

*Seeing Clearly
through the Darkness*

A Study of Judges by Kay Daigle

Seeing Clearly through the Darkness



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Cover Art

Our beautiful cover was painted by Sandy Sparks (sandysparksart.com) ©2019. Sandy describes her inspiration: “Throughout scripture God is represented by light. That light pierces the darkness revealing His will for our lives and His plan of salvation for mankind. The watercolor is meant to reflect this process, not the final scene when all is revealed and known.”

Appreciation

I’m so grateful for Irish Kinney and Evelyn Babcock whose input on the consistency of the message and their eye for detail were essential to the editing process.

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How to Use this Study Guide

Understanding open questions

Open questions require thinking and listening to God so that you wrestle with what you read in his Word. Rather than many questions, we ask only a few open questions that direct your attention to important themes and truths for your written responses on paper, perhaps in a journal. Let God speak from his Word, not only to learn about who he is and how he acts, but also in a personal way that applies to your own life and walk with him.

The simplicity of this study doesn't equate to shallow

This study demands your involvement. Although the layout is simple, how deeply you go depends on you. As you spend time talking to God and recording your thoughts on the questions, he may lead you to other cross-references, but he will certainly give you insights into the verses. Don't stop with initial surface answers, but ask God to clarify and guide. The time you spend in the scriptures with God gives him space to speak. Listen well, record your thoughts, share them with your small group, and glean from others' insights.

Studying through three parts a week

If you like doing a little study at a time, each week's lesson is set up in three parts, but feel free to go through it in any way that works best for you. If you prefer daily time in the Word, consider spending two days on each part, journaling about the optional starred section the second day. You may be amazed at what you see by reading the same passage twice. If you prefer to do the week's study in one sitting, you may want to read all the passages first and then journal at the end. Of course, it's great to be in God's Word each day, but you may have other ways of doing that. Stick to what works for your schedule.

Additional reading and background information

Background information pertinent to your understanding is provided. Feel free to do your own research when you have interest or questions, but the group conversation will be focused on the passages studied by everyone.



A star identifies optional verses or suggested study for those with time and interest. The additional reading will help you wrestle with deeper insights into the passages.

Light for Living

The verses that begin each week's lesson are great choices for memorization and/or discussion.

What you need

- A quiet place, if possible.
- A Bible that you can understand. If you don't have one, ask your group leader for suggestions, or email us at info@beyondordinarywomen.org. Modern versions are available as downloads, through Bible apps, or in print at any bookstore. (We are using the NET Bible at lumina.bible.org, a free online Bible translation with study helps.)
- A notebook, loose paper, laptop, or tablet to record your thoughts and also carry them to your group meetings. (See Journaling 101 on p. 63 in the Appendix.)
- The commitment to listen to God and write out what you hear as you read, study and pray.
- Someone, or even better a group, to discuss this with you and provide support, encouragement and spiritual challenge

Best practices for group get-togethers (See also Appendix & leader videos)

Plan a regular place, time, and leader.

The leader should—

- read the section "Tips for Leaders" in the Appendix p.67.
- watch **Beyond Ordinary Women's (BOW's) free, short videos or listen to the podcast versions:** "Tips for Leading a Journaling Study" (<https://vimeo.com/190999125>) and the series "Listening Well" (<https://vimeo.com/album/4065298>). If your group includes Millennials, watch the series "Millennials: The Good, the Bad, and the Ministry" at <https://vimeo.com/showcase/6829309>.
- start on time, not waiting for late arrivals.
- move the group along, being sensitive to God's Spirit.
- encourage everyone to share without forcing it.
- be a great encourager.
- avoid dominating the conversation.
- keep the focus on the women, not herself and her own thoughts.
- provide time for the group to think and share from their journals.
- contact absent group members to encourage them.
- email the group weekly to remind them of the upcoming meeting, and share her excitement.

As a group—

- come prepared and on time with your study, journal, and Bible.
- share freely and honestly.
- encourage one another.
- don't interrupt the speaker.
- love one another.
- rather than giving advice for the problems that other members of your group express, pray for one another and entrust each other and your problems to God.
- be honest and vulnerable, but wise in how much detail you share personally.
- stay in touch with each other between meetings for support and encouragement.

If your group meets within a larger group in a church setting

- Look for a woman gifted in teaching God's Word to teach a short time after the small group discussion. Watch the short, free video "Why Use Live Teachers, not Video?" at <https://vimeo.com/209323216>. (For help in preparing to teach, see our collection of videos at <https://beyondordinarywomen.org/bible-teaching/> or contact us at <https://beyondordinarywomen.org/contact-alternative/>.)
- Because the discussion isn't about the teacher's comments but focuses on the members' personal study, the discussion should precede the teaching time. Based on educational research, this matters.
- The teacher may spend 15-25 minutes adding to the background of the lesson, beginning and ending within the allotted time frame. The majority of the time together should be invested in small groups.
- The teacher's role is to clarify and extend what the group has studied, not retell what has been discussed.

Stories

Each week's study includes a true story at the end that relates to the lesson. The names have been changed in some cases to protect people involved.

Introduction

We're bombarded daily by the impact of media and culture on our lives. Like it or not, our advanced technology has rendered us incapable of escaping it. Though we may seek retreat in our churches, homes or private schools, our world is always there, intruding upon our lives.

The issue is not how we can escape such a world, but how we deal with it.

Sometimes I'd like to be like the Amish, living in a cocooned environment where the culture doesn't intrude. But what would I do with the commandments to be salt and light? Can boundaries really keep out evil and wrong thinking?

What we all need is discernment, the ability to see clearly through what we hear and see in the world, so we live wisely in the culture.

The book of Judges details a dark time when the people of God looked increasingly like the culture around them. We are right there—facing the same temptations today.

The Bible is actually God's story. It records events that reveal how he interacted with his people, the descendants of Abraham, today called the Jews. The stories are rich spiritually and practically if we take the time to study and apply what we learn about God and his message to us. God remains the same always. What is revealed about him in the Old Testament is also true of him today. To love and trust him, pay attention to what these stories teach you about him and about yourself.

Kay Daigle

June 2019

Week One: The Consequences of Disobedience

Light for Living

If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

Joshua in Joshua 24:15 (NASB)

As a mother, I found disciplining my children to be less than fun and often painful. At times I chose to simply ignore the problem, but that didn't help train godly, polite, kind, and forgiving children. Although I didn't enjoy dealing with disobedience and sass, imposing consequences on my children often affected their long-term behavior.

This week we'll see that God is a great and good Father who may discipline his children by letting them live with consequences.

Background

The book of Genesis records the story of Abraham, whom God called out of an idol-worshipping family into a relationship with him by faith. God gave him three great promises: a nation, a land, and a blessing to the world; yet, these promises weren't fulfilled in Abraham's lifetime. He lived to see Isaac, the son of promise and his two sons, not much of a nation; he wandered as a nomad in the land; and he never saw the blessing, which wasn't fulfilled until approximately two thousand years later through Jesus.

Genesis goes on to record God's sovereign plan to save Abraham's descendants from famine by sending them to Egypt where there was food (Genesis 37, 39-47 and 50:15-21). There they were enslaved for four hundred years and yet grew into a nation numbering in the millions. Under the leadership of God's chosen man Moses, God freed them to return to the land promised to Abraham (the book of Exodus). After forty years of wandering in the wilderness because of their lack of faith, God gave their army victory after victory under Joshua (the book of Joshua).

When we believe that God is good and merciful, it's very difficult to understand his instructions for conquering this land long promised to Abraham's descendants:

When God, your God, brings you into the country that you are about to enter and take over, he will clear out the superpowers that were there before you: the Hittite, the

Girgashite, the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite. Those seven nations are all bigger and stronger than you are. God, your God, will turn them over to you and you will conquer them. You must completely destroy them, offering them up as a holy destruction to God.

Don't make a treaty with them.

Don't let them off in any way.

Don't marry them: Don't give your daughters to their sons and don't take their daughters for your sons— before you know it they'd involve you in worshiping their gods, and God would explode in anger, putting a quick end to you.

Here's what you are to do: Tear apart their altars stone by stone, smash their phallic pillars, chop down their sex-and-religion Asherah groves, set fire to their carved god-images.

Do this because you are a people set apart as holy to God, your God. God, your God, chose you out of all the people on Earth for himself as a cherished, personal treasure (Deuteronomy 7:1-6, MSG).

Why would God ask them to destroy the people who lived in the land? K. Lawson Younger, Jr. summarizes three reasons: *“judgment of the Canaanites, protection of the Israelites from Canaanite religious influence, and fulfillment of the patriarchal promises concerning the land.”*¹



Read what your Bible resources or commentaries say about God's instructions in Deuteronomy 7:1-6. Write down anything that helps you understand this.

This is arguably the toughest command in the Bible, but these people were evil to the point of sacrificing their children to their gods. I can understand that such evil is like a terrible, infectious disease which threatens God's people, but it's hard to accept nevertheless. Yet, when I consider the lengths to which I would go to protect my own family from a threat, it's easier to understand that God knew what had to be done.

For me, the issue comes back to Jesus. A God who would become man and live among us, accepting hatred, abuse and a horrible death on the cross to overcome evil for our sake, is a God who loves the people of the world, whether I understand his command to destroy these nations or not.

I identify with Peter's response when Jesus's hard teachings caused many of his followers to desert him. When Jesus asked the twelve if they would also abandon him, Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69, NIV).

¹ K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *NIV Application Commentary: Judges/Ruth*, Terry Muck, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 2002, 28-29.

Part One Study

The Era of the Judges begins with Joshua's death and ends with Saul's anointing as the first King of Israel. During this period God was their King, and the people were expected to listen to and obey him. What happened in reality was a far cry from that vision, however. A repeated theme in the book is found in two places, 17:6 and 21:25 (ESV): "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Seven times we read this repeated statement: "The descendants of Israel did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD and served the Baals" (2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).² Repeated ideas point to major themes in the book, so keep them in mind as you read.

Judges has three main sections: introduction (Judges 1:1-3:6), stories of the judges (Judges 3:7-16:31), and finally a double conclusion containing two stories of moral decay (Judges 17:1-21:25). You may want to read more background information about this book and time period in the Appendix on p. 55.

Before you read the introductory section, it's important to understand that it's not completely chronological. And there's a double introduction: the first (Judges 1:1-2:5) presents the people's perspective, and the second (Judges 2:6-3:6) reveals God's point-of-view.³

Under Joshua's leadership the Israelites defeated the major kings of Canaan in a series of battles, detailed in the book of Joshua. Then, the land was divided among the tribes, and each tribe was to complete the conquest of their allotted land.

Read Judges 1:1-2:5, the first introduction. (FYI—The tribes of Israel are referred to as if they are individuals here. For example, Judah is a tribe, not a person.) Then, write down your thoughts as you consider these questions:

- Describe your reaction to God's instructions to totally wipe out these people. (See the Background section of this lesson if you skipped it.) How well did the various tribes obey that command according to Judges 1? And how did they explain it?
- What does God's response to their disobedience reveal about him?
- The response of God's people to the messenger's announcement in Judges 2:1-3 reminds me of 2 Corinthians 7:9-10. Read those verses and write down your thoughts about the correlation.
- As you read the quote at the top of the next page in light of what you've seen in God's Word, what is God saying about destructive patterns in your own life that have brought consequences? How have you, much like the Israelites, excused your disobedience and compromise?

² "Baal is the Canaanite word for 'lord.'" Timothy Keller, *Judges for You: Edited from the Study by Tim Keller* (India: The Good Book Company, 2013), 30.

³ Younger, 61.

“If we examine our lives, the bulk of our failures—especially in spiritual matters, but not exclusively—are the results of outright disobedience to God’s explicit, straightforward commandments, or of attempting to live in such a way that we blend into the world.”⁴

Part Two Study

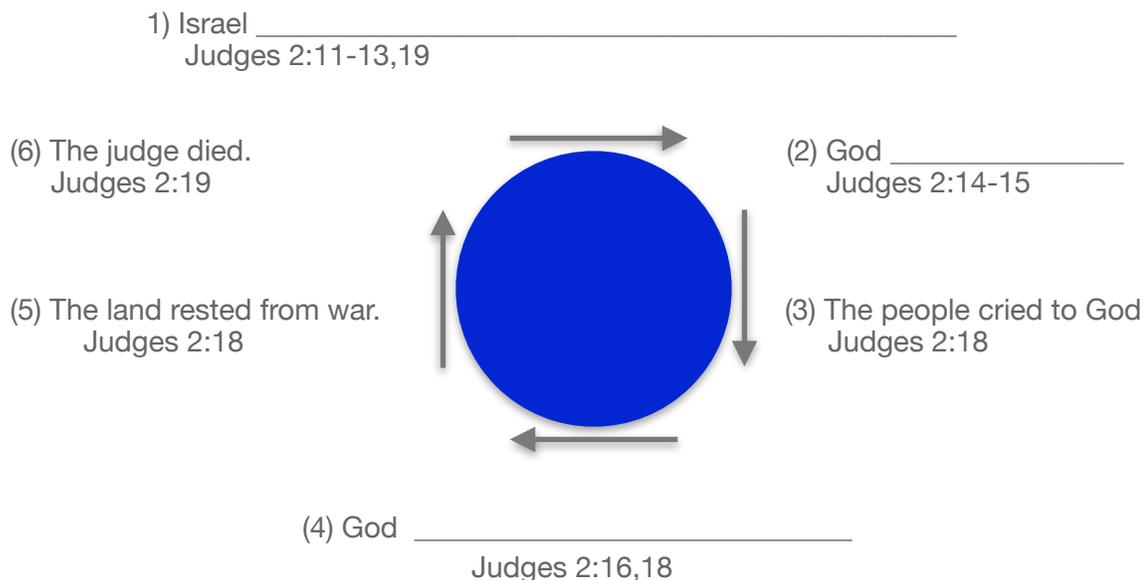
The second introduction to the book of Judges is found in Judges 2:6-3:6. While the first introduction provides the Israelites’ point-of-view, this one reveals God’s perspective on the same events.

Read Judges 2:6-3:6, the second introduction.

(To be sure that you understand this, Judges 2:6 flashes back to Joshua 24. It isn’t chronological after 2:5, but instead these events occurred before Judges 1:1.)

- Fill in the chart below with a summary of what happens over and over in the Judges’ Era.⁵ Draw the chart below if you’re using an online study. What does the cycle reveal about God? What is he like?
- Compare this second introduction to the first one that you read in Judges 1:1-2:5. What differences do you see in the two points-of-view?

Judges Cycle



⁴ Younger, 79.

⁵ For answers to the blanks on the chart, see the Appendix page 58.

Read Joshua 24:1-29, Joshua's farewell address to the nation. (Remember that Joshua 24:28 is the flashback point of Judges 2:6.)

- As you think of God's character and what the people did during the time of the judges, how does Joshua's message explain the cycle? (Note the name LORD written in all caps in the Old Testament. This is YHWH, God's personal name for himself based on the root meaning "I AM," and is probably pronounced Yahweh.)



Yahweh describes himself as a jealous God (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 4:24). The Old Testament prophets used marriage terminology to depict the covenant relationship between God and Israel, which involved describing Israel as unfaithful, a wife who prostituted herself (e.g. Jeremiah 3:6-12; Hosea 2:2-17). In the New Testament the church is Christ's bride (Revelation 19:6-8), so James calls those who love the world adulterers (James 4:4). Read these references and note your thoughts about the positive role that jealousy plays in marriage and how it relates to the cycle of the Judges.

- How is God speaking to you today?

Part Three Study

Reread Judges 3:1-6.

We see in v.4 that God used the consequences of disobedience for a positive purpose: "They were left to test Israel, so the Lord would know if his people would obey the commands he gave their ancestors through Moses."

God allows temptation/testing/consequences in our lives for similar reasons—to reveal what's really in us, not for his sake since he already knows, but for us so that we repent and bring him glory. Peter explains: ". . . you may have to suffer for a short time in various trials. Such trials show the proven character of your faith, which is much more valuable than gold – gold that is tested by fire, even though it is passing away – and will bring praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:6-7).

Applying Judges isn't about focusing on sins common to people outside the church: sexual sins, murder, stealing, etc. When my focus is there, I feel pretty good and righteous. The sin of God's people in Judges is idolatry, lack of trust in their God. Just as Adam and Eve sinned by trying to become like God, so we too bow to idols to get what we want. God expects each of us to focus on uncovering the idols of our own hearts, not pointing the finger at the culture.

“This is the right response to oppression: to see how God’s hand is working behind and through it, and look honestly at ourselves, and to cry out to the LORD for revival.”⁶

Journal your thoughts about these questions:

- Applying Judges 3:1-6 and 1 Peter 1:6-7 (quoted on the previous page), in what ways might God be using our present culture and world in your life? What does this reveal about God?
- In John 17, Jesus intercedes for his followers as our great High Priest. Read vv. 14-23 and comment on how his prayer for the church connects to the situation in the Era of the Judges.
- How has God spoken to you through his Word this week?



I’m left with questions for myself and the church at large as to how we respond to the testing that comes from living in our culture. Journal your answers to questions I’m asking myself: Do I really put God and his kingdom first, or do I show more concern about idols like prosperity, entertainment, nationalism, ease, comfort and safety? Do I trust God or the powers of this world for tomorrow? When my idols are threatened, do I act like those who don’t know God instead of like Jesus?

Marla’s Story

At my workplace, I had an eyesore bookshelf that took up the whole wall of my office. It was an open-faced bookcase that just seemed to gather old manuals, office supplies, and dust all the time. I needed a new file cabinet in my office, and I needed the bookcase removed so that I could rearrange my office.

For two months I asked my boss to remove the bookcase. I sent him e-mails and verbally told him that I would like to fix up my office and the bookcase had to go. I stated that if he did not remove the bookcase I would tear it down. My boss let me know that if I tore down the bookcase, I would be fired.

After two months of patiently waiting (or what I thought was patiently waiting), I sent him an e-mail stating that I wanted the bookshelf gone by Friday. Nothing happened, so I tore the shelving down. Consequently, my boss wrote me up for insubordination and put me on probation. This action also changed the working relationship I had with my boss.

The lesson God taught me through this experience is how much this is like my relationship with God. I wait for God to answer me within my time frame not his. I think I’m being patient, and when

⁶ Keller, 44.

God does not act, I react. In doing so, I do not receive God's best and usually have to deal with the consequences of my actions.

As you consider Marla's story, do you identify any idols? How do her actions ring true in your life?

Week Two: Do Justice and Love Mercy

Light for Living

He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8 (NKJV)

If you follow the news, you realize that like everything in our broken world, there is injustice in our judicial system. DNA testing has proven the innocence of many who were wrongly convicted and punished with dozens of years or more in prison for crimes which they didn't commit. Others seem guilty and yet get off on technicalities. The systemic injustice for people of color in the U.S. becomes clear when their sentences are compared with those of white people who commit similar crimes.⁷

Our God is just and expects us as his image-bearers to work toward justice, as we see in this week's verse. Ultimately, a day will come when God will right the wrongs of our all too human systems.

And yet God is not only just but also merciful, and he asks us to display all aspects of his character to the world around us. The more I study Judges, the more convinced I am that it is God's mercy that is most prominent throughout the book. Mercy, like diamonds, shines most brightly when juxtaposed with the dark.

Part One Study

Review the cycles in Week One on p.14, in the Appendix on p. 58 of this study, or in Judges 2:11-19.

Judges taps into a theme that runs throughout the Scripture: God in his mercy is our Savior/Deliverer. This biblical theme is first introduced after sin enters the world and God curses the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve:

*And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel. Genesis 3:15 (NIV)*

⁷ The Sentencing Project, "Criminal Justice Facts," at <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/> accessed 4/27/19.

This verse is considered the first proclamation of the gospel or good news. God promises that a child of a woman will heroically save/deliver the world from the forces of evil. Although Adam and Eve's sin marred Paradise, hope was ahead, not because they, or we, deserve it, but because God is merciful. Those of us who live after the New Testament recognize the child as Jesus.

The Bible tells us that 2,000 years ago Jesus did come and die to deliver the world from the evil that enslaves us personally and corporately. The scriptures also describe a coming day when he'll return, judge perfectly, and restore all creation to the paradise of Eden.⁸

The stories in Judges provide a shadow of the gospel story that only comes to light in the New Testament. The judges' victories were incomplete and temporary, but they provide a glimpse of Jesus's future rescue of his people from the power of sin and death. In this time between Jesus's first and second comings, God deals with us as he dealt with the Israelites of the Old Testament days: he lets us live with the consequences of worshiping and relying on the gods of this world to cause us to cry to him and turn from our idols. Someday when the Savior returns, we'll be freed from the very presence of sin as we live on a new earth with him forever—our deliverance complete!

The stories of the judges teach us that we can never put our trust in worldly deliverers who can only provide temporary safety. From where we sit in history, we understand that whatever happens our only hope for the present and future is in the God who has rescued us through Christ.

As you read these passages about our Deliverer/Savior, write your thoughts on the questions: John 1:1-5, 9-17; Romans 5:6-11; 6:5-10; Ephesians 2:1-10; Revelation 19:11-16 and 21:1-4.

- Where are you spiritually? Do you believe what these verses reveal about Jesus? Do you need his mercy to free you from your dysfunctional life that causes pain to you and others because of sin? Do you need him to provide a life as God's child? Will you follow Jesus by the power of God's Spirit? Be prepared to share honestly with your group about your current relationship with Christ. We are all still growing. If you have questions about Jesus, contact your small group leader, minister, or contact us at BOW (<https://beyondordinarywomen.org/contact-alternative/>).
- How do these verses about Jesus's life and future relate to God's justice and mercy?
- What is God saying to you through these passages?



Read these additional passages in light of the questions above: John 3:16-21; Colossians 1:15-22.

⁸ If you have never studied the big picture story of the Bible, consider doing BOW's study The ONE Story (<https://beyondordinarywomen.org/the-one-story/>) which focuses on the overall story and unity of the Bible.

Part Two Study

Remember that there are three sections in Judges: the double introduction (Judges 1:1-3:6), stories of the judges (3:7-16:31), and a double conclusion with two stories of moral decay (17:1-21, 25). We studied the introduction in Week One, and now we'll begin reading about the judges in the second and longest part of the book.

As we study through the cycles in Judges, note that they descend in an overall downward spiral—the judges become less virtuous and the people adapt more and more to look and think like the people of the land.

Review Judges 1:11-15, and read Judges 3:5-11 about Othniel, considered by some to be the ideal judge.⁹ Then write your thoughts on these questions:

(FYI: There is some debate about how Othniel and Caleb were related.¹⁰ Many scholars believe that Othniel is Caleb's nephew.)

- How would you describe Othniel? Why might some describe him as the ideal judge?
- How do you see God's justice and mercy in the cycle that includes Othniel?
- What is God saying to you about your own life?



Read in Bible resources about the idols Baal and Asherahs¹¹ (Judges 3:7), and write down what gets your attention. Many outstanding Bible resources are free online, including [bible.org](https://www.bible.org).

Part Three Study

In every judge's story the people of Israel dealt with an oppressive foreign ruler as a consequence of their idolatry, and yet God in his mercy raised up a deliverer. Sometimes innocent people deal with cruelty; it is not always a consequence of their personal sins or disobedience. so we have to be careful here. The faithful remnant also lives with the consequences that the majority deserves. As you think about applying Judges, remember that Israel is unique as a designated God-given land for the Jews. Because no other country falls into that category, we need to apply what we read to ourselves and our churches, not to the unbelievers in the nation around us.

⁹ Younger, Jr., 36.

¹⁰ Othniel's "exact relationship to Caleb is uncertain. The antecedent of 'his younger brother' could be either Caleb or Kenaz, in which case he would be Caleb's nephew." Block, Daniel L., *The New American Commentary: Judges and Ruth*, Vol. 6, E. Ray Clendenen, Ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 93.

¹¹ "The Asherahs were local manifestations of the Canaanite goddess Asherah." Note 9 on Judges 3:7 in <https://netbible.org/bible/Judges+3>. See the Appendix section "Additional Information about Judges" p.57 for more specifics.

We believers are to be salt and light in our nations as aliens, knowing that our first allegiance belongs to God's kingdom (Philippians 3:20). To apply the stories in Judges consider how we as God's New Testament people are making compromises, the nature of our idols, the ways we ignore God's commands to love him first and our neighbors as ourselves, and the ways we replace trusting and worshiping God with trust in ourselves, other people, government, money, etc.

A God-given desire for justice lives deeply within all people. Sometimes, however, that desire leads fallen people to seek revenge or become self-righteous. The English words righteousness and justice are two forms of the same word in the Bible. Self-righteousness means judging ourselves as worthy and just while we vilify other people. We can often see it in our hearts when we lack empathy toward "those" who aren't like us. When we do that, we aren't merciful or loving toward our neighbors.

With that in mind let's continue the stories of the judges. The cycle began again after 40 years of rest following Othniel's deliverance.

Read Judges 3:12-31, and record your thoughts as you think through these questions:

(FYI: "An oxgoad was a long stick with a small flat piece of iron on one side and a sharp point on the other. The sharp side was used to drive the oxen during times of plowing, and the flat end was used to clean the mud off the plow."¹²)

- Compare Ehud and Shamgar to Othniel, the first judge. Consider their situations and methods, as well as anything the text tells you about their character. What makes each good or unusual choices for God's leaders? Why would God choose judges with limitations?
- What is God saying to you through the stories of these first three judges?
- What three things does God require of us according to Micah 6:8, our verse this week? How might God be asking you to be an advocate/support for justice and mercy?

Just as the judges delivered God's people from the oppression of foreign kings when the people cried out to God, so we participate in God's kingdom work by speaking and working for justice. The more difficult the situation is, the more courage we need to stand against what is popular and accepted among our friends. The church has not always led the way in this area. As followers of Christ, we are called to speak out against inequality and injustice wherever we find it—on the job, or in the church, our nation or our families.

At the same time we're to be forgiving and merciful because that shows God to others, maybe like nothing else does. We show mercy to the guilty and those affected by sin. Our desire for justice must be tempered by our realization that we too have received mercy— totally and completely

¹² Note in *Life Application Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 387.

undeserved. Harsh attitudes and hard lines that fail to love our neighbors are irreconcilable with the name of Christ.



Read, listen to, or watch a true story or facts about injustice, discrimination or oppression. Stretch yourself to consider a viewpoint outside of your personal experience from people unlike you. Where can you help bring justice, and where can you give mercy? How can you act on both concepts which are high on God's priorities? (Need suggestions? See a short list in the list of "Resources on Injustice" in the Appendix on p. 61.)

A friend who worked through this study to provide input as I edited it suggested that I "strongly encourage" you to read the resources on injustice suggested in the starred optional section you just passed. She said that she's so glad that I needed her input on them because she would've skipped them otherwise. She ended up challenged by what she read. Consider reading at least one of them! It's easier to turn our heads and ignore injustice, but that leaves us as accomplices to evil.

Crystal's Story

I grew up thinking that our country was a place where justice always prevailed. But then in February 2012, with the shooting of an unarmed black teen, Trayvon Martin, I started to question my views. Was racism still a reality in our country? Did people experience systemic injustice just because of the color of their skin? These questions forced me to dive back into the history of our nation and to revisit the story of the black experience in America through their perspectives.

Over the next few years, I read everything that I could get my hands on to understand more fully what I felt like was not being talked about in the classrooms or even the churches where I had grown up.

There continued to be more high-profile shootings of black and brown men, women and children, often in encounters with police, but now I was starting to see through the typical rationalizations offered that something deeply unjust was happening. Comments that I heard from other white Christians that racial justice was a "distraction from the Gospel" rang hollow.

When I started to study the Bible again, now in community with believers from diverse ethnicities and life experiences, my eyes were opened to the fact that these issues were central to God's heart for justice and reconciliation. Because they are important to Him, they should be important to me as His child.

How has this changed my perspective now? Now I listen first before I speak. I grieve with those communities most affected by the brokenness and injustice in our world. I teach my kids that God

has created us in all our differences and loves this diversity. I speak up and work to support those on the frontlines of creating more just communities where we live. Just as the Israelites learned in the book of Judges, I too have learned that my ultimate hope cannot rest in man but only in the God of perfect justice who has reconciled us in the cross and will make all things right again in the end.

Week Three: Grab your Opportunities

Light for Living

Has the Lord not taken the lead?

Deborah in Judges 4:14

I look back with a great deal of regret over wasted years and opportunities. But Paul says that the way to move forward is to put the past behind and focus on what's ahead: *“Instead I am single-minded: Forgetting the things that are behind and reaching out for the things that are ahead, with this goal in mind, I strive toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 3:13b-14).

Forgetting the past means accepting God's forgiveness and grace; however, it doesn't imply that we ignore its lessons. My past has taught me not to miss any opportunities that God gives me.

As we read God's continuing story this week, we meet a heroic woman who embraced the possibilities of her circumstances by acting when the opportunity unexpectedly arose. We'll also look at my favorite judge, Deborah, who was a great woman of valor.¹³ She was ready for God to use her, even in unorthodox ways that she perhaps never imagined when she recognized that he had taken the lead. (See this week's verse above.) God is not a respecter of persons; if he used these women, he can use you and me. The key is trusting in a big God rather than looking at our positions or experiences.

Part One Study

Read Judges 4:1-11, noting your thoughts about these questions:

- What do you learn about Deborah?
(FYI: God used prophets in the Old and New Testaments as his messengers. Prophets spoke for God to people; they were his mouthpieces.)
- What possible reasons come to mind as to why Barak might want Deborah present as he went into battle?
- What is God saying to you personally today?

¹³ Proverbs 12:4; 31:10 and Ruth 3:11 refer to women in this way.

Consider this: Ron Pierce believes that the context suggests that “woman of fire” is a better translation of the Hebrew than “wife of Lappidath.”¹⁴ Think about that as you read the rest of her story this week.



Read about other women who served as prophets: Miriam (Exodus 15:19-21), Hulda (2 Kings 22:8-20), Isaiah’s wife (Isaiah 8:1-3), Anna (Luke 2:36-38) and four daughters of Phillip (Acts 21:8-9). Journal your insights and feelings.

Part Two Study

Read Judges 4:12-24, and journal about these questions:

- How do you see the three main characters of the story (Deborah, Barak, Jael) use their opportunities well?
- Share your thoughts about the surprising ways that God works in this story.
- How do you see both God’s sovereignty (rule over all) and people’s responsibility?
- What is God saying to you about your willingness to follow God into risky situations?

Week Two’s Lesson noted that many commentators consider Othniel the ideal judge. Yet, Deborah has no recorded weaknesses either, and much more is written about her. I appreciated this note in the ESV:

While the pattern of apostasy continues (esp. 4:1-3), Deborah distinguishes herself as the most godly of all the judges; it is ironic that the most distinguished judge was a woman (4:8-9). . . Deborah’s actions and words consistently pointed to God, not away from him, in contrast to the poor choices of [other] judges¹⁵



Many theologians, pastors, and teachers through the centuries have suggested that the only reason God used Deborah as a judge was that no man would step up and do it, which is likely why many of them consider Othniel to be the only ideal judge.¹⁶ Do you see anything in the scriptures to suggest this? What differences do you see in Deborah’s story that would suggest she was more distinguished than Othniel? You may want to look at recent scholarship on this issue.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ron Pierce, “Deborah: Only When a Good Man is Hard to Find?” *Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible*, Ed. Sandra Glahn (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2017), 191-192.

¹⁵ Note on Judges 4:1-5:31 in *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 444.

¹⁶ Pierce, 291.

¹⁷ See footnote #14 for a recent resource on many of the women of the Bible.

Part Three Study

The second chapter of the story of God's victory over the Canaanite king Jabin and his commander Sisera is a poem. Like all poetry, it uses figurative, not literal, language. This poem celebrates Israel's victory over its oppressors in a way that exalts its heroes.

Read Judges 5:1-31, commenting on the questions below.

- Last week we looked at the need to stand against injustice. What do you learn from Deborah, Barak, and Jael about courageously acting against oppression?
- How did God prove that he was the one giving Barak the victory?
- What are your insights into the contrast between Deborah and Jael on one hand and the way the poem pictures Sisera's mother on the other?
- What has God been saying to you this week through this story and song?



Consider these verses about God's sovereignty. How can they help you overcome fear when faced with God-given opportunities: Psalm 33:8-11; Isaiah 14:26-27; 43:13; 45:7; 46:9-11?

Sherry's Story

We lived in Charlotte, North Carolina before moving to Texas. We moved into an older neighborhood that had many older folks. Our neighbor directly across the street from us was a precious 84-year-old widower. He was a fascinating man who had wonderful stories to tell. He had traveled the world and owned his own antique and art gallery for many years. He loved to garden and his home was on the home and garden tour every year.

My children and I visited and walked in his garden with him, but mostly he loved to have the children come over and have cookies and hot tea with him in the afternoon. He was a Jewish man, although he did not practice his faith. We shared with him on occasion about what we believed, where we went to church and the fact that our children were in Christian school. Being the very intelligent man that he was, he had a scientific argument for everything. He respected our beliefs, but thought we were a bit conservative. I never came right out and shared the gospel with him. I'm not sure why—was it a fear of rejection, a fear of offending him? I can't say.

We left Charlotte after a short 16 months. We were very sad to leave him, but I think he was more sad to see us go. He had no children and was quite lonely. We kept in close touch through letters and phone calls.

Two years after we moved to Texas I received a phone call from a girl who helped him with groceries and errands. She said his health was declining and she wanted us to know. She said he had our children's pictures all around his room. He missed them a lot. I was so sad after she called. He

was like a member of our family. I wanted to go see him. My husband and I talked it over and it worked out that I was able to go see him shortly after the phone call. Before I got on the plane, my daughter said, "Mommy, you have to tell him about Jesus." I knew she was right.

I had a wonderful visit with him for an afternoon and then a morning visit before leaving. He did not talk much and seemed unclear in his thinking. I hugged him good-bye, knowing I would never see him again. I got on the airplane and flew home without ever making the gospel clear to him. I skipped and skirted around it but never came out and shared the truth. I have shared my faith with total strangers and family members on many occasions, but for some reason I hesitated with him.

Ten days after my visit, he died. I sobbed that day, because I would miss him, but mostly because I had felt led by the Lord to share with him but disregarded God's leading. I had been disobedient, and it will forever be a reminder to NEVER pass the opportunity or ignore the Lord's prompting. Could the Lord save him without me? Absolutely, but I was disobedient, and I missed a blessing.

We took him to a butterfly exhibit once. I took a photograph of a beautiful butterfly on a flower. I found the photo not long after his death. I framed it and put it where I would see it as a reminder to never miss an opportunity again.

Week Four: Act in Faith but Beware of Pride

Light for Living

The Lord is with you, courageous warrior!

The angel of God to Gideon in Judges 6:12b

As a girl, I greatly feared balconies. One of the movie theaters in our town had a steep balcony. I had a recurring nightmare that I lost my balance on its stairs and rolled down and over the railing into the crowd below. Because of those dreams, I preferred sitting downstairs, even if my seat was on the front row, rather than walk into the balcony. My fear drove my actions. Our military leader this week was afraid, but God moved him from fear to faith.

Background

Just as the cycles of sin increasingly worsen throughout the Judges' Era, so do the judges themselves. It's slowly downhill after Deborah. Notice as we continue our study how the character and leadership of each subsequent judge worsens. Too often we think biblical heroes are worthy in every way. To see clearly through the darkness we must assess the judges by taking seriously both the good and the bad in context of the entire Word of God.

This week God's story in Judges focuses on Gideon (also named Jerubbaal, meaning "let Baal contend"¹⁸) and his son Abimelech. Despite his weaknesses, Gideon was greatly used by God. Sadly, however, his story ends poorly, leaving us with both encouragement and challenge. Where did he go wrong?

Part One Study

Read Judges 6:1-7:23, and journal your responses to these questions:



Compare the conversation surrounding God's call of Gideon in 6:11-24 with that of Moses in Exodus 3:1-4:17.

- How did God's response to Israel's idolatry this time differ from the previous cycles (6:6-10)? Considering all of today's verses why do you think God acted as he did?

¹⁸ Note on Judges 6:32, *ESV Study Bible*, 450.

- How did God take Gideon from fear to increased faith? What do you learn about God from their interactions? (**FYI:** Signs are an indication of unbelief, not faith (Matthew 12:38-39; 1 Corinthians 1:22-24). Note that Gideon wasn't trying to discover God's will, although this passage is often taught as a method of doing that. God's will was clear. What does it seem that Gideon was trying to learn then?)
- There is a lot going on in this story. What most stands out to you?
- Consider what this story tells us about God. What is God saying to you about your abilities, willingness and availability to follow and serve him?

Part Two Study

When God's Spirit "clothed" him, Gideon sent for the men of Israel to fight with him (Judges 6:34-35), but the text doesn't say that God told him to call an army. When God's Spirit empowered a person in the Old Testament, it wasn't necessarily a sign of spirituality, as the filling of the Spirit is in the New Testament. It only indicated that the Spirit provided the individual with power for a specific task, not that everything he did was of the Spirit any more than all that we as believers do is of the Spirit.

Read and comment on Judges 7:24-8:32 in light of these questions:

- Write your thoughts about Gideon's mixture of wise and poor decisions in this story.
- It appears that Gideon's victory gave him a sense of pride. How do you see that pride affect his decision-making and actions? How would you describe his legacy as a leader?
- Ask God to reveal your own areas of pride. Considering Gideon's examples, what prideful actions do you see in your own life? (Read James 4 if you have time.) Confess them to God and to anyone else who has been affected. (BTW, pride is self-focus which involves thinking either too highly of self or too lowly of self. Both aspects of pride take our eyes off of God.)



Judges 8:27 says that all Israel prostituted themselves or whored after Gideon's golden ephod. (See the starred section on p.15 to understand that terminology if you didn't read it or remember it from Week One, Part 2.) What's an ephod? Study in your Bible notes or online resources and write down your insights. Dr. Younger suggests that Gideon may have used it to receive divine guidance as the High Priest did. *"In this way the ephod becomes Gideon's permanent fleece."*¹⁹

¹⁹ Younger, 206.

Part Three Study

We see the fallout from Gideon's choices as we read the story of his son Abimelech, whose name means "my father is king."²⁰ Keep his name in mind as you read and answer questions.

Read Judges 8:29-9:57. Comment on these questions:

- What consequences of Gideon's pride and foolishness stand out to you?
- What do you learn about leadership from Abimelech's story and the parable of Jotham which was intended as a picture of him and his leadership?
- Judges 9:56-57 says that God brought justice to both Abimelech and the men of Shechem. Describe how events brought justice.

"When believers forget the Lord and live according to the world's dictates, this only intensifies the power of the wicked. When believers choose this path, becoming functional unbelievers, they may find that God allows them to get what they deserve, just as the Israelites experienced in the Abimelech story."²¹

- What is God saying to you about ways in which your words, actions and leadership reflect the world more than the love of Christ?

The saga of Gideon and his family is a sad one for the people of Israel. As Robert B. Chisholm comments, "*The seeds planted by Gideon had taken root. Israel (cf. v. 22) now had as its king a murderer who was financed from the treasure of a pagan god and was supported by a gang of thugs.*"²²

The people turned from devotion to Yahweh and embraced the idols and spiritual darkness of the culture around them. Sadly, Gideon's victory as judge was eventually overshadowed by his pride.



Referring to Judges 9:23, Chisholm provides insight: "*The expression 'evil spirit' need not mean that the spirit was itself demonic or evil. The Hebrew term can refer to moral evil, but it can also refer to disaster, harm, or calamity in a non-moral sense. If the word is given the latter sense here, the expression may simply mean that the spirit was sent to bring harm and calamity upon the objects of God's anger.*"²³ Other verses where it is used similarly are 1 Samuel 16:23; 18:10; 19:9. How does this affect your understanding of God's work?

In light of recent disturbing reports about the personal life of another Christian leader who accomplished great good in his lifetime, a friend expressed her heartfelt desire for godly pastors. Of

²⁰ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Kregel Exegetical Library: A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2013), 311.

²¹ Younger, Jr., 234.

²² Chisholm Jr., 312.

²³ Chisholm Jr., 316-317.

course there are many of them, but overall our present-day church leadership appears to be spiraling downward morally, as we see in the lives of the judges. There's something within us that yearns for morally consistent leaders. Although we may prefer just not thinking about it—maybe even giving up studying Judges because it feels depressing—let's take that yearning for a godly shepherd as God's reminder to turn our eyes on Jesus, the only leader who will never disappoint us.

My Story

Only God could take a young woman who feared spiritual leadership of any kind and build her faith in him until she stepped out in obedience as God opened opportunities.

That's my story, which is much like Gideon's. Gideon was afraid of a physical enemy and the wrath of his own people if he rocked the boat. What was I so afraid of? Not living up to the expectations of others. Failure. Being in front rather than behind. Being put on a pedestal. Lack of qualifications in character and experience. The possibility of disappointing God.

Despite my many attempts to avoid leadership roles, I watched God work in several situations so that I had to lead even without the role or title. He navigated around my no's to use me despite my attempts to avoid his will. In time he showed me that my problem was lack of faith in him. Instead of looking at his abilities and power, I was too busy looking at me and my failures and short-comings.

As I look back over more than thirty years of leadership in all sorts of roles, it's clear that it's always been about God, not me. It's been his guidance, power, strength, wisdom, and plans—not mine. Whatever has been achieved for the sake of God's kingdom is because he has been at work.

The same God who used Gideon and works through me can use anyone paralyzed by fear who turns her focus on God and trusts him by walking in obedience.

Week Five: Know your God

Light for Living

But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.”

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.”

Jesus to Jewish religious leaders in Matthew 22:29; 23:23 (ESV)

Often I hear Christians support their choices by saying, “I prayed about it” or “God told me to do it.” And of course, God leads his people in prayer and by his still small voice. I’m not suggesting that we don’t pray or expect him to guide. But what if we’re mistaken because we don’t know him well enough to recognize the ways in which he leads and the choices that align with his character? I’m very careful about attributing my actions to God because I’m fallible and may be mistaken. I may say, “I sense God leading me,” after some time testing it and asking for counsel from friends whose lives and actions reflect God’s character. More often it’s only in hindsight that I can firmly attribute direction to God.

Our first Light for Living verse this week quotes Jesus speaking to the Jewish leaders, who seemingly knew the scriptures better than anyone in that day. I find it a sobering reminder of how off we can be, in thinking that we know the Bible. They often knew the “rules” but failed to apply the character of God to their reasoning. And the second of this week’s verses speaks to that very issue—our God is just, merciful and faithful, and he calls us to show his image to the world through our lives.

To know God requires immersing ourselves in understanding who he is and how he acts. That’s why I’ve found that repeatedly reading and studying the whole Bible is one of the best protections for incorrect thinking about God. After all, the Bible is his story.

Our fallen human nature can lead us to believe that our desires are God’s—that his greatest concern is our personal happiness and pleasure because he exists for us rather than the other way around. We tend to make him in our own image instead of wanting him to remake us in his. When we determine God’s will based on our feelings of peace, we risk being wrong because we’re naturally more at peace with our selfish desires and the thinking of our culture than with sacrificial love. Our blindspots can only be countered by immersing ourselves in the Word of God from Genesis to Revelation and seeking wise counsel from others who walk with him.

Background

This section of Judges reveals a very dark time. The deliverers who saved the people from oppressive foreign rulers were apparently as ignorant of God and his character as the people who followed them. Their failure to see clearly through the darkness caused suffering and oppression. God was still present, however, and he continued to work for the best of Israel because he is faithful and merciful, not because they deserved it.

Part One Study

As you read about this cycle, note that Israel is now worshipping additional gods.

“Every time Israel worshiped the idols of a nation, that nation ended up oppressing them. This time, Israel has added the gods of the Ammonites and Philistines—and in consequence they are given over to being oppressed by the Ammonites and Philistines (10:7). Idolatry leads to enslavement.”²⁴

Read Judges 10:1-11:11, and respond:

- What strikes you in the short record of the judges mentioned in 10:1-5?
- What differs here from previous cycles and what does this story reveal about both God and also the people of Israel?²⁵
- Compare the backgrounds of Jephthah and Abimelech (Judges 8:29-31; 9:1-6). What insights do you have about Jephthah and the people of Israel from Judges 10:17-11:11? Write down your thoughts about God’s choice to use Jephthah.

“There is no indication that the Lord raised up Jephthah or even commissioned him for battle, though he did energize him for war.”²⁶



What insights do you gain as you compare Jephthah and his “worthless” meaning “empty, idle, worthless (ethically)”²⁷ men with David and his fighting force (1 Samuel 22:1-2; 23:5; 25:4-8; 14-16)?

Part Two Study

Read Judges 11:12-40, journaling as you think about these questions:

- What do you learn about Jephthah through his interactions with the Ammonites?

²⁴ Keller, 109.

²⁵ For information about the specific Canaanite gods mentioned, see the section “Additional Information about Judges” in the Appendix p. 57.

²⁶ Chisholm, 21.

²⁷ *Strong’s Concordance* Hebrew definition for 07324 accessed at <https://netbible.org/bible/Judges+11>

- Based on his words, what is Jephthah's motive for making his vow? What does the vow show us about his view of God's power and character? In light of Deuteronomy 12:29-31 and 18:10-12, how does the vow reveal his ignorance of God's law and his adoption of the cultural norms?
- How does Israel's repentance, which led to God's relenting in Judges 10:10-16, differ from Jephthah's act in making this vow?
- What is God saying to you today about what you truly believe and know about him based on your actions and prayers? Could you be ignorant of God's character or will? What cultural ways of thinking have you adopted?

There are two thoughts about what Jephthah did to his daughter as result of his vow: 1) he killed her as a sacrifice to God, or (2) he forced her into lifelong virginity. The second idea is apparently a fairly recent one, perhaps because we don't want to believe that Jephthah, a judge, would actually sacrifice his daughter. But remember that the character of the various judges becomes weaker as the book progresses. And we also know that at this time Israel worshiped Yahweh, the true God, alongside other gods, resulting in a syncretistic religion, the fusion of different beliefs. These idolatrous religions valued the sacrifice of children as an act of worship. This concept wouldn't have been foreign to Jephthah or the people of Gilead. Repugnance to child sacrifice seems to be the main reason to dismiss it as fact.

To excuse Jephthah, some suggest that he expected an animal to come out of the house, not his daughter. Gary Inrig, however, lays out the case that Jephthah's daughter was indeed sacrificed:

*First, animals were not kept indoors. Second. . . if he intended an animal sacrifice, he would have vowed his very best animals, not just whatever wandered out the door. Third, he intended a sacrifice, as the word translated 'burnt offering' indicates. Every time the word is used in the Old Testament, it refers to a blood sacrifice*²⁸

This story should force us to think about the toll that idolatry of any kind takes on individuals, families and communities, as well as the dangers of mixing our worship of God with any other allegiances.

Jephthah and his daughter understood that vows are serious. It's true that we should fulfill our vows, but before we even make them, we should verify that they align with God's Word and his character. If we make a rash vow, we shouldn't fulfill it if God's Word forbids our actions. Jephthah was either ignorant of God's laws not to sacrifice people or misunderstood God's character which prioritizes people over rules.



Read these verses, writing down your thoughts about the importance of keeping your word and what God is showing you: Ecclesiastes 5:2-7; Matthew 5:33-37; Psalm 15:1, 4c.

²⁸ Gary Inrig, *Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 193-194.

If you have time, write a lament over the unnamed daughter of Jephthah and all children today who pay for their parents' idolatry.

Part Three Study

The first tragedy in Jephthah's story was the death of his daughter. Sadly, he caused another tragedy because of his lack of wisdom and understanding of God's will.

Respond to these questions as you read Judges 12:

- How did the anger of the men of Ephraim toward Gideon (Judges 7:24-8:3) compare with their anger at Jephthah? How did Gideon and Jephthah's responses differ?
- Write down any thoughts that you have about the descriptions of the three judges mentioned after Jephthah's story.
- What is God saying to you about conflicts in your life? Are there any perspectives or issues that you hold so closely and personally that you would fight a "civil war" over them with friends, family or other believers? Where is the line?



Watch this series of three short, free videos from Beyond Ordinary Women Ministries: "Fight Right": <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4885111>.

Pamela's Story

My sister contracted hepatitis when she was pregnant with her first child. Although the doctors were careful not to scare her, of course our entire family was very concerned. My mother was particularly stressed and worried about both my sister and the baby. Thankfully she was a prayer warrior, but she somehow felt the need to try to manipulate God. She bargained with him, saying that she would become more regular in her Sunday evening church attendance if he would protect them both.

Praise God that although my sister struggled to feel better for several weeks, her baby was born healthy a few months later.

Sadly, my mother's prayer revealed her lack of understanding about the nature of God. Her bargain seemed to be based on one of these possible misunderstandings: God could be bribed if she sacrificed something, or the illness was God's punishment for her failure to faithfully attend church on Sunday night. In either case, she saw God's actions as based solely on her good works.

Thankfully, my mother's bargain did no damage to anyone but her. Only recently did I recognize the connection between her prayer so long ago and her lifelong lack of trust in God's grace and goodness. It makes me sad that her failure to really know God prevented her from experiencing the joy and security of his love and salvation.

Week Six: Don't Waste God's Gifts

Light for Living

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. Through faith they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, gained what was promised, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, gained strength in weakness, became mighty in battle, put foreign armies to flight.

Hebrews 11:32-34

Have you ever known anyone who wasted her life? Someone who began with great potential because of her God-given gifting but never lived up to that promise?

This week we look at Samson, perhaps the most well-known of all of the judges. As we've studied this time period, we've noted that the judges increasingly became less like God and more like the world around them. By the time we meet Samson, the final judge in this book, there is little to commend. Yet, he is listed along with other judges who preceded him as a man of faith. (See the verses above.) As you read about him, think about how and when he evidenced faith.

Part One Study

Samson's life is understood in three parts: the birth announcement in Judges 13, his activities as a young adult in and around the town of Timnah in Judges 14-15, and the saga of his demise in Judges 16. Today we'll read the first section.

Read Judges 13, commenting on these questions:

- Compare this cycle to the general cycle (p.14 or p. 58) and to what you remember in the details of the specific cycles we've seen. What does it suggest about the people of Israel and about God?
- What insights do you have from the two appearances of the angel of Yahweh and his interactions with Manoah and his wife? (FYI: The angel may be an appearance of God or not—see the footnote.)²⁹

²⁹ Conservative scholars are divided as to whether the angel here is the Lord himself or simply a messenger who speaks for him. Younger, Jr. explains: "Since verse 21 informs us that Manoah finally recognized the messenger as the angel of the Lord, it is odd that here he claims to have seen God. This might suggest that the angel and God are to be equated ontologically, but this need not be the case. Having taken so long to recognize the messenger's true identity, perhaps Manoah compensates for his dullness by going to the opposite extreme" (399).

- What is a Nazirite? It's not someone related to the town of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. The noun *nazir* derives from a root meaning "to dedicate or consecrate oneself."³⁰ Read Numbers 6:1-8, comparing the Nazirite's restrictions there to the angel's instructions to the woman. How might restrictions of this type help a Nazirite fulfill his purpose?
- Read 1 Peter 1:14-16. The words "holy" and "sanctified" mean separated or set apart unto God. Consider ways in which we should live differently as God's children (Ideas? Try Matt. 5-7.)

If we see clearly through the darkness, we won't live like those who can't see, but that shouldn't cause pride. Too often we believers become self-righteous about what we don't do, building a judgmental barrier to the rest of the world. We're not saved because we choose not to participate in certain activities or cease from specific sins in our lives. Those should happen as an outgrowth of our love for Jesus. We are God's children only because of his mercy and grace.



Focus on Manoah's wife, the unnamed mother in Samson's story. Compare her spiritual insights with her husband's, **or** compare this story with other biblical birth announcements in situations that are hopeless and impossible from a human perspective (Genesis 18:9-15; 1 Samuel 1:3-18; Luke 1:5-25; Luke 1:26-38).

The name Samson means "little sun" and it could refer to his being a light, but the evidence suggests that it is more likely that he was named after the Canaanite sun god *Shemesh*.³¹

"... how can this barren Israelite couple, who conceive and bear a child with the miraculous aid of the Lord, name their son Shimson, "Little Sun" ("Sunny Boy"!), which if not outrightly pagan is dangerously compromising?"³²

Part Two Study

So far the story of Samson seems great with promise. God miraculously opened his mother's womb and indicated that he would be dedicated to God as his instrument to begin delivering Israel from the Philistines. Now we'll read the second part of his story which records his activities as a young man near the town of Timnah.

Read Judges 14:1-15:20, journaling your thoughts on these questions:

- In what ways did Samson look just like his enemies? What do these stories reveal about what motivated him?

³⁰ Block, 403.

³¹ Block, 416-418.

³² *Ibid.*, 419.

- What do you learn about Samson’s character and his understanding of his identity as a Nazirite from these stories? (FYI: The Nazirite prohibition against touching a corpse may involve only human corpses.)³³
- Considering how God deals with Samson, what do you learn about God from these stories?
- What are your insights about the Israelites’ relationship with God from their response to Samson’s feats against the Philistines?



Samson displays many characteristics of the fool described in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Compare what you see in these stories to the descriptions in these verses: Proverbs 10:1, 23; 12:15; 13:20; 14:29; 17:25; 18:6; 26:12; 28:26; 29:11.

Throughout Scripture, God is at work accomplishing his purposes and his plans, as in Samson’s case. And yet Samson seems to be a free agent, doing whatever pleases him without regard to God’s will.³⁴ There’s a tension between God’s sovereignty, his rule over all, and man’s responsibility that the Bible never explains. God uses us to accomplish his purposes and his plans, but we aren’t robots. How does it all fit together? When God doesn’t choose to explain, it’s best to accept that both are true rather than attempt a logical explanation by embracing one over the other. Remember that it’s a paradox, a mystery that we accept by faith.

God can use his people for his purposes even when we don’t seek his will. But he alone knows what could have been.

“A doctrine of sin requires us to acknowledge that our perceptions are faulty—and a doctrine of providence requires us to acknowledge that in the face of sin, God will bring about goods that otherwise never would have existed.”³⁵

Part Three Study

After the occurrences surrounding Samson’s killing 1,000 Philistines with a fresh jawbone, twenty years elapsed before the final events that led not only to his downfall, but also to his greatest victory.

³³ Some commentators believe that Samson violated his vow by his contact with the lion. Leon Wood takes the opposite view: “The language used in giving the Nazirite prohibition regarding a dead ‘body’ speaks only of a dead ‘person’ (*nephesh*, meaning ‘soul’ or ‘person’; Num. 6:6) The same language is used, in fact, regarding a similar prohibition for the priest (Lev. 21:11). But priests had to come near dead bodies of animals continually in their activity of sacrifice. Both priests and Nazirites, then, could be near the dead bodies of animals, but not bodies of people.” Leon Wood *Distressing Days of the Judges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1975), 313.

³⁴ For example in Judges 14:4 “Yahweh’s seeking does not imply that he is inciting Samson’s lustful desire for the Timnite woman. Rather, it suggest that Samson’s sinful actions accord with Yahweh’s will. God uses Samson in spite of his wrong motive and actions (cf. Gen. 50:20)” Younger, Jr., 302.

³⁵ Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 9.

Read Judges 16:1-31, considering these questions:

- Compare the relationships between previous judges and their oppressors with those between Samson and the Philistines.
- What stands out to you about God and Samson in this part of the story?
- Although the Bible never suggests that Samson worshiped the local gods, his words and actions reveal idols in his heart. Considering his entire life, what idols do you see directing his life? (What or who did he prioritize before God or rely on instead of Yahweh?)
- What is God saying to you about your own idols?



Record your thoughts about prayer in light of the events and situations in Judges 15:18-19; 16:23-30.

In the great Shakespearean tragedies, there's always a character defect that leads to an unhappy ending. Samson is a tragic hero as well. Although he fulfilled God's purpose for his life, he failed to do it God's way. As a result, he wasted his potential and we're left to wonder what he could have done if he had sought and followed the Lord rather than having been driven by his own lusts.

Thankfully, Samson's finest hour shines at his death, which has many similarities to that of Jesus. Keller details the parallels:

*First, both Samson and Jesus were betrayed by someone who acted as a friend . . . Both were handed over to Gentile oppressors. Both were tortured and chained, and put on public display to be mocked. Both were asked to perform (though Jesus unlike Samson refused). Both died with arms outstretched. . . . And both appeared completely struck down by their enemies, yet both in their death crushed their enemy—Samson, the Philistines and Dagon; Jesus, the ultimate enemy, Satan. . . . And both were saviors alone. . . . In short, we have in Samson, more than in any of the other judges, the pattern of the 'victorious defeat.'*³⁶

God used Samson despite Samson, but so much was lost. May we, in contrast, stay in touch with God's larger purpose for our lives so that we live for him and the advancement of his kingdom. May we use our gifts well by living up to the great potential for which God has designed us.

Beverly's Story

When I left for college, I decided to try out what the world had to offer. I had become disillusioned with my church and consequently decided to put God aside also. I could go out every night of the week if I desired. I went to church once during college but found it boring and awfully early after getting in so late on Saturday night. I took advantage of every party and had a lot of fun.

³⁶ Keller, 163-164.

Several years later I began to feel the emptiness of this life. There was something missing, and I felt a strong desire to get back into church. As I plugged back into a church fellowship and began to get involved in Bible study, I had a deep regret for the years I had spent away from the Lord. I had missed out on years of growing in the Lord. I had a lot of knowledge about the Bible but had never spent time studying God's Word for myself. I began to realize what a waste those six years had been that I chose to go my own way. My behavior had led to some choices that would have been unthinkable just a few years before.

Now I'm watching my child go through this same rebellion against God. He puts on the Christian act when he's at church, but his behavior with his friends shows that he's making the same mistakes I made. He's tasting what the world has to offer and nothing I can say about my experiences can make him understand the regret he'll have in the future about the time he wasted in his relationship with God.

Week Seven: Don't Seek What Glitters

Light for Living

This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.

Jesus quoting Isaiah to the Pharisees in Matthew 15:8-9 (ESV)

There's something broken in the human heart that draws us to things like success, fame, money and popularity. The history of mankind is marked by stories of tragedy that result when people seek what glitters. Whole nations have been destroyed by leaders who seek power and bring defeat on themselves and their own people. Many tragedies, however, involve the destruction of families or relationships: parents who pursue success over the needs of their children; husbands and wives who look for self-fulfillment rather than self-sacrifice in marriage; pastors who've built their own kingdoms rather than God's. This week we read a sad story that can be traced back to one man's desire for what glitters.

Background

At this point we begin the last of the three sections of the book of Judges. We've read the double introduction (Judges 1:1-3:6) and the judges' stories (Judges 3:7-16:31). The rest of the book shifts to stories of religious anarchy and moral chaos. They aren't chronological, so they actually happen before Samson's story. Clues suggest that they occurred within a few years after Joshua's death. Some call this a double conclusion as it balances the double introduction.

God can use the darkest and saddest chronicles of history in order to teach us about himself and alert us to danger. The Old Testament has great profit for the church:

Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:11-13, NASB).

Applying the scriptures helps avoid God's discipline (Hebrews 12:2-11), so let's look within ourselves initially and at the church secondly. These aren't lessons for non-Christians or the nation; they're about believers being the people we're supposed to be. Just as God's people embraced the darkness in Judges, we can also be guilty.

Four times in the last section we read this phrase: “In those days there was no king in Israel” (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25, ESV). In two of these instances the author adds this note: “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25, ESV). We’ve just read that Samson did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 14:3), and now we’ll see the same attitude in the larger population.

Part One Study

The first conclusion is a story in three parts, like episodes in a series. Today we’ll look at Episode One.

Recognizing the disobedience to God’s will and commands involved in this story requires knowledge of some Old Testament laws, so don’t skip the cross-references in your reading.

The main character of the first episode is Micah, “*a shortened form of Mikayabu, meaning ‘who is like Yahweh?’ This is ironic since he is so absent from the story.*”³⁷

Read Judges 17:1-6, and note the word LORD in all caps, which indicates God’s personal name *Yahweh*. Journal as you consider these questions and cross-references:

- What do you learn about the character of Micah and his mother from this story? (Read Exodus 20:1-5, 15; 28:1-14; Numbers 30:9; Deuteronomy 12:1-7, 13-14, 26-28.)
- How does Romans 1:19-25 help explain why God is so opposed to idols, even if those images are dedicated to worshipping him? What does this show about God?
- What is God saying to you about areas where you excuse your conduct or ignore God’s Word, essentially doing what’s right in your own eyes?



How do this week’s Light for Living verses on p. 43 connect to this story?

Part Two Study

Micah imitated the religious observances given to the Jews by God: a temple, priests who wore ephods, and ways of worship. Micah believed that he could worship Yahweh as he pleased.

Now let’s look at Episode Two of the story.

Read Judges 17:7-13, again paying attention to where God is referred to by name as the God of Israel. Write down your insights as you think about these questions:

- Compare the story the Levite told Micah with God’s instructions for the Levites in Joshua 21:1-3. What insights do you have into the Levite’s character from Judges 17? (FYI: We see in Numbers 3:1-13 that the tribe of Levi was ordained for God’s service, but only the descendants of Aaron, also Levites, were designated as priests.)

³⁷ Younger, 336.

- How is Micah’s view of God distorted?
- What glittery things draw you? Where are you seeking things such as success, approval, comfort, safety, love or happiness? What is God saying to you from this story?



Read Hebrews 10:23-25, and write down your insights as to why God commands us to worship with the church in community.

Part Three Study

Episode Three gives us clues that this entire story occurred early in the Judges’ Era (Judges 18:1). Joshua had allotted the tribe of Dan land near the Mediterranean, but the Amorites forced them to stay in the hill country (Judges 1:34). In our first lesson we learned that Israel’s failure to obey God’s instructions to rid the land of its inhabitants brought on idolatry and the cycles.

As you read this part of the story, consider the ripple effects of one man’s sinful actions—Micah.

Read Judges 18:1-31.

FYI: There’s debate as to whether recognizing a voice (v.3) means identifying an accent from a different area or being acquainted with a particular person.³⁸ Also, Laish is described as land outside the allotments God made and not listed in the areas that God commanded to be cleared of their inhabitants.³⁹

Journal your thoughts on these questions and the one below the quote:

- What does this story add to what you know about Micah’s character? What does it tell you about the Danites?
- What were the long-term effects of Micah’s false worship both to himself and to others?

The story’s big surprise is the identity of the Levite, who is unnamed until the end of the story. The term “son of Gershom” in Judges 18:30 may mean descendant, allowing the story to be a little later in the time of the Judges, but it may also be that he was Moses’s grandson, which would date it early in the Era of the Judges.⁴⁰

“James 1:27 states that pure religion in God’s sight has two basic components: concern for the weak and vulnerable (this is, an ethical dimension that makes the best interests of others a priority) and spiritual purity (defined as keeping oneself unstained by the pagan world and its standards). Judges 17-18 depicts the antithesis of pure religion.”⁴¹

³⁸ Chisholm, 455.

³⁹ Ibid., 459-460.

⁴⁰ “This Levite is a descendant of Gershom, the son of Moses (Ex. 2:22; 6:18-20), which means that he is a member of the Kohathite clan of the Levites . . . Thus, this Levite should not have been living in Bethlehem in Judah.” Younger, Jr., 339.

⁴¹ Chisholm, 463.

- What insights do you have into this story in light of the quote on the previous page? What is God saying about your life?



False worship and false teaching is a danger in our churches too. What do you learn about identifying false teachers and their teaching from these verses, and how do those qualities relate to idolatry? Matthew 7:15-23; Acts 20:28-31 (Paul to the elders of the Ephesian church); Galatians 1:6-10; Colossians 2:8; 2 Timothy 2:15-19; 2 Pet. 2:1-2; 1 John 4:1-3.

Our idols not only affect our own lives, but we also spread them through our influence with our families, friends, communities and churches. Although it's hard and uncomfortable, we each need to uncover and root out our idols before we infect others. Beware of what glitters lest it draw you and those you love away from true worship of the one and only God.

Susan's Story

I grew up in a Christian home and in a very strong church that taught the Bible. I participated in the youth group, the Wednesday night activities, and the youth choir tours. I was there virtually every time the door was open. I loved my church, my friends, and the strong Bible teaching and music. I worked at a Christian camp after I graduated from high school. And I was very excited to be going to a Christian university after having spent 12 years in public school. I was sure that this would enhance my walk with the Lord. I would finally be able to relax and enjoy school with other believers.

When I got to college, I immediately felt accepted and successful and I began to acquire recognition and honors. I gradually began to substitute this for a growing relationship with the Lord. I still went to church but the Word wasn't being taught. I prayed every day, but they were short prayers of thankfulness or prayers for help or prayers of desperation. I became a double-minded person (James 1), thinking that I could worship and serve God and do my own thing at the same time. I substituted human logic for divine revelation and I lost all discernment. I used my own reasoning to sort out situations and I enjoyed the passing pleasures of sin. When I reached the pinnacle of the achievement track I was on, I felt totally empty inside and was truly miserable. I knew that I should be happy. I had achieved the goals that I had set, but, I had drifted away from the truth and the rest of my life had lost its meaning.

Thankfully, God prevented me from making some disastrous decisions at this time in my life. (Most notably, he prevented me from marrying the wrong person by having that person decide it was not right.) Eventually, through God's painful, loving discipline I began to think through some things and saw that he would not let me go my own way.

A friend invited me to a conference taught by the top speakers at Campus Crusade for Christ. I went night after night and I realized what I had left. These Bible teachers were exciting and challenging and I remembered that God's Word was "alive and powerful and sharper than a two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). I was challenged to confess sin and to be filled with the Holy Spirit. It was all coming back to me. I had left my "first love" (Revelation 2:4-5). I had drifted off on my own but God called me back to himself. How grateful I am today that he would not let me go my own way. His Word is truth, and I cannot make up my own way to serve him or to worship him. I have to do it his way.

I had avoided Bible studies when I was having so much "fun" in college because I knew I would feel convicted. I prayed that God would give me a desire to study his Word, and he has! The joy, peace, purpose, and fulfillment that I have now are the result of his working in and through my life. He has filled the emptiness that I tried to fill with position and relationships with himself. The plans I had for my life pale in comparison with what God planned. He has given me his best for me and I am still in the process of learning to trust him fully and not "lean on my own understanding" (Proverbs 3).

Week Eight: Live Without Compromise

Light for Living

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
And do not rely on your own understanding.
Acknowledge him in all your ways,
And he will make your paths straight.*

Proverbs 3:5-6

Are you aware of a situation where one poor decision leads to another and another? Maybe you've found yourself unexpectedly living with consequences from a series of bad choices or ethical compromises. That's the kind of story that we find at the end of the book of Judges. Unwise choices, accommodation of evil and revenge result in civil war and the loss of thousands of lives. Such things happen when everyone does what is "right in his own eyes," the repeated refrain that describes this period of spiritual and moral failure.

This second part of the double conclusion to Judges involves sexual abuse as well as a lack of concern and accommodation of its evil by Israelite men. This can be a very difficult reading, especially if you've been abused and unprotected by those who should have supported you. If you have, you may choose to skip Part One which involves the details. If you haven't experienced abuse, please pray for those in your group who have. **Leaders**, I'm sure you're already aware that statistics reveal that there will be women in your group who have been abused. Discussing the details of the abuse you'll read about isn't necessary to understand and apply the larger story, so carefully plan your questions beforehand.

Background

Likely within a few decades after Joshua's death,⁴² a series of disturbing events occurred that start with the story of a Levite (not the one from last week's story). This Levite, a man of the tribe set apart for God's service, had accepted the world's way of living instead of choosing God's best.

"Having concubines was an accepted part of Israelite society although this is not what God intended (Gen. 2:24). A concubine had most of the duties but only some of the privileges of a wife. Although she was legally attached to one man, she and her children usually did not have the inheritance rights of the legal wife and legitimate children. Her primary purpose was giving

⁴² Block, 517. This conclusion is based on the biblical note that Phinehas the priest is the grandson of Aaron, the brother of Moses (Judges 20:28).

the man sexual pleasure, bearing additional children, and contributing more help to the household or estate.”⁴³

As you read the entire story, note the contrasts between the two occasions when the Levite received hospitality. The cultural norm of the day required the host to protect his guests (apparently male guests only). God calls his people to give hospitality (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9) but, of course, not at the expense of accommodating evil. Sadly this tragic story was precipitated in part by, first, hospitality’s absence, and, second, its cultural norms being valued over a concern for women.

Part One Study

Read Judges 19, journaling your thoughts as you read these questions:

- Describe the character of the Levite,⁴⁴ his concubine,⁴⁵ his father-in-law and the Ephraimite from their words and actions in the story.
- What motivations, compromises and guilt would you assign to each individual and group (don’t forget the other townspeople we don’t see) involved in this story?

“ . . . the people of Gibeah abuse in general the Levite and his party passively (by refusing basic hospitality) before the rapists abuse them actively” (19:15,22).⁴⁶

- What is God saying to you about your passive or active participation in evil by doing what seems to be right through ethical compromise in your business, family, nation or even church? Consider how your actions and words or your inaction and silence may be accommodating evil.



Read Genesis 19 in light of this story. Consider who is involved and the apparent norms they valued. Write down your thoughts from the contrasts and comparisons.

Unfortunately many of us are infected with the self-interest cancer. Just like the host in Judges 19 . . . we are programmed by our societal principles to function along the axis of expedience. When confronted with a moral dilemma, too often we function on what is expedient, on what we have been culturally conditioned to do. Thus, we don’t even see these victims, even though they are all around us. At the work place, school, supermarket, and church, they are there. But until we remove the self-interest cancer that diminishes our vision, we won’t see them. We won’t help them. But God’s Word demands much higher standards of ethics and morality.⁴⁷

⁴³ Note in *Life Application Study Bible*, 420.

⁴⁴ It is unclear as to whether the concubine was killed by her rapists or the Levite when he cut her up.

⁴⁵ Note on Judges 19:2 in NET Bible concerning their translation of the word “angry” regarding the concubine: “Or ‘was unfaithful to him.’ Many have understood the Hebrew verb וַתִּזְנֶה (*vattizneh*) as being from זָנָה (*zanah*, ‘to be a prostitute’), but it may be derived from a root meaning ‘to be angry; to hate.’”

⁴⁶ Younger, 355.

⁴⁷ Younger, 366.

Part Two Study

Read Judges 20.

The sins of rape, murder and accommodating evil led to injustice when the tribe of Benjamin refused to turn the guilty men over for punishment. Dr. Chisholm comments: “. . . *blood ties were apparently more important to Benjamin than justice.*”⁴⁸

Write down your insights into these questions:

- Compare the story itself in Judges 19 with the Levite’s account of it in 20:4-7. What seems to be his motivation for assembling the entire nation together?
- How did this war differ from the wars led by previous judges?
- Consider each action of Israel in connection with God’s direction. Journal your thoughts.
- Answer at least one of these questions: What do God’s actions toward the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 20:28, 35) say to the church when it protects the guilty instead of their victims? How does this story apply to division within the church (local and universal) based on political “blood ties” instead of concern for justice, unity and God’s kingdom work?



Read John 17, often called Jesus’s High Priestly Prayer. Add any additional thoughts it gives you about any current “civil wars” within the larger church.

Part Three Study

After the other tribes of Israel attacked almost 27,000 Benjamite warriors and destroyed their tribe, animals and cities, only 600 men survived by escaping and hiding in the wilderness.

*This book and the history of the nation that follows serve as eternal testimony to the grim reality that God’s people are often their own worst enemy. It is not the enemies outside who threaten the soul but the Canaanite within.*⁴⁹

Read Judges 21, and comment in light of these questions:

- How did doing what was right in their own eyes backfire in this story? What wrongs had seemed right to them and who did they blame?
- How do we exorcise the Canaanite within us—both individually and as the church of the Living God?



Once again in the book of Judges God’s people mistreat women. Read Genesis 1:26-28, Romans 12:3-8 and Galatians 3:27-29 to be encouraged with the truths that women are equal image-bearers to men and workers in his kingdom. All of us are to love God with all that we

⁴⁸ Chisholm, 501.

⁴⁹ Block, 585.

are and our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:28-34), even if the culture or the church fails to adequately value all who are made in God's image. Write down your thoughts.

We've spent eight weeks in God's Word reading stories that serve as warnings about the results of failing to see clearly through the darkness that lives within us and among God's people. Before we complete our study, let's review what God has taught and shown us.

Review the cycle on p. 58 and as much of your journal as time permits. Be prepared to share your answer to ONE of these questions with your small group:

- What message stands out to you as you think through these stories?
- What have you understood more clearly about God through these stories?
- What have you changed in your life or attitudes as you have applied the scriptures week after week?

Judges reveals how easily we substitute our own thinking for God's when we don't stay in Scripture. God's own people incorporated idolatry into their worship and adopted cultural norms, all the while believing that they were right and God was fine with it. Although God raised up judges to deliver them, overall the judges proved to be less than heroic in character. Despite the problems with Israel and the flaws of the judges, God still moved as the true hero in every story, using these sinful people along the way as shadows of the Savior who would come from heaven to live among us. By his death he would achieve the ultimate victory over sin that humankind is unable to overcome alone. And someday he will usher in a perfect world free of oppression and sin that lasts forever.

The book of Judges may feel depressing because of the final two stories, but let's focus on its overall message of a powerful and merciful God who loves us despite our sins. Because of that love, he disciplines us to turn us from idolatry and accommodating evil to faith in him alone.

We are surprised by a God who finds ways of working in, with, and under very compromising situations in which people have placed themselves in order to bring about good. In the midst of unfaithfulness, the faithfulness of God is revealed, a God who never breaks covenant.⁵⁰

Our final story in this study is from a former college tennis coach's wife who shares her husband's account of being presented with a not-so-subtle "win at all costs or be fired" message. Compromising would have allowed him to stay and continue impacting his players for Christ. After all, doesn't a godly end justify the means?

⁵⁰ Terence Fretheim, *Deuteronomic History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 98.

Betty's Story

When my husband Dave was a college tennis coach, he was called into the office of the president one day. He had been the coach for over six years, and his team had been ranked in the Top Twenty of NCAA Division I. But this particular year several players opted to leave school in the middle of the year to join the pro tennis circuit. That left him with a greatly weakened team that had to play a very strong schedule. Although they had less successful results than in previous seasons, that year was Dave's personal best because of the many meaningful spiritual discussions he had with team members.

On his arrival in the president's office, Dave was shocked when the president said, "Well, Coach, it looks like that we may have to re-assign you. It appears that you're just not getting the job done with the tennis program."

Dave responded that he didn't realize that one losing season out of six—and the previous ones being ranked in the Top Twenty—was “unsuccessful.” He explained the circumstances, but the president said, "You don't seem to be able to get the job done."

Dave stated that if it meant breaking the recruiting rules or violating any NCAA policies, then the president was right—he was not the man for the job. Dave stated that he believed that a coach didn't have to cheat or break rules to have a winning program.

The president responded, "Well, you go talk to your people and I'll talk to mine. But I think that we will be re-assigning you. Come back and see me next week after I meet with the Board of Regents."

Dave showed up at home unexpectedly and shared what had just happened. He said, "The only people that we can talk to are our Christian friends who will join us in prayer." As we shared with them later and prayed, God gave us complete peace.

Three days later, Dave got a call from the Sports Information Director saying, "Dave, we've got it! We've got just what you need to convince the president that you are the man." It had just come over the wire that Dave had been selected as the Host/Director for the next NCAA National Tennis Championships. The miracle of this is that Dave hadn't even applied for the position and was totally taken by surprise.

The very next day, the top Canadian tennis player he had been recruiting sent his letter of acceptance for the fall. Both stories hit the area newspapers and TV stations over the weekend while we were talking to our people.

At the Board of Regents meeting that Monday night, there was much affirmation of my husband being "the man." Two days later the president met with him, and his line was totally different: "Now,

just what can we do for you? Courts need resurfacing? Got it! Need a graduate assistant? Got it! Anything else?"

We truly saw God turn the heart of the president (Proverbs 21:1) and honor Dave's commitment to obey God (I Samuel 2:30b).

Appendix

Additional Information about Judges

Dates of the judges

- The era that falls between the period of conquest from the death of Joshua (1:1), often dated from about 1390 B.C. to the coronation of Saul around 1050 B.C. This time frame involves overlapping dates for some of the judges who lived in different areas of the land, so the initial date is uncertain.
- The judges include Eli and Samuel whose stories are recorded in 1 Samuel.
- This era lasted approximately 1/3 of the entire Old Testament history of Israel.¹⁹

Authorship

The author is unnamed in the book but is likely an editor of previously written materials from various sources. Traditionally the Jewish rabbis leaned toward Samuel as the possible writer.

Three sections of the book

- Double introduction (1:1-2:5 and 2:6-3:6).
- Cycles section (3:7-16:31). This section includes 6 cycles of apostasy-punishment-cry of pain-deliverance.
- Double conclusion (17:1-18:31 and 19:1-21:25).

Theme of the book

Seven times this idea is repeated: “The descendants of Israel did evil in the eyes of the LORD” (2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).

A good summary of Judges is found twice in the book: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25, ESV).

Four times in the last five chapters this is repeated: “There was no king in Israel” (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25, NASB). These statements describe the leadership problem, not the overall theme.

The true hero in the book is God and God alone, not the judges.

¹⁹ Wood, 2.

Purposes of the book

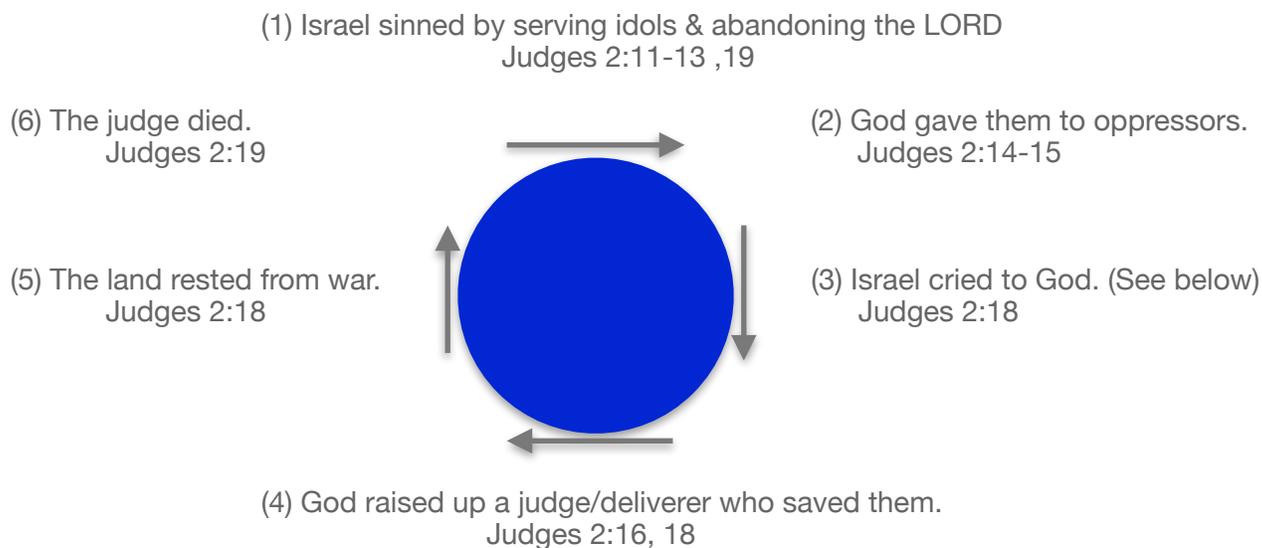
Dr. Robert Chisholm finds three purposes for the book of Judges:⁵¹

- To defend God’s reputation which was at risk because of the failure of the Israelites.
- To warn against assimilation.
- To show the need for godly leadership.

What was a judge?

Hebrew word “judge”: “sā pāt: broader than our term judge, meaning to govern, administer, exercise leadership.”²⁰ The position may best be understood as a tribal leader.²¹ To clarify it in your mind, think deliverer rather than legal functionary, although some, like Deborah, served as both warrior and applier of the law.

Judges Cycle



NOTE of (3): The term “cried to God” doesn’t necessarily include repentance; however, Samuel, the final judge, provides a historical overview of this period of history in 1 Samuel 12:6-13 (ESV) where he describes repentance as normative of the cycles: “And they cried out to the LORD and said, ‘We have sinned, because we have forsaken the LORD and have served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. But now deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, that we may serve you.’”

⁵¹ Chisholm Jr., 58-62.

²⁰ Block, 23.

²¹ Younger, Jr., 21-22.

Local Gods

Who were these idolatrous gods mentioned in Judges? Dr. Block provides help:

El . . . is familiar from authentic Hebrew traditions; but in Canaanite mythology *El* was the head of the pantheon, the father of the gods and creator of the world. In comparison with *Baal*, *El* appeared as a tired old deity. *Baal*, the storm god, appears to have been the most popular divinity among the Canaanites, being recognized as the power behind the life-giving rain that fertilizes the ground and causes vegetation to grow.⁵²

Judges alludes to more than one goddess with similarly spelled names; the spelling below is from the NET Bible:

- “Ashtaroth is the plural form of Ashtoreth (Gk. Astarte) a goddess of fertility, love, and war who was closely associated with Baal (Judges 10:6; 1 Sam. 7:4; 12:10). Canaanite texts seldom mention Ashtoreth, but she appears in Mesopotamian texts by the name ‘Ishtar’ and in Egyptian representations of Canaanite religion.”⁵³
- Asherah (plural Asheroth) is mentioned in Judges 3:7 and 6:25-26. “Asherah was a popular Canaanite goddess, a consort of El, the head of the Canaanite pantheon, who may have been displaced at some point by Baal.”⁵⁴

Using plural forms of a deity’s name “shows that each was worshiped in many locales, and their local manifestations took on the character of independent gods. . . .”⁵⁵

K. Lawson Younger, Jr. gives us some vital insight into idolatry:

The presence of the deity in the statue was then maintained magically through offerings and the proper care of the statue. If improper attention was given to the cult image, the deity could withdraw of its own free will. . . . In the production of the idol, in the idol’s embodiment by the deity, and in the maintenance of deity’s indwelling of the idol, there was a significant degree of control exercised by the human manufactures and worshipers through magical means. The second commandment (Exodus 20:4-6) addresses especially the issue of the cult image since this is *a human manipulative attempt* that inverts the created order. Consequently, any human attempt to manipulate God, whether in thought, intent, or action, is a serious breach of the second commandment.⁵⁶

⁵² Block, 41-42.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Note on Judges 3:7 in ESV Study Bible.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Younger, Jr., 47.

List of the judges

The category for a judge's listings depends solely on the amount of space given to the story.

The primary or major judges.

Recorded in Judges

- Othniel
- Ehud
- Deborah
- Gideon
- Jephthah
- Samson

Recorded in 1 Samuel

- Eli
- Samuel

The secondary or minor judges

- Shamgar
- Tola
- Jair
- Ibzan
- Elon
- Abdon

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Journaling 101

What does it mean to journal?

It's NOT drawing and coloring. (I call that drawing and coloring.) Journaling is recording your thoughts. That's it. Nothing special or difficult. When we journal, we simply write down how we interacted with God's Word. We pen our thoughts and impressions as we read and ask God for insights. (See p. 65 for a sample journal entry.)

I learned late to journal. I began because I had a hard time concentrating during what was supposed to be my time with God. Do you relate? Instead of focusing on the verses that I was reading or the prayers that I needed to say, my mind was wandering to my to-do list, my conversation with a friend, a problem I had to handle, or any number of other things. Once I lost focus, it was difficult to get it back.

My goals were worthy, but I was struggling with how to get there.

So I began writing out my prayers. I wrote out word for word what I wanted to pray, as well as the thoughts that came to me while I wrote, believing that it was highly possible that God was guiding those. I began my time with God by reading some scriptures and usually a short devotional, and then I began to write.

Easy journaling.

Why journal?

The term Bible study can be scary. We often think that God's Word is hard to understand, requiring a great deal of intelligence and/or education to navigate, so we stay away from anything other than a favorite verse or two scattered throughout its pages.

We forget that God wants us to know him. We do that through the pages of his Word, his revelation of himself to ordinary people like you and me. Remember this is his story, not the story of people. God is the main character. People are in the story as they interact with him and his work on earth in reconciling them to himself and restoring creation to its perfection.

If we replace time listening and seeking God with a "study" that tells us what to think and believe (true of some but not all studies), we bypass the relationship and knowledge that God gives us directly when we go to his Word instead of to other people for spiritual nourishment.

Imagine sitting down with the author of a book you love rather than reading a book review. That's the opportunity you have with God. He has made himself available to those who seek him through

the Scriptures. But there's a caution here—he doesn't tell us everything because he is so beyond us—incomprehensible. But he does unfold truth, insight, encouragement, challenge, and conviction into our hearts when we seek him. In the end there is a certain amount of mystery that we must learn to live with in knowing God. We are mere humans after all.

Journaling with only general questions to guide you allows your study to be what you make it.

This is your study. Your time. Your relationship with God. Your journal is your own. Use it in your own way that works for you.

How much time do I need to spend journaling?

Is your time scattered and often absent? Read the story once in the morning, maybe to your kids, with your roommate or husband during breakfast, or alone as you enjoy an early cup of coffee before work. Think about it as you drive carpool, eat lunch at work, or make your commute. Write in your journal at lunch or before you head to bed in the evening, noting the insights that occurred to you during the day.

Do you want a deep study? Spend time every day reading and rereading the stories of the week. Ask God for insights and applications. Since each week's study has three sections, spend two days on each section. Read the verses again the second day, and ask God for new insights. Read some of the cross references in the margins of your Bible. With your journal beside you, note all of your thoughts as they come. You may be very surprised at how often your mind goes in a new direction.

Make the schedule your own. Spend little or much time on it. It is your record of how you and God interact as you read his Word.

Do I have to use the questions in the lesson?

Absolutely not. They are merely there to launch your thinking, not to determine the path of your thoughts. The questions are to help, not hinder. If something else is on your mind when you begin journaling, skip them entirely. Listen to God's Spirit as he gives you insight into the scriptures you read.

What if I am stuck and can't think of anything to write?

Here are some general questions that you can use with any passage as you begin to journal:

- What do I like about this story? Why?
- What do I not like about this story? Why?
- What do I learn about God and his purposes in this section of Scripture?

- What do I learn about people in general from the story? In other words, what lessons about people do I learn?
- What is God telling me to do from what he revealed? How and when will I do it?

If you are a seasoned student of the Bible, you may want to look for other stories or verses that relate to what you read and journal about how they connect to each other and to you. Use the cross-references in your Bible to help you.

What kinds of things should I write?

What follows is a journal entry that I wrote from a Bible story that is not part of this study. Just so you don't think this is too hard, you need to know that I added paragraphs so it would be easier for you to read. I don't write in my journal that way. Because I write only for me, not an audience, I normally abbreviate a number of words and phrases that are common in my journal, but I have written them out for you so they make sense.

I also deleted the names of people that I am praying for, but I left the prayer itself so you could see how the story became the basis of my prayer, which included confession and intercession. I don't normally pray through a format like PRAY (praise, repent, ask, and yield), but over a few days of journaling as I read the Word, God leads me to all kinds of prayers. You can journal with that kind of format for your prayers if you prefer.

June 17

Mark 4:35-41

Although I've heard, read, and taught this story many times, it still overwhelms me. God, you are so great and powerful! Why do I doubt that you can handle my small problems when Jesus speaks and immediately the wind and the waves obey? Why do I make you too small to handle problems faced by people I love? Why do I wonder deep in my heart if you care when I'm struggling? I'm just like the disciples, ridiculously asking, "Don't you care?"

I am amazed that as the boat was filling with water and winds were whipping around, Jesus was lying in the boat asleep with his head on a cushion, perfectly at peace. They had to wake him up! That's a deep and restful sleep! You know how storms wake me up pretty quickly.

Jesus pointed to the disciples' fear, suggesting it was caused by lack of faith. Father God, forgive me for making you too small in my imagination, so small that you lack the power to keep me despite the storms that swirl around me. Forgive my fear that comes from lack of

faith. Forgive me for fearing that you won't take care of those whom I love. Forgive me for fearing for my grandchildren's future. Forgive my lack of faith.

You sent your followers straight into the storm, and they learned about your great power. I know your power and protection because of previous storms. Help me remember them when I'm caught up in a new sudden storm.

I lift up my friends and family who are now in storms Give them grace and faith. Make them stronger in faith. Help them persevere and bring you glory. Bring comfort to In the storms' wake, I pray they all know your power and grace in a deeper way. Amen.

You can do it!

Let me simply encourage you—you can do this. It allows God to move in your heart and mind in a way that specific questions may not allow for. Just read the verses, and write down what God brings to your mind. Refer back to the questions in the study, answering those that you want to answer and thinking about the others. Some wonderful insight may come to mind if you do.

I am praying that God will so encourage and speak to you through this format that you will continue to journal, never settling for fill-in-the blank Bible studies. (And I know God uses them in a mighty way sometimes, but consider journaling through the verses instead.)

Tips for Leaders

Browse our BOW videos or listen to the podcasts for small group leaders at <https://beyondordinarywomen.org/leading-small-groups/>.

1. Listen to God

It seems simple, but it can be oh, so difficult, to listen to God as you lead a group. Our fears tell us not to sit in silence. Our hearts suggest that we should give solutions or even verses to fix problems or questions. The clock indicates that we should cut others off as quickly as possible. And I have been there and done them all!

If we as leaders come to the group time doing what feels comfortable, we may miss the fullness of what God wants to do. So pray well before you go. Pray as you lead the group time. Don't speak in response to the comments of others until you are sensitive to the movement of the Spirit as to what to say, if anything.

And what may be even more difficult is to encourage the same kinds of listening skills with the others in the group. Listening to God before answering someone's comments or intervening in what God may want to say to her about her problems is very difficult. I feel that way and likely you do too:) Many in the group will struggle, but we can all improve if you remind yourself and the group each week to pause and listen to God before speaking.

2. Keep Discipleship Goals in Mind

GOAL #1: ENCOURAGE THE GROUP IN PERSONAL STUDY

If you want the group to be in the Word for themselves, start the discussion by letting them share what excited them. Stay away from your own thoughts and listen to them. To involve them, ask very general open questions, such as those in the lesson. Choose questions from the lesson; use some from the list given on p. 69 (under #3 Ask Open Questions), or write your own questions.

Because the group will journal as they study, see which way the discussion goes before inserting your own direction to the lesson. That said, don't let it linger on speculation about things the Bible doesn't reveal. It's okay for a few minutes, but refocus the conversation to what God has made clear, not what he chose not to tell us.

GOAL #2: SET DISCIPLESHIP GOALS FOR EACH LESSON

What do you want to accomplish in your discussion? If you randomly ask questions, you may enjoy a good discussion, but it may not move the group closer to Jesus. Your goal should not be simply getting people to talk but to encourage spiritual growth in the group.

See yourself as the leader, not a teacher or a facilitator. What is your goal? What do you want the group to leave with that will help them grow as believers? It could be a deeper faith through a better understanding of who God is and how he works. It could be a principle that helps them live out genuine faith in a culture that is looking for what is real.

For most lessons, consider these questions as you review the lesson:

- What do those in your group need to know about God from this story?
- What does the story reveal about real faith?
- How does the story and/or verses fit with the big story gospel of Paradise, Ruin, Reconciliation, and Consummation?
- What principles from the story need to be obeyed? What application do you want them to prayerfully consider—a way of believing about God that intersects with real life or types of actions to take?

Wait to discuss these areas by providing opportunity for the group to bring up the topic before you simply move toward your goals. Make sure you listen first. Many of the questions you want to ask will come up more naturally from within the group. If no one brings it up, then do so with a question to the group.

You don't necessarily have to write your own questions. Use those within the lesson to launch into an area you want to cover. The lesson questions are open-ended and broad. You can have a great discussion using them. If you listen well, you can follow up with a question that clarifies or expands on their comments to move them further toward your goals.

If you want to write a few questions to summarize the material covered rather than going through those in the lesson, write open questions from the material they studied and read. Or use some of the questions in the next section.

3. Ask open questions

You may be used to reading a set of questions to the group and having them read back their answers. I have written many Bible studies that have that type of structure. It's easy for the leader to follow and makes it simple for the group to provide answers.

Instead, this study is based on journaling, which isn't comprised of answers to a number of very specific questions but rather uses open questions, meaning not yes/no or narrow answers. (See BOW's free downloadable resource at <http://beyondordinarywomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Asking-Open-Questions.pdf>.)

When the lesson is comprised of one long story or section, it will likely work best to let the group know that they can talk about any part of the lesson instead of a specific section of the story. Your questions should allow a response on anything they want to discuss from the lesson. It's all right if no one brings up a certain section of the story at all.

Allow the Holy Spirit to use the discussion to take the group where he wants it to go, but also keep in mind your goals and move them into those topics if they don't go there themselves.

Here are examples of open questions that you might use:

- What in the story was most significant to you and why?
- How did God surprise you through the story?
- How did you relate to any of the people in the story and why?
- What feelings did you have about the judge?
- How did God reveal himself to you through your reading?
- How do you see the story intersect with God's big gospel story of Paradise, Ruin, Reconciliation, & Consummation? (If you aren't familiar with the overall big story of the Bible, work through [The ONE Story](https://beyondordinarywomen.org/the-one-story/) at <https://beyondordinarywomen.org/the-one-story/> which is BOW's study on the meta-narrative that pulls the entire Bible together.)
- What excites you about this story?
- Was there anything in this story that seemed new to you?
- What confused you about this story?
- What did God say to you this week about yourself?
- What is God asking you to do in response to this week's study?

These questions are all very general and open. As you work toward your goals, your questions may be more specific. What often happens, however, is that some of the questions you have prepared will be answered before you ask them. So be aware enough to skip as needed.

A quiet group or a group that is new to one another may not talk quite as readily. Allow them a time of silence to consider their answers before rewording it or sharing your own answer. The Holy Spirit will lead you.

We love your questions or feedback. Contact me at kay@beyondordinarywomen.org. For additional help go to beyondordinarywomen.org at <http://beyondordinarywomen.org/leading-small-groups/> and watch our free short 5-10 minute training videos or podcasts for small group leaders.

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