlson (IdentityinGod.blogspot.com), my mom, and others who listened to the hard stuff and prayed strong prayers over me. I'm also indebted to an amazing group of reviewers who helped me take this fledgling study and make it fly. Thank you, Janey Goude (Facebook.com/JaneyGoude), Catherine Gillespie (ASpiritedMind.com), Emily Musgrave, Jenna Woestman, Jessica Fortenberry (RedonBlack.weebly.com), Celeste Fortenberry, Toi Brown, Laura Rinehart, Cindy Alford, Maggie Johnson (MaggieHJohnson.com), and Joy Niehaus (RedirectedDreams.blogspot.com).

Thank you to Jenni Keller (JenniKeller.me) who encouraged me to do this study and cheered me on to completion. Thank you to Kat Lee and HelloMornings for giving me the opportunity to partner with you and encourage women all over the world to start each day in God's word. Thank you to my pastors, Tom Macy and Joey Woestman, for getting me started with insights, sermons, and commentaries. I hope commentary author Dale Ralph Davis will be amused and not annoyed if he happens to get a hold of this study and sees his name in half of the slots of the works cited section. I would have been wandering for ages in the book of Judges if it weren't for his wit and wisdom. From what I've seen, his is the best commentary in existence on this book.

Finally, I thank my Lord for His long-suffering with the people of Israel and with me. I need Him every hour to set me right, and He comes through time after time in the most tender ways.



Week 1: Day 1

TRANSITIONS

Judges 1:1, 2:6-10

In the opening scene of the Book of Judges, we find the people of God in a time of crisis, a moment of destiny, when they can follow in the way God has led them, or turn from it. Our narrator, whom scholars guess to be the prophet Samuel, doesn't shield the reader from the bad news. In the very first verse of Judges, we learn that Israel's beloved leader Joshua has died.

Many books in the Old Testament begin this way. In Exodus 1:6-10, Joseph dies, and a new king in Egypt, who cares nothing for Joseph, labels the growing population of Israelites as a threat. In Joshua 1:1-3, Moses dies, and a new leader prepares to lead Israel into the land promised by God. Later, in 2 Samuel 1 and 2, King Saul dies, and, after a time of mourning, David is anointed as king over Israel. In 1 Kings 2:10-12, King David dies, and the throne is handed over to his son, Solomon. At transition points, when an old leader has gone and a new leader has come, the future opens to new possibilities and new dangers.

Read Judges 1:1, 2:6-10. How does the current crisis affect Israel?

What difficult transition have you endured after losing a beloved mentor?

In our churches, we may define the eras of our congregation's history by naming the pastor who led the church during a particular time. I can trace my childhood congregation's journey from the glory days through years of difficulty based on the timeline of each leader's tenure. The quality of church life in each era depended on whether the pastor was a person of integrity or one plagued with moral failure. For a long while, the church remained under the leadership of interim pastors who drove in on Sunday mornings to provide sermons to sustain the congregation, but otherwise left the church to shepherd itself. The book of Judges tells a similar story. Judges 2:18-19 gives us a preview of the cycle Israel will follow throughout our epic story. When God raised up a judge to deliver Israel, the people would experience relief. "But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers...."

On the timeline below, list some of the major segments in your life story, as well as the people or events connected with the transitions. Draw a downward arrow in the situations when you have grown distant from the Lord. Draw an upward arrow in the situations when you've enjoyed His presence.



How has the quality of leadership in various times of your life affected your spiritual health?

Look up Joshua 23:6-8. What wisdom does Israel's leader Joshua share in his parting words?

What transition are you facing now? What wisdom can you glean from Joshua 23:6-8 as you move forward?

Week 1: Day 2

BAND OF BROTHERS

In the chapters to come, we will be sifting through a lot of proper nouns, names of people and places that may be very unfamiliar to us. But if we listen closely and get ourselves acquainted with the family and history behind the words, they won't sound so much like a foreign language.

Jacob, also known as "Israel," comes from a family line of faith. His grandfather Abraham believed God's promise that He would make a great nation out of him (Genesis 15:5-7), and now Jacob sees the promise beginning to come true.

As Jacob prepares for his death, he conducts a blessing ceremony for his sons and grandsons. Here, we receive inside information about the past and future of these sons, who will come to be known as the 12 tribes of Israel.

Read Genesis 48:11-16 and Genesis 49:1-28. Next to each name below, draw a symbol that represents Jacob's description of that person.

Reuben
Simeon
{Levi}
Judah
Issachar
Zebulun
Dan
Gad
Asher
Naphtali
{Joseph}
Ephraim, son of Joseph
Manasseh, son of Joseph
Benjamin

The tribe of Levi, who is set apart to receive a different kind of inheritance from the Lord, is often left out of the list of twelve tribes (notice the brackets above). Joseph, too, is left out of the list as his two sons take his place. Whether in favoritism or as a consolation prize for Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery as a teenager (Genesis 37), Jacob offers a double-blessing by naming Joseph's sons as half-tribes.

With his last breath, Jacob instructs his sons to take his body all the way back to Canaan in order to bury him in the cave where his grandparents and parents are laid to rest (Genesis 49:29-31). As Joseph's own death nears, he asks his brothers to swear an oath to someday carry his bones out of Egypt (Genesis 50:24-25). For 400 years, the expanding family of Israel remains in Egypt. But in the hearts of these men and their descendants is a desire to return home to the land God promised their father Abraham.

Read Genesis 15:18-21. While the Israelites are away in Egypt, which groups claim the territory promised to Abraham?

The Canaanites too are a “band of brothers.” Most of the people groups occupying Israel’s promised land in the Judges era are descendants of one man named Canaan, the son of Noah’s son, Ham (Genesis 10:15-20). Some scholars believe that the perversion of Ham (Genesis 9:20-25) ran rampant in the family line of Canaan and later showed up in the disturbing activities of the Canaanites.¹

It is vital that we address the negative threads in our family histories. If failures or hurts of past generations go unchallenged and unchanged, they can grow into monstrous perversions that can ruin a family and take over an entire community.

Take a moment to pray and ask God to come alongside you, pointing you to the positives and negatives in your family history. Seek help from a professional counselor if necessary. In a spirit of gentleness, list at least one positive and one negative trait for each family member. Add other family members if you feel it would be helpful.²

Mother/Caregiver:

Father/Caregiver:

Maternal Grandmother:

Maternal Grandfather:

Paternal Grandmother:

Paternal Grandfather:

What threads do you notice in your life now?

What do you sense God wants you to do about these things?

Read Psalm 16:1-6 aloud. Share your disappointments or devastations with God. Then, spend some time thanking Him for the good heritage He gives you as His child, even if your earthly heritage is broken.

Week 1: Day 3

THE PROMISE OF PRESENCE

After Joseph's death, there is a gaping hole in leadership, one that leads the Israelites into their fate as a slave population. But God has a plan. When Pharaoh's daughter finds a contraband Hebrew baby floating in a basket among the reeds of the Nile, she rescues him and raises him as a prince of Egypt. Later, as he sneaks out of the palace, he becomes enraged at the sight of an Egyptian slave driver beating one of his people. He kills the Egyptian and runs away to the wilderness as a fugitive (Exodus 1:22-2:15).

Read Exodus 3:1-12. Take note of how God demonstrates His love.

God invites Moses, in the loneliness of the desert, to come near and experience His presence. Later, it will be said of Moses that God speaks to him "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33:11). God's presence is friendly but frightening, tender but fierce, something so holy that Moses must remove his sandals before approaching. He hears the crackle, feels the heat, and sees the bright fire on branches that still hold their shape and keep their supple green leaves.

This same wondrous presence that Moses experiences will, in a cloud by day and fire by night, faithfully bring the nation of Israel through great danger into the good land promised to them. Isaiah 43:2 says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." Because of His presence, God's people come through the plagues of Egypt like the bush that burns but is not destroyed.

After God leads the people of Israel across the dry ground of the Red Sea, washing away their Egyptian enemies behind them (Exodus 14), He brings them to camp in a place called Sinai, the very same place where Moses discovered the burning bush and his call to ministry all those months earlier.³ There at the mountain, God declares His love for His people, gives them the Ten Commandments to guide their steps, and reaffirms His covenant with them.

Read Exodus 23:20-33. On the chart, record the things the Israelites must fulfill in order to keep their covenant with God. Then, record the things God promises to do.

Israel will...	God will...

From the time of Abraham to the time of Moses, God provides plenty of previews of His plan to bring Israel into Canaan. Under Joshua's leadership, the Lord puts that plan into action by parting the waters of the Jordan River and leading Israel across on dry ground into the land promised to them. By the end of Joshua's life, although much has been accomplished, there are still conquests to be made. Like a grandfather scrolling through old family photo albums, Joshua gathers the children of Israel around and tells the stories of their warrior God and prepares them for the days ahead.

Read Joshua 23:3-13. How does Joshua say the people should treat the Lord?

What do you want to change in the way you treat God based on what you've learned about His presence and His covenant love?

Write three "I will" promises declaring the ways you want to show your love for the Lord this week. Optional: Draw, paint or create a graphic featuring your promises. Share on Instagram or Twitter, tagging your entry with #RelentlessStudy so we can encourage one another to lavish our love on God and enjoy the precious gift of His presence.

Week 1: Day 4

TAKING THE LAND TOGETHER

Judges 1:1-4, 16-20

Shortly after I returned to the United States from a year-long assignment in a country hostile to the Gospel, terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center on my home soil. Partly from the trauma of it all, and partly from my transition back to my culture, I felt a dulling of my senses and my spiritual life. I knew my faith didn't depend on emotion, but I felt distant from the Lord and didn't want to stay that way.

One evening, as I sat in a living room with some friends, I admitted my feelings, or lack thereof. What one of them said, I'll never forget: "You are not the bride of Christ on your own—all of us together are the bride of Christ." Ephesians 3:17b-19 encourages the believer, "...that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." With all the saints. Together we comprehend His love. Together we find strength.

In the book of Judges, God wants Israel to walk alongside Him in covenant love, and He wants His people to walk alongside each other, too. The tribes of Israel have been given an inheritance, but it is up to them to trust God and work together to fully dwell in it.

Take a look at the map⁴ at the end of today's lesson to get a feel for the territories allotted to the tribes.

Read Deuteronomy 18:1-2. The tribe of Levi is missing from the map. What inheritance does this tribe get?

Joshua has begun a good work, but as the Lord said, "You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to possess" (Joshua 13:1). As the people lose their faithful leader, God shows His own faithfulness and sufficiency in leading them. It is He, after all, who has been leading Joshua.

Read Judges 1:1-4, 19. List several ways that the Lord shows Himself faithful to Israel in this time of transition.

Take a moment to "inquire of the Lord" about something that's puzzling you right now.

As Israel asks the Lord for insight, we see that God offers direct guidance in telling them who will fight. He offers assurance even before they've picked up their weapons, letting Judah know He will give the enemy into their hand. He offers power, giving 10,000 of the enemy into Judah's hand. Finally, He offers His presence. The Lord is *with* Judah.⁵

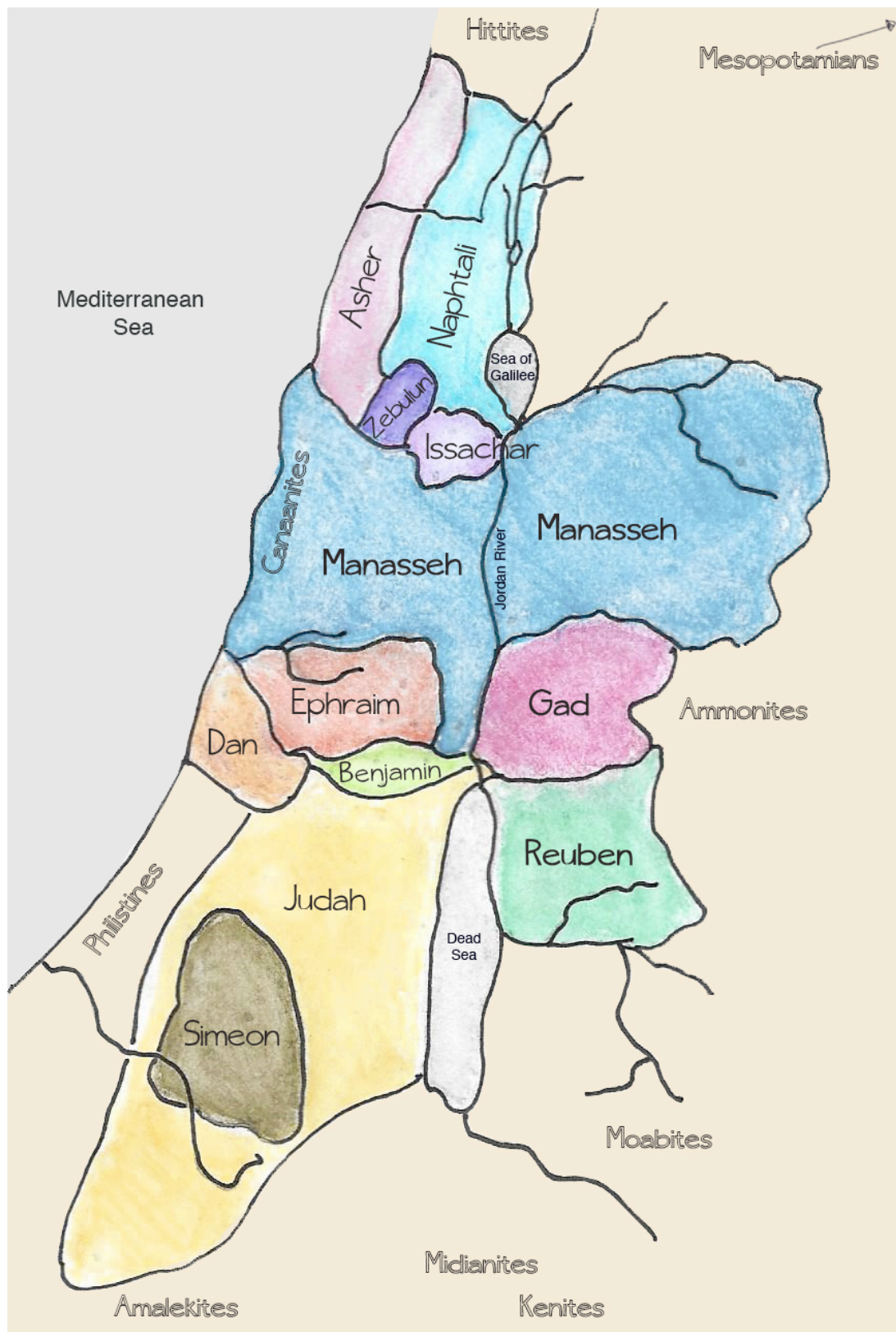
Read Judges 1:3,16-20. Take note of each mention of *with*, *us* and *we*.

Locate Judah and Simeon's territories on the map. What does their location say about their relationship? How might such an arrangement be more difficult if there weren't unity between the two tribes?

In Judges 1, Judah invites Simeon to join him in battle against the Canaanites. Simeon agrees. On the map, you'll see that Simeon's territory is entirely surrounded by the land of Judah. Imagine how uncomfortable such an arrangement could become if the two brothers are at odds with one another instead of being unified. Woven throughout the epic story of Judges, we see God's stamp of approval when Israel chooses to work together like Judah and Simeon: "[A]s Yahweh's people assist one another they receive Yahweh's help," author Dale Ralph Davis says. For now, Israel moves forward together. But unfortunately, as the epic story of Judges goes along, Israel's unity crumbles, "and with it Israel's fortunes."⁶

How have you seen unity, or a lack of unity, affect your family, church or ministry?

What steps can you take to better connect with others in the body of Christ so that you can comprehend the fullness of the love of God?



Week 1: Day 5

UNRATED

Recently, as my kids and I were reading *A Wrinkle in Time*, by Madeline L'Engle, we came to a most disturbing section of the book in which the man with red eyes took control of 5-year-old Charles Wallace's mind and turned him into a drone like all others on the planet Camazotz. Charles' older sister Meg grasped for Charles and tried to shake him back to normal, but like every other idea she'd tried, this one failed to work. As the conflict continued to intensify and the man with the red eyes gained more control, my own 5 year-old shouted from her carseat, "I hope they get him dead!"⁷

I was taken aback at first. I'm the kind who cringes at killing a bug, not because I'm afraid of the crunch, but because I feel sorry for them. But put me in front of a sinister-looking spider and I'll have flashbacks of spider bites that have put people in the hospital. I overcome my squeamishness pretty quickly when it comes to protecting my kids.

There in the car, my daughter boldly blurted out her plans for the enemy. No hoping that he'd come around and try to be a nice guy. No hoping that the good people would merely try to get away from him. She didn't pull any punches. In the face of real evil, it's hard to be polite. Real evil must be crushed so it can't hurt anyone else.

What are your favorite battle stories or war movies? Do you tend to be bloodthirsty or squeamish when it comes to violence on the page or screen?

Judges is not pretty. It's not as palatable as the pithy book of Proverbs or the encouraging epistles of Paul. With the book of Judges there is blood. There is gore. There are swords that get lost in fat folds, random objects used to cause blunt force trauma, and body parts that end up missing. Many of us may find these kinds of scenes out of place in the Bible. We know God is love, and our limited definition of love makes us want to close our eyes to anything that isn't glitter and gumdrops. But we need to be reminded that in the face of evil, God's perfect love and justice come together to bring out the warrior in Him.

The Canaanites burn their children as offerings to their gods. They practice divination and fortune-telling. They take part in sorcery, necromancy, and other perversions. "And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you," Deuteronomy 18:9-12 says.

Leaving some evil to fester could be deadly both physically and spiritually. Dale Ralph Davis says when the Israelites refuse to root out the evil around them, "[they are] like a

surgeon who removes only part of the cancer because even cancer has a right to grow and find fulfillment.”⁸

There is one very important point we have to settle here. The book of Judges is NOT a mandate for the people of God in other contexts. God gave the difficult assignment of clearing the land to a particular group of people, in a particular place, at a particular time in history. Author Paul Copan says, “This was a unique, unrepeatable historical situation, and we could not justify Israel’s attacking the Canaanites *unless* God had commanded this by special revelation. Even so, God had patiently waited over 400 years until the Canaanites would be ripe for judgment,” a judgment that was not against the Canaanite people group but against the Canaanite religion and its perversions of incest, bestiality, prostitution and other deviant acts.⁹ As the enemy clings to sin, they go down with it. But you may be surprised at how God reacts to the defeat of the enemy.

Look up the following passages. Record your insights on God’s view of war and the death of the wicked.

Proverbs 24:17-18

Ezekiel 18:23,32

1 Chronicles 28:2-3

How might you align your heart more with God’s heart when it comes to your view of the enemy?

Several years ago, at a Passover seder, we tipped our glasses and allowed three drops of wine to fall at the mention of the blood, fire, and smoke brought upon the Egyptians as God freed the Israelites from slavery. Then, we allowed ten more drops to fall, one for each plague that the enemy had endured. As the leader of the seder shared, this represented how the suffering of our enemy should lessen our joy.

Rabbi Shlomo Brody writes, “If one’s merriment focused on the downfall of another human being, it would be morally problematic. If one celebrated the removal of evil from the world and the manifestation of Divine justice, however, it would be a laudable act of sanctifying the name of God.” He goes on to agree that the target of God’s judgment was the Canaanite false religion, not the Canaanite ethnic group. “We celebrate the downfall of evil-doing, not evil-doers,” he says.¹⁰

Week 1: Bonus Lesson

A MINI-SERIES

Judges 1:4-26

Let's take a look at a mini-series of stories fit for the silver screen as we kick off the book of Judges.

In our first episode, I'm reminded of Inigo Montoya from The Princess Bride who over and over again rehearsed the words, "Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die." It sounds so serious on paper, but on film it has a hint of humor to it. And so does this story, aside from the fact that the victim's demise is unfortunate. Here the victim himself admits that his wounds are warranted, that he deserves to be maimed.¹¹

Read Judges 1:4-7. What does the victim reveal that lets us know this assignment is an act of justice?

In our second episode, we have our own ancient version of *The Bachelorette*, as one famous warrior debuts his daughter and says, "May the best man win."

Read Judges 1:11-15. Take note of the winner. We will meet him again soon.

In our third episode, we've got a little hint of *The Bourne Identity* as the tribes of Joseph head to Luz's city wall to find a weak spot.

Read Judges 1:22-26. Describe how the spies treated the man from Luz.

This passage brings to mind the story of Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute who turns her life over to the Lord and saves the spies of Israel who've come to scout out Jericho (Joshua 2). Both stories demonstrate that God's displeasure is not against the Canaanites as an ethnic group but against the dangerous false religion that the Canaanites embrace. Others could have turned from their perversions and put their faith in God as Rahab does. Because of her genuine love of the Lord, Israel takes her in as their own, and God gives her a special place in His plan. In Matthew 1:1-17, we find that God adds this Canaanite woman to the bloodline that leads to Jesus, the Messiah. What a transformation. As Copan writes, "Israel's enemies are the eventual objects of God's salvation. No ethnic hatred here."⁸

Week Two

Week 2: Day 1

DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Judges 1:27-3:7

In the 1960s, psychologist Walter Mischel placed a group of children in a room one at a time, and put a large marshmallow in front of each child. Before leaving the room, he explained that if the child could resist eating the marshmallow until the adult returned, he or she would be rewarded with a second marshmallow. If the child decided to eat the first marshmallow without waiting, there would be no second marshmallow offered. Out of more than 30 children in the study, only one-third had the will-power to resist temptation. The ongoing study showed that those who practiced self-control were more successful and healthy as they entered into adulthood.¹ In the time of the judges, Israel is like the child that puts the marshmallow on the tongue as soon as the adult leaves the room. And so, the people sell themselves short of the blessings of God's covenant.

Read Judges 1:27-36, 3:6. How does Israel's behavior in this passage mesh with what we learned last week about their covenant with God?

Earlier, when God and Israel entered into covenant together, Israel promised to be true to God by driving the enemy out of the land, destroying their gods, and crushing their sacred stones. After disobeying the Lord's command to clear the land, the Israelites slide into a downward spiral that leads to more sin and disobedience.

Read Judges 2:11-15. How do Israel's choices affect their well-being?

Romans 1:22-24a describes God's process of discipline for those who lean away from God and into the trap of the enemy: "[T]hey...exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity..." As the Israelites live side by side with the Canaanites, they embrace false gods and twisted practices. Eventually, God gives the Israelites what they think they want. Seeming to let them go, He allows them to discover for themselves the true nature of the enemy they've treated as a friend. Israel's experience with the enemy leads them to a place called Bochim, which literally means "weeping." Here, God reminds Israel of their covenant with Him (Judges 2:1-5).

Read Judges 2:18-19. Take note of God's heart and actions for Israel and how they treat Him in return.

Think of a friend who has fallen away from the Lord. How is that person's process similar to Israel's? On the graphic below, write the steps of that person's downward spiral. Take a moment to pray for your friend.



What similar trends do you notice in your own relationship with the Lord? What kind of distress have you experienced as a result? Below, write a prayer of repentance.

Israel is relentless in disobedience. But whether disciplining or rescuing, the Lord is relentless in His love. Though His anger burns toward His people's sin, it is a loyal anger. "Such anger should not surprise us," Dale Ralph Davis says in his commentary, "It is the price we pay for being loved.... To have a God who loves his people is to have a jealous God, and to have a jealous God is to have an intolerant God. Such is the God of Israel whose jealous love makes him faithful in His anger toward you...."²

Week 2: Day 2
DOUBLE TROUBLE
Judges 3:7-8

As we meet the Israelites at this point, we see what happens when God's people take His blessings for granted, instead of enjoying His presence through them. We see the results of Israel's failure to drive out the evil in the land. Israel has given in to peer pressure and forgotten the Lord their God...again.

In Canaanite religion, as Dale Ralph Davis points out, "Baal was the god of storm and fertility, and, for the Canaanites, of course, fertility was the name of the game -- fertility of crops and livestock and family." Baal's teammate was Asheroth. The Canaanites believed that "the fertility of the land depended upon the sexual relationship between Baal...and his partner." In a more disturbing twist, Canaanites engaged in "sacred" prostitution at the temple as part of their worship. Davis continues, "The idea was that the copulating of the worshiper and of the holy whore would encourage the divine couple...to do their thing and thus the rain, grain, wine and oil would flow again."³ Perhaps the inconvenient babies from these sexual encounters were the children sacrificed on the altars there.

Read Judges 3:7-8. What promises from God has Israel forgotten as they worship the false gods of fertility (see Week 1: Day 3)?

When we read this passage in English, we miss the poetry and pun written in it. What we translate as "Mesopotamia" reads in the original language as "Aram-naharayim," meaning "the land of double rivers." Scholars say the king's name was likely a humorous nickname put on this heavy-handed tyrant by the oppressed. The name literally means Cushan of "double wickedness." Notice the parallel between the land of *double rivers* and its leader of *double wickedness*.⁴

Just for fun, try saying the two names out loud. Listen to the rhythm and rhyme.

"Aram-naharayim. Cushan-rishathaim."

This Mesopotamian king ruled from an area outside Canaan to the northeast (see map on p. 14), but scholars assume he controlled the majority of, and maybe all of Israel, making him the most powerful oppressor of the Judges era.⁵ Remember, as we learned above, this ruler was put in place by God Himself as a punishment for Israel. As Dale Ralph Davis says, "No one wears the political pants of history unless Yahweh issues them to him."⁶

Dale Ralph Davis reminds us of the fact that this harsh sentence is rooted in love: “Yahweh’s wrath is the heat of his jealous love by which he refuses to let go of his people; he refuses to allow his people to remain comfortable in sin.... It shows that the covenant God who has bound himself to his people will not allow them to become cozy in their infidelity. ‘Steadfast love’ pursues them in their iniquity and is not above inflicting misery in order to awaken them.”⁷

Read Proverbs 3:11-12. When have you felt God’s hand of discipline in your own life?

What promise from God have you forgotten? What false love or false hope have you held onto?

What uncomfortable situations has God allowed in order to loosen your grip on sin and idols?

In Judges 3:9, we get a view into Israel’s response: “the people of Israel cried out to the Lord.” Davis says the word for “cry out” in this passage means “a cry of anguish directed to no one in particular” and the Israelites’ focus is on their own distress and not on repentance. Yet even here, when His people cry to Him out of mere self-pity, the Lord steps in to raise up “a deliverer for the people.”⁷

Read Romans 5:7-8. What do these verses and God’s response to Israel’s misery tell us about His character?

Go back to the reflection question above and think about the promises you’ve forgotten and the false love or false hope you’ve held onto. Close your eyes and picture Jesus laying His life down to cover these sins. Write down your thoughts and feelings about His lavish grace.

Week 2: Day 3

GOODBYE OPPRESSION, HELLO OTHNIEL

Judges 3:9-11

God has placed Israel under the hand of the most powerful oppressor of the Judges era, and now in an act of mercy, He has decided to kick that oppressor out of the throne. By tackling such a powerful king at the beginning of this epic story, God is demonstrating His own omnipotence, His all-sufficiency.

Read Judges 3:9-11. Take note of where Othniel gets his strength and how it is used.

Othniel had been courageous in defeating the enemy within his reach in his own territory (Judges 1:11-15), and now God has a bigger job for him. God brings this deliverer out of the settlement of Caleb at the far southwest corner of Israel, to defeat a king at the northeast, the very opposite border (see map on p. 14). God has certainly enlarged his area of influence. Yet it is not Othniel's influence that is the focus of this passage.⁵ It was God who gave Israel into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia. Now, it is God who gives Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia, into the hand of Othniel.

Imagine for a moment what it was like to cower under the oppression of the king of double wickedness for eight long years. Imagine the relief that came when God sent a hero not only to remove the evil dictator, but to preside over the land of Israel, providing 40 years of wisdom, guidance, leadership, and rest.

Read the following Scriptures and record your insights about rest.

Exodus 33:14

Psalms 4:8

Matthew 11:28-30

God desires that we would experience the peace of His presence. Yet so often, we are like Israel who ignored history, failed to be thankful for God's dramatic rescues, and sadly became complacent in time of peace. As Romans 2:4 says, they take for granted "the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance." We need to tune our hearts to respond to God's gentle lovingkindness in times of peace. If we do not handle His good gifts well, we shouldn't be surprised when His severe mercy comes to shake us to our senses.

Spend some time in prayer asking God to make you aware of how He has brought rest in various situations in your life. Give thanks for His peace and presence.

Week 2: Day 4
INNOVATIVE WEAPONS
Judges 3:11-31

The land has rested for 40 years under the leadership of Othniel, but things change when the time comes for his death. The cycle of sin begins to repeat itself as the Israelites “again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (Judges 3:12).

Read Judges 3:12-17. Take note of how God responds to Israel’s distress.

The Moabites have allied with the Ammonites and Amalekites to oppress Israel. Under this team of bullies, the people cry out to the Lord. As Israel prepares to send a tribute down to the king of Moab, God raises up a deliverer. A little like Katniss Everdeen of The Hunger Games, tribute to the Capitol, Ehud is an unlikely hero whose feisty and innovative ways start a revolution. This left-handed man fashions a custom-made sword without a cross-piece and hides it on the right side of his body, making the weapon difficult for bodyguards to detect as right-handed citizens carry their swords on the left. Imagine Israel, taxed and plundered, skin and bones, hovering at the poverty line. Imagine them taking the best of their produce as a tribute to the excessively fat king, Eglon. After presenting the tribute, Ehud leaves Eglon, perhaps getting cold feet about the plan to do away with the king. But as Ehud makes his way back home, something stops him in his tracks.

Read the first phrase in Judges 3:19. What gets Ehud’s attention?

This is a place of remembrance for the Israelites. When the nation arrived at the border of Canaan under Joshua’s leadership, God parted the waters of the Jordan River as He had at the Red Sea, a symbol that He would clear the way before them and fulfill His promise. They camped at Gilgal and took twelve stones out of the river to set up as memorials where they crossed on dry ground (Joshua 4:19-24). Israel returned there many times for rededication and remembrance. But in Israel’s distress in Judges 2:1, while God waited for Israel to meet Him at Gilgal, they chose to gather at Bochim, the place of weeping. We, too, have a choice. We can meet God at the place of remembrance, or we can wallow in our own tears.

What are you wallowing in? What emotions are distracting you from your mission?

Invite the Holy Spirit to bring to mind a time He's saved the day for you. Recall every detail of that situation, stacking the memories like the stones Israel set up at Gilgal. Praise the Lord for His presence and leadership. Ask Him to show you the task ahead. Pray for courage to follow through.

Now, as Ehud passes by the riverbank where the Israelites laid down the twelve stones, he finds idols carved in the image of false gods. Fired up, he turns back toward Eglon.

Read Judges 3:18-31. What gory details do you find in this passage? Why might the narrator of this story choose to share this information?

The Moabites may have tried to soil the Israelite's place of remembrance, but the "potty humor" in this story paints the king of Moab as unclean himself. "The God of the Bible does not hold back in the wild blue yonder somewhere waiting for you to pour Clorox and spray Lysol over the affairs of your life before he will touch it....he is the God who delights to deliver his people even in their messes and likes to make them laugh again," Dale Ralph Davis says.⁸

This chapter ends on a little footnote about Shamgar, a mystery man with a Canaanite name. Scholars say he could have come from an Israelite-Canaanite marriage or grown up in a Canaanite home and later put his faith in the God of Israel. Like Ehud, Shamgar is an unexpected hero with an unexpected weapon. A lack of resources is no excuse for bowing out of battle. Committed to his mission, Shamgar picks up a farming implement, the tool he has in reach, and uses it to rescue God's people.

When have you counted yourself out of God's work because of not having the perfect tools?

Make a list of resources in your reach that could be used to root out negative influences or deliver the oppressed (i.e., a blog, a call to a congress person, a living room for hospitality, volunteering for refugee ministry, a prayer circle). Circle a resource to pick up and use today.

Week 2: Day 5
WOMEN AND WARRIORS
Judges 4

The cycle continues. A faithful judge dies. The people of Israel again do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. The Lord gives them over to the hand of the enemy. This time, the enemy is so formidable that the men of war are turning squeamish.

Read Judges 4:1-3. What is so daunting about this particular oppressor?

In Judges 1:19, we read that Judah could not drive out the enemy because of their iron chariots. Scholars believe that iron chariots were a new technology only available to the most powerful of kings during the timeframe of this story. Psalm 20:7 says, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." Imagine how much fear and suffering the Israelites could have avoided if they had only focused on the power of God over the power of those iron chariots.⁹

Read Judges 5:6-8. List the conditions Israel endured at this time.

What seemed like harmless carousing with the Canaanites, when Israel first shrugged off God's commands, is now affecting their quality of life. "[W]e learn that the oppression of the Israelites was so cruel that the people went into hiding.... Travel on the main thoroughfare was unsafe. The frightened Israelites 'took to winding paths'...or back ways, which the enemy did not use so that the Israelites would be unlikely to meet their enemy."⁹

Read Judges 4:4-16. Take note of any evidence of fear and how the characters respond to it.

This military leader who trusted in his iron chariots now comes up against the Lord's unbreakable power and plan. And he runs. No doubt Sisera thinks he is fleeing danger and running to safety, but it's a useless effort to run from God's wrath when the only safe place is "in the shadow of the Almighty" (Psalm 91:1) Only "If you say, 'The Lord is my refuge,' and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent" (Psalm 91:9-10). The tent Sisera stumbles upon is quite different. Here, the coward running from battle meets a woman of courage and

cleverness. This wife of Heber, the man who moved up from his own people to live in this place, is at the right place at the right time to bring justice.

Read Judges 4:17-20. How does Sisera describe the identity of any potential enemies to Jael in verse 20? How does this mesh with the prophecy Deborah communicated to Barak back in verse 9?

When the Islamic terrorist group ISIS began wreaking havoc in Iraq and other areas of the Middle East in the summer of 2014, the terrorists “took hostages, and raped and sold into slavery thousands of women.” But now Kurdish women are forming their own military units and fighting back, emboldened by the knowledge that they themselves are the enemy’s kryptonite. As Journalist Martin Himmel said, “ISIS warriors believe if they die in battle, they receive the 72 virgins of paradise, but if they are killed at the hands of female fighters, they go straight to hell.” Like these women, Jael is an unlikely warrior...and this is the advantage that brings Sisera down without a fight.¹⁰

Like Shamgar who used a farm tool as a weapon against the Philistines, the unexpected warrior in front of us picks up the everyday objects around her and uses them to accomplish judgment on Canaan. Commentators’ opinions vary about whether or not Jael was righteous in her actions. Sometimes the Bible simply describes the reality of sinful human choices or complicated plot lines that are not sanctioned by God. Yet, as you’ll see in the next chapter, Jael’s acts are sung as heroic in Deborah’s war ballad.

Read Judges 4:21-22. In what ways does Jael act out the stereotypical characteristics of a woman? In what ways does she break the stereotype?

How are you affected by the words and actions of Deborah and Jael? How do their roles in this story affect your view of how women should take part in God’s plan?

I can almost see it in slow motion as Barak approaches the area, running after the enemy Sisera. Here is the woman right out of Deborah’s prophecy, a humble, soft-spoken woman, yet one with an iron fist. Who knows how the story would have played out if she had not taken the tent peg in her hand, but because of her secret mission, Sisera’s master, tyrant to Israel, would soon meet a similar fate.

Week 2: Bonus Lesson

VICTORY SONG

Judges 1:1, 2:6-10

It is time, for a time, to lay aside the task of trying to pronounce the names of people and places that make us sound like we've got marbles in our mouths. It's time to look away from our timelines and maps. It's time to take a break from straight-forward prose and lean back into the mystery of poetry. Poetry is about sound, rhythm, beauty, feeling. While we can glean information from some poems, the primary purpose of poetry and song is to pull together meaning and sound to stir up emotion.

Here in Judges 5, we listen in on a duet featuring Deborah and Barak. Let's run our fingers through the poem for a bit, looking for contrast in the descriptions.

Read Judges 5:2-30. Use two contrasting words to describe each of the following pairs.

God and his people (Judges 5:2-11)

Warriors and brothers (Judges 5:11-23)

Deborah/Jael and Sisera's mother (Judges 5:24-30)

Read Judges 5:14-17, 23. Which people and actions garner admiration? Which people and actions cause disappointment? What can you learn from these examples?

Find a quiet place to be alone and read the entire chapter aloud, feeling the sound, rhythm, and emotion of the words as you read them.

What can you "make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel" about today? What victories has He brought in your life that you can record as a way of celebrating what He's done?

Week Three

Week 3: Day 1

MAN OF VALOR...IN HIDING

Judges 6:1-24

After the grand celebration of Israel's victories led by Deborah and Barak, you'd think the Israelites would have figured out who they are and who they can trust by now. But at the beginning of Judges 6, it's the same song, different verse. They've chosen evil over covenant love. And the Lord lets them feel the full brunt of their choice by giving the people into the hand of the Midianites, who come in year after year to loot them.

Read Judges 6:1-6. Take note of the ways that the Midianites, Amalekites, and others have overpowered Israel and how the Israelites have coped.

The Midianites in our text are a "fierce nomadic tribe from the desert" who have tamed the camel by this point in history, greatly increasing their "the mobility and striking power," Ruth M. Bathauer says. The Amalekites are "a bedouin people roaming the Sinai peninsula whose name the Israelites remembered as the first enemy to attack their forefathers after they left Egypt." These groups aren't interested in claiming the Israelites' land, but instead camp outside Manasseh's territory before every harvest, ready to rush in and take over food, water, animals, and pasture.¹

Read Judges 6:7-10. When the people of Israel cry out to the Lord, who does He send to them? What message does that person bring?

The Midianites and Amalekites raid the land, destroy crops, steal livestock, and kill Israelites. But when Israel cries out in distress, God doesn't sit with them and complain about the flaws of the enemy. He sends someone to give the Israelites a history lesson and rebuke them for their disobedience. Israel so often chooses to do things the hard way. They have ignored their covenant with God and His promise to bless their food and water, and have instead trusted in false gods of fertility to give them success with their crops. Let's see where this leads them.

Read Judges 6:11. Take note of where Gideon is and what he's doing.

In what ways are you disobeying God and making things harder than they need to be?

In Gideon's era, grain stalks are usually brought to a wide-open space on top of a hill where a farmer throws them into the air and the wind separates the grain from the stalks to make them ready for cooking. A winepress, on the other hand, is a confined trough where grapes are trampled to make juice. Gideon does his work the hard way using the wrong tool for the job in order to keep out of sight, the only chance for his family's survival.²

Read Judges 6:12-13. What does the visitor think of Gideon? How does Gideon feel about God?

Gideon has heard the stories of God's mighty power in Israel's history, yet he is disillusioned. It's the age-old question: If there is a God, and if He is a loving God, then why all this suffering? I find it interesting that the Lord doesn't argue with Gideon's feelings, but assures him instead.

Read Judges 6:14-16. How does Gideon's view of himself coincide with his view of God? How does the Lord respond to him?

The identity God speaks over Gideon in verses 12 and 14, is a description that is true only because of verse 16, "But I will be with you." God gives no details for how the story will play out, but He gives assurance. Gideon will be a man of valor because of God's presence.

This self-proclaimed weakling from the weakest family continues to ask for assurances to soothe his insecurities. But soon, Gideon gets the hint that this isn't just any heavenly visitor. He prepares a meal for this special guest, unleavened cakes and a young goat with its broth, which resembles the offerings Israel used to bring to the Lord their God at his altar. John MacArthur says this is the "preincarnate appearance of Christ called a Christophany," and his appearance in full glory would strike a man with fear, the kind experienced by Ezekiel and Isaiah in their visions, the kind John felt when he received his revelation on Patmos, the kind God warned Moses about in Exodus 33:19-20.³ Beyond the symbolism, this is also a sacrifice in the most practical sense for Gideon,

seeing as recent attacks have left livestock and grain in short supply. He gives to God out of the little that he has.

Read Judges 6:17-24. Take note of Gideon's certainties and fears. What evidence of peace do you find in the interaction between God and Gideon?

This has been a holy moment. God has approached a fearful young man in a downtrodden tribe, asserted that the young man is indeed a mighty man of valor, and assured that He will be with him and lead him to strike down the Midianites. To culminate this encounter, we see an offering being presented to the Lord in Israel for the first time in who knows how long. As this scene closes, Gideon's fear begins to turn in the right direction, becoming reverence. A proper view of God's glory and power shows us our God-given strengths and our enemy's weakness.

List your insecurities and disillusionments. Pray over each one, thanking God for the way His presence assures and comforts.

Week 3: Day 2
COURAGE AND CAUTION
Judges 6:25-40

Gideon builds an altar in honor of the Lord. But it is not enough to build it on ground that has been too long dedicated to the worship of Baal. These altars can't stand side by side. Matthew 6:24 says, "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other...."

Read Judges 6:25-32. Take note of how Gideon's actions affect his family.

**What altars do you need to tear down to make space for worshiping God?
What fears are standing in your way?**

The Lord comes to Gideon under cover of darkness, knowing Gideon is not yet ready to bring his newfound faith into daylight. But clothed in the Spirit of the Lord, Gideon begins to take courage. He tears down Baal's altar and cuts the Asherah pole, then wakes to find his courage is contagious. His idol-owning father now stands publicly against Baal. "If he is a god, let him contend for himself," he says. 1 Timothy 4:12 says, "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." Despite Gideon's age and insecurity, God uses him as a catalyst to begin transformation in Israel.

Read Judges 6:33-40. Take note of the things God gives Gideon.

How does it make you feel that God doesn't judge Gideon as he continually asks for assurances?

As Gideon goes with God, united with his father and with the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, victory is sure to come. Or is it? Gideon wants to know. In the same way that Jesus allowed Thomas to touch his wounded side for evidence, "God graciously condescends to [Gideon's] doubt," John MacArthur says.³ Dale Ralph Davis agrees, "Gideon wants to be more sure of Yahweh's sure word. He is hesitant, not

unbelieving. It is not the absence of faith but the caution of faith we see here.... God is not ashamed to stoop down and reassure us in our fears.”⁴

How might you step out in courage, clothed in his Spirit today?

Week 3: Day 3

300

Judges 7:1-22

“The world will know that free men stood against a tyrant, that few stood against many, and before this battle was over, even a god-king can bleed,” King Leonidas said to the Persian ruler Xerxes in the movie *300*, a modern telling of the epic battle between Sparta and Persia. Sparta’s 300 men didn’t stand a chance to Persia’s 300,000, but despite the inevitable outcome they faced, Leonidas’ small but mighty army fought to the death, calling the rest of Greece to unite and refuse to submit to the advancing Persian Empire.⁵ Had all of Greece united in advance, who knows what story could have been told?

When we meet up with Gideon again, he has gathered 32,000 men from the surrounding Israelite tribes. But as the army waits outside Midian’s headquarters, Gideon is handed another strategy, one that seems like certain death for his troops.

Read Judges 7:2-8. Take note of the phases in God’s plan to sculpt Gideon’s army.

When we first met Gideon, we were immediately confronted with his weakness. And now we are seeing that this weakness is not only something that God puts up with, but a weakness He uses as a backdrop for His mighty ways. When is God better glorified than when there is no human solution to the problem? God first whittles the army down by letting any fearful men run for home. Remarkably, Gideon no longer listens to his insecurities. He stays committed as God cuts the army down to a mere 300 men.

Read Judges 7:9. What assignment and assurance does God give to Gideon as he and his army face the massive army of the enemy?

Not so long ago, we read that Gideon chose to tear down Baal’s altar under cover of night. This next assignment, too, will be completed in the dark. Isn’t God such an attentive, personal God? The Lord knows the remnants of fear that remain in Gideon’s heart.

Read Judges 7:10-14. What does God offer to Gideon as a way to calm his fear?

Note that God sends Gideon with a friend. Perhaps this is so that Gideon will have evidence later when he second-guesses what they witness. Of the five senses, Gideon is told to use one in particular. Gideon is not to trust his eyes as he may look at the enemy sprawling like “locusts in abundance” or “their camels...without number” looking like “the sand that is on the seashore in abundance.” He is to listen.

In ancient cultures, dreams were understood as a way to hear from the divine or discern one’s destiny. In other accounts of dreams shared in the Bible, we usually hear a dream from the mind of a great leader and an interpretation offered by one of God’s gifted servants, such as Joseph with Pharaoh or Daniel with the king of Babylon. But here, we have one idol-worshipping infantryman telling his dream to another idol-worshipping infantryman, and that fellow soldier interpreting the dream back to his friend. Clearly, God can speak through whomever He chooses.

Read Judges 7:15. After hearing the dream and interpretation, what does Gideon do?

After this assurance, and before jumping to action, Gideon pauses to worship. He has discovered the timeless truth that “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:24), and his gratitude wells up to the point of overflowing. From this point, we hear nothing else about Gideon needing assurances. He is convinced. After Gideon, worships the Lord, he preaches to his army, “Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand.” He experiences God. He gains confidence. He worships. He shares the news.

What assurance has God given you during the course of the study that you can pause and thank Him for?

Who in your life might be encouraged about what God has been communicating to you? Send a personal message to share your thoughts.

Week 3: Day 4
TROUBLE IN THE RANKS
Judges 7:16-8:3

On my first trip overseas, several members of my mission team stayed up all night on our last night together at a game reserve in South Africa. When the conversation and singing weren't working to keep us awake anymore, someone brought up the crazy idea to play a South African fraternity joke on our fellow teammates who'd already gone to bed. We knew a little secret-- most of our friends hadn't figured out how to adequately lock their cabin doors. Armed with a couple of flashlights and our voices, we carefully creaked a door open, crept in on our tiptoes, hovered over our friends, turned on our flashlight "headlights" and then yelled out "kombi!!!!," which was the name of the vans we drove throughout our time in South Africa and Swaziland. It was a mean joke as I think back on it now, to watch them bolt upright from deep sleep, gasp for air, and yell out in their dreamy stupor...but it sure was fun.

As our story of Gideon vs. the Midianites continues, we find that the element of surprise plays a major role in the battle. We've seen some strange weapons in our reading of Judges. We have Ehud's custom-made sword without the cross-bar. We have Shamgar's farm tool. We have Jael's tent peg and hammer. And now we come upon the strangest battle implements of all.

Read Judges 7:16-18. Take note of the odd strategy of Gideon's army.

When Gideon and his men sneak up to the enemy camp, the watchmen for the second night watch have just taken their posts. The Midianite soldier's nightmare is about to come true.

Read Judges 7:19-22. What effect do the sights and sounds have on the enemy?

Sometimes the answer to the problem of the wicked is just to let them take care of themselves. Proverbs 11:17 says, "A man who is kind benefits himself, but a cruel man hurts himself." Psalm 35:8 says, "Let destruction come upon him when he does not know it! And let the net that he hid ensnare him; let him fall into it--to his destruction!" The 300 brave souls who remained in Gideon's army have a front-row seat for God's amazing rescue through the self-destruction of the Midianites. Perhaps this almost effortless victory on behalf of Gideon's 300 men gave those 22,000 scaredy cats the confidence they needed to jump back to action just like King Leonidas' brave loss gave Greece the will to fight in unity against the Persians.

Read Judges 7:23-8:3. What conflict comes up after the military campaign is finished? What character flaw is at the source of the conflict?

In Matthew 6:1-2 Jesus says, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven....” Left out of Gideon’s trumpet-playing warriors, the men of Ephraim try to toot their own horns. Back in Judges 7:2, God said His reason for slimming down Gideon’s army was so Israel couldn’t boast and say they had saved themselves. He wants them to know the lengths He goes to in His love for them. He is their warrior, mighty to save. Gideon could put the narcissists of Ephraim in their place, and even exalt his own leadership in the battle, but knowing God’s heart, he chooses instead to compliment the Ephraimites and downplay his own victory. In the tenderness of the Spirit of God that clothes him, Gideon chooses wisdom in his response.

Look up Proverbs 15:1 and write out the words.

All of us have people in our lives who make it harder to live out our faith. We imagine if we didn’t have to deal with the snarky attitudes or cold shoulders that we could be so much better behaved. But if we are living in the power of God’s Spirit and not in our own pride, the Lord makes us able to relax our gritted teeth and speak peace.

What difficult person in your life makes it hard to experience joy? How does Gideon’s example encourage you in that relationship?

Pray through your frustration. Commit to speaking peace to that person. Ask God to show Himself at work in that person’s life.

Week 3: Day 5
A BAD ENDING
Judges 8:22-32

When I was in my early twenties, I joined my nation and the world in cheering on an athlete who pushed the boundaries of human potential, winning seven consecutive Tour de France titles. If I said his name back then, you'd think of hard work, resolve, and overcoming insurmountable odds. After all, he had fought a potentially fatal form of testicular cancer in 1996, and had come back to racing to win again. He became a household name, and American drivers were sharing the road with more and more ten-speeds as cyclists chased the dream. Now, if I say *Lance Armstrong*, what thoughts come to mind? If you know the name, I'd venture to say you think of a mixture of talent and scandal. When a 2012 investigation proved he had used performance-enhancing drugs, his titles were stripped from his record, his not-for-profit had to distance itself from him, and Lance Armstrong has been rebuilding his public image ever since.⁶

It can be crushing to see a hero fall. Maybe that's why all the children's Sunday school materials skip over this chapter of Gideon's life. I remember reading it as an adult a few years ago and feeling like somebody had been keeping skeletons in the closet and I'd unwittingly opened the door, releasing all these bones to tumble down on my head. It was hard to process this oddly tragic ending for a hero I thought I knew so well.

Read Judges 8:22-23. How does the request of the Israelites differ from the identity God gave to Gideon in Judges 6:14-16?

In Revelation, when the disciple John falls down to worship the angel revealing the visions to him, the angel says, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God" (Revelation 22:9). While we can feel free to express gratitude for the leaders God puts in our lives, we need to be careful to reserve our worship for the Lord alone.

Read Judges 8:24-27. Take note of how Gideon repeats history.

Gideon may refuse the request to become the Israelite's king, but he grasps for a different kind of leadership. He doesn't put on a royal robe, but he fashions a priestly garment, an ephod, for himself. His actions here are a sad throwback to his father's idol worship in Judges 6, and the priest Aaron's creation of the golden calf in Exodus 32. Gideon's ephod also reminds me of the coat of many colors, the garment Joseph wore to show he was favored by his father (Genesis 37:3). Gideon has always asked for assurances, for direct knowledge of God's will. He has become accustomed to having

insider information on God's next move. He has been showered with the adoration of his fellow Israelites after battle. And now he sees himself as larger than life. In his delusion of grandeur, he grasps for something that is not his to have.⁷

In Week 1, we learned that God assigned the privilege of priesthood to the tribe of Levi alone. Gideon, from the tribe of Manasseh, oversteps God's boundaries and parades around as priest himself. Dale Ralph Davis says, "Yahweh had provided priest and ephod at the sanctuary; here Israel's leaders and people could receive direction and guidance. If Yahweh gave uniquely direct guidance to one of his servants (as to Gideon in chapters 6 and 7) in some circumstances, that did not authorize that servant to assume he should become an ongoing alternative channel of divine guidance for Israel.... Gideon hankered after more than what God had given for declaring his will."⁸

In Judges 2:3, we read that the gods of the Canaanites would become a snare to the Israelites if they did not drive the Canaanites out. This same Gideon who wrecked the altar of Baal, cut the Asherah pole, and gave his father courage to speak out against false gods, now turns the very ephod of God's high priest into an idol for Israel to worship. It's not so surprising that Israel again "whore[s] after the Baals" when they've so recently "whored after" Gideon's ephod.

While he rejects the formal offer to become Israel's king and says "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you," his actions show what's really in his heart. Living like a king, Gideon fathers seventy sons through his many wives and concubines. In Judges 8:29-31, Gideon's expanding ego shows as he names his son "Abimelech," meaning "my father is king."⁹

In the end, Gideon's pride exceeds that of the self-centered men of Ephraim and becomes a snare to his whole nation. If we put our trust in Christian leaders and heroes, we run the risk of becoming disillusioned, or being led astray ourselves, as a flawed leader walks away from pure devotion to God. There is no firm foundation but the solid rock, our Cornerstone, Jesus Christ. "He who believes in Him will not be disappointed," Romans 10:11 says.

What leaders have disappointed you? How have these disappointments affected your faith?

What types of pride or entitlements in your own heart tempt you to stray? How can you guard against these temptations to finish strong?

Week 3: Bonus Lesson

THE ENEMY WITHIN

Judges 8:4-21

In between Gideon's soft words with the narcissistic Ephraimites and his surprising downfall into pride and self-worship, he stumbles on the Israelite towns of Succoth and Penuel. Still pursuing the kings of Midian, Gideon and his army feel their strength giving out. Their stomachs ache in hunger. Their legs and lungs ache from the long pursuit.

Read Judges 8:4-8. Take note of how the people of Succoth and Penuel respond to the needs of Gideon's army.

Those who are able to help refuse to share with these men of valor. They cower under the threat of oppressors, fearing the enemy will come back in force to take revenge on Israel, stealing more food and acting violently toward them. The people of Succoth and Penuel apparently are hedging their bets that the enemy will go light on them if they refuse to offer food to Gideon and his army. What a contrast to remember that Gideon was once like these fearful ones, hiding in a winepress trying to ration his food for himself and his family.

Think about hard times in your own past. How has fear made you stingy?

What work of God have you missed out on by trying to conserve your resources for your own use instead of sharing them with His servants?

Read Judges 8:7-9. Take note of how Gideon reacts to the betrayal.

Read Judges 8:10-21. Compare Gideon's treatment of the enemy kings with his treatment of his fellow Israelites who've betrayed him.

Interestingly, Gideon's motivation in killing Zebah and Zalmunna is not judgment for their oppression of Israel or their rebellion against God. Gideon brings the sword on these kings of Midian because of what they did to his own family, "my brothers, the sons of my mother." Yet when he approaches the towns of Succoth and Penuel, his fellow Israelites, we see His loyalty is completely conditional. I Timothy 5:8 does say, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." Still, Gideon seems to be (dys)functioning out of his own anger, not clothed in God's Spirit here. Instead of the gentle answer to turn away wrath with his prideful brothers, the Ephraimites, this time, Gideon rages at Succoth and Penuel, ripping them apart with thorny branches and bulldozing their safe places. He tortures, abuses, and causes great destruction before taking their lives.

Growing up in a culture of poverty and oppression, where the Israelites had to hide any remnants of grain, wine, and oil, Gideon and the people of Succoth and Penuel become defensive toward one another. As Brene Brown says in her book, Daring Greatly, "Worrying about scarcity is our culture's version of post-traumatic stress. It happens when we've been through too much, and rather than coming together to heal (which requires vulnerability) we're angry and scared and at each other's throats."¹⁰

Look up the following verses and record any insights about how we should address our needs.

Philippians 4:19

Matthew 6:31-32

James 4:1-2

Luke 4:4

John 4:34

If Gideon had depended on God to meet his needs, and had practiced empathy toward the fearful people of Succoth and Penuel, perhaps he wouldn't have opened himself to the flattery of Israel that came to him after his exploits. Perhaps he wouldn't have chased after the acknowledgment of people and taken on the persona of king or priest, lifting Himself to a role he was never meant to fill.

What expectations have you placed on your people? How have their failures affected your attitude and actions?

Which verse above speaks most to you in your circumstance? Commit that verse to memory today. Quote it to a friend or family member.

Week Four

Week 4: Day 1

TERROR FROM WITHIN

Judges 9

With a twisted perversion rooted in deep psychological issues, World War II Japanese sergeant Mutsuhiro Watanabe did all he could to crush his POWs physically and mentally. Watanabe's brother held a high position in the Japanese army. His brother-in-law was commander of one of the largest POW camps. But when Watanabe applied to become an officer, he was rejected, despite his education and family connections. In Unbroken, Laura Hillenbrand writes, "Those who knew him would say that every part of his mind gathered around this blazing humiliation, and every subsequent action was informed by it. This defining event would have tragic consequences for hundreds of men." His anger and insecurity morphed into mental illness, which then morphed into violence. Watanabe ordered POW soldiers to repeatedly punch their friends in the head, forced them to bow to inanimate objects for hours on end, whipped them in the face with a metal belt buckle, made them clean out the dysentery-laden latrines by hand, stole their rations, and demanded that the men hold up heavy objects with their bony arms for extended lengths of time. If they failed, he threatened to shoot them. Years later, because of Watanabe's unchecked issues, survivors would still wake up drenched in sweat after nightmares of his sadistic abuse.¹

In the story of Abimelech, we find another twisted tyrant as Gideon's longing for power leaks through to his son. Abimelech isn't content to live out the meaning of his name, "my father is king." He *himself* wants to be king. There is nothing in the text that tells us Gideon's other sons had a right or a desire to rule, yet Abimelech sees them as a threat. Perhaps he is bitter at being the son of Gideon's mistress. His otherness seems to fuel his intense sibling rivalry.

Read Judges 8:31-9:7. Keep track of the relationship problems in this passage and how Abimelech responds. (Note that Gideon is called by his nickname, Jerubbaal, in this chapter. See Judges 6:32 for more details.)

One of Gideon's sons, Jotham, hides and survives Abimelech's slaughter. But when he hears that his cruel half-brother has become king of Shechem, he finds courage to climb up and speak his mind from the mountaintop. Using the symbolism of a thorny bramble ruling over healthy trees, Jotham reveals the unworthiness of Abimelech and the foolishness of the men of Shechem (Judges 9:8-21).

Rivalry runs so deep in Abimelech's psyche that even after killing most of Gideon's sons, he is still on the lookout for mutiny. In Judges 9:22-41, when a newcomer gains the confidence of Shechem's leaders, the tension becomes like an overinflated tire ready to pop. Abimelech drives this man out, but continues in fits of paranoia like Mitsuhiro Watanabe, taking out his anger on the innocent population. Abimelech's words of kinship with those in Shechem back when he came to power (Judges 9:2,4) were merely a cover-up for the real power-grab in Abimelech's heart. Now, the rage he used to massacre the sons of Gideon turns on the people of Shechem.

Read Judges 9:45-57. What evil does Abimelech inflict on his people?

Earlier, when Jotham spoke out against Abimelech and the fools who appointed him, he prophesied, "...let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem...and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem...and devour Abimelech" (Judges 9:20). Now, we see Abimelech setting fire to the tower where the people of Shechem have fled for safety. As he begins to set fire to another tower nearby, a woman after Jael's own heart (Judges 4:21) drops a millstone on his head. Through this, God returns the perpetrator's evil on his own head, and Jotham's words come true.

Abimelech's evil and Shechem's foolishness have collided to destroy Israel from within. Whether in personal life or political campaigns, we need to ask God to help us discern who is telling the truth, who has our best interests and His ways in mind, and who we should allow to take a position of influence in our lives. We need to bring up serious questions about motives...those in others, and those in ourselves.

How have you been swayed by flattery like the people of Shechem?

What wounds in your past have become obsessions? How might those obsessions be harming those around you?

Look up the lyrics to "One Pure and Holy Passion," written by Mark Altrogge. Meditate on the words. In an attitude of prayer, lay your hands with palms facing down as you give up your self-centered passions, obsessions, and ambitions. Then, turn your hands upward, ready to receive God's direction. Commit to following the Lord and pursuing Him passionately.

Week 4: Day 2

RELIEF

Judges 10:1-5

When terrorists flew planes into the towers of the World Trade Center in 2001, the emotional impact spread far beyond the smoke and wreckage that blackened the streets of New York. I shared earlier in this study about how that day impacted me, though I was far from the scene. I've read accounts of American citizens who were time zones away from ground zero yet still experienced panic attacks in the aftermath of 9/11. While the tragedy primarily assaulted the individuals on the scene, it also traumatized us as a people. Like those of us in the 9/11 generation, the Israelites have endured a horrific ordeal under Abimelech and find themselves in need of comfort. The reign of terror may be over, but there are wounds left to be tended.

Read Judges 10:1-5. We've talked about the hard times of transition when a beloved leader dies, but what kind of effects could Israel be experiencing after Abimelech's death?

Hundreds of years later, the prophet Isaiah shares words of sweet relief after Israel's release from another terrible enemy. His happy words spill over like a cup poured past the brim. Prophets so often carry the heavy burden of bringing bad news and judgment, and now he gets to sing a more cheerful tune. "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me," he says, "because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news...." (Isaiah 61:1a). Just as the judges get their power for mighty deeds from the Spirit of God (Judges 3:10, 6:34), the servant who comforts the innocent receives this same touch of grace for ministry. Hundreds of years after Isaiah, Jesus would quote from this same passage, bringing the meaning of the message to its fullness in Him.

Read Isaiah 61:1-3. What types of victims are mentioned in this passage? What types of therapy are offered to those victims?

Which type of victim most closely matches your experience? In what ways have you felt God ministering to you after hard times?

Abimelech, the man once anointed king by the oak tree at Shechem, is gone. And God desires to anoint His people with "the oil of gladness instead of mourning...that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord," (Isaiah 61:3b). It is here that

we meet Tola, who judges twenty-three years, and Jair, who judges twenty-two years. That makes forty-five years of solid leadership to help heal the damage that just a few years of evil had brought on the nation.

The Lord longs to give you good news, to bind up your broken heart, to set you free, to fight your enemies, to comfort you in grief, to adorn you with gladness and beauty, to give you a heart of praise in place of your faint spirit. Because of our tender warrior God, we don't have to stay wounded.

Week 4: Day 3
USING GOD
Judges 10:6-18

At the end of the movie, *O, Brother, Where Art Thou?*, three escaped convicts face the prospect of being hanged in the back country of the deep south. In this moment of panic, the ring leader Ulysses, normally a skeptic of all things spiritual, falls to his knees, looks up to the sky, and talks to the God he supposedly doesn't believe in. "Please look down and recognize us poor sinners.... I know I've been guilty of pride and sharp dealing," he says. "I'm sorry that I turned my back on you, Lord. Forgive me.... Help me, please." At that moment, water begins to gather in small puddles around his bended knees. In the distance, he sees the strange sight of a tall wave plummeting toward them. He looks on in wonder as his prayer for deliverance is answered. But when he comes up from the deep rushing water with his friends and all of the household items swirling around them, he suddenly changes his tune, saying there is a perfectly scientific explanation for all this. He refuses to give God credit for the rescue. "Well, any human being will cast about in a moment of stress," Ulysses defends.²

The people of Israel have cried to the Lord before in complaint about their condition, but this time there is an added element--in this rock-bottom moment, the Israelites approach God with a new attitude.

Read Judges 10:6-15. What is different about the way Israel approaches God about their distress this time? How does God reply?

God knows Israel's heart, that they will turn from Him again and again, using Him to bring back the material comforts they miss. "And they do not cry to Me from their heart when they wail on their beds," Hosea 7:14 says, "For the sake of grain and new wine they assemble themselves, they turn away from me." They snap their fingers, like God is some cosmic waiter. When He's filled their stomachs and quenched their thirst, they don't want Him anymore. Our loving God longs for a people who want His presence more than they want a blessing from Him.

Read Judges 10:16-18. List any words that describe God's heart for Israel.

For now, Israel makes good on their word to kick the false gods to the curb, but it is not this action that moves God to act on their behalf. It is the misery of Israel, and God's lovingkindness toward His people, which moves Him to step in and save the day. I love how Dale Ralph Davis puts it: "Our hope does not rest in the sincerity of our repentance but in the intensity of Yahweh's compassion.... It is as if he cannot stand to see his

people--even his sinful people--crushed. In all their affliction he is afflicted.... [H]e is the God whose holiness demands he judge his people yet whose heart moves him to spare his people."³

How healthy is your relationship toward God when you're in the middle of distress as compared to when things are more peaceful? Do you make empty promises in order to get what you think you need in the moment?

How does being aware of God's desire for a relationship with you change the way you approach Him?

Week 4: Day 4
TEACHER AND PREACHER
Judges 11:1-28

When we left the scene yesterday, the Ammonites were camped around Gilead. The Israelites had cleared out their idols and started serving the Lord. Now, they're looking for God's salvation on the horizon.

Our next fighter is from the tribe of Gilead. His heritage makes sense for this particular battle, located in Gilead's territory. The man is a warrior. That makes sense for the task at hand. But in this judge's bio, we find a surprising detail that makes him an odd choice for leadership.

Read Judges 11:1-11. How have Jephthah's parents' choices affected his life direction?

God allows Jephthah's background to paint a picture of what is happening between God and Israel. Dale Ralph Davis says that the "parallels between Israel's way with Yahweh and Gilead's way with Jephthah seem too close to be accidental. When the Israelites are in a jam they cry to Yahweh to bail them out (10:10), as the elders of Gilead do to Jephthah (11:5-6). Both Yahweh's reply and Jephthah's (11:7) show that they know someone is trying to use them."⁴

Unlike Abimelech, (the outcast son of a concubine who manipulated Shechem's leaders into giving him the kingship) Jephthah (an outcast son of a prostitute) puts his insecurities about family dysfunction and favoritism right out in the open. In this way, he gets honest assurances from those seeking his help. His willingness to confront and bring out the truth comes into use not only with the leaders of Gilead, but in conversations with the enemy as well. He wields words before weapons.

Read Judges 11:12-28. What comparisons does Jephthah make between the one true God and the false god of the Ammonites?

Though Jephthah has hovered on the fringes of society as an outlaw, he knows the history of Israel like he's been tutored under the best teachers. First, he starts to teach, reminding the Ammonite king that God drove out the Amorites so that Israel could have the land. It hadn't been Ammonite land after all. Next, he starts to preach. The land had been a gift to Israel from the very Creator of it. After all, "The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world and those who dwell in it," as Psalm 24:1 says.

Jephthah's shady past as an outcast and outlaw have prepared him surprisingly well for this moment in Israel's history. While He is not the author of sin, in His wisdom and amazing power, God often uses human mistakes and messy circumstance to bring about His good plans. As Jephthah and his hooligan friends terrorized their neighborhood growing up, Jephthah learned the ways of a warrior. As a young man despised and rejected, he developed the bold defiance that gave him the confidence to confront the enemy.

How has God used puzzling events and relationships to shape your character and prepare you for a task ahead?

Think back on a time when someone has used you and/or taken you for granted. How does it affect you to think that God, too, is taken for granted?

Week 4: Day 5
TRAGIC WORDS
Judges 11:29-12:7

As much as Jephthah's public speaking skills have won us over up to now, we are about to see the danger of his way with words. In our reading today, two tragedies arise from words, one from a vow spoken out of Jephthah's zeal as he goes into battle, and one from a password that becomes a weapon in a scuffle started by pride.⁵

As we've read before about Othniel (Judges 3:10) and Gideon (Judges 6:34), "the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah." In all three cases, we see that the blessing of God's Spirit brought special power and energy that would lead to victory as the Lord gave the enemy in to their hand. Yet, we know from watching Gideon that being clothed in the Spirit does not override human flaws and sin.

Read Judges 11:29-33. In Jephthah's zeal, what statement does he make? What are the results of the battle?

Read Judges 11:34-40. What does Jephthah first see coming out of his doors when he comes home from battle?

Jair, the judge before Jephthah, had thirty sons. The judge after Jephthah will have thirty sons and thirty daughters. The one after that one will have forty sons. Surrounded by all of these men with dozens of children, we find Jephthah cornering himself into giving up his one and only child.

How strange that Jephthah makes such a vow, knowing the first thing to come out of his house could very likely be a human being. It leads us to wonder whether Jephthah had been desensitized by the detestable human sacrifice of the enemy or if his zeal simply clouded his common sense. Whatever the case, Jephthah's commitment to keeping this vow shows that he doesn't know God as well as he thinks he does. He is more superstitious about his own well-being in keeping the vow than he is about following God's commands.

Look up the following verses and write what you learn about God's view of human sacrifice:

Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5
Deuteronomy 12:31; 8:10
Psalms 106:34-40

Though Jephthah's overzealous promise includes the words "burnt offering" (Judges 11:31), some scholars argue that Jephthah may merely give up his daughter to permanent temple service, something like what Hannah vowed as she prayed God would give her a child (1 Samuel 1:11). Whether or not Jephthah follows through on his full commitment to offer his daughter as a burnt offering, or whether he hands her over for a nun's life at the temple, the writer paints a sad picture for us. Mourning and lament fills Israel as this young woman is given up because of flawed zeal. I agree when Dale Ralph Davis says, "Some of our most solemn commitments may be stupid." And so are some of our most serious conflicts.⁵

Read Judges 12:1-7. Take note of any irritations, insults, or threats.

The men of Ephraim are at it again, only this time in place of Gideon's soft answer, we witness Jephthah's brash response. When Ephraim calls Jephthah and the men of Gilead "fugitives...in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh," they're saying, "You don't belong. You're an outcast." These are fighting words to a man like Jephthah who has spent his whole life living on the fringes of society under a cloud of rejection.

Soon, Jephthah and his men fight the Ephraimites and take over the area along the Jordan River. Still stinging from the Ephraimites' efforts to make him and his men feel like outcasts, Jephthah brings attention to the very thing that makes those from Ephraim feel out of place. Apparently, they have a distinct accent that sets them apart from the rest of the tribes. In order to keep safe, each Ephraimite who wishes to cross the Jordan claims to be from a neighboring tribe, but Jephthah and his men force the issue of the accent, demanding that the Ephraimite say "shibboleth" (a Hebrew word related to agriculture) in order to pass through. Since the dialect of Ephraim does not include the "sh" sound, and the Ephraimite can only say "sibboleth," the Ephraimite's cover is blown and so is his chance at survival.

Remember how the land saw its last period of rest during Gideon's era? These two outcasts, Abimelech and Jephthah, have made certain of that, churning up chaos and violence among their people, even away from the company of the Canaanites. With family like this, who needs enemies?

What would you say to Jephthah if he asked your advice in either of these situations? How might that advice help you in using your words wisely?

Week 4: Bonus Lesson

FAME AND FOOTNOTES

Judges 12:8-15

In 2005, an earthquake with a magnitude of over 9.1 on the Richter scale pushed up the ocean floor near Indonesia and sent out waves fifty-feet high to ravage coastlines all over Southeast Asia. In the rush of water, victims were pummeled and slashed by beams from buildings, large shards of glass from broken windows, and pieces of metal ripped from cars. In the wake of the tsunami, while thousands drowned or were killed by the impact of debris, a woman named Maria Belon rose to the surface. The movie *The Impossible* details the miraculous story of how local islanders helped her survive her life-threatening injuries, allowing her to eventually reunite with her husband and children who had all been scattered in the chaos. This humble, soft-spoken woman has reluctantly agreed to share her story on radio shows, in magazines, and on the silver screen, but she makes it a point to say, “There is no difference between me--a Spanish woman named Maria who is alive--and thousands of moms who are under the sea. I do not deserve to be alive, but life is not fair.” Other victims and survivors of the tragic event may not have received the same kind of recognition, but Maria affirms that their lives weren’t any less important.⁶

Similarly, Dale Ralph Davis says our next judges, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon, along with others previously mentioned, Shamgar, Tola, and Jair, are considered “minor judges because they receive less ink, less space in the story, a fact which does not mean they were of no importance. In fact, there was probably little difference in the function between the major and the minor judges.”⁷

While stories of Othniel and Ehud fill paragraphs and stories of Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah (and later, Samson) fill chapters, the minor judges remain in the shadows of history. The narrator of Judges boils down Shamgar’s family history and victory in battle to one measly sentence. Tola gets three sentences giving us the *Cliff’s Notes* version of his family history, his tribal affiliation, his hometown, his length of service, and his burial place. Jair gets the same three sentences of space to fill us in on his basics. Now we meet the rest of the minor judges, those whose lives remain largely a mystery to us.

Read Judges 12:8-15.

Ibzan gets his three sentences of fame. We find out he’s from Bethlehem, has thirty sons and thirty daughters, is quite the matchmaker, judges Israel for seven years and is buried where he was born. Elon gets two sentences. We find out he’s from the tribe of Zebulun, judges Israel ten years, and is buried in his home territory. Abdon gets three sentences. We find out his family heritage as son of Hillel from a city in Ephraim, that he has forty sons and thirty grandsons who ride on seventy donkeys (the brand new luxury vehicle of their day), that he judges Israel 8 years and is buried where he was born. With so little to remember them by, these judges are often forgotten altogether.

It can seem unfair that the lives of some of the Lord's faithful servants are relegated to a mere footnote, while other servants' stories are painted in bold letters across the pages of Scripture, guaranteeing them name recognition for generations to come. But is this what God really has for them, or for us?

The Lord wants us to see in little or plenty, in fame or obscurity, that we are not meant to glory in a person and his exploits. As Dale Ralph Davis points out, "The Bible is saying that its focus is not on man's life but on God's action.... That does not mean that man does not count but that man is not the center."⁸

Look up Mark 10:35-45. What does Jesus recommend for those who want true greatness?

"The soul was never made to carry the weight of fame," Ann Voskamp says, "Fame can only be carried by the One who could carry the weight of the world on that Cross.... The frame of a soul was made to serve."⁹

In the same way, Paul reprimands believers who try to lift him above his co-laborer in the gospel, Apollos...and vice versa. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth," he writes in 1 Corinthians 3:6.

Look up Isaiah 40:1-9. Record your insights about glory, legacy, and the human condition.

Do you tend to be the center of attention or do you more often feel overlooked? How does this passage affect your outlook on your status?

Make way for the glory of the Lord. Let's get ourselves up on a high mountain, not a high horse. We've got something worth shouting about, and it's not you, or me, or any hero among us. Here is our God, friends. Mighty to save. It has always been and always will be about Him. Alpha and Omega. Beginning and End. In terms of His glory, we are all footnotes.



Week 5: Day 1
SUPERHERO IN UTERO
Judges 13

This is starting to sound like a bad playlist stuck on repeat. The Israelites are at it again, doing what's evil in the sight of the Lord. And the Lord again hands them over to what they think they want. Israel has been under the enemy's power for so long that they are now accustomed to it. In this run of the cycle, Israel forgets to ask for help. Hopeless, they resign themselves to a life of servitude to the Philistines. Here, our story zooms in to give us a close-up view of another hopeless situation in the life of an Israelite couple.

Read Judges 13:1-7. What do you learn about Manoah and his wife? What message and special instructions does the visitor bring to the couple?

Throughout Scripture, we meet women who experience long-term infertility and find themselves dealing with social shame and personal disappointment. We can all relate in some way to having our hopes sabotaged. Maybe you assumed you'd be married by now, but find yourself single and holding the souvenirs of broken relationships. Maybe you worked your way up at the office only to get downsized. Maybe you hoped to live a life of adventure on the mission field but you've ended up living a minivan life in the suburbs. Maybe you've worked hard to create a close-knit family, but conflicts have made bickering and awkwardness the side dishes at your Thanksgiving dinners.

What experience have you had similar to the childlessness of Manoah and his wife? How have your expectations for life collided with reality?

When I was expecting my firstborn, I read up on all the things pregnant women are supposed to eat and not eat to protect the little life in utero. Feta cheese and real Mexican queso were out. So were deli meats and veggies from the salad bar. No caffeine or alcohol. Even honey was on my doctor's list. But the woman in our text has a list of responsibilities even more intense as she carries an extra special baby.

According to Numbers 6, a person taking a Nazirite vow sets himself apart for a period of time, or for life, dedicating himself to holiness and worship of God. The person taking the vow must not drink alcohol or consume anything with traces of grapes, not cut his

hair, and not touch any unclean thing, including dead bodies. The pregnant mother carrying the Nazirite must abide by these stipulations as well. The responsibility is so much for these nervous parents that Manoah begs the angel of the Lord to come back and tell them again just what they are to do with this child.

Read Judges 13:8-25. How does the visitor reply to Manoah's question?

To see the Lord face to face is as dangerous as it is awe-inspiring. The angel of the Lord questions whether or not Manoah can handle hearing His true identity: "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?" I love how my friend Catherine Gillespie puts it: "We throw around words like *awesome*, using them to talk about everyday things like a really delicious sandwich, so it's hard for us to grasp the concept that even God's *name* is so powerful that you are going to be flat on your face at the sound of it."¹

Look up the following verses. Write your reflections on the glory and wonder of God. Consider how the work of Jesus affects the way we approach God.

Exodus 33:18-22

Hebrews 12:18-29

Hebrews 4:14-16

What began with the happy news of a baby on the way has now escalated to the point of a panic attack as the couple sees the angel of the Lord face to face. Yet, like a woman in labor who knows joy will come after the pain, Manoah's wife trusts that this frightening moment isn't going to be the end of their story. Because she knows the character of Lord, she gives a confident response in the midst of a traumatizing situation. Years of building up our faith through daily spiritual disciplines like dedicated times of prayer, Scripture memory, daily Bible study, and singing hymns of worship can help us to remain strong when we are confronted with shocking things.

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promises is faithful," Hebrews 10:23 tells us. "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it," 1 Thessalonians 5:24 says. The expectant woman in our story agrees: "If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have...announced to us such things as these." She presses on, confident that the Lord will deliver to them their little deliverer, Samson.

What spiritual disciplines do you practice to help build up your knowledge of the Lord's character? Discuss with a friend. What disciplines would you like to add?

Week 5: Day 2

A PREVIEW OF STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

Judges 14

As if raising a son under the strict requirements of the Nazirite vow wasn't difficult enough, Samson's mother and father encounter an even greater challenge when he comes of age. As he explores his stomping grounds, Samson visits a town just south of his hometown.² There, he comes face to face with the enemy, the Philistines. But this encounter has the look of love, not the look of war.

Read Judges 14:1-4. What secret do we learn about Samson's desires?

When Samson says, "Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes," he tragically echoes the theme of the whole book of Judges, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25b). We know God commanded the Israelites not to intermarry with the enemy, whose gods would become a snare to them. So, what do we do with the fact that God secretly uses Samson's uncontrolled passions to bring him into the boxing ring with the Philistines? Could God have accomplished His purpose if Samson had been faithful and married a God-following woman? I believe so. But God works with real, flawed people.

When has God worked through you in spite of your sin?

At some point, Samson's parents give up on trying to argue with Samson's hormones, and they go with him on the journey to Timnah to meet the girl. On the road, we get a preview of Samson's strength.

Read Judges 14:5-6. What rushes toward Samson? What rushes in Samson?

When comic book character Peter Parker suffered a spider bite that turned him into a superhero, he didn't know his own strength. In *The Amazing Spider-Man*, he crushed his alarm clock when he hit snooze, blasted toothpaste onto the mirror, and pulled the lever from the faucet when he tried to turn on the water.³ His power was beyond him. As his Uncle Ben said in earlier adaptations of the Spider-Man story, "With great power comes great responsibility."⁴ Samson has been set apart with a Nazirite vow. Now,

God's Spirit has empowered him to fight the king of the beasts. Let's see how he handles this power and responsibility from here on out.

Read Judges 14:7-9. What does this action tell us about Samson's commitment to his vow?

Read Judges 14:10-18. What bets and threats are made at the wedding reception (literally a "drinking feast")?⁵

Samson doesn't tell his mother and father about taking down the lion with his bare hands. Yet in the presence of the enemy, he makes his exploits the center of attention. The arrogance that creeps up at Samson's wedding feast begins a feud that will escalate to extremes, hurting not only his enemy, but himself, too.

Read Judges 14:19-20. This chapter begins with the allure of love. How does it end?

Our hopes for this man living up to his full potential crumble as Samson breaks the requirements of his vow. He eats honey from a carcass, and likely imbibes alcohol at the party he throws to celebrate his wedding to a woman he should have known better than to marry. This superhero has a weak spot for food, wine, and women, which snares him almost like the false gods do to the nation of Israel. Samson has been given a unique purpose, passion, and skill set, but his strengths become dangerous when he fails to restrain them. His sense of calling turns into a feeling of entitlement. His confidence turns into arrogance. His sense of justice turns into abusive rage. God still uses Samson, but there are consequences for his uncontrolled passion. As his strengths mutate into weakness, his marriage and life fall apart.

What talents, gifts, and skills has God blessed you with? How have you allowed your strengths to turn into weakness?

Find a permanent marker and an old gel bracelet. Write one of your strengths on the bracelet. Wear the bracelet today. Pray that God will work in your strength and keep it from showing up as a weakness.

Week 5: Day 3

FIRED UP

Judges 15:1-8

Samson is the kind of guy who'd flip a game board over if he's not winning. After losing the riddle game at the wedding and taking out his rage on the men of Ashkelon, he leaves Timnah in a huff in springtime and stays away all summer while his anger simmers. When the comparative cool of the wheat harvest comes, he swallows down his pride and heads back with a gift for his bride.

When my husband and I were newlyweds, we made the crazy decision to adopt a hunting hound as our family pet. Hoover was the most adorable puppy we'd ever laid eyes on. His soft, floppy ears hung beautifully on the sides of his head. His markings were a handsome scattering of black, white, and caramel in the most beautiful pattern. But as he grew out of puppyhood, we found his behavior wasn't nearly as adorable as his hound dog face. Clueless about how to properly train this dog, it seemed every time we tried to solve one problem, it would only bring up another. He barked at level 10 for hours on end until we got a threatening note from a neighbor. We put a bark collar on him to stop the noise, but it caused more anxiety. He dug at our carpet until it went threadbare, so we gated him in the back room to keep him from ruining the main areas of our home. When we spent time in other parts of the house, he chewed up the thrift store furniture in his space (three rounds of it). We adopted a doggie friend to keep him company, and he bullied our newcomer until it turned into an all-out brawl. The more I think about it, I wonder if we should have named him Samson for his hot-headed ways.⁶

A similar story plays out between Samson and the Philistines. Every time the Philistines think they have Samson where they want him, he comes back with something worse. Dale Ralph Davis says that even though Samson's story doesn't paint him in the best light, it "constitutes one long Israelite joke on the Philistines.... [E]ven in his downfall he will make the Philistines appear as bungling stooges."⁷

Read Judges 15:1-6. How does Samson's response to the unfortunate surprise come back to bite him?

The threat launched at the woman by the wedding attendants in Judges 14:15 has sadly come to pass. When hot heads meet a fellow hot head, what else can we expect but fire? We've already discussed how God can take sinful human passions and redeem them for good use in His ultimate plan, but it's also important to note that not all of Samson's acts were done in the power of God's Spirit.

In Judges 14:6, we see that the Spirit of the Lord rushes over Samson before he rips the lion apart. We see the same in Judges 14:19 when he judges the men of Ashkelon. We will see God's Spirit empower him again in this chapter. But we see no evidence of

Samson acting in any power but his own flesh when he scoops the honey out of the lion's carcass, when he ties the foxes' tails together and sets the crops on fire, and later when he falls prey to another Philistine woman.

Read Judges 15:7-8. After another fit of rage, where does Samson go?

The word for this place, Etam, literally means, "lair of wild beasts" or "place of ravenous creatures."⁸ How appropriate for our wild man, Samson. He sits lonely like the creature who lives in a dark stone castle in *Beauty and the Beast*, cursed to a life of solitude because of his condition. Unlike Gideon who led his army in battle, Samson is a lone warrior who has no one to join him in celebrating his exploits. Sadly, Samson's story is shaping up to be a tragic one.

In the first week of our study, we talked about the importance of being unified with the people of God, and how brothers and sisters in the body of Christ can help us believe when our faith feels weak. Perhaps if Samson would have made a commitment to consistently spend time with those who love God, rather than carousing with those who worshiped false gods, he could have kept his vows and led Israel in the way he was supposed to.

Psalms 116:18-19 says, "I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord!" While we most likely haven't taken a Nazirite vow, there are certainly promises, commitments, or vows each of us has made in the presence of God and His people. How can we expect to keep the vows made in the presence of God's people if we have since isolated ourselves from those people and their encouragement? "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works," Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

What vows or commitments do you struggle to remain faithful to?

What steps can you take today to better connect in ongoing, consistent fellowship with a group of believers in order to find encouragement in keeping your commitments?

Week 5: Day 4
BOUND AND DETERMINED
Judges 15:9-20

Not only do Samson's people not join in to celebrate his victories, his people actually turn against him. Fearing Samson's behavior might fire up the enemy to bring down more abuse, they choose to remain in captivity rather than cheer on their rescuer.

Read Judges 15:9-13. What surprising response does Samson give?

Look back at Judges 1:1-20 (Week 1: Day 4). What were the men of Judah like before? How would you describe them now?

Describe a time when you've been so comfortable with sin or oppression that you resisted rescue.

"What a depressing scene as three thousand men confront and accuse Samson, completely oblivious that God may have sent Samson as their way out of bondage," Ruth M. Bathauer says.⁹ She goes on to point out that while Samson didn't hesitate to kill a group of Philistines, he wouldn't dare turn against his fellow Israelites as others like Abimelech and Jephthah have.

Read Judges 15:14-17. What happens to Samson when the men of Judah deliver him to the Philistines?

Unlike Deborah and Barak with their war ballad sung with the crowds in Israel, or Gideon with his built-in celebration trumpets, Samson here again is left to sing his own victory song.

Read Judges 15:18. How does Samson's condition affect his frame of mind? How are Samson's mother's words in Judges 13:23 applicable here?

Look up the following verses. Take note of the need in each passage, and how God responds to it.

Exodus 17:2-6

1 Kings 19:4-6

Read Judges 15:19-20. How does Samson's experience compare with the stories in the passages above?

Samson is abandoned by his people and left to fight and fend for himself, yet in this tender scene, he finds he does not have to remain alone. When he confesses his need for God, even in a voice of complaint, he gets to experience God's presence and care. God sustains Samson with fresh water from the rock, and Samson names the place "Caller's Spring." This is Samson at his best, his most humble, grateful for God's sustenance and God's presence.

Once, when I was struggling with some people who had treated my family unkindly, I prayed little sentences throughout the day, asking for relief. That evening, sun-drenched and tired, my family and I sat on the patio of a Greek restaurant for dinner. My toddler laid her head on the table and moaned. In the background, a nostalgic song played ever so tenderly. I let a bittersweet tear slip as my husband caught my eye. Just then, an olive-skinned waitress with the most stunning sea-blue eyes approached our table. She laid her hand on my toddler's back, tenderly lifted her head, and placed under it a makeshift pillow formed out of folded kitchen towels. I asked her about her children, her travels, and her heritage. Soon, her hospitality turned our table into a banquet spread. We had already ordered our food, but she brought out extras, a tray of Kalamata olives and bowl after bowl of fresh fruit for my tired kids. After an hour of being treated so warmly and graciously, my 5-year-old daughter popped up, turned toward the waitress and said, "I just LOVE you. I have to hug you." As we signed the bill, the waitress made her way toward me, looked me in the eye and then put her arms around me to squeeze me. "God bless you. God bless you," she said. "He already has," I told her.

When have you felt alone and in need? How has calling out to God changed the dynamic for you?

With a recent example in mind, name your place or situation like Samson named his (i.e., I might call my scene by a lighthearted name like "Kalamata Kindness.").

Week 5: Day 5
ENTRAPMENT
Judges 16

We would hope that God's presence and provision would be enough for Samson, but as isolated people often do, he goes astray trying to find a balm for his loneliness. The Philistines seem to know by now that women are Samson's weakness, their allure luring him into their traps. But they're still dealing with a man who can take a locked gate taller than the tallest man, tear it off at the hinges, and then carry it uphill to a destination 40 miles away.¹⁰ That is, until Delilah. We don't know the extent of Samson's feelings for Delilah, but we do know about Delilah's heart toward Samson. Like the Philistines and Delilah toward Samson, our enemy, Satan, seeks our most vulnerable areas for attack.

Read Judges 16:1-6. Take note of how the enemy uses Samson's addiction.

Read the following verses and record your insights about where temptation comes from and how to resist it.

Matthew 26:41
James 1:13-16
Ephesians 6:11
Hebrews 12:4
Romans 6:12-14
Galatians 5:16

What temptations do you struggle with? What addictions do you run to for comfort? Which verse above speaks most to your situation?

The apostle Peter tells us to "be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith...." (1 Peter 5:8-9). Samson saw what God could do through him when he met the lion on the road. Imagine what wonders we might have seen had he resisted temptation and stayed true to his vow. Samson is anything but sober-minded, choosing to play around with God's gift instead of guarding it.

Read Judges 16:7-19. How is it that Samson finally comes to tell her the truth? How does Delilah treat him after the secret is out?

Read Judges 16:20-22. Describe your feelings as you discover what happens to Samson. Take note of the small sign of promise.

Samson's strength is not in his long, unruly hair. His uncut locks are merely an outward sign of God's power. As he casually gives away his precious secret to the enemy, he shows once and for all where his heart is. Samson has long been blinded to the power of his passions. Now the Philistines make it literal by gouging his eyes out. He has long been bound up in pride. Now they bind him with a couple of bronze shackles. It seems in the dark of blindness and the drudgery of walking circles around the millstone, Samson renews his Nazirite vow and gives his heart again to God. As we notice a little stubble on his once-bald head, hope grows.¹¹

Read Judges 16:23-31. Who gets the glory for the Philistine victory?

Consider a recent situation in which you were insulted or harmed. How important was God's glory to you versus your own personal justice?

Samson is a cross between a carnival side-show and a grand spectacle, like the Christians who faced lions in the Coliseum. But this is not just about entertainment. This is about glory and who gets it. Though Samson hears shouts of praise for the false god, Dagon, he can't find it in his heart to think of the Lord's glory going unacknowledged. He is driven by a desire for personal revenge. In spite of this, the Lord returns his strength.

Doesn't the end of Judges 16:30 sound like the perfect epitaph for Samson's tombstone? Samson performed many mighty deeds in the power of the Spirit, things that have been told across the generations. Remarkably, we who know the Lord Jesus get the privilege of having the Spirit not just rush over us, but live in us. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we can guard the gifts God has entrusted to us, using them for His glory (2 Timothy 1:14).

Week 5: Bonus Lesson

PARALLEL LIVES

Judges 6:11-8:32, Judges 13-16

Plutarch, a famous Greek author born around the time of Jesus' death and resurrection, spent the last two decades of his life writing biographies about men of valor in Greek and Roman culture. His famous collection, known as Parallel Lives, pairs the stories of warriors or philosophers with similar experiences, virtues, or vices. Using his words to weave the life events and characteristics of two similar men into one complex story has provided psychological fuel for all kinds of writers from Plutarch's time onward, including the most famous writer in western history, William Shakespeare.¹² In our epic story in the book of Judges, we have a natural pairing of two characters who share many similarities, as well as some interesting contrasts. Let's perk our ears up for the details in the parallel lives of Gideon and Samson.

Look back at your lessons from Week 3 about Gideon and compare notes with your lessons from Week 5 about Samson. If you have time, read Judges 6:11-8:32 and Judges 13-16 aloud.

Consider the following questions as you read....

What common visitor do Gideon and Samson's family receive? How do each of the characters respond to the visitor from start to finish? What emotions do they experience? What do they ask for?

How would you describe each man's self-concept?

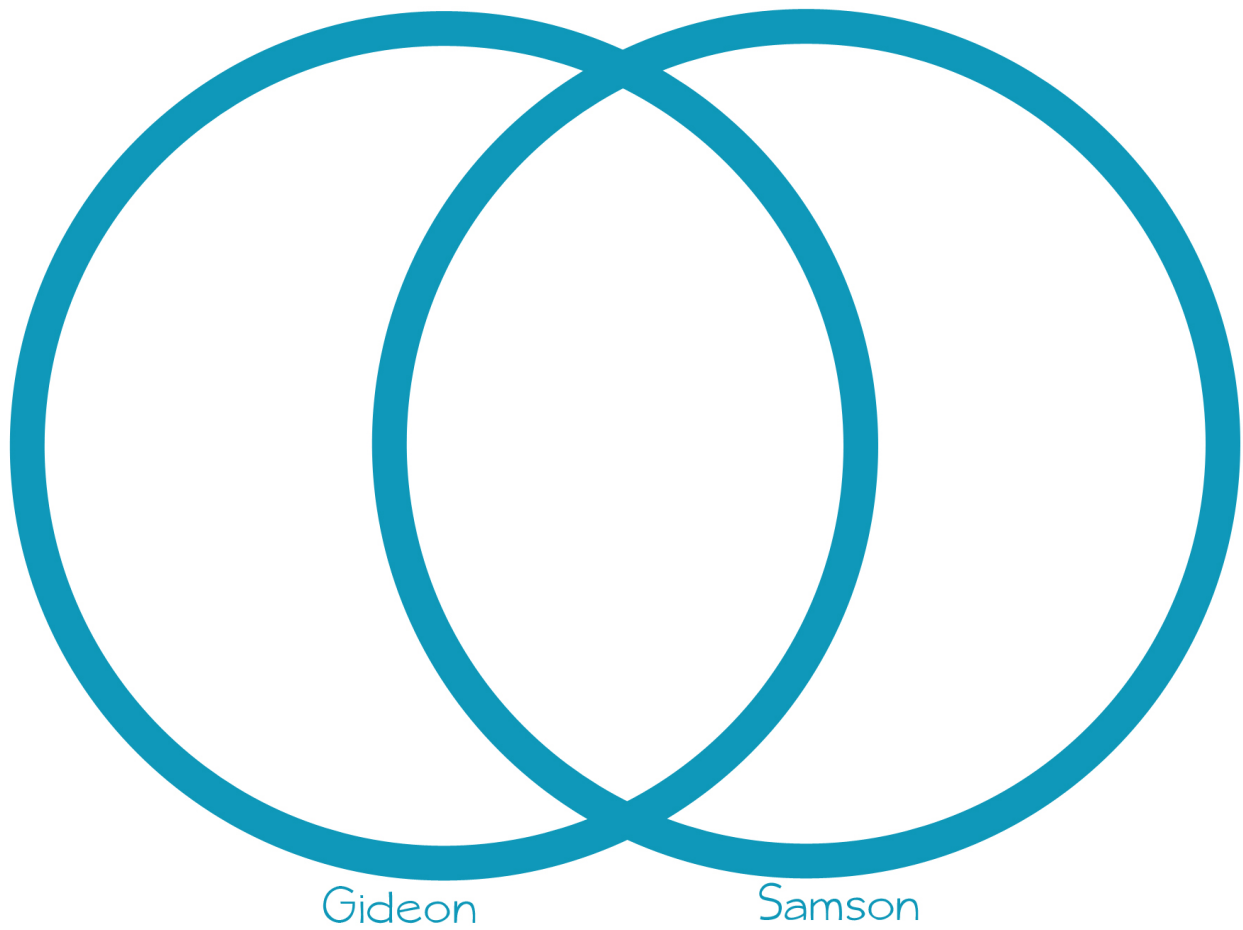
What flaws and gifting are evident in each of these men?

What differing types of warfare are used in Gideon's and Samson's conquests? How do the warriors celebrate after a victory?

What do you notice about the way their fellow Israelites treat them? How do each of them respond?

How do their endings compare?

Record your findings in the diagram, writing the differences in the outside parts of each circle, and the similarities in the section where the circles intersect.



Which warrior do you most easily identify with?

What new insights did you gain by looking at these warriors side by side?

Week Six

Week 6: Day 1

MAN-MADE

Judges 17

Last week, we watched Delilah betray Samson in exchange for 1,100 pieces of silver. Now, we come upon a man so in love with money that he steals 1,100 pieces of silver from his own mother. In Judges 17:13, Micah reveals his motives: “Now I know that the Lord will prosper me....” In 1 Timothy 6:10a, Paul says, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.” Micah’s obsession with money leads him to break a whole slew of God’s commands. Some love prosperity more than God’s presence.

Read Judges 17. Take note of actions that seem especially strange to you.

Micah’s mother hands the local silversmith 200 pieces of the recovered silver and asks him to make idols. Instead of challenging her, Micah makes more idols and sets up a shrine in his house. He will try anything to get prosperity. First, he worships the local gods. Then, like a businessman diversifying his stock options, he makes an ephod (a garment only Israel’s priests are authorized to wear), mimicking the worship of God. We know only the tribe of Levi had been chosen as the priesthood. But Micah, from the tribe of Ephraim, ordains his son as priest anyway. Then, a Levite comes to town. Maybe Micah feels uneasy about ordaining his son. Or maybe he thinks having a Levite priest will bring him more favor with God. Soon, Micah dismisses his son and makes the Levite an offer he can’t refuse: a yearly sum of silver and a nice suit. Micah thinks that because he’s finally following one of God’s regulations for worship (having a Levite for a priest), he is entitled to God’s blessing. However, inside Micah’s house and in his heart, there are clear signs of disobedience and disregard for the Lord’s commands.

Look up Exodus 20:3-17 and Deuteronomy 12:3-7. List the ways Micah and his mother failed to obey these instructions.

What commands of God have you disregarded in recent times?

Though the house of God at Shiloh is near (Judges 18:31), Micah chooses to set up his own place of worship where he can call the shots. There, he mixes together what he likes from Israel's background and what he likes about the local religion. He consecrates silver to the Lord and then makes a molten image from it. He sets up a shrine to a grouping of false gods and ignores the house of the true God in Shiloh. He hires somebody to be his own personal priest so he can feel pious.

The fancy word for this is "syncretism," the mixing of religious ideas from various sources. Like Micah with his idols and ephod, I've known many Christians who twist their faith in order to feel control over their lives. Some carry around talismans, fiddle with the Ouija board, check their daily horoscope, have an occasional Tarot reading, or visit a psychic. Desperate for insight, they consult with darkness. "When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God?" Isaiah 8:19a (NIV) says.

Even if you don't dabble in the occult, there is a more subtle kind of twisted faith in our culture that can lead away from the worship of God. Micah thinks if he pushes certain buttons and follows certain ordinances, he can program God and get prosperity. Many today expect the same thing. Some call it "Name It and Claim It." Others call it the "Health and Wealth Gospel." Whatever you call it, this mindset says God rewards faithful Christians with financial blessing. Pastor Rick Warren says the Prosperity Movement is "creating a false idol."¹

**What behaviors have you used to try to program God or gain God's favor?
What do you expect God to do for you in return?**

**What sin are you ignoring while you pat yourself on the back for your
"good behavior"?**

God tells us in Isaiah 66:2b, "...These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word." If we refuse to revere God, and instead use God as a game piece in our quest for success, we will live out the sad theme of Judges, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." If we want to worship the Lord, we must do what is right in His eyes. True worship starts with clearing out the false gods of pride and prosperity.

**Look up John 4:23-24. What do you need to clear out to allow yourself to
worship God in purity and truth?**

Week 6: Day 2

SOMETHING FOR THEMSELVES

Judges 18

When we look at Israel in these last chapters of Judges, it seems appropriate to sing the lament over them that described Samson in Judges 16:20b: “But he did not know that the Lord had left him.” They did not know that the Lord had left them...to their own devices. There is no angel of the Lord popping in to interrupt the foolishness here. The people are left to wallow in their own self-deception. The people plod on confidently in their man-made mix of truth and error. They are right in their own eyes. And so the sordid story continues.

Read Judges 18:1-6. What evidence do you find that people are doing what is right in their own eyes?

Read Judges 18:7-10. Take note of how the people of Laish are described. What motivates the tribe of Dan to attack this group?

Let’s think back on the enemies in the book of Judges. There was the king of double wickedness in Othniel’s era. In Ehud’s time, the king of Moab gorged himself on the taxes and tributes he demanded of Israel. The Canaanites of Deborah’s time caused such terror that travelers abandoned highways to avoid running into the enemy. The Midianites of Gideon’s era plundered and took Israel’s crops and livestock. In Jephthah’s time, the Ammonites camped around Israel, ready to launch an attack. In Samson’s time, the Philistines ruled with an iron fist.

When it comes to the people of Laish, our narrator uses quite different descriptions, emphasizing the peaceful nature of the people. Through these soft words, it becomes clear that Dan is a tribe of bullies. Like Micah, we see them motivated by a desire to prosper. They spy something lush and fragrant, a city well-built, and they covet it. Another commandment broken. Presumptuous like the priest who blessed their journey, Dan assumes God has given this people into their hands. In reality, the people of Dan seek out a new territory because they simply don’t like the lot God has given to them.

Judges 1:34 says that rather than going in and clearing the land of the formidable Amorites, which God had assigned to them, the tribe of Dan backs off and settles in the hill country. *The Apologetics Study Bible* notes that “the Danites failure to defeat and dispossess the Amorites was not a matter of not enough strength of numbers (Numbers 26:43 says that the tribe of Dan had 64,000 men) but of not enough faith in an

omnipotent, covenant keeping God.”² The task is too big for their wimpy faith. And so, they seek an easy target and bully their way into it.

In my favorite novel, *Perelandra*, the “Eve” character talks about what it is like when you want something other than what has been picked out for you. One thing has been given, another thing desired. She describes the metaphor of a person going to an orchard to pick a particular fruit yet finds it is not available. “The picture of the fruit you have not found is still, for a moment, before you,” she says, “And if you wished, if it were possible to wish--you could keep it there. You could send your soul after the good you had expected instead of turning it to the good you had got. You could refuse the real good; you could make the real fruit taste insipid by thinking of the other.”³

What gift from the Lord have you snubbed? What have you gone seeking after instead? Who has been hurt because of it? Pray now and commit to setting aside the picture of what is not yours so you can embrace what is.

Read Judges 18:11-31. Write the absurdities you find in this passage.

The hooligans continue their romp through the region, kidnapping Micah’s hired priest. The priest doesn’t seem to mind. Going with Dan will mean a larger ministry and higher salary for him, to be sure. Apparently, the Prosperity Gospel is as alluring for the priest as it is for the people.

As this scene wraps up, we learn the sad fact that the person who leads the tribe of Dan in worshipping Micah’s carved image happens to be the grandson of Moses. I remember when I was a little girl how special I felt when my father stood behind the podium and opened the hymn book for the congregation. I kept my hymn book closed so that everyone around could see that I, the music director’s daughter, knew the words by heart. I’ve met people like this who treat faith as something to show off like a family connection. If we have parents or grandparents with a strong faith, we need to be careful not to depend on them for our spiritual identity, only to find our own faith is a mere shadow. A strong spiritual heritage, even being the grandson of Moses, doesn’t mean an automatic stamp of approval on a life. We must know, follow, and love the Lord in a deeply personal way to experience true transformation.

Who have you depended on for your spiritual identity? What will you do to pursue a more authentic love for the Lord?

Week 6: Day 3
UNSPEAKABLE
Judges 19

In the early 1990s, First Lady Hillary Clinton, visited southeast Asia to learn about how to fight against human trafficking in the United States and worldwide. She invited brave workers to come out from the shadows to several different congressional hearings where they shared the horrible truth that had long remained hidden. Recently, when I interviewed an advocate for human trafficking victims, I learned that until these issues became trendy in the political sphere, missionaries from the most victimized parts of the world had kept their stories down to a whisper as they came home and gave ministry reports to their supporters. Most churches seemed not to have the stomach for hearing the atrocities acted out on people sold into slavery around the world.⁴ Similarly, there seems to be a hush-hush attitude about this part of the book of Judges. It is disturbing, yet it is here, inscribed on the pages of our Bible.

Read Judges 19:1-9. Make a list of characters from this passage.

Notice how none of the characters have names. This seems to be an intentional tool that the narrator of Judges uses to allow Israel to see these characters as symbolic of something larger. They are individuals, yet they illustrate a culture-wide problem.

Here, we find another Levite running around the hill country of Ephraim. The law says Levites are to marry from the tribe of Levi. This Levite takes a concubine (a second-tier wife) from Judah. At some point, the concubine runs away to her father's house in Bethlehem. Judges 19:2 says the "concubine was unfaithful" to the priest, but this does not necessarily mean that she has been sexually promiscuous. Professor Nehama Aschkenasy writes that this was a common term "explaining the woman's abandonment of her husband" for various possible reasons.⁵ The Septuagint, the primary Greek translation of the Old Testament, translates the text as "his concubine was angry with him."⁶ The fact that her father welcomes her home without shame, and that the Levite comes knocking at her door to "speak kindly to her and bring her back," show us that the Levite was likely to blame in whatever it was that sent the concubine running. The fact that the father does not want to let them go, while it shows his hospitality, also hints that he has some qualms about his daughter going away again with this man.

Read Judges 19:9-15. What happens when the Levite ignores the advice?

Night falls, and the couple finds themselves without a place to stay. In the town where the Levite expects to be welcomed like extended family, he finds himself abandoned.

Eventually, an old man transplanted from another territory takes in the Levite and his entourage for the night.

Read Judges 19:16-26. Take note of how the concubine is treated.

“Violate them and do with them what seems good to you,” he says. I can hear the familiar refrain tolling like a funeral bell, “Each one did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). When the men insist on their first choice in a repeat of the events in Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), the Levite throws his concubine out the door, sacrificing her health, safety, and dignity for his own protection.

Read Judges 19:27-30. Take note of the concubine’s condition and how the Levite handles her.

Is it just me, or do you find it strange that the Levite gets up in the morning as if he actually slept through the horrible ordeal overnight? Do you find it strange that he “went out to go on his way” as if nothing had happened? Clearly his intentions to “speak kindly to her” in Judges 19:3 were nothing but a facade. She is an object to him.

What recent atrocity on the news or in your community has fired you up in anger? What can you do today to stand up for the victim?

With the precision that this priest might have been taught to use in cutting meat from bone for the ritual of animal sacrifice at an altar, he further victimizes this victim and does something I can only picture a serial killer doing. The Israelites are traumatized: “And all who saw it said, ‘Such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day; consider it, take counsel, and speak.’”

We talked in the beginning of our study about the importance of unity with God and with Israel. Here in this most horrifying chapter of the book of Judges, and perhaps the most disturbing story of the Bible altogether, we see just how broken the nation and its people have become. In this graphic butchery of this helpless woman, we see a picture of the stomach-churning sin of the people who are supposed to live in wholeness in their covenant relationship with God. And in the Levite’s strange act of mailing her body parts to each of the 12 tribes, we see the disintegration of Israel itself. The sin of the people is on display. What is right in their own eyes is just so wrong.

Week 6: Day 4
BATTLE OF BROTHERS
Judges 20-21

Because of the nightmarish dismemberment of one woman, Israel unifies. We see no hint of the Ephraimite ego that popped up for Gideon and Jephthah. We don't see Judah trying to sell any Israelite heroes off to an oppressor in order to save their own hides. We see one big army resolved to bring justice to the perpetrators in Benjamin's territory.

Read Judges 20:1-17. Take note of who is missing from the assembly and what information is missing from the Levite's story.

Read Judges 20:18-28. What difficulty does Israel endure? What long-forgotten posture do the people take?

Somehow, in the mystery of God, even when He says to go in a certain direction, we are not always assured that there will be no danger or sacrifice. After these defeats against the sharpshooting Benjaminites, Israel could easily give up. But their renewed closeness with God makes it possible for them to take courage. We must fix our hope not on a particular outcome, but on God who holds our future.

What failure or loss has threatened to take away your courage? Find a memento that represents that loss. Offer it to God (i.e., giving it away, burying it, or burning it) and seek Him for the next step.

In Judges 20:29-45, Israel fakes a retreat to get the tribe of Benjamin away from the safety of their city, and to get them to spread out over the smaller roads in the region. Then, part of the Israelite army rushes in to overtake Gibeah and blow it up in smoke. Finally, the Israelites ambush the Benjaminites on the run, and drive a remnant of Benjamin into a hiding place in the wilderness.

Read Judges 21:2-3, 6-7, 15-17. Describe the emotion of the people of Israel after their victory over Benjamin.

As we get into Judges 21, we discover that Israel is deep in grief with a sudden realization that the tribe of Benjamin is going to die out completely after the next generation. In the heat of battle, Israel had made an oath not to give their daughters in marriage to any of the survivors of Benjamin. (Who would want to see their daughter marry a Benjaminite after the way they treated the concubine?!!) Yet Israel found themselves regretting this vow.

In the television comedy, *Last Man on Earth*, two survivors, Phil and Carol, drive around in empty towns left after a world-wide plague. Carol, a stickler for the rules, makes Phil come to a full stop at every stop sign even though the principle of the law (safety in traffic) no longer applies. Like Carol with the stop signs, the Israelites felt more attached to their vow than to common sense. They failed to see that God and His laws of love, justice, and mercy could offer them freedom from their rash promises and foolish choices.⁷

Read Judges 21:5, 8-12. Take note of the Israelites' solutions.

One solution involves using the spoils from yet *another* oath they had made. While most of Israel came together to bring down Benjamin, there had been one town that refused to take part and was not involved in the oath at the assembly. Israel goes to battle against them, not seeking God about whether or not this is a good idea. They kill more countrymen and salvage 400 virgins to offer to the Benjaminites, not asking the virgins' opinion of whether or not this was a good idea. When these women are not enough for repopulation, Israel continues to ignore the higher principles of love and justice.

Read Judges 21:20-24. What deceptive methods do the Israelites use to fulfill their oath?

Kidnapping dancing girls at a festival near the house of the Lord in Shiloh? Not my idea of rehabilitating the tribe of Benjamin after violating, abusing, and ultimately killing the concubine. Clearly, the Israelites have not sought the Lord in keeping their vow. Again our narrator reminds us of the root of all the foolishness.

Last verse, same as the first: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The people of Israel have become so intent on fixing their own problems that they forget about sitting in the presence of God and seeking His direction.

Week 6: Day 5

REMEMBER

A Review of Judges

In our study over the last 30 days, we have spanned an era of almost 400 years, slogging through the most harsh, horrific conditions in Israel's history. We have met many formidable enemies who have sought to grind God's people into the ground.

As we've run into enemy after enemy, we have also met the most fascinating "good guys," imperfect heroes who often have their own dark side. We've come up against the face of evil in the enemy and within. Through it all, I hope you have read between the lines to see how God is bringing His people through. He yearns for His people to know and experience the wholeness of His covenant love. Our tender warrior, the one and only God, time after time comes to the rescue of a hardhearted people. In each story, where we see the ugliness of human failure, we also see the strong, and at times severe, mercy of the Lord.

Now, I want to think back on the characters and stories we've come across during our time in the book of Judges.

Take time to remember the relief that came when God sent the hero, Othniel, not only to remove the evil dictator, but to preside over the land of Israel, providing wisdom, guidance, leadership and rest.

Remember Ehud who brought Israel's tribute of produce to the fat Moabite king. Remember how Ehud got cold feet about his mission of deliverance, then passed the idols at Gilgal and gained courage to go back and put an end to Eglon and his evil reign.

Remember Shamgar who used the oxgoad, a simple farming tool right in his reach, to accomplish God's big purposes.

Remember Deborah who called the men to war and prophesied that God would use a secret weapon, a woman, to carry out His judgment on the Canaanites. Remember how she and Barak sang their victory song, praising the Lord for His rescue.

Remember Gideon who cowered in the winepress saying he was too weak and insignificant to be a man of valor. Remember how God assured him time after time that he would be with him. Remember how Gideon worshiped when he saw God's victory in the sound of trumpets, the breaking of jars, and the shining of torches. Remember how Gideon squandered his latter days in pride.

Remember Abimelech's evil and the way his obsessions destroyed Israel from within. Remember Tola and Jair whom God sent to lead the people after Abimelech's reign of terror, to replace Israel's post-traumatic stress with comfort and joy.

Remember the ruffian Jephthah who came boldly before the Ammonite king and gave him a history lesson before going to battle and defeating his army. Remember how his boldness turned foolish in his tragic vow, and brash in his dealings with the egotistical Ephraimites.

Remember Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon and all of the minor judges whose obscurity remind us that history is less about man's legacy and more about God's plans and power.

Remember Samson, that wild beast of a man whose superhuman strength began to save Israel from the Philistines but couldn't begin to save him from his all-too-human weakness for women. Remember how he toyed with God's gift and lost it. Remember how God listened to his prayer and used Samson to "bring down the house."

Remember the stomach-churning events that happened when Israel traded their relationship with God for a house full of idols. Remember how when they called to him in sincerity and desperation, God was there to lead them out of the dark and bring justice to the land.

Circle the character or situation that most resonates with you from the list above (or write your own note about another not specified here). Revisit that particular section of Judges and re-read the passage.

Take some time to read through the passage phrase by phrase, pray through each thought, and ask the Holy Spirit to root out any similar sin and weakness in you.

This study has not been for the faint of heart. Some of our reading has been heavy and even painful, but we know "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Sometimes training in righteousness comes by seeing the unedited results of unrighteousness.

I hope your time in the book of Judges has strengthened your resolve to drive out anything that would draw your affection away from the Lord, that it has made you want to revel in the presence of God all the more, and has made it clear that if you do stray, your Warrior will come through to rescue you from sin and oppression in His unstoppable love.

Week 6: Bonus Lesson
CONVICTION, COMFORT, AND CHANGE
Relentless in Review

Scan back through your notes from the Relentless study and highlight any insight that especially ministers to you. Although I know God can use us in any condition, I want him to use me in my obedience rather than my rebellion. I've been convicted that I need to see sin as the enemy it is and root it out before I get too comfortable with it.

How have you been convicted through your time in the book of Judges?

As I've read and studied, I've been comforted by God's assurances, like those He gave to Gideon. I tend to think negatively like Gideon and see the world through my feelings of abandonment instead of believing God at His word. I require a lot of attention, but God's commitment to Gideon and the other judges proves He can handle me too. I've also been comforted that God doesn't stop pursuing His people, and that even leaving us to our own devices can be a form of love to remind us of what we're missing out on.

How have you been comforted by God through this study?

Like Samson at Caller's Spring and the Israelite's with their stones at the side of the Jordan, I have felt challenged to come to the place of remembrance, retrace my steps, and celebrate what He's done for me, instead sitting at the place of weeping.

How has this Bible study challenged you? What will you change?

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." If you've been challenged, changed, or comforted, God wants you to share the good news. Below are some ideas to encourage you to pass along what you've learned in this study.

Consider writing your thoughts as a caption and sharing an inspirational photo on Instagram or Facebook.

Call a friend for a coffee date to share your heart.

Coordinate with leadership and offer to share your testimony at a gathering at church.

Get out the paintbrush or markers to fashion some hand-lettering on a card for a friend.

Write a blog post or article to outline the lessons you've learned.

Coordinate a new group and teach another round of the Relentless study.

If you share online, please tag your posts with #RelentlessStudy so we can reflect and celebrate together!

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