



UNLIKELY HEROES

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES

WRITTEN BY DR. STEVE JONES

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

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LESSON 1 | OTHNIEL: AN UNKNOWN HERO

JUDGES 3: 7-12

One of the most easily misunderstood doctrines of Christianity is “The Wrath of God.” Just saying the phrase makes people cringe. If there is any attribute of God that no one wants to talk about, it is His Wrath. Some people reject it outright or else relegate it to the Old Testament. They say things like: “the Old Testament is all about God’s wrath and judgement; the New Testament is all about his grace and love.” This idea actually led to one of the first great heresies of the early Christian period called Marcionism. It went so far as to say that the God of the Old Testament, who was always punishing and judging people, was actually the Satan of the New Testament. Marcion couldn’t see continuity between the two Gods. He thought the God of the New Testament was a god of love and forgiveness. Marcion misunderstood both the judgement and the grace of God.

God judges sin. That doesn’t change because what leads to life and death doesn’t change. The judgement that God pours out on sin, he continues to do so in the New Testament as well. The reason is that God is both loving and righteous. God cannot overlook our sin. The New Testament doesn’t show a new side of God. He shows us his grand solution to the problem of sin: the cross and the empty tomb. This allowed God to show His hatred for sin and His love for humanity.

God in the Old Testament expresses His uncompromising views toward sin, and at the same time demonstrates His desire for all people to repent of their sin, return to Him, and find the life that can only be found in His presence. He also demonstrates his love by remaining faithful to his people even when they rebel from him in sin. He doesn’t show his faithfulness to sin; he shows it to his people in spite of their sin.

God is righteous, which means he hates and judges sin. God is also faithful to us, which means he doesn’t forsake us even when we forsake him. That is the truest meaning of the cross. It allows him to demonstrate once and for all both his faithfulness to us as well his righteousness, which condemns sin.

One book where these two attributes are on display is the book of Judges. Through the book the people continue to fall back into sin. God’s response is predictable. He never compromises regarding sin. He always judges it. He also never tires in restoring His people when they return to him in repentance. That is what this study is about. We are going to look closely at the book of Judges. As we do so, hopefully we will realize how perfectly righteous God is and how perfectly faithful to us he is as well.

But first, a brief introduction to the book of Judges is in order.

WHERE JUDGES FITS IN THE BIBLE

Judges is a book found in the Old Testament. It is classified as one of the History Books. Here is where to find it in the roadmap of the bible:

The Bible is broken into 2 groups: Old and New Testament

- Old Testament is written primarily in Hebrew and is about God's choice of the people of Israel
- New Testament is written in Greek and is about Jesus and the Church
- Judges is in the Old Testament

Old Testament is broken down into 4 groups:

Law, History, Writings, Prophets:

- One of the biggest obstacles to reading and navigating the Old Testament is not understanding this 4-fold division. So, take out your bible, open to the Table of Contents and label the Old Testament books in these groups.
- **Law** – (Also Called the Torah, Pentateuch, and the 5 Books of Moses) Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
- **History** – Joshua through Esther. These books tell the story of the formation, division, collapse, exile, and restoration of the nation of Israel. (See below OT history for more on this.)
- **Writing** – Job through Song of Songs. These books are a collection of wisdom literature (Proverbs), Worship Songs (Psalms), Philosophy (Job, Ecclesiastes), and Love Poetry (Song of Songs)
- **Prophets** – The rest of the OT contains the writings of the prophets. They are divided into two Groups: Major and Minor Prophets. This had nothing to do with the importance of each work. It has mainly to do with length. The Major Prophets wrote longer works.
 - **Major Prophets** – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel (We include Lamentations, which was written by Jeremiah, in the list of the Major Prophets, though in the Hebrew Bible it is listed in the writings with Proverbs, Psalms, etc.)
 - **Minor Prophets** – Hosea through Malachi

WHERE JUDGES FITS IN BIBLE HISTORY

Judges is a story of the Conquest, which occurs after the Exodus. Judges is a transitional book and period in Old Testament History. Judges follows the book of Joshua, where the people of Israel enter and take possession of the Promised Land. Judges precedes the period of the kings, which is told starting in 1 Samuel. The period of the judges did not end until Saul becomes king in 1 Samuel 12. Therefore, the period of the Judges includes not just the book that bears its name, but also 1 Samuel 1–12 and the book of Ruth, which takes place during this time.

Old Testament History in a nutshell – In order to understand any book of the OT, you need to have a basic understanding of where it fits in the scope of OT history. By placing it in context, you will be able to have a greater appreciation for what is going on.

- **Patriarchs** – the Story of God calling Abraham and working in the lives of his children. Contained in the Book of Genesis.
- **Slavery/Exodus** – The Story of how God brought Israel out of Egypt, led them through the wilderness and to the Promised Land. Contained in Exodus-Deuteronomy.
- **Conquest** – The story of how the people of Israel entered the Promised land, conquered the other people living there, and established an early system of rule. Contained in Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel.
- **United Kingdom** – In 1 Samuel, Israel demands a king. So, God gives them Saul. The 12 tribes of Israel are only united as one nation for the reigns of 3 kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. Contained in 1 Samuel.
- **Divided Kingdom** – After the excesses of Solomon, the 10 northern tribes of Israel rebelled, broke away, and started their own nation. From this point on, the term Israel refers to the 10 northern tribes; Judah refers to the nation composed of the 2 remaining tribes: Judah and Benjamin.
- **Exile/Return** – Both nations became wicked and were judged by God. Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC and were absorbed into their empire. They reappear at the Samaritans in the New Testament. The nation of Judah lasted until around 600 BC when it was also conquered, this time by the Babylonians, who transported many of them to Babylon (modern day Iraq) where they remained in Exile for about 70 years before being allowed to return and rebuilt the city and the temple.
- **For more, watch the intro to this sermon on Ruth (starting at about the 4:00 mark):**
<https://vimeo.com/136524262>

WHO WROTE JUDGES?

The book of Judges does not list an author. But there are clues that the book was composed during the early period of Israel's united monarchy. The events in Judges are viewed from the perspective of a time when Israel possessed a united, stable government. Judges 21:25 says, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The idea behind this passage is that it is different than in the author's own day. Judges 1:21 also says, "But the sons of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem; so the Jebusites have lived with the sons of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day." This shows us that it was written before David's capture of Jerusalem because the Jebusites were living there "to this day."

BASIC OUTLINE OF JUDGES

The book itself seems to be a compilation of stories that have been edited and organized. The book itself divides into three sections:

Part 1: Settlement in Canaan (Judges 1:1–2:5) This section probably comes from a separate source but was introduced by the original editor to provide the background for the main part of his book. Note that the death of Joshua is listed in Judges 1:1, then in Judges 2:6 Joshua is still alive and has his death recounted again in Judges 2:8.

Part 2: Israel's Judges (Judges 2:6-16:31) This is the core of the book which tells the stories of 12 individuals that were raised up to be judges in Israel.

Part 3: 2 Historical Appendices (Judges 17:1–21:25) The final section of the book of Judges contains two stories that serve as appendices. They don't tell us about any more judges. Rather, they reveal the moral and spiritual decay of the time. They underscore Israel's failure to keep the law on their own and their need for the leadership and guidance of a king. Though 1 Samuel describes the call for a king as a failure, it was necessary because the people had shown they couldn't rule themselves on their own.

THE BASIC PATTERN OF JUDGES (3:7-12)

Some of the stories of the Judges are long, others are short. But they are all organized around a basic pattern. The pattern is easiest to see in the brief story of the first judge: Othniel

1. Israel Sins (v7) – Most of the stories of the Judges start with Israel's sin. We sometimes miss it because of headings in many of our Bibles are placed in the spot where God raises up the judge. But that is not where the story starts. Go back a few verses and see that the reason God raises up a judge begins in the sin that the Israelites had fallen into. Israel turned her back on God and started serving the two primary alternatives in the area: Baal and Asheroth. Baal was the son of El in the Canaanite pantheon of Gods. He was the god of the storm and the rains and therefore the controller of vegetation. Ashtarothe is a female deity and the consort of Baal. Also known as Astarte and Ishtar, she was a goddess of war and fertility.

2. God Judges (v8) – Verse 8 says that God's anger burned against Israel. He is angry because the people have turned their backs on him. He is angry because they are giving other deities the credit for his work. His is angry that they are running to other Gods instead of Him. God's anger is an attribute of his jealous love. Jealous doesn't mean exactly the same thing as we think of when we say jealous spouse. The better translation is probably "zealous" (just change the j to a z. Both words come from the same root). God is eager for his people to be who He created them to be. He refuses to let them remain in sin. So, God judges them. He hands them over into the hands of the king of Mesopotamia, Cushan-rishathaim.

3. Israel Repents (v9a) – But God’s judgement is always rooted in his desire for us to repent. It might not seem like it, but God making his people serve Cushan-rishathaim is the beginning of their salvation. It makes them experience the tangible effects of their sin, and it encourages them to forsake their sin and return to God. The people eventually turn back to God and cry out to Him for deliverance.

4. God Raises up a Judge (v9b) – What is amazing about this is that God doesn’t pout or punish Israel for their continual backsliding into sin. Verse 9 says, “When the sons of Israel cried out, the Lord raised up a deliverer.” It shows us that God is eager to welcome us back. He hears our cries to him and acts to deliver us. In this case, he raises up Othniel, whom it turns out is nephew of Caleb, Joshua’s right hand man.

5. The Judges Delivers Israel (v10) – We think of judge as a person in a courtroom who wears a robe, swings a gavel and passes judgement on court cases. Though that may have been one of their functions after their military victory, the main role of the judges was to be deliverers of the people from their enemies. They were vessels of God’s salvation and deliverance. They were divinely empowered leaders but did not become hereditary rulers.

6. Once the Judge dies, Israel falls back into sin (v11-12) – The last part of every story is how the cycle repeats itself. After every period of deliverance, the land experiences rest and peace. But after the judge dies, the people fall back into sin.

APPLICATION

This pattern of the book of Judges reveals some important truths about Us and about God.

1. **God is just** – God never rewards sin and never lowers his standards. He can’t lower his standards because what brings life doesn’t change.

2. **God is faithful** – God never tires in showing us forgiveness and offering us restoration. He longs for us to trust Him and experience the rest that can only be found in his presence.

3. **We need a savior** – The book of Judges is another dimension of the Biblical narrative that reveals that when left to ourselves, we always fall into sin and death. We need someone to do it for us. We need someone to save us.

4. **God uses unlikely people** – Nothing is said of Othniel’s qualifications. He isn’t related to Joshua. He is barely related to Caleb. He is just the guy God wanted to use in that circumstance. What qualified Othniel for the job is found in verse 10: “The spirit of the Lord came upon him.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where is Judges found in the Bible? Where does Judges fit in the History of the Bible?
2. What is the biblical definition of a judge?
3. What is the basic pattern of the stories in the book of Judges?
4. What does this pattern reveal about God's nature?
5. What does this pattern reveal about our nature?

LESSON 2 | EHUD: A LEFT-HANDED HERO

JUDGES 3:12-30

Left-handed people are a mysterious and misunderstood bunch. If you are left-handed, chances are you have been treated different because of this trait: either treated as special, or different, or difficult. Left-handers somehow always end up standing out, either because of the pencil smudges on the edge of their writing hand, the way in which they are always bumping elbows with us at the dinner table, because they wear their watches on the wrong hand, or because they need a special desk or special scissors.

The sad fact of the matter is that the world is made for right-handed people. Most left-handers have stories they can tell about how they were treated not just differently but poorly because of their “affliction.” Thought it doesn’t happen too much anymore, there was a time when teachers tried to “train” left-handedness out of students. Some even considered it evil. The Latin word for “left” is “sinistra” which gives us the English word “sinister.”

Interestingly, the negative treatment of left-handedness has a less than sinister origin. First, in a world without hand sanitizer, clean water, or even toilet paper, people had to find a way to ensure hygiene and cleanliness of food. In many cultures, even today, the right hand is for eating and the left hand is for...um... toilet functions. You never touch other people or food with your left hand. That is one reason why people in the ancient world reclined when they ate. They laid on their left arms and hands to ensure they wouldn’t pick up food with them.

Also, our alphabet is designed to be written from left to right. Practically, this means that the ink is means to be dragged or pulled across the page. This is the reason for the smudges on lefty’s hands and for the odd angles that left-handed people frequently use to write. It is so they can get to a place where they can pull instead of push the pen or pencil across the paper.

Though left-handed people frequently lament the way the world seems to exclude them, there are ways in which they are revered. Left-handed people are sometimes seen as being more artsy. They also typically spend less time standing in lines as well. Most people when presented with a crowd or a line will drift towards their dominant hand. Most lines are longer to the right because most people are right-handed.

Today we are going to look at a person who benefited from being left-handed. Today we are looking at the story of the Judge Ehud, who was able to deliver Israel, in part, because he was left-handed.

SAME SONG, DIFFERENT VERSE (V12-14)

The story of Ehud begins like every other story in Judges. Verse 12 begins with the word “Again.” After Othniel dies, the sons of Israel once again fall back into sin. So God strengthens Eglon, the king of Moab, which is to the southeast of Israel. Eglon forms an alliance with two neighboring tribes, the Ammonites, and the Amalekites, and invades Israel. Verse 12 says, “he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees.” City of Palms is a reference to Jericho. Joshua hadn’t inhabited or rebuilt it after the conquest. In fact, Joshua 6:26 contains a curse against anyone who tries to rebuild Jericho, a curse that was fulfilled by 1 Kings 16:34. Since the Israelites hadn’t inhabited or fortified the city, the Moabites were able to use it as a base of operations to subdue Israel. This goes on for almost two decades.

EHUD DELIVERS TRIBUTE (V15-18)

Finally, Israel has had enough and cries out to God. God hears them and responds by raising up a man to deliver them: Ehud. Like many people God uses, Ehud is an interesting character. Verse 15 describes Ehud as “the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man.” Son of Gera is either a reference to the name of his actual father, or a reference to his clan within the tribe of Benjamin. According to 1 Chronicles 8:3, “Gera was the son of Bela, who was the son of Benjamin.” The more interesting part of Ehud’s description is that he is referred to as “left-handed.” The word that is often translated as left-handed literally means “restricted with regards to his right hand.” This is interesting for several reasons. First, the name of the tribe he is from, Benjamin, literally means “Son of my right hand.” So, this verse literally says, “Ehud, son of Gera, from the tribe of Son of the right hand, restricted with regards to his right hand.” Some people think it just means he was left-handed. Others think that there is more here, that he was disabled in some way that necessitated him using his left-hand. The latter seems reasonable because of the juxtaposition of the description and the meaning of his tribe’s name. He is a person who was, in the world’s eyes, deficient, broken, not useful. In God’s hand, he becomes the chosen instrument of deliverance.

We aren’t told why the Israelites decided to send him with the tribute. Perhaps as someone who was potentially disabled, he was seen as non-threatening and therefore a suitable person to present a peace offering to an enemy king

What we do know is that Ehud took it upon himself to make a two-edged dagger and attach it to his right thigh under his cloak. Most people carrying weapons would do so on their left side. You might wonder why he wasn’t searched on the other side too. Probably because they didn’t suspect anything. Ehud wasn’t a soldier. There wasn’t the ancient equivalent of airport security in the palace. There were guards, but as we will see, Ehud finds a way to bypass them.

EHUD DELIVERS A MESSAGE (V19-26)

Ehud delivers a message and leaves. It isn't until he is on the way back home that he decides to turn around and do something. Verse 19 says, "he himself turned back from the idols which were at Gilgal." Ehud sends the rest of his party back home but he himself turns back at the "idols." There were probably carved stone statues that the Israelites were worshiping. These might have been images of Canaanite gods, or examples of Israelites breaking the second commandment and making an image of their own God that looked similar to Canaanite idols. It is unclear whether Ehud had planned on acting before this or if the site of these idols awakened in him a need to do something. For whatever reason, he turns around and goes back to the king.

Once back at the palace, Ehud tells the king that he has a secret message. The king dismisses his entourage and guard in order to keep the message secret. Palaces are always places of intrigue full of spies. Now Ehud and the King are alone. Ehud then tells him, "I have a message from God for you." This causes the king to rise to his feet. As the king approaches, Ehud draws the dagger and stabs him. The king is so fat, and the dagger evidently had no hilt. The result was that the sword was swallowed up by the king's large body.

Ehud leaves quietly and locks the door behind him. The servants come back and find the door locked. They wait before they try to open the door because they think he is going to the bathroom. The end of verse 24 says, "He is only relieving himself in the cool room."

EHUD DELIVERS ISRAEL MOAB (V27-30)

After escaping the Palace, Ehud runs back to "the hill country of Ephraim" and raises an army. He tells them in verse 28, "Pursue them, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hands." With Ehud at the front of the army, the Israelites seize the ford over the Jordan river prohibiting Moabites from fleeing to their homeland and preventing reinforcements from coming to their aid.

APPLICATION

At first glance, this just reads like an epic tale of palace intrigue and plotting. Perhaps a fun read for a fireside or bedtime, but not having much application to our lives. But if we look closer, we see some aspects of this story that make it more than just another old war tale.

God turns Weakness into Strength – Ehud was at least left-handed, which in his day created more social difficulties than it does today. It seems equally likely that his left-handedness was necessitated by either a disability or injury to his right hand. What the world, and perhaps Ehud himself, thought of as a hindrance made Ehud perfectly suited to be used by God to deliver Israel. God turns what the world calls weaknesses into strengths. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul writes about a "thorn in the flesh" that he implored God

to remove from him. We don't know what it was, but we do know how God responded to Paul's prayers. 1 Corinthians 12:9 says, "He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." It was true with Paul. It was true of Ehud. It can be true in our lives as well.

God turns Strength into Weakness – Eglon was a king whose victories had gone to his head. We aren't told how he had become so fat. But perhaps he had spent the two decades of oppressing Israel by indulging his appetites. But not just fat, he was arrogant and overconfident. The king of Moab was spending time in enemy territory and allowed an Israelite to get near him all by himself. All the things that had gone right for Eglon had evidently gone to his head. As Proverbs 16:18 says, "Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before stumbling." God had turned his strengths into weaknesses to bring him down. That is the same thing that can happen to us. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:27, "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong."

God's help is in the details – It is easy to read this story and think Ehud did everything. I mean, where is God? Sometimes we don't see God because we aren't looking for him. God's help is in the details. Think about the story of Ehud. In order for his plan to succeed, a lot of little things have to go exactly right. His dagger has to go undetected. He has to be readmitted to the king's chamber. He has to find a way to get the king alone. He has to kill the king in a way that doesn't create a lot of noise. He has to find a way to get out of the palace without getting caught. He has to make it back to his own people and raise an army before the Moabites catch up to home. So many things have to happen exactly right for the plan to succeed. You can attribute it to luck. But its like flipping a coin 20 twenty times and it always coming up heads. Eventually, you will start thinking there is more going on than mere chance. So many things went right that day; it was because of God's providence and intervention.

God's help is in his presence – Sometimes we want God to do stuff for us. But the truth is that the primary way that God helps us is through his presence. That is what happens here. Ehud may have killed Moab's king, but Moab still has its army and generals. Israel is also the same nation that has been subjugated for almost two decades. Nothing has changed, except for one thing. In verse 28, Ehud shouts, "Pursue them, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hands." God is with them and has given the enemies into their hands. We seek God's blessing sometimes apart from his presence. We forget that God's presence is the source of his blessing. Psalm 42: 5 says, "Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him For the help of His presence." Psalm 73:28 says, "the nearness of God is my good." When we seek God's blessing first, we frequently miss them. But when we seek God's presence in our lives, we experience the blessing that comings with it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does God turn Ehud's weakness into a strength? What weaknesses have you seen God use as a strength? Why do you think God does this?
2. How does God turn strength into weakness?
3. What does it mean that God's help is in the details?
4. What does it mean that God's help is in His presence?
5. What were the idols that Ehud turned back at? What might be something similar in our society, something we are used to walking past, but should at some point rouse us to act?

LESSON 3 | DEBORAH, BARAK, JOEL: HUMBLE HEROES

JUDGES 4:1-5:31

Someone once said, “It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.” I know who said it, but the quote works better if it is anonymous. OK, it was President Harry Truman. But the point is that if you only cared about the goal accomplished and not assigning credit or blame, we wouldn’t care who said the phrase.

But we do care. We care a lot. We want to make sure we get the credit we deserve. We don’t want to share the limelight with anyone. Many times, we try to overreach and claim more credit than we deserve for our contribution.

The source of our constant quest for credit is our need for acknowledgement. We long for our lives to matter. We are eager to find fulfillment. Many people think that search for significance ends with finding a way to make ourselves stand out from the crowd. It’s an anxious self-assertion that reveals a deep-seated fear of being overlooked and not mattering.

The answer to such longing and fear is humility. Many people often think humility means having a low opinion of yourself. Like a pretty person thinking they are ugly or an intelligent person thinking they are stupid. Humility doesn’t mean thinking less of yourself; it means thinking of yourself less.

Humility also doesn’t mean giving up on your desire to make a difference, to resign yourself to a second tier of existence. No. All the anxiety and pressure we feel when others succeed and we don’t is a desperate response to the frustration of the need we all have to know that we matter, to know that our lives really do count, and we are significant. Humility isn’t about giving your dreams up; it’s about giving your dreams over to God and seeing what He does with them.

Humility is the solution to this hunger we have. When you think of yourself less and humbly submit to God’s plan, you will find the significance and meaning your heart truly desires. That is why Jesus says in the Beatitudes: Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth (Matt 5:5). That is also the attribute we see on display in today’s passage, which tells the story of not one but three individuals who each are willing to humbly play their part in God’s big plan, and as a result Israel is delivered from their oppressors.

Judges 4 tells the story of the female judge Deborah, the general Barak, and the housewife

Jael. Judges 5 is a retelling of the story as an epic poem. Each person in the story embraces the role God has for them and shows us how to live humbly playing the part God gives us in his story.

A FORMULAIC BEGINNING (V4:1-4)

In typical Judges fashion, the story starts in the usual way. Like students who start getting into trouble the moment the teacher leaves, the people of Israel fall back into rebellion after the death of Ehud. Verse 1 says, “Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died.” In just as predictable a response, God punished the Israelites for their sin: “the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; and the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim.” (v2) Finally, the Israelites have had enough of their sin and the oppression that it has caused. Verse 3 says, “The sons of Israel cried to the Lord; for he had nine hundred iron chariots, and he oppressed the sons of Israel severely for twenty years.” I find it interesting that twenty years seems about the average for the Israelites to figure out they are being punished for their sin and for them to finally cry out to God to deliver them.

DOBORAH: THE HUMBLE MESSENGER (V4-7)

The story of God’s deliverance starts in with a woman named Deborah. Verse 4 says, “Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time.” This is our only reference to a female judge. Instead of being a military ruler, however, she is a prophetess. Verse 5 says, “She used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment.”

Deborah is a controversial character to some. Some are uncomfortable about a woman in leadership. They even go so far as to interpret her leadership role in this context as a sign of the weakness and sin of Israel. But we should not be surprised that she fills this role. The Bible, though not full of similar instances, isn’t void of them either. Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, is described as a prophetess. In the New Testament, Acts 21:8-9 tells us about Philip the evangelist who “had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses.” In 1 Corinthians 11:5, Paul assumes women will pray and prophesy as part of Christian worship services.

But it also is important to note that none of the Biblical writers are making a point about gender rights either. They aren’t trying to emphasize that anything men can do women can do as well. They just mention that Deborah was judging Israel. She had a God-given gift that was recognized by the nation who brought her their cases so they could benefit from her wisdom.

But Deborah is more than a wise judge. She is also humble. She knows both the extent and the limit of her gift. God has told her that he is going to give Israel a military victory over their oppressors, so she calls the general Barak. Verse 6-7 says:

⁶ Now she sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh- Naphtali, and said to him, “Behold, the Lord, the God of Israel, has commanded, ‘Go and march to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun.’ ⁷ I will draw out to you Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his many troops to the river Kishon, and I will give him into your hand.”

How does this show Deborah’s humility? It shows her content to play to role assigned to her rather than trying to overreach and do more. She could have thought that if God was going to miraculously deliver, he could do it through her just as easily as through Barak. She could have wanted the credit for not just receiving the message but gaining the victory. She does none of that. She is content to humbly play her part in the story.

BARAK: THE HUMBLE GENERAL (V8-16)

The person she hands the baton to is no less humble than she is. There are a variety of ways Barak could have responded poorly to Deborah. He could have arrogantly responded, “Thanks sweetheart, the men will take it from here.” He could have dismissed her by saying “Who do you think I am to take military advice from a woman?” But instead, his answer reveals his humility.

Verse 8 records Barak as saying to Deborah: “If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” Barak isn’t being a coward; he is being humble. He doesn’t want to take the place of a person that God has clearly spoken to. He isn’t afraid to act. He is unwilling to act in a way that is not in accordance with what God wants.

In verse 9, Deborah responds, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman.” What is interesting, is that as the story unfolds we realize that Deborah isn’t saying that she will get the credit if she goes with him. She is speaking prophetically about who God will ultimately use to finish the job of defeating the enemy.

Proof that Barak accepts this condition can be found in how verse 9 ends: “Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.” Again, Barak reveals his humility. He doesn’t care who gets the honor and credit. He just wants to be a part of God’s victory.

Verses 12-16 tell the story about how Sisera brings his 900 chariots out to oppose the army of Barak and eventually routed. In a way that is not spelled out clearly in the text, the river along which the chariots were stationed must have played a part in rendering them useless. In Judges 5:4, it says “When You marched from the field of Edom, the

earth quaked, the heavens also dripped, even the clouds dripped water.” Judges 5:21 says, “The torrent of Kishon swept them away, The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.” Evidently there was some sort of miraculous event which caused the river to quickly flood the nearby plain. Seeing the change, Deborah tells Barak to attack, and the enemies are easily routed. The entire army is destroyed except for the general. Sisera escapes and flees to what he thinks is safety.

Jael: THE HUMBLE HOSTESS (V17-22)

The woman that Sisera flees to is a named Jael. Verse 17 says she is “the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite.” Sisera thinks he is safe. He has found the dwelling of someone that isn’t an Israelite and who is currently at peace with his people.

Jael invited him in and conceals him. Verse 18 says, “Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, ‘Turn aside, my master, turn aside to me! Do not be afraid.’ And he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug.” He asks for water, and she offers him milk. He then asks her to lie for him and tell people who might ask that he isn’t in there. She doesn’t do what he asks. Evidently the exhaustion of the battle combined with a glass of milk and a rug for a blanket caused Sisera to fall asleep. Verse 21 says, “Jael, Heber’s wife, took a tent peg and seized a hammer in her hand, and went secretly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went through into the ground.” And in an extreme example of understatement, the text said, “so he died.”

Some may ask: how is Jael humble? If anything, she is dishonest. She betrays one of the ancient world’s most sacred responsibilities: guest-host relations. Sisera was her guest. She had an obligation to provide and protect him. She isn’t humble. She is a liar and a murderer.

Before we condemn Jael so quickly, perhaps we should consider the person of Sisera more closely. Again, the epic poem in Chapter 5 helps us out. At the end of the chapter, the poem imagines Sisera’s mom waiting for him to come home. She wonders what is taking him so long. Her maids tell her it is probably because of all the spoils and loot they have to divide and carry. Verse 30 says, “Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoil? A maiden, two maidens for every warrior.” The English translation doesn’t do the last sentence justice. The Hebrew word translated “maiden” literally means “womb” or “uterus.” It refers to a woman based on her sexual reproductive organs. In this context, Sisera not just treats women as property to be divided and claimed but reduces them to objects to be used for his own pleasure and gratification. He was not a person to whom the responsibilities of guest/host applied. He was a person who received the just punishment for his crimes.

But Jael does act humbly. She acts decisively, but she doesn't gloat or brag. When Barak comes looking for Sisera, verse 22 says, "Jael came out to meet him and said to him, 'Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.'" She doesn't ask what Barak will give her. She doesn't say sarcastically "You're welcome." She doesn't gloat and cut his head off and nail it to her door post. She humbly tells Barak she knows where he can find the man he is looking for and leads him to the dead body of Sisera.

APPLICATION

Each of the characters in this story shows a different aspect of humility. If we want to be one of the people Jesus called blessed, if we want to experience the success He refers to as "inheriting the earth," we would do well to emulate the attributes of these humble heroes.

1. Humility means not being afraid to play your role – Deborah is an important person in Israel. She is a judge that everyone comes to. She is a prophetess, which means that God literally speaks through her. But when the message she receives is that Barak is to lead the victorious army, she is content to deliver it. She demonstrates the type of humility that is content to play the role assigned to it. That is hard for all of us. We all sometimes long for the promotion that we think we deserve but which we aren't cut out for. We have to learn the humility of Deborah that is content to do what Hebrews 12:1 says: "run the race that is set before us." Or to accept the place that God has placed us in the body. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:18 that "God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired." It takes humility to accept that God has placed each of us exactly where he wants us, and that placement is both for his glory and our good.

2. Humility means not being afraid to share the stage – Similar to Deborah's willingness to play her part, Barak demonstrates that he doesn't need to hog the limelight. He is willing to do whatever he can. But he is humble enough to acknowledge he can't do it on his own. He wants Deborah's continued presence and wisdom. He doesn't consider the credit for the victory as something worth fighting about. After all, It's all God's stage anyway. True humility recognizes this.

3. Humility means not being afraid to seize the moment – There is a false humility that is actually timidity. It makes you say things like "who am I to do something like this?" This false humility makes you think you are unworthy or unimportant or unnecessary. But those are all lies told by the enemy to prevent you from acting when you can and must. This is what Jael shows us. She is the wife of a nomadic shepherd. She is along way from home. Suddenly a defeated general stumbles into her tent and tells her to hide him. You can tell the story several different ways. She could have done what he said and hid him, worried he might harm her. She could have run away and told someone about who was in her tent. She could have just run period. She does none of it. She realizes, like Esther will later, that

maybe she has been placed where she is for “such a time as this.” She realizes who is before her. She realizes the situation. She humbly tells herself, “Why not me?” and seizes the moment to be a part of God delivering Israel. How many moments have we missed because we didn’t think we would be capable of doing something? How many times have we not taken the microphone or not taken the stage out of a false sense of humility? It’s a humility similar to Deborah’s and Barak’s, which sees the role clearly and is willing to simply play the part without thought of reward or credit.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the people of Israel continually fall back into sin? Why do you think it only happens after the judge dies?
2. What is your response to the idea of Deborah as a judge?
3. How does Deborah demonstrate humility? What sort of humility does she demonstrate? How can we do something similar?
4. How does Barak demonstrate humility? What sort of humility does he demonstrate? How can we do something similar?
5. How does Jael demonstrate humility? What sort of humility does she demonstrate? How can we do something similar?

LESSON 4 | GIDEON: A TIMID HERO

JUDGES 6-7

Confidence. Assurance. Swagger. Whatever word you use to describe it. Some people have it. Others don't.

Gideon's story is about how God uses him in spite of his doubts and timidity. It reminds us that God knows our weaknesses. Psalm 103:13 says, "For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust." Hebrews 4:15 reminds us that in Jesus, "we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses." Our weaknesses don't exclude us from God's service. They aren't something that need to be fixed before we are useful to Him. Rather our weaknesses make us cling to God more eagerly and learn to depend on him. One way that weakness manifests itself is in doubt. We know how imperfectly we are made, and so we doubt ourselves and God. This is the case with Gideon, he is a timid hero. His weakness and doubt are on display at every stage of God leading him. Perhaps as we study the story of Gideon, we will learn how to face our doubts and learn to deal with them.

ISRAEL SINS...AGAIN (V6:1-10)

The story starts, like it does with every judge, with Israel falling back into sin. The punishment for this time was that God gave them into the hands of Midian. Midianites don't seem to have cared about conquering and controlling Israel. They were content with raiding and plundering the people when they gathered in their harvest.

A subtle change in the story, though, occurs. When Israel cries out to the Lord in verse 7, before a judge is raised up, verse 8 says, "the LORD sent a prophet to the sons of Israel." The purpose of this prophet was to remind the people about who God is, what He has done for them, and what they should have but failed to do. Verses 9-10 say:

9 I delivered you from the hands of the Egyptians and from the hands of all your oppressors and dispossessed them before you and gave you their land, 10 and I said to you, "I am the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But you have not obeyed Me."

After God makes abundantly clear the reason for their oppression by the Midianites, does God then raise up a judge for the people.

GIDEON DOUBTS (V6:11-24)

The process of raising up Gideon as a judge begins when the Angel of the Lord visits him at work. Gideon is an atypical hero who is timid and doubts. In fact, the story starts with him hiding out of fear. Verse 11 says that Gideon is “beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites.” He is hiding, hoping that raiders don’t see him and choose to plunder his crops. In verse 12, the angel address him by saying “The LORD is with you, O valiant warrior.” In verse 13, Gideon again responds with doubt and despair, “O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us?”

In Verse 14 God commissions him to be Israel’s deliverer, “The LORD looked at him and said, ‘Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?’” To this Gideon responds with doubt. In verse 15 Gideon says , “O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s house.”

Even after further reassurance, Gideon doubts. In verse 17 Gideon tells the angel: “If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who speak with me.” Again, Gideon is unsure. Again, God confirms His words to Gideon.

GIDEON DESTROYS (V6:25-35)

Despite Gideon’s perpetual timidity and doubt, the angel of the Lord continually reassures Gideon. When finally convinced, Gideon obeys. In verse 25, God tells Gideon “Take your father’s bull and a second bull seven years old and pull down the altar of Baal which belongs to your father and cut down the Asherah that is beside it.” There is something interesting about the fact that the first act of destruction Gideon is called to perform is to tear down his own father’s altar to Baal and Asherah pole. Evidently, in addition to teaching his son about Israel’s God, Joash had also been trying to cover all his bases and dabbled as well in a little Canaanite worship.

Even Gideon’s first act obedience reveals his timidity. Verse 27 says “because he was too afraid of his father’s household and the men of the city to do it by day, he did it by night.”

Gideon destroys the altar using his father’s bulls. He builds an altar to Yahweh, then sacrifices the bulls to Yahweh on it and uses the wood of the Asherah pole to light the fire.

When the townspeople discover that Gideon is responsible, they plea with Joash to hand his son over. Joash, who has clearly learned the appropriate lesson from his son’s altar-breaking, tells the people that if Baal is a real God, let him stand up for himself. Joash also gave his son a new name because of his actions. Verse 32 says, “Therefore on that day he named him Jerubbaal, that is to say, ‘Let Baal contend against him,’ because he had torn down his altar.”

GIDEON DOUBTS...A SECOND TIME (V6:33-40)

After getting his own house in order by destroying his father's own pagan altar, Gideon now blows a trumpet to assemble an army to face the Midianites and Amalekites. But as he looked at the large force assembled to follow him, and as he considered the task in front of him, he doubted again. He needed to be reminded, reassured, that God really was leading him, really was calling him, really was going to do what He said He would do. Verse 36 says, "Then Gideon said to God, 'If You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken...'"

It is important to underscore that all this happens after verse 34 says, "the spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon." This reminds us of two important things. First, God's power in our lives doesn't short circuit or override our own personalities. God's power works with our gifting and disposition to accomplish His will. Second, the kind of doubt Gideon expressed isn't antithetical to having faith in God.

The proof Gideon asks of God is two tests where first Gideon lays out a fleece that he asks God to saturate with water but leave the ground dry. He then asks God to do the reverse: dry fleece, wet ground.

Gideon's fleeces have been the source of a great deal of controversy. Some people use Gideon as a paradigm for Biblical decision-making. They tell us that we can learn God's will on a matter by "sending up a fleece" and allow God to show through small acts what He wants us to do. Others think that Gideon is actually showing his weakness and lack of faith and therefore Gideon and his fleeces should not be used in such a way. It was God not Gideon, they say, who is the subject of the story. He patiently endured Gideon's lack of faith to coax him into acting.

The truth is that Gideon's fleeces do show us a great way to gain insight in our decision-making process, but not perhaps in the way we were expecting. Gideon wasn't looking for a small sign. He was looking for a revelation of who God really is. The gods of Baal and Asherah were deified natural forces. Gideon is asking God if he is just another natural force or if He is sovereign over nature. He is asking God for a revelation of himself. He wants to know God more and see God more clearly.

The thing is that we have something Gideon didn't: the written revelation of who God is. God does want to reassure us and guide. He promises to do so. But we step into error when we seek or think we have found a means of hearing and being guided by God that circumvents or bypasses God's revelation of himself in His word. We will find our decision-making process clarified when we start by filling ourselves with knowledge of who God is.

GIDEON DIVIDES (V7:1-8)

What happens next is not an amazing military victory, but rather a sign that Gideon perhaps was not expecting. After Gideon assembles the army, God says to him in verse 2, “The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, ‘My own power has delivered me.’” Gideon wanted a sign that God was going to be the one who would deliver Israel, so God gives him one. He tells Gideon to whittle down the army. He first allows any who are afraid to go home. The army shrinks from 22,000 to 10,000. Still too many, God says. So, this time, God proposes a test. Verse 5 says, “You shall separate everyone who laps the water with his tongue as a dog laps, as well as everyone who kneels to drink.” The distinction is made between people who put their face in the water to drink and people who use their hand like a dog uses his tongue to scoop water into his mouth. Some people have tried to find a reason in why God proposes this test: perhaps the men were more alert and ready for battle. The truth is that the author doesn’t mention any reason behind the test. This final test pares down Gideon’s army all the way to 300 men.

GIDEON DOUBTS...A THIRD TIME (V7:9-15)

With his army reduced to barely 1% of its original size, Gideon must have been a little surprised and nervous. This time God doesn’t wait for Gideon to voice his fears, but rather gives him what he needs to overcome a third round of doubting. In verses 9-11 God tells Gideon, “Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hands. 10 But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp, 11 and you will hear what they say; and afterward, your hands will be strengthened that you may go down against the camp.” The fact that Gideon does go down into the camp reveals that he was afraid. He seeks the reassurance from his fear and doubt that God offered.

While in the camp, he overhears a Midianite soldier recounting a dream that he had: a loaf of barley bread tumbled into their camp, hit a tent, and knocked it over. The man hearing it interpreted the dream as Gideon conquering the Midianite camp. The loaf of barley bread represented the staple food of Israel, and the tent represented the nomadic dwelling of Midian.

When Gideon hears this, he finally has the assurance he needs. Verse 15 says, “When Gideon heard the account of the dream and its interpretation, he bowed in worship. He returned to the camp of Israel and said, ‘Arise, for the LORD has given the camp of Midian into your hands.’”

I love how Gideon responds. He worships God not just for God’s revelation – God had been trying to convince Gideon this was going to happen – but for being patient with him and confirming it to him in a way he could accept. Then Gideon got to work.

GIDEON DELIVERS (V7:15-25)

The final episode of the story reads almost like an afterthought. We know God is going to do it, we now get to see it done. Gideon gives his 300 men trumpets and torches inside clay pitchers. They encircle the camp in the middle of the night, blow the horns, smash the pitchers, shout, and reveal the torches. This causes the whole Midianite camp to wake up in confusion, think they are surrounded, and start killing each other. Then the rest of the army pursue the Midianites and hunt them down.

APPLICATION

The victory is important, but the emphasis on the story is on how God led Gideon. Gideon was timid, doubtful. But God was determined. He knew Gideon was the right man for the job. The story of God's dealing with Gideon underscores an important fact: it's okay to doubt. It is worth saying that not all doubt is created equal. What some people call doubt is actually skepticism or sin being labeled as doubt. People with that kind of dishonest doubt don't want to be convinced; they want to find reasons to stay in their sin. But for people who have real questions and honest doubt, here are some helpful lessons from the story of Gideon to help us process your doubt.

Be honest about your doubt – Gideon doesn't try to grit his teeth and grind it out. He continually tells God what he is thinking. We can do the same. Tell God your doubts in prayer. See if He doesn't do for you what He did for Gideon: guide and reassure as He promised. Tell your doubts to others as well. First, it gives people the freedom to ask their questions. Second, there is a chance that others have or have had similar questions and can help you find answers. God wants to build our faith in Him but also wants us to grow closer to each other as well.

Be humble about your doubt – One sign of dishonest doubt is arrogance: the belief that you have found the unanswerable question. Gideon doubts, but he is humble. In Judges 6:39, during the fleece episode, Gideon starts his request of the second fleece with, "Do not let Your anger burn against me that I may speak once more." Gideon knows what he is asking is rooted in his own weakness or ignorance. He is honest enough with his doubt that he wants to express it. But he is humble enough with his doubt that he realizes that a less-loving God might respond negatively to being constantly doubted.

Be hopeful about your doubt – The last line of the previous paragraph is important. Gideon learned that we don't have a less-loving God. We have a God who knows our weaknesses and is determined to help us grow into who He created us to be. We can be hopeful in our doubt because God promises to lead us to truth and help us to get over it. The best example of that in this story is that God predicts Gideon's third wave of doubt before it hits and sends Gideon in the camp to reassure him. God knows our weaknesses as well as our strengths. Our weaknesses don't disqualify us from being used by him. They might actually lead us to a place where we are supremely equipped to do something unique and important for God. That is an extremely hopeful thought.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some ways people misunderstand the story about Gideon and the fleeces? What are some bad conclusions to draw? What is the best understanding of what that means?
2. Why does God whittle Gideon's army down to 300 men? What is a way that God might do something similar in our lives? What does God want us to realize?
3. What does it mean to be honest about our doubt? How are we sometimes dishonest with it?
4. What does it mean to be humble about our doubt? How are we sometimes arrogant in our doubt?
5. What does it mean to be hopeful about our doubt? How are we sometimes discouraged in our doubt?

LESSON 5 | SAMSON: A BLIND HERO

JUDGES 13:1-16:31

Judo is an interesting martial art. Most martial arts are about attack. Judo is focused on using an opponent's force to one's own advantage rather than to oppose it directly. You use the force and direction of an opponents attack to accomplish your goals rather than theirs.

It might sound like a trite oversimplification, but God is an expert at spiritual Judo. He is capable of taking all that the enemy means for evil and use it for good. Many times, we think that evil people are in control. But our lives are in God's hands, not theirs. All the evil in the world doesn't wreck God's plan. Paul reassures us in Romans 8:28 that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." God isn't shocked or scared by all the evil in the world. He doesn't like it. But it is not surprising to Him. And He is powerful to cause all things to work together for good.

One great example of God's spiritual Judo happens in the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. Joseph's older brothers hate him and sell him into slavery. While in slavery, he is falsely accused of a crime and thrown into prison. While in prison, he helps people, who promise to remember him and get him out, but they don't. Finally, after a lot of heartache, he gets out of prison and is exalted to a place of power where he comes face to face with the brothers who started this whole mess. Instead of exacting revenge, he says in Genesis 50:20, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to keep many people alive." Joseph doesn't excuse his brothers' sins against him or even try to pretend it was good. What he does say is that God took what they intended for evil and used it to do good.

This means not just that evil doesn't have the last word, it means that you and I will end up doing the will of God one way or another. As Paul says in Philippians 2:10-11 that one day "every knee will bow...and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." We can either do so willingly or unwillingly. Our disobedience doesn't thwart the will of God. It simply deprives us of experiencing the joy and fulfilment that comes from being willing participants in God's great plan.

That is the story of today's judge: Samson. He is a person who is uniquely blessed and chosen by God for a special role in delivering Israel. Samson, however, is blind to everything except his own ego and appetites. He ends up doing the will of God and delivering Israel

but in such a way that deprives him of any benefit or blessing. Hopefully, as we study his story, we can gain insight into how to avoid being as blind as Samson and how to see how God has blessed us, called us, and wants to use us for His glory and for our good.

SAMSON'S AUSPICIOUS START (V13:1-25)

The story of Samson starts like all the rest. Judges 13:1 says rather predictably, "Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, so that the LORD gave them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years."

The next verse is not the story of how Israel cried out to God. Rather it says something that would have caused the ears of every Israelite listener to perk up. Verse 2 says, "There was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren and had borne no children." This is a common story in scripture from Abraham to John the Baptist. A woman's barrenness becomes the backdrop for God's demonstration of His grace and power. Any Israelite listener who didn't know this story would know that something good, something big, was about to happen.

An angel appears to Manoah's wife and tells her not just that she will conceive and give birth to a son, but this son is going to be special. Verse 5 says, "the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines." According to Numbers 6:1-8, a Nazirite vow involved abstaining from three things: from wine or any other intoxicating drink; from cutting your hair; and from contact with a corpse. Normally, a Nazirite vow was undertaken voluntarily for a limited period of time. Samson's story is different. It is imposed rather than voluntary. It begins in the womb. It lasts his whole life. It is also the source of his strength.

After an interesting encounter with an angel, the chapter ends with a son named Samson being born. Verses 24-25 say, "24 Then the woman gave birth to a son and named him Samson; and the child grew up and the LORD blessed him. 25 And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol."

Sadly, the story of Samson from here on reads like a tragedy. Samson ends the story physically blind. But the truth that he was spiritually blind long before he was deprived of his sight. Reading the whole story will reveal just how spiritually blind he really was.

SAMSON WAS BLIND TO GOD'S LAW (CH.14)

Chapter 14 tells the story of Samson's marriage to a non-Israelite woman from Timnah. He saw a pretty foreign woman and wanted her for a wife. His parents try to convince him to change his mind. In verse 3, his parents ask him, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?"

Verse 4 says something interesting: “his father and mother did not know that it was of the LORD, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines.” This doesn’t mean Samson was excused for disobeying God’s law. It means that Samson was so blind to following God and so focused on seeking the satisfaction of his own appetites that God decides to use Samson’s sinful behavior to accomplish Israel’s deliverance. One wonders how the story would have gone differently if Samson had not been so blind.

While journeying to the village of his future wife, he kills a lion that attacked him. On a subsequent journey, he discovered that a swarm of bees has taken up residence in the lion’s carcass. Instead of avoiding the dead animal, he eats some of the honey from its carcass and gives some to his parents, who didn’t know where it came from. All of this further underscores his complete disregard for God’s law. He makes himself unclean and breaks own vow by coming in contact with a dead animal. He also makes his family unclear by encouraging them to eat the honey as well.

At the wedding feast, he poses a riddle based on the lion’s carcass with the honeycomb in it. When the wedding guest learn the secret by convincing his new wife to reveal the secret to her, Samson responds in anger by killing thirty Philistines to pay what he owes on the bet.

SAMSON WAS BLIND TO HIS IMPACT ON OTHERS (CH.15)

Not only is Samson blind to God’s law, but he is also blind to how his actions impact others.

First, when Samson returns from his fit of rage, he decides to go home to his wife. When he visits his father-in-law, he discovers that his wife has been given to someone else. In anger, he burns the fields of the Philistines by tying firebrands to foxes’ tails. The Philistines, when they learn that Samson is responsible, kill his father-in-law and his wife.

Again, Samson responds in anger. Again, Samson unleashes a tremendous slaughter. Again, he doesn’t understand the impact this has on others. This time men of Judah come to him and ask why he is causing them problems. They actually come to capture him and hand him over to the Philistines. He agrees to go with them as long as they agree not to kill him. They bind him and take him to the Philistines. When they hand him over, Samson breaks his bonds and kills a thousand Philistines using nothing by a donkey’s jawbone.

Yes he killed many Philistines. But his actions were rooted in his quest for selfish revenge. Even his own people didn’t want him around. He was blind to the negative impact he had on others. But God used this to put him in situations where he could be in conflict with God’s enemies.

SAMSON WAS BLIND TO HIS WEAKNESSES (V16:1-3)

We all have weaknesses. Weaknesses become problems when we aren't aware of them. Samson had weaknesses, and he was blind to them. What is even more sad is that Samson's weaknesses were obvious to everybody except for him. Anybody who had been around Samson for any amount of time knew what bait worked on him.

Samson's main weakness: women. He betrays the answer to his riddle at the wedding because his wife begs him repeatedly. In Chapter 16, Samson gets into trouble because he goes to Gaza, which was a Philistine headquarters. What is the source of the trouble? He saw a harlot and spent the night with her. When the Philistines hear he is in their town, they plan on surrounding him and killing him. Instead, Samson wakes up and not only destroys the city gates, but he also drags them to the top of nearby mountain and leaves them there.

SAMSON WAS BLIND TO THE IMPORTANCE OF HIS CALLING (V16:4-20)

After this, the Philistines know something about Samson that he doesn't know about himself. They discover he is in love with another foreign woman. They bribe her to betray him. After series of lies, Delilah finally coaxes the truth out of him. In finally revealing his secret to Delilah, Samson reveals something even more profound. In verse 17 Samson tells Delilah, "I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaved, then my strength will leave me..." This statement reveals that he knows the source of his strength. He knows he is called and set apart by God. He just doesn't take it seriously. He is blind to the importance of his calling. He has tremendous strength, and he uses it to pick petty fights and to seek revenge for petty squabbles. He knows God is the source of his strength, and he takes it for granted and uses it to get what he wants and to satisfy his own enormous appetites.

In the end, he loses everything. He is left without his strength, without his family, without his sight, without his freedom...and most importantly, without God. Verse 20 says sadly, "he did not know that the LORD had departed from him."

SAMSON WAS BLIND TO GOD'S BIG PLAN (V16:21-31)

The conclusion of Samson's story is just as tragic. After having his eyes gouged out and made to grind grain like an animal in a Philistine prison, one day the Philistine's summon him to a great festival dedicated to one of their gods. They want to gloat over him and laugh at him. After entertaining them for a while, he finds himself standing in the center of the temple. He asks the boy who was guiding him to help him feel the columns with his hands.

Finally, Samson does what the Israelites still haven't done. He cries out to God. Verse 28 says, "'O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, O

God, that I may at once be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.” But even in his prayer, he reveals his further blindness. He is blind to God’s big plan. He doesn’t want to deliver Israel from the Philistines. He doesn’t care about the God’s plan that he was raised up to fulfill, or Gods people that he was born to deliver. He still is looking for simple revenge for having been blinded.

Still God uses him to deliver Israel. But in the end, Samson’s life is destroyed. He had a high calling, which he ignored, and amazing gifts, which he misused. He ended up ruining his own life. But God still used him to deliver others.

CONCLUSION

Samson’s story presents a powerful reminder that we all end up doing the will of God with our lives. We are either willing instruments in the hands of God, or we are someone against whom God has to use his spiritual judo to accomplish His will in spite of our actions. The question is whether we will experience the blessing and fulfillment that comes with doing it willingly. Samson shows us a life characterized by blindness. He didn’t care about God’s law. He didn’t realize how his actions impacted others. He wasn’t aware of his obvious weaknesses. He never cared about how his life fit into a larger plan that God was causing to come true. May that not be said of us. May we seek to follow God’s law, influence others in positive ways, address our weaknesses, and always seek to use the gifts and calling God have given us to intentionally further the building of his kingdom. May God’s kingdom come because of us, not in spite of us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Samson’s birth clue you in that something important is about to happen? Who else is born under similar circumstances?
2. What does it mean that God is good at spiritual Judo? How is this true in the story of Samson? How is Samson a tragic hero?
3. What is Samson’s main weakness? How do you think Samson doesn’t know it? How can we avoid having blind spots like Samson?
4. How is Samson blind to the importance of his calling? How can we prevent ourselves from being blind in this way?
5. How is Samson blind to God’s big plan? How can we prevent ourselves from being blind in this way?



— ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

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