



## THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

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Judges  
First Message  
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As we begin a study of the book of Judges from the Old Testament, I want to say at the outset that even though Judges is an Old Testament book, the truths we will discover here are very much New Testament truths. The Old Testament brings these before us in a way that fills out the principles we encounter in the New Testament. In particular, Judges highlights like no other book the truth of Romans chapters 6–8.

I want to begin by talking about an important concept, and that is the concept of place. “Place” brings to mind home, security, rest and identity. We all have places that are important to us. Sometimes that place is physical; it is tied to our roots, our home. A few weeks ago, Gary Vandret talked about a sentimental trip he took with his brothers to New York City. There he and his brothers visited the home where they grew up. They walked the streets where they played as children, etc. Our children’s pastor, Jane Alexander, is from the South, and she always looks forward to times with family and friends when she visits there. I’m from Nebraska, and so the heartland of our nation has a fond place in my heart. In *Gone With The Wind*, Scarlett O’Hara, as you recall, was devoted to her land, Tara. I asked my youngest daughter where her place was, and she said that now her favorite place is her beanbag chair that she got for Christmas.

Sometimes our place can be mental, a place we travel to in our minds. When I remember a familiar scene in Nebraska, I can travel back in my mind to my home. We can be transported by poetry. Consider these lines from William Butler Yeats: “I will arise and go now and go to Innisfree.” A song does the same thing for us. “There’s a place for us, somewhere a place for us,” goes the lyric from the musical *West Side Story*. There are places we go to for rest. I recall coming home from college as a young man. As soon as I entered my home I would enter into rest. No matter what was bothering me I could find comfort and rest at home, and I would sleep undisturbed. When we despair or face confusion, there are places where we go to walk, to meditate, to be quiet. When I was younger, my “place” was always the basketball court. If I could just go out and shoot hoops for an hour, I could think through all my problems and make the decisions I needed to make. Physical roots, home, land, these are all important concepts to us.

Place was very important to the nation of Israel as well. There is a great deal of material in the Old Testament about a certain place, and that place was the land that Israel entered into to possess. Much of this narrative describes how Israel was to possess and live in this land. So if we’re going to understand the Old Testament, and in particular the books of Joshua and Judges, we need to understand the idea of land as a theme that runs through the

scriptures. This will provide a wonderful visual aid to truth that the Bible has to offer.

As we open the book of Judges we see that the nation of Israel had been on a long spiritual journey. God had called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans and brought him to the land of Canaan. He told him, “This will be the land that you will inherit, all you and your seed.” “I will make you a great nation,” he told Abraham. The age of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, followed. Then, one of Jacob’s sons, Joseph, was sold into slavery in Egypt, and there the people of Israel were born. They were held in slavery for 400 years, and then God sent them a deliverer, Moses, to lead them out of Egypt. They crossed through the Red Sea, but they failed to go into the land and they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Finally, Joshua and a new generation crossed over the Jordan River and entered into the land. In the book of Judges, each tribe is dismissed to inherit their own territory, to possess the land that God had given to them. God said, “I will send hornets ahead of you that they may drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites before you. I will not drive them out before you in a single year, that the land may not become desolate, and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. I will drive them out before you little by little, until you become fruitful and take possession of the land” (Ex. 23:28-30).

Just like Israel, Christians too embark on a spiritual journey. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians: “Now these things happened to them [Israel] as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). Every believer in Jesus Christ embarks on a similar journey. God delivers us from Egypt, from the world system, from its way of thinking and acting. God leads us through the Red Sea and across the Jordan River. Both of these crossings picture baptism. The crossing of the Red Sea illustrates our being baptized into the death of Christ, being cut off from the world with all its attitudes and opinions. We pass from one life into another. Crossing the Jordan River also pictures baptism—being baptized into the life of Christ. It is a picture of the end of our life in Adam and the beginning of our life in Christ; the end of our reliance on ourselves and our own programs. And then, like Israel entering into the land of Canaan, we enter into the land. This pictures our entering into the life of Christ, the Spirit-filled life, life as God designed it to be, life as it can be.

A few years ago, I read the C. S. Lewis favorite, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, to my children. When we encountered that marvelous character, a lion named Aslan, I asked my children, “Whom does Aslan remind you of?” “Jesus,” they chimed. In the same way, the concept of the land in the OT reminds us of Jesus.

What I want to do this morning is highlight several comparisons between the land and Jesus. Hopefully, this will deepen our understanding of our life in Christ. The first thing I would like to say is that the land is a gift to God's people. Thirty times in Deuteronomy, God says, in effect, "I will give you this land as a free gift." Listen to this statement: "But as for you, stand here by Me, that I may speak to you all the commandments and the statutes and the judgments which you shall teach them, that they may observe them in the land which I give them to possess" (Deut. 5:31). The land emphasizes the free act of grace on Yahweh's part. Israel brought nothing to this promise. Actually the opposite was true. God told them, "Know therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people" (Deut. 9:6). The initiative was with God, and it arose out of his love for his people.

There is another idea associated with this truth about the land being a free gift: Israel could not take it or grasp it. The land was beyond her power to acquire; it could only be hers as a gift. If it was not a gift, then it would not be hers at all. A couple of incidents bear this out. In Kadesh Barnea, Israel was rebuked for her faithlessness, but she proceeded willfully, apart from Moses and apart from the Ark of the Covenant. She entered into battle and was roundly defeated. The same thing happened at Ai, when the people acted on their own initiative, in their own strength, disregarding the fact that the land was a gift, and again they were defeated. The land is a gift.

When we come to the New Testament, we find the same thing to be true about our life in Christ: Christ is a gift, and the life that he gives is a gift. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord," says Romans 6:23. We read in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast." Life in Christ is a gift. We don't deserve it; we don't earn it. It can't be grasped; it can't be contained; we can't put it in a bottle; it can't be had by our own strength or power. Just like the land, if we do not receive it as a gift, then we fail to experience it.

We've just celebrated Christmas, that most wonderful of holidays. All of you probably took part in that familiar scene of opening presents on Christmas morning. Usually we have one of two responses when we open up a gift. If it's something that we demanded or manipulated for, we're disappointed. We say, "That's great. I got what I wanted." But there's no joy associated with receiving the gift. But then we open a gift that's far beyond what we expected. We were given it because somebody loved us. When that happens, our heart is filled with joy and we receive it as a gift. The land tells us that we need to receive Christ in that way. We can't define it or demand it; it's a gift that we must experience and enter into.

The second thing we see about the land is that it is a blessing. God says, "So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8). There are two blessings that are associated with the land—abundance and rest. Deuteronomy talks about the abundance that we find in the land: "For the LORD your God is bringing you into a

good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land where you shall eat food without scarcity, in which you shall not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper" (Deut. 8:7-9). The land is described as being superior to the land of Egypt. The eyes of the Lord are on the it, and it appears to Israel as a kind of paradise. The land also represents rest, not primarily peace of mind, but physical rest, freedom from the harassment of enemies. God said, "you have not as yet come to the resting place and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you. When you cross the Jordan and live in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies around you, so that you live in security" (Deut. 12:9-10). This kind of rest is not possible in the wilderness. There the nation wandered; they were confused and attacked. But when they came into the land, they were to find rest.

We find the same truth in the New Testament concerning our life in Christ. This life is described as a blessing; more specifically, it's described as a blessing of abundance and of rest. Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Paul wrote, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). Our life in Christ can be compared to a land overflowing with milk and honey, overflowing with God's goodness, mercy, love and grace. It's a land that is designed to be fruitful—overflowing with the fruits of the Spirit. And not only do we have abundance, we have rest. Jesus said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and My load is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). On a similar note, the writer of Hebrews says, "There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His" (Heb. 4:9-10).

Consider for a moment a few of the people who encountered Jesus and the transformation they underwent as a result. The woman at the well lived a life that was anything but abundant; her life was dried up and barren. But Jesus said to her, "If you ask of me, I would have given you living water." She believed, and her life became full. There was abundance and rest where before there was need and turmoil. "Do you want to be well?" asked Jesus of the paralytic man. "Yes," the man replied, "I'd like to be well." Jesus said to him, "Then take up your pallet and walk." Someone who had no value, who was dead, suddenly came alive and his life was filled with abundance and rest. Even Nicodemus knew that he lacked something. Externally, it looked like he had everything, but he knew in his heart that something was missing. He came to Jesus by night and Jesus said to him, "You can be born again." Life in Christ is designed to be an abundant life!

The next thing we see about the land is that it must be entered by faith. This was a hard lesson for the nation of Israel to learn. The first time they came to the land they sent in spies to reconnoiter, but all of them, except for Joshua and Caleb, came back and said, "No way! The giants

are too big and too numerous; they have too many weapons. There's no way that we can enter into that land." So Israel at that point did not enter the land; they were consigned to meaningless wandering in the wilderness. The same is true when we come to the New Testament: We enter into the life of Christ by faith and faith alone.

Everywhere in scripture we are reminded that we can never accomplish the work of Christ. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12). "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). When we enter into this life in Christ, we can't reduce it to a formula. We can't put it on a pert chart, consolidate it on an efficiency model, type it into our computers, or put it on our voice mail. The life of Christ is designed not to be safe or to be lived safely. We have to enter by faith, and often when the circumstances dictate that we will be roundly defeated. If we don't, if we disbelieve, then life becomes meaningless and we wander like Israel in the wilderness. I'm reminded of the story of the airliner that was taxiing onto the runway and the pilot's voice came over the speaker: "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. Welcome to Flight 222, non-stop from New York to London's Heathrow Airport. Today we will be flying at 35,000 feet, at approximately 500 miles per hour. Our flight course will take us over Canada, Greenland and Ireland. We shall be in the air about eleven hours. We are almost ready for take off—just as soon as I get up my nerve!" We wouldn't be too excited about the pilot's faith, would we? But all too often this is how we enter into our life in Christ. All too often we're just trying to get up the nerve because we want it "hard-wired," we want to find the resources within ourselves. But God says we are to enter by faith and faith alone. "The righteous man shall live by faith," says Paul.

I study with a group of men on Monday nights, and last week I got to share my life with the group, so I brought all my pictures, etc. (They were excited to see what I looked like growing up in the hippy generation.) I told them that I had come to Christ in college and that my life had been transformed in my twenties. I shared some stories about what God began to do in my life, how I was stepping out in faith, etc. Later that evening I felt rebuked. I thought to myself, "I was excited about sharing those stories, but what's happening now? The game's not over. It may be the second half, but it's not over." We must enter into the life of faith day in and day out!

The next thing we see about the land is that it is holy land: the land was where Israel met God, where they walked with God and enjoyed his company. God said, "And you shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the LORD am dwelling in the midst of the sons of Israel" (Num. 35:34). Israel took the ark of the covenant into battle with them as a symbol that God was with them. When the temple was built, the cloud descended upon the temple and filled the house of the Lord, and the glory of the Lord lived in that house. When we come to the New Testament, however, we discover something very different: God is no longer to be found in a building; he is no longer to be found in a particular place. Now, God is in Christ, and by grace we have access to God

through Jesus. Jesus said, "And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth ...that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me" (John 17:19, 21).

Years ago, when my wife was first considering becoming a Christian, she got all prepared one day to go up to the Stanford University Chapel, a place she had been many times as a child. Before she could get there she was sitting quietly, thinking and praying. Suddenly, she had a distinct feeling that God was coming to her in a very real way. Further, she felt that somebody was with him. God said to her, "This is my Son. I want you to get to know him." This was how she came to Christ. She came to the Father through the Son. She didn't find God in the Stanford Chapel; she found him in the Son.

The land is holy land. Christ is our holy land, and that is where we meet God.

And the land demands a specific lifestyle. God said, "These are the statutes and ordinances which you shall be careful to do in the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess" (Deut.12:1). He told them, "You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes" (Lev. 18:3). Israel was not at liberty to set its own behavioral guidelines. Residence in the land meant paying attention to what was fitting activity in the land. Again, in the New Testament, the same principle holds true about our life in Christ. Our relationship with him demands a lifestyle of obedience. We must learn to live not as the world lives, to not walk as the Gentiles walk. We're in the world but we're not of the world. We're to put off the old man and put on the new man. There's a way of living that comes with this life in Christ. Jesus put it this way, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15).

Finally, there's one other parallel that I would like to make that's particularly appropriate when we encounter the book of Judges: the land needs to be possessed. Yes, the land is a gift, but when Israel enters it, there are enemies living there. The nation learns that the land must be possessed. God said, "And I will fix your boundary from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River Euphrates; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand and you will drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods. They shall not live in your land, lest they make you sin against Me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you" (Exodus 23:31-33). This is the problem that arises when we come to the book of Judges. The book of Joshua is a book of victory, a book of conquest, but in Judges we discover a generation that does not know the Lord and they fail to drive out the inhabitants of the land. The key to the whole book is chapter 21, verse 25: "*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" They did what was right in their own eyes, not what was wrong in their own eyes; what was right in their eyes, but wrong in God's eyes. They had to learn the principle that even though the land was a gift, it had to be possessed.

Again, the same thing holds true of our life in Christ. This life is a gift, but it must be possessed. When we enter into this life we enter into the kingdom of God, but we still have an enemy to contend with: it is the flesh. We learn from the New Testament that the flesh sets its desire against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh so that we may not do the things that we please. Thus we learn in the book of Judges that victory in the Christian life is not automatic. Even though no enemy can stand up to the power of Christ, we still must enter into the battle. Although the inheritance is deeded to us, it must be conquered in battle. Our enemies just don't get up and walk away; they have to be defeated. Even though we might know great truths about God, and great truths about deliverance, it doesn't mean that we will automatically get to enjoy them. The land needs to be possessed.

We could talk all morning about the land and how it pictures for us our life in Christ. As W. D. Davies wrote, "The land has been Christofied." Even though the land was very real and very much physical for Israel, I hope that it allows you to see the richness and depth of our spiritual life in Christ. This is why the book of Judges is so relevant and so practical to our us.

As we bring this study to a close, I want you to consider something: Where is your land? Where is your place? On what is your blessing and your security founded? What do you look to for abundance? What are you trying to establish? Where are you building? If you're like me, all too often your focus is lacking. Like Israel, we're content to wander in the wilderness because we're fearful of entering into the land. We have decided to remain on the other side of the Jordan and settle for second best because that place looks good enough for us. How many of you, like I do, think on occasion, "If I could just get out of the Silicon Valley rat race, sell my house and get five acres someplace, then my life would be good. I could find abundance, rest and security"? But that kind of thinking blurs our focus and we fail to enter into the life of Christ.

The scripture tells us that Christ is our land, our place. One day this life of Christ will lead us into a new heaven and a new earth and we'll have new bodies. We'll be just like Christ. And the scripture says that we can enter into that life now! When we think about it, we make choices in different areas every day of our lives to enter into life. Every day we decide consciously or subconsciously whether we're going to enter into life. Take our jobs, for instance. We can hang our heads, complain, and be unenthusiastic about our work, or we can work well and enter into the community of people we work with.

We have the same opportunity in our schools. We can decide to just drop our kids off at school in the mornings and pick them up in the afternoon, or we can decide to enter into the community of the school—go to the activities, meet the teachers, be involved with the parents of our children's friends, etc. We can leave our children off for sports activities or we can meet the coach, talk to parents on the sidelines, and enter into the community that surrounds these particular events. We make this choice in our neighborhoods. Do we have a barrier in front of our homes that says, "Do not enter," or do people feel free to stop by and say hello? Do we look the other way when somebody walks by on our street or do we try to enter a conversation and find out who they are? Do we sit in the back yard or do we at times sit in the front yard so that we can meet people? What do we do with friends? Do we decide to attach ourselves to people and find out about them, what's in their hearts, what they're going through, or do we play it safe, stay home and watch videos? What about church? Do we zip out of here on Sunday mornings and go home to watch the ball games, or do we make a choice to really enter into the community of faith that God has surrounded us with? Are we involved with people? Are we a part of people's lives? These are the kinds of decisions we have to face in our life in Christ. Do we really enter into this life, or do we just stand at the boundary?

Do you want a land? Do you want a place? If you do, you will find that his name is Jesus. He is a land flowing with milk and honey. His life is a gift, and it is filled with abundance and rest. The book of Judges will challenge us to enter into the land, to enter into his life, to be filled with the Spirit by faith.

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## THE SEEDS OF DEFEAT

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Judges 1:1–2:5  
Second Message  
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When people buy a house, one of the first things they do is make a list of the projects they want to accomplish when they move in. I know I did this and, as I recall, my list was both aggressive and optimistic. New homeowners think they can paint the entire inside of the house the first week, plant a new lawn the second week, wallpaper a couple of bedrooms the third week, and so on. Reality soon sets in, however. They begin to make separate lists—a 30-day list, a one-year list, a five-year list, etc. This process is similar to what happens when we become believers in Jesus Christ. We enter into a new and different life and certain projects need to be accomplished—there is work to be done and new territory to be taken.

Last week, we began our study in the book of Judges by comparing Israel's entry into the land with the Christian's entering into the life of Christ. Today, I want to begin by reading the entire first chapter of this wonderful narrative.

Now it came about after the death of Joshua that the sons of Israel inquired of the LORD, saying, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?" And the LORD said, "Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand." Then Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come up with me into the territory allotted me, that we may fight against the Canaanites; and I in turn will go with you into the territory allotted you." So Simeon went with him. And Judah went up, and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hands; and they defeated ten thousand men at Bezek. And they found Adoni-bezek in Bezek and fought against him and they defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. But Adoni-bezek fled; and they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and big toes. And Adoni-bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to gather up scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me." So they brought him to Jerusalem and he died there.

Then the sons of Judah fought against Jerusalem and captured it and struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire. And afterward the sons of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites living in the hill country and in the Negev and in the lowland. So Judah went against the Canaanites who lived in Hebron (now the name of Hebron formerly was Kiriath-arba); and they struck Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmi.

Then from there he went against the inhabitants of Debir (now the name of Debir formerly was Kiriath-sepher). And Caleb said, "The one who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will even give him my daughter Achsah for a wife." And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it; so he

gave him his daughter Achsah for a wife. Then it came about; when she came to him, that she persuaded him to ask her father for a field. Then she alighted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, "What do you want?" And she said to him, "Give me a blessing, since you have given me the land of the Negev, give me also springs of water." So Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs.

And the descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up from the city of palms with the sons of Judah, to the wilderness of Judah which is in the south of Arad; and they went and lived with the people. Then Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they struck the Canaanites living in Zephath, and utterly destroyed it. So the name of the city was called Hormah. And Judah took Gaza with its territory and Ashkelon with its territory and Ekron with its territory. Now the LORD was with Judah, and they took possession of the hill country; but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley because they had iron chariots. Then they gave Hebron to Caleb, as Moses had promised; and he drove out from there the three sons of Anak. 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.

Likewise the house of Joseph went up against Beth-el, and the LORD was with them. And the house of Joseph spied out Bethel (now the name of the city was formerly Luz). And the spies saw a man coming out of the city, and they said to him, "Please show us the entrance to the city and we will treat you kindly." So he showed them the entrance to the city, and they struck the city with the edge of the sword, but they let the man and all his family go free. And the man went into the land of Hittites and built a city and named it Luz which is its name to this day.

But Manasseh did not take possession of Beth-shean and its villages, or Taanach and its villages, or the inhabitants of Dor and its villages, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its villages, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages; so the Canaanites persisted in living in that land. And it came about when Israel became strong, that they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but they did not drive them out completely.

Neither did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites who were living in Gezer; so the Canaanites lived in Gezer among them.

Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Nahalol; so the Canaanites lived among them and became subject to forced labor.

Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, or

**the inhabitants of Sidon, or of Ahlab, or of Achzib, or of Helbah, or of Aphik, or of Rehob. So the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; for they did not drive them out.**

**Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh, or the inhabitants of Beth-anath, but lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; and the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and Beth-anath became forced labor for them.**

**Then the Amorites forced the sons of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the valley; yet the Amorites persisted in living in Mount Heres, in Aijalon and in Shaalvim; but when the power of the house of Joseph grew strong, they became forced labor. And the border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akkrabbim, from Sela and upward. (1:1-36, NASB)**

Notice that the very first verse is a call to battle, a call to fight. "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites to fight against them?" asked the sons of Israel of the Lord. Joshua had taken the nation into the land, having led a conquest of thirty-one kings. When he died, each tribe was dismissed to their territory, to their inheritance, and there they were to continue the battle and root out the remaining enemies. Thus begins the period of the Judges, a time that covered 1381 BC to 1050 BC (from the first judge, Othniel, to the last judge and the first prophet, Samuel). Now God's instructions to Israel were quite clear in texts through Deuteronomy and Exodus. Listen to this text, for instance, from Exodus 23:31-33, "I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the River. I will hand over to you the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before you. Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods. Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you" (NIV). Clear instructions: Israel was to drive the enemy out of the land completely.

Why? It was because of the enemy's moral degradation. God had given the Canaanites and the other peoples living in this land time to respond, yet they chose to worship idols. So now God was bringing about their judgment through the nation of Israel. It was the Lord who did battle on Israel's behalf, and yet Israel was to join him in the battle. Remember that the land represents for believers in Jesus Christ the abundant and Spirit-filled life that is given to us as a gift when we believe. Just as Israel was given a new land and was to enter into that new land, so we are given a new life and called to enter into that life. But just as Israel had enemies to conquer, so we, too, have enemies in our life. The land needs to be possessed, or appropriated.

What are the enemies we are called to annihilate and destroy? We do not have to face Canaanites and Perezites and Jebusites. The New Testament tells us that these enemies are called sin and the flesh. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:17, "the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please" (NASB). The enemies we face might be lust, greed or ambition. They might be moods that control us, such as depression or anger. They might be fears—fear of failure,

fear of rejection. They might be patterns that have developed over a long period of time, such as being obsessive-compulsive. Some of these things might result from our family background, but they are enemies that are rooted in our flesh. They seek to control us and lead us into sin. Thus, when we come to Christ, we find as we enter into this new land of milk and honey that we are called to battle.

Three things will help us understand more about this fight. Here is the first one: *Victory in the Christian life is not automatic.* Even though the land is given to us as a gift—our inheritance is allotted and mapped out for us—it still must be conquered in battle. The enemies don't just run away from us. The spiritual land we enter, unfortunately, is not like the land of Camelot, where all the leaves blow into neat little piles. This is a paradox, isn't it? Life in Jesus Christ is a gift from God. It is a land of milk and honey, one that is designed to be abundant and restful. But, on the other hand, there is a call to fight, to conquer enemies that would inhibit us from enjoying our inheritance.

Here is the second thing: *According to the Scripture, the enemies that live in this land have already been defeated.* No enemy that you face in life can stand against God. The Lord said to Joshua, "Arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you" (Josh 1:2-3). And here in Judges 1:2, God says, "behold, I have given the land into his hand." Every place your foot treads, your enemy will be defeated. Just as Israel was promised victory, so we, too, are promised victory in the Christian life by the power of the indwelling Christ. Paul describes it this way: "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom 8:2).

Here is the third thing that will help us understand this battle: *The abundant life in Christ is provided by God for every one of his people, not just certain advanced saints.* It is not awarded because we take classes in theology. It's for each and every one of us. But the battle must be entered into by each individual and by each generation. This presented a problem for Israel. They had followed Joshua for a number of years, but then Joshua and all his generation were gathered to the Lord. Judges says that there arose after them a generation that did not know the Lord nor yet the work that he had done for Israel. No one can fight the battles for us; we ourselves must enter into warfare.

In some respects, this is where we find ourselves here at Peninsula Bible Church. In the late Forties and early Fifties, a group of godly men laid a foundation and did a work by the power of God. Battling night and day, they captured new territory. They expounded the scriptures; they led people to Christ; they built up; they encouraged. But now a new generation has arisen. Just as Israel could not depend on the work of Joshua, we can't live on the work of those who have gone before us. We must enter in, each and every one of us, in our generation.

God has called us into a battle, not against people or nations, but against sin, against our own flesh, against evil and darkness.

"Oh, yuck!" you say, "I don't want to fight. Can't I live a comfortable life now that I'm a Christian?" I, too, hate conflict. I avoid it at all costs. I'm scared to enter into battle. I

discovered this as a child. When I was about 10 years old, a boy wanted to fight me. To this day I don't know what he wanted to fight about; he just wanted to fight. I joked around, trying not to take him seriously, trying to avoid conflict and get out of the mess. Suddenly he hauled off and punched me in the nose. I put my hand up to my nose and, lo and behold, there was blood on my finger. You might say that this turn of events made me take that fight very seriously. I chased that kid around the park and through the neighborhood for an hour. He's lucky I didn't catch him! Sometimes we're reluctant to fight because we don't take sin seriously. But then sin lands the first punch and we get a bloody nose. God says we need to be ready to enter into the battle.

And we see in our text that the tribes of Israel got off to a pretty good start, especially Judah and Simeon. They teamed up together (it is a helpful thing to team up with a brother or sister to take on new territory and defeat enemies), and they helped one another in the territories allotted to them. But, despite everything the Lord had given them, problems developed even for Judah and Simeon. They defeated Adoni-bezek, but they did not know what to do with him. So they cut off his thumbs and his big toes, adopting the practice of the pagan nations around them. (That's what Adoni-bezek had done, so they did the same thing to him.) This would be like the United States responding to terrorist activity by taking hostages themselves and tormenting and terrorizing them in kind. This was a failure on the part of Judah. They began to have more victories, driving out more enemies, but another problem arose. They took the hill country, but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley. These people were fortified and strengthened by iron chariots; they were deeply entrenched and hard to drive out. Thus, in verse 19, the whole scene changes, and problems really develop.

Let's look at some examples. Verse 21: "the sons of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem." Verse 25: "the house of Joseph went up against Bethel, they let the man and all his family go free." Verse 27: "Manasseh did not take possession of Beth-shean and its villages." Verse 28: "they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but they did not drive them out completely." Verse 29: "Neither did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites who were living in Gezer." Verse 30: "Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron." Verse 31: "Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco." Verse 33: "Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh." They failed miserably to carry out their assigned task. God had made it clear to them: When they came into the land, they were to drive out completely the inhabitants of the land. They were to destroy them, but they didn't. They compromised; they grew complacent; they allowed them to live next to them; they put them to forced labor. They thought they had the situation under control. Their slogan may well have been, "If you can't beat them, join them."

The spiritual principle is obvious: When we enter into the land of Jesus Christ, the beginning of defeat for us is when we fail to completely eradicate the enemies from our life. We allow sin to live with us. We don't drive it out completely. We grow complacent. We compromise. We think we have our sin under control, and that's good enough for us. Like Israel, we settle for something short of complete destruction and annihilation of sin. Thus begins

the downward slide. Here is how the New Testament teaches this truth, from Romans 13:14, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." Judges gives us the unabridged version of that verse. Again and again the point is driven home: "they did not drive out the enemy completely."

When I was a teenager, I found a copy of Playboy magazine lying in a ditch. Do you know how valuable a treasure a Playboy magazine can be for a 13-year-old boy? I thought to myself, "I can finally go home and read the articles." I put it in my dresser drawer and occasionally took it out—just read the articles, of course. But I noticed something strange happening to me, even as a young man and not yet a Christian: I began to realize that that magazine was having a very unhealthy influence on me. I felt I couldn't let it live in my dresser drawer anymore. One night, I opened that drawer, picked up the magazine, and made the decision to walk down to the end of the street and throw it in a dumpster. I learned this principle very early: If I was not going to be controlled by an enemy, then I had to drive it completely out of my life. That's what God says we're to do with our enemies—drive them out completely. We are to starve the flesh and feed the Spirit. We are to make no provision for the flesh.

Why can't God and sin live together in our lives? Why do we have to remove sin completely? Our text is helpful here. If we let sin live, if we do not crush it completely, then it will begin building building up in some other area of our lives. The tribe of Joseph took Bethel, but they let the man and his family go free. What was the result? "And the man went into the land of the Hittites and built a city and named it Luz which is its name to this day" (1:26). They let him go so he went someplace else and built a city, even calling it by its original name. If we think we have control of some area of our lives, say, our home, but if we don't completely drive out sin, it's going to surface somewhere else—at work, perhaps; it's going to make itself manifest in some other area in our life. This is the lesson of our text. Some of the tribes thought they had victory, they thought they had control because they put the Canaanites into forced labor, but then we come to verse 34: "The Amorites forced the sons of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the valley." They were not really in control; rather, their enemy was controlling them. Sin inhibits, limits and restricts our movement. If we let it live in our lives, then we end up in idolatry, just like the nation of Israel. This was God's warning to the nation time and time again: "Go in and drive out those enemies completely, because I don't want you to say, 'How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.'"

Now God doesn't want us to drive out the enemies for the purpose of being nice, neat Christians. He doesn't want us to merely toe the line as an end in itself. He knows that when we allow sin to live in our lives, it will take away from our relationship with him. Our love for God will grow cold; our worship will wander; our relationship will sputter. He does not want us to be controlled and defeated by sin because he wants us to enjoy the abundance of the land. Driving sin out of our lives is the means to the end, which is entering into the holiness of God, knowing him fully, and enjoying him completely. He calls us to make a choice: God and sin cannot coexist. We cannot serve two masters.

At this point, the angel of the Lord rebukes the nation for what they've done. 2:1-5:

**Now the angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought up you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you, and as for you, you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars.' But you have not obeyed Me; what is this you have done? Therefore I also said, 'I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.'" And it came about when the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, that the people lifted up their voices and wept. So they named that place Bochim; and there they sacrificed to the LORD. (2:1-5)**

We understand that this angel is none other than the Lord himself, the pre-incarnate Christ. (We will encounter the angel of the Lord again in this book.) He gives Israel a command: "You shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land." But Israel had sinned and disobeyed. "What is this that you have done?" asks the angel. God is the covenant maker, but man is the covenant breaker. As a result, God says, "I will no longer drive this enemy out before you. They shall become a snare to you." (Next week, we'll study in more detail why God wants the enemy to remain in the land and be a snare.) The people respond by lifting up their voices and weeping.

Gilgal and Bochim, the two places identified here, are highly significant. "Now the angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim," says our text. Gilgal was where Israel crossed the Jordan, the place where they renewed the practice of circumcision, where they kept the Passover. This was where God appeared to Joshua and told him that he was the commander-in-chief of the Lord's army and that he would lead Israel to victory. In other words, Gilgal represents victory, blessing, obedience. "Bochim," on the other hand, means weeping. In the book of Joshua, the people lived in victory, but here in Judges they are miserable and sorrowful. What is the lesson for us? It is this: The path of partial obedience leads to Bochim. We think that by doing this or having that that we will enter into life, but then we discover that we are defeated and controlled by sin. Sorrow, not victory, becomes our portion. If we want

something badly enough, God will give it to us. Our dreams become nightmares as disobedience leads us into slavery. One commentator wrote, "The most miserable people in the world are professing believers who will not commit themselves to the Lord Jesus."

We have learned three important truths today. First, there is a call to battle when we enter into the Christian life. We may not like it, nonetheless it's a call to battle. Second, we must recognize that we can be defeated. And we begin to taste defeat when we become complacent, when we compromise and allow sin to live in our lives, not because we lack the power to destroy the enemy. And third, if we allow sin to remain, we will end up in Bochim, the land of weeping, rather than in Gilgal, the land of victory.

We all face problems with sin. We can't defeat all of these enemies at once any more than we can paint all the rooms in our house at the same time. Some of the enemies that we face have iron chariots; they're deeply entrenched and they're fortified. But let us not feel overwhelmed and guilty this morning. Rather, let us be conscious of these truths, and let us begin to take sin seriously and resolve to enter into this battle. Augustine said, "We don't have the power to do, but we have the power to choose." We must be willing to take responsibility for these areas of our lives, to look them squarely in the face and decide against them.

Charles Osgood made an interesting comment about the events surrounding Magic Johnson and the revelation that the famous athlete had tested HIV positive. "Perhaps we will never find a way to deal with this very serious illness that has come into our midst until we attempt to put right and wrong back in our vocabulary," said Osgood. Israel did what was right in their own eyes. Their motto might well have been, "If it feels good, do it." They disobeyed God and failed to drive the enemies out of their land. What about about us? Are we willing to drive the enemies out of our land, to not compromise or grow complacent? Our hope lies in the promise of God. The Lord is with us. Just as no enemy could stand before Israel in 1381 BC, no enemy can stand before the power of Christ in your life. The cross could not defeat him. The tomb could not contain him. And that very resurrection power is ours if we will but decide to enter the battle. The question we face this morning is this: Are we willing to drive these enemies out completely and take this land that is already ours in Jesus Christ our Lord?

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## THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF SIN

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Judges 2:6-3:6  
Third Message  
John Hanneman  
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General Douglas B. McArthur once wrote an article entitled “Requisites for Military Success” in which he identified the four things that he felt were necessary to victory in battle. First, he wrote, an army must have the will to win, an *esprit de corps*, a cause worth dying for. Secondly, an army must have adequately trained and well-equipped personnel. Thirdly, there must be an adequate source of supply; supply lines must be kept open. And fourthly (most of the article was devoted to this) an army must have knowledge of the enemy. The greater the knowledge of the enemy, wrote the famous general, the greater the potential for victory.

Knowledge of the enemy is vital in many spheres in life. Politicians certainly make use of it. It’s useful in business, and it is absolutely a prerequisite in the sporting world. What we want to do today is apply this concept to the Christian life. As we’ve seen in our study in the book of Judges, Christians have an enemy—and, as our friend Pogo reminded us, that enemy is us. One of the most stubborn and persistent enemies we face is what the Bible calls “the flesh,” the seat of sin. As believers in Jesus Christ we have a new spirit. We are born of God; we are indwelt with God himself. Yet we have the same old body; the same old smelly flesh will be with us until the day we go home to be with the Lord. We are new creatures in Christ, but we still have this hangover in Adam, so to speak. We’re prone to listen to its voice; we’re tempted to walk in its ways. But, if we can learn to understand how the flesh operates, and if we can discern the patterns and cycles of sin in our life—if we can understand the enemy—then, the greater our potential for victory will be.

Today we’re going to look at what we could call the summation of the entire book of Judges. We will find this in 2:6–3:6. (Last week we looked at the preamble, 1:1–2:5.) Chapter 3 verse 7 through the end of chapter 16 forms the main body of the book, and this is where we encounter the thirteen judges; while chapters 17–21 form the appendix. The appendix is not actually chronological, yet it gives a close-up look at the moral and spiritual decline of the nation of Israel during the time of the Judges. Our study will be in two parts. First, we’ll observe the pattern of sin among the nation, and then, God’s response to Israel’s disobedience. Judges 2:6–19,

**When Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land. And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the LORD which He had done for Israel. Then Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of one hundred and ten. And they buried him in the territory of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. And all that generation**

**also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel. Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the Lord to anger. So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroath. And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed. Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them. And yet they did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as their fathers. And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them. But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways. (2:6–19, NASB)**

Here we find that the cycle of sin breaks down into four specific stages. The first stage is apostasy. Verse 11: “The sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals.” They forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtaroath. This phrase marks the transition, the bookmark for the entire text. It’s repeated six more times in the narrative, and thus we could say that it forms the outline for chapters 3–16. We have already seen that several things influenced this apostasy. First, Israel grew complacent—they did not drive their enemies out of the land. They had enjoyed great victories while Joshua was alive and leading them, but now a new generation was in charge and they failed to drive the enemies out of the land.

The second thing that influenced their apostasy was neglect: “There arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD.” We learned last week that each generation must enter into battle and capture territory for themselves. Israel could not rest upon the victory or suc-

cess of their predecessors. They could not inherit the faith; they had to enter into battle themselves. God has no grandchildren. He has sons and daughters, yes, but no grandchildren. Israel, we read, “forsook” the Lord. They left, they deserted the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the Canaanite gods of their enemies. Israel’s relationship with God was not strong enough to counter the influence of these people whom they allowed to live in their land. This is why God wanted them to drive them out completely.

We suffer from the same problem, don’t we? As the hymn says, we are “prone to wander.” We allow our relationship with God slip. We forget about him. We stop praying. We stop reading the Word. We stop worshipping regularly and hearing the scriptures taught. Slowly, we begin to forget God. That is when we begin to become influenced by the gods around us, and that is when we start to worship them. They may not be the Baals and the Ashtaroth, but they are idols nevertheless; idols like money, power, ambition. Like the nation of Israel we fall into apostasy. Instead of worshipping our heavenly Father we begin to worship idols.

What caused this to happen to Israel? It was because they thought they were secure from sin and temptation. This is what happens to us, too. When we think we are strong, then we are at our weakest. Proverbs says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (16:18). Pride goes before a fall. Israel had had great victories under Joshua. They had defeated 31 kings! They thought they were safe and secure, but it was at this very point that they became prideful and started doing what was right in their own eyes. This was what led them into apostasy. I have learned that I am most vulnerable to sin after God has given me a victory. It’s when I finish teaching and I am tempted to say, “At last, now I can relax. I fought these enemies, now, rather than serving, I can be served. I can let down and do whatever I want.” Following a victory is when we tend to forget God and leave ourselves vulnerable to sin. Thus the first stage in the cycle of sin is apostasy.

The second stage is servitude, or slavery. Verse 14: “He sold them into the hands of their enemies.” Israel became a slave of their enemies. God would make sure of that. He would sell them and deliver them over into the hands of the Canaanites. Forgetting God and not driving out the enemy leads to idolatry, and idolatry leads to slavery. Three times in the first chapter of the book of Romans, Paul repeats the phrase “God gave them over” when he is referring to the natural consequences of people’s sin. He puts this even more graphically later, in Romans 6:16, “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?” The fact is, we cannot decide to sin just once. Have you ever tried to eat just one potato chip? If you try to sin just once, you will enter into slavery. Sin begins to take control of your life. It happened with Israel and it will happen with us. We become slaves to sin—restricted, confined, limited.

Notice what the text says here: “God gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them.” This is exactly what happens when we become slaves to sin. We are plundered, robbed of our sense of well-being and joy. Our time is wasted, frittered away. We don’t enjoy relationships

with our spouses, our families or friends because we’re caught up in bondage, in slavery to sin.

Thus we come to the third stage in the cycle of sin, and that is supplication. The nation became “severely distressed” (v.15). Later on, we will see that it is at this point that they cried out to God. This was what David did, as we read in Psalm 32:3-4,

**When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away**

**Through my groaning all day long.**

**For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me;**

**My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.**

When sin has a hammer-lock on us, we grow “severely distressed.” It’s as if God puts us in a full Nelson until we’re willing to cry “Uncle!” Sometimes we have to be in a lot of pain before we’re willing to give up and look to God. This third stage, therefore, is when we become so miserable that we cry out to God.

Finally, the fourth stage is salvation. Verse 16: “Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them.” These thirteen judges were not magistrates, as judges are in our modern society. Rather, in this context they were leaders, rulers, deliverers. It was they who led the nation to victory, overthrowing enemies that held the nation in slavery. A judge not only ruled over the whole nation, but over a territory, a tribe, or a group of tribes. This is why, as we will see, some of their tenure in leadership overlaps.

In this fourth stage we learn two important truths. First, just as Israel could not deliver themselves from bondage, so we, too, cannot deliver ourselves from the power and dominion of sin. The flesh is too strong; sin is too controlling. Just like Israel, we need a deliverer. God, of course, has provided that deliverer for us: His name is Jesus. Matthew writes, “You shall call his name Jesus, for it is he who will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). And Paul says, “For he delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). The judges are a type of Christ. They picture how Christ delivers his own.

And secondly, God is faithful to his covenant. He does not leave us or forsake us. We may desert God to serve an idol, but God never leaves us. If a friend or relative crosses us just one time, we are tempted to write them off, but God does not do that. He is merciful and compassionate. Our text says, “The LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them.” (2:18.) He is always there, ready to deliver us from the bondage of sin.

Parents grow to understand this attribute of God when they see their children hurting. Children, especially teenagers, can frustrate and cause their parents to grow weary. My 14-year-old daughter and I have all the normal conflicts of a parent and teenager—probably more than normal. We know how to push each other’s buttons, and we do. Last week, she broke her leg playing soccer, and as I drove her to the clinic, seeing her completely helpless and in so much pain, suddenly none of that conflict mattered. Her groaning moved me to a sense of pity. It pains me to see her limited, not being able to enjoy the sport she loves, not being able to go on the high school ski trip next week. When I took her to the x-ray room at the clinic, she couldn’t even move into one position, so I held the photo-

plate because I didn't want her to have to move and experience any more pain than was necessary. I realized that I would do anything for her. I would gladly have traded places with her. I would have taken the broken leg if I could so that she could be free, but I could not. But that is exactly what God did for us. He took our place. He died on the cross that we might not be limited or restricted. He died to free us from the vice-like grip that sin holds on our lives. God wants to set us free!

But, for Israel, victory and deliverance was followed by tragedy, as we see in verses 17-19. God would raise up a judge, and yet after the judge died, the nation would act more corruptly than their fathers in following other gods, once more "doing what was right in their own eyes." This cycle repeats itself time and time again in the book of Judges, and each time the apostasy is more corrupt, the slavery lasts longer, the bondage to sin more pronounced.

The same can hold true for us. When the problem goes away, when we start trusting in ourselves again and doing what is right in our own eyes, then we think we can coast. If we don't deal with the root problems of sin in our lives, however, if we deal with the symptoms only, then sin returns and the pattern repeats itself all over again. And, as was the case with Israel, each time the cycle can grow more intense, more severe. The more entrenched sin becomes, the more difficult it is for us to remove.

Lately, I have begun to notice weeds growing in my driveway. Each day I drive up it seems there are more and more of them. If I don't begin to do a little weeding soon, eventually it's going to take a concerted effort as weeds will have taken control of the yard. It's the same with sin. If we allow it to grow, it will take over more and more of our lives. The longer we wait, the more difficult it will be to root it out. If we merely deal with the symptoms and not the basic problems, then the cycle will repeat itself over and over again. This is the pattern of sin. Can you identify with it? We forget God; we sin and become a slave to sin; then, when we've had enough, we cry out to God; and finally, God delivers us and brings salvation.

It's easy to see how this pattern operates in practice. Take resentment, for example. If you allow resentment to live in your life, sooner or later you will forget God; you will walk in the flesh, and sin. Perhaps you will express your resentment in anger toward someone. This unchecked anger will take control of your life; it will dominate you and hold you captive. You become a slave to your emotions, and you are miserable. You cry out to God, and he is faithful to deliver you through the work of Jesus Christ. But if you do not deal with the root problem of the resentment, sooner or later you will forget God once again; you will walk in the flesh, and whole pattern will be repeated.

Take sexual sin. If you allow lust to live in your life, then, one day when you are weak, you will forget God and walk in the flesh. Your sin will manifest itself in pornography, or sexual immorality, or lust, and it will gain control of you and hold you in slavery. You will become addicted to someone or something, and you will feel miserable. You cry out to the Lord, and he is faithful to deliver you. But, if you don't deal with the lust that's in your heart, then the pattern will be repeated and the second time will be worse than the first.

All of us are addicted to someone or something. The

flesh is addictive! It may be alcohol, drugs, sex, power, or food. We can be addicted to another person if we are seeking our sense of approval or acceptance from that person. We can be addicted to controlling other people; and if we don't have someone to control in our life, we're miserable. We can become enslaved to television, to eating disorders. Our flesh is very addictive. When you think about it, it is easy to see the patterns that each of us develop in our flesh.

Now the question is, can these patterns be broken? Can this cycle be stopped? The Simon and Garfunkel song lamented, "Like a rat in a maze, the path before me lies, / And the pattern never alters until the rat dies." Are we destined to slavery? No! The Bible says that these patterns of sin and addiction can be broken. Paul writes in Romans 6:2, "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" The rat died! No longer does your flesh have to control your life. Once we come to Christ we are no longer under the power and the dominion of sin. That relationship has been severed. The truth has set us free. Now when sin tells us what to do, we no longer have to do it. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death," says Paul (Rom. 8:2). Galatians says, "If we walk by the Spirit we will not carry out the desires of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). And again, Romans 6:12-13 says, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God." The good news is that this pattern, these addictions, can be broken.

"How does all this work out?" you ask. Let me suggest three things. This is a good place to start. First, we need to figure out the various patterns in our lives. That's not hard to do if we're willing to look. We've repeated them so many times they're like second nature. We need to know ourselves—to know our moods, know where the ruts are dug, analyze what triggers or stimulates our flesh. We should know our physical makeup, for example. Are we a morning or an evening person? The flesh is boring and repetitive; it does the same thing every time.

Secondly, we must realize that knowing the pattern is not enough. We cannot deliver ourselves; we cannot do this in our own strength. Oh, we might have success for a time, but eventually it's going to crop up again. Remember the warning given on the screen following the television stunt specials: "Don't try this on your own. Though it may look easy it's very dangerous. This should only be attempted by a trained professional."

Thirdly, as we stop trusting in ourselves and start trusting in God, then we can start having victory. As we recognize these patterns, and realize that we cannot deliver ourselves, the Holy Spirit illuminates our mind and, as it were, freezes the action. We stand there at the brink of the cycle and the Spirit gives us time to think about it. Has that ever happened to you? The older you grow in the Lord, it seems, the more time you have and the clearer the choice becomes about what is going to take place. The Spirit, in effect, lets you play through the tape of what's going to occur. You put the tape in the VCR and watch what happens. You don't have to watch the whole thing; you just fast-forward to the end because you've seen the tape so many times.

Suddenly, the Spirit presents us with a choice. We don't have the power to do, but we have the power to choose. And the Spirit makes it clear that we have a choice. We can choose to walk in the flesh and experience the cycle of sin again, or we can choose to walk in the Spirit and do what is pleasing to God and joyful for us. Then it's time to take a step of faith, believing that God will provide the resources and strength to overcome. And, as you take that step of faith, that's exactly what God does. It is then that we are freed from the power of sin. We have said no to the flesh and yes to the Spirit. Perhaps this is a bit simplistic, but I think that is how we can start to break down these patterns in our lives. If we know the enemy, and how he works, the greater is our potential for victory. Through the grace and strength of our Deliverer, Jesus Christ, we have the hope of breaking these patterns.

Now in the second part of our text we will look at God's response to Israel's disobedience. As each judge died, the nation would forsake the Lord again. They would begin to serve the Baals, returning again to stage one in the cycle. Verse 20:

**So the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He said, "Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and has not listened to My voice, I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will keep the way of the LORD to walk in it as their fathers did, or not." So the LORD allowed those nations to remain, not driving them out quickly; and He did not give them into the hand of Joshua. Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to test Israel by them (that is, all who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan; only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly). These nations are: the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath. And they were for testing Israel, to find out if they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers through Moses. (2:20-3:4)**

God is saying to Israel, "I'm not going to drive any more of these enemies out from your land. You didn't drive them out, so I'm going to let them live. I have a two-fold purpose in doing this. First, it is in order to test you to see if you will keep my ways." This was a reminder of Deuteronomy 8:2: "And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not." God allowed the enemies to live in the land to test Israel to see what was in their heart, to see if they would obey him.

Secondly, God allowed some enemies to remain so that the nation might learn how to make war, as previous generations had done. God wanted to see if Israel would confront these enemies, take them on and learn how to do battle against them.

The same is true for believers. The flesh hangs around

for the same two-fold purpose: to test us, and to help us learn how to make war against it. Now there are some things that God might remove supernaturally. This happened to me when I first became a Christian. Suddenly, just like that, they were gone. And there are some habits and patterns that, as we mature in Christ, we'll naturally grow out of. But there are other things in our flesh that we may well have to battle until the day we die. That's hard for us to accept, but it can be a good thing. For instance, these enemies reveal our heart. Every time we are confronted with sin and temptation we're made aware of how we're doing with God as that relationship is brought to the forefront of our minds. Hopefully, when we face these sins and temptations, we're driven back to God on our knees, not because we're afraid of being a slave, but because we love and appreciate him.

A second thing these enemies do is teach us how to fight. We're to learn to hate evil and sin the way God does, and to love holiness the way he does. So God wants each one of us to become a warrior against sin. In this war we cannot be pacifists or conscientious objectors. We can't pack our bags and go to Canada. If we do, we'll just take our flesh with us and the enemy will be waiting for us.

There's no "neutral" in the Christian life. If we're not taking on new territory, we're losing ground. If we're not going forward, we're going backward. God designed it that way. We have to keep battling the flesh so that we might learn how to be a warrior and further our relationship and our dependence upon him. The weeds don't go away completely because God wants us to keep them under control. The temptations don't go away completely because he wants us to be warriors. I know that some of the areas that I struggle with have been around for a long time. Some patterns became entrenched in my youth, before I became a Christian. When I'm 80 years old, my flesh is going to look the same as when I was 8 or 18 or 28. If I choose to walk in the flesh, it's going to be the same result. It's not curable. The only cure is to choose not to walk in the flesh, and to walk in the Spirit. And the more I choose to walk in the Spirit the less I will experience the enslavement of the flesh.

This then is the cycle, the pattern of sin: apostasy, servitude, supplication, salvation. If we don't deal with the root problems, the cycle will repeat itself over and over. We will face these enemies of our flesh as long as we have the flesh. But God wants us to be warriors. There's no easy way out. We are going to fail, we are going to get clobbered a lot, but God says, "Get back up and get back into the fight. I'm going to deliver you. I will get you home. I will finish what I began in your life."

The good news is that God has raised up a Deliverer. If we are willing to take a hard look at the patterns in our own lives; if we are willing to trust in the power and the strength of this Deliverer, Jesus Christ; and if we are willing to walk in the Spirit and not walk in the flesh, then each and every one of us can and will experience a victorious life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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# THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

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Judges 3:7-31  
Fourth Message  
John Hanneman  
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Stories about underdogs are always very popular. When an unknown, unlikely, and overmatched individual goes up against the big guys and wins, we all take pleasure in the accomplishment, don't we? I think we love these stories because we see ourselves as underdogs. It gives us hope and motivation if someone like us has a great victory. Today, we will look at three underdogs in the book of Judges. I have called these three heroes "The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly." No, we're not going to watch a Clint Eastwood western. We're going to study the scriptures, although our text will remind you somewhat of a "spaghetti" western.

In our study in Judges up to this point we have looked at the negative side of this narrative. Here is the verse that sets the theme so far: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." (17:6.) Joshua had led the nation into the land, defeating 31 kings in the process, but in Judges, Israel suffered great failure. The people did not drive the enemies out of the land. Another generation had arisen that "did not know the Lord nor the work he had done." The nation experienced this cycle of slavery time and time again.

But there is a positive side to this book, too. God raised up judges, men and women of faith, unknown and unlikely heroes, who led Israel out of bondage. Today, we will examine the stories of three of these men. Chapter 3, verse 7:

**And the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, so that He sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years. And when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died.**

**Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the LORD. And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek; and he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees. And the sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.**

**But when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for them, Ehud the son of Gera,**

**the Benjamite, a left-handed man. And the sons of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab. And Ehud made himself a sword which had two edges, a cubit in length; and he bound it on his right thigh under his cloak. And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. And it came about when he had finished presenting the tribute, that he sent away the people who had carried the tribute. But he himself turned back from the idols which were at Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." And he said, "Keep silence." And all who attended him left him. And Ehud came to him while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said, "I have a message from God for you." And he arose from his seat. And Ehud stretched out his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly. The handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the refuse came out. Then Ehud went out into the vestibule and shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and locked them.**

**When he had gone out, his servants came and looked, and behold, the doors of the roof chamber were locked; and they said, "He is only relieving himself in the cool room." And they waited until they became anxious; but behold, he did not open the doors of the roof chamber. Therefore they took the key and opened them, and behold, their master had fallen to the floor dead.**

**Now Ehud escaped while they were delaying, and he passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah. And it came about when he had arrived, that he blew the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was in front of them. And he said to them, "Pursue them, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hands." So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan opposite Moab, and did not allow anyone to cross. And they struck down at that time about ten thousand Moabites, all robust and valiant men; and no one escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land was undisturbed for eighty years.**

**And after him came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel. (3:7-31, NASB)**

Here again we encounter the four stages in the cycle of sin, which we discussed last week. Apostasy, we learned, is the first stage. Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. The second stage is servitude: God sold

them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim (literally, “Cushan of double wickedness,” the king of Mesopotamia). Israel served him eight years. The third stage is supplication: Israel cried out to the Lord. The fourth is salvation: the Lord raises up a deliverer. Othniel, Caleb’s nephew, is the deliverer in this case. Caleb, as you recall, was one of the spies who went into the land when Moses led the nation out of Egypt. Both Caleb and Joshua were all for entering the land, but the rest of the people responded negatively. So these two men remained 40 years in the wilderness, until another generation arose and took Israel into the land. In chapter 1, Caleb promised his daughter Achsah to the man who would take the city of Kiriath-sepher. Othniel took that city, and married Caleb’s daughter. So this man married into a good family, we would say. And he himself demonstrated a willingness to take on new ground—a strong spiritual characteristic. Othniel, therefore, is the “good” in our story of the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The second judge we encounter is Ehud, a very interesting character. Not too many preachers would choose to preach on Ehud. Who would want to read that text? Here again we see the cycle of sin. First, the apostasy: the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord (v. 12). Then, servitude: God sold them into the hands of Eglon, king of Moab. Moab was the son of Lot by an incestuous relationship with his eldest daughter. (The Moabites lived across the Jordan to the south of Israel.) Israel served Eglon for 18 years. Then, once again, we see supplication (v. 15): They cried out to the Lord. And, finally, salvation: God raised up a deliverer named Ehud. This deliverer came to Gilgal to present his tribute to Eglon, and killed him in the process. Ehud blew a trumpet, and all of Israel joined in the fight as he led a rout of the Moabites.

Ehud, of course, is the “ugly” in our story this morning. It would be safe to say that you would not want to display his poster in your son’s bedroom, next to that of Will Clark. But Ehud is a tremendous character, really. He was a son of Gera, a Benjamite. We also know some things about his make-up. He must have been a prominent individual because he was given the responsibility of taking the tribute to present to Eglon. And he must have been courageous, because he was willing to go it alone. Unlike the Terminator or Rambo, he didn’t go in with a lot of heavy artillery. All he took was a double-edged, 13-inch dagger. Ehud was a military strategist. He plotted to kill Eglon, to get him alone, to tantalize him with something very special. And he had an escape route planned. Then, he was able to rally all of Israel. Instead of attacking the city he went down to the Jordan because he knew the Moabites were going to retreat across the river into their own country. There is where he headed them off, and the Israelites killed 10,000 Moabites, all robust, mighty men.

It’s interesting to note the several references in this text to the fact that Ehud was left-handed (literally, “hindered in the right hand”). Twice the text says that he put the dagger on his right side because he was left-handed. Ehud, we know, came from the tribe of Benjamin, a name that means “son of my right hand”—a term of strength. But the text is clear: Ehud was left-handed. He was “hindered in the right hand,” meaning, he was weak and physically limited. He was an awkward man—“gauche,” “left-handed,” as the French would say. Something that is wicked or evil we call sinister, which is the Latin word for the left hand. Someone with skill and ability is called dexterous, which

means right-handed in Latin. Ehud was a left-hander; he was handicapped.

Now the third judge we meet in our text is Shamgar. He is mentioned in only one verse, but we can learn some things about him. Shamgar is the “bad” in our account. His father’s name was Anath, which is the name of a Canaanite god of sex and war. It’s likely that Shamgar was not an Israelite at all. He may well have been a Canaanite. His weapon, an oxgoad, a long handled, pointed instrument tipped with metal, indicates that he was probably a peasant and this was the only weapon available to him. His enemy was the Philistines, but he had the same mission as Othniel and Ehud, and he also saved Israel.

Thus we have the setting for our text this morning. We’ve already seen how relevant the book of Judges is to life today. Just as Israel faced enemies in the land, we, too, face the enemies of sin and the flesh when we become believers in Jesus Christ and enter into the land—the Spirit-filled life in Christ. And, just like Israel, we fail to drive the enemies out of the land. We forget God, we serve idols and become the slaves of sin. And finally, just as Israel had deliverers and judges, we, too, have a Deliverer in the person of Jesus Christ to save us and free us from the bondage of sin.

We want to examine three specific areas of application. The first has to do with sin. You can’t read the book of Judges without talking about sin. There are some things here that give us added perspectives and dimensions on what we’ve talked about already. For instance, sin can grow to an obese state. We see this in Eglon, the king of Moab. If you let sin go unchecked, it just grows, and it can become obese. And sin is ugly. I think the story of Ehud is given to us for shock value. We can justify sin, we can paint it in pretty colors, we can deny its importance or relevance, but when we look at it for what it is, it’s just plain ugly. And it’s not easy to kill. It doesn’t go away by ignoring it. It must be faced head-on—like Ehud takes on Eglon—even if it’s gory and disgusting. When you want to weed out sin from your life, you have to get down and dirty, so to speak. You’ve got to get your work clothes on. You can’t deal with it wearing white gloves.

We also learn that people are content to stay enslaved for a long period of time. When Israel first came under bondage, it was eight years before they cried out to the Lord. The next time it took 18 years. We have to ask ourselves, why did they wait so long? Why do we wait so long when we become addicted to patterns of sin? Perhaps we’re afraid or ashamed to face the reality or the ugliness of these patterns and addictions. Maybe we feel we’re going to lose something we enjoy too much. Or maybe we’re content to remain where we are and our misery becomes comfortable. But we have a Redeemer, a Savior, a Deliverer whose name is Jesus, and he saves us from the dominion and power of sin in our lives. Whether it’s been eight years or 18 years, we can cry out to the Lord today. We can turn away from sin and he will begin to free us from our enslavement to patterns and addictions.

Then we see the result of coming to Christ, of turning away from our idols and having him deliver us. The result is rest and peace. When Othniel judged Israel, there was rest in the land for 40 years. After Ehud judged Israel, there was rest in the land for 80 years. “For the wages of sin is death,” says Paul, “but the free gift of God is eternal

life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Sin makes us miserable; it robs us of our sense of joy and well-being. But God restores our life in Christ and gives us rest from our enslavement to sin.

A few weeks ago, a man called me on the phone to inquire about getting married at Peninsula Bible Church. I asked him if he and his fiancée were both Christians, and he said he was, but she was not. We talked about that for a little bit, and we were even able to talk about some of the patterns that had developed in his life and in his relationship with this woman. Finally, I said, “I have to be honest with you. I cannot be involved in your marriage because of what the scriptures say about Christians marrying non-believers.” I could tell that it was a real blow to him. A couple of weeks ago we had lunch together, and he told me that he had called off the marriage and was in the process of severing the relationship completely. He had begun to see the patterns that had developed in his life over the last few years, and how he had become dependent on women. In this relationship he was dependent upon her, not God. She controlled his life. So for the first time he said no to the flesh, no to what he thought he wanted to do, and yes to God. He was learning about God again. He was back in church, he was growing, and becoming dependent upon God. He’s in the process of being delivered and being made whole. His face was radiant, as he kept saying over and over again, “This is a very difficult thing for me to do, but it feels good.” In other words, there was rest; rest had entered the land once again. He had said no to the flesh; he had said yes to God. After years of enslavement he was experiencing rest.

The second area I want to talk about is the potential we have in our relationship with God, despite what might seem like an apparent lack of credentials. In our text we encounter at least two unlikely heroes; men who were not that well known, who didn’t have a lot of credentials. In Shamgar’s case, our information is limited to one verse. We encounter these people all throughout the book of Judges. (Samson, the judge who had the most going for him, is the one who messed up the most.) What we have here are underdogs, obscure people, men and women whom God chose to use to his glory. Granted, Othniel came from a good family. It can be a very good thing to grow up in a Christian home and have a Christian heritage; God can use you there. But Ehud is a no-name. He is weak and limited. Shamgar wasn’t even an Israelite. He, too, was a nobody, and yet God used him. David was an unlikely hero. Samuel looked at all the brothers in the family, and David was the last one—but he was the one God wanted to use.

Jesus was a most unlikely hero. Isaiah says that “He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He had no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hid their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (Isa. 53:2-3). Yet Jesus accomplished the single most important act in history: He died for our sins, thus becoming the greatest hero of all. No one recognized him when he came upon the scene. There was no red carpet, no fanfare. An unlikely hero.

Now here we are in Christ. We, too, might feel like un-

derdogs; that we don’t have the right credentials. Our family background is not good enough, we think. We feel we’re too ordinary. But our text tells us that God can use us in amazing ways. This room is filled with Othniels and Ehuds and Shamgars. It doesn’t matter what your family background is. It doesn’t matter if you’re limited in some capacity. God sees you as very much more than ordinary. He takes each one of us from our different backgrounds, with our different talents and our different gifts, and he molds us uniquely into a representation of himself. There’s no pattern, no mold. We don’t have to look alike. He uses us, each one of us, in unique ways. And God is excited about how he wants to use you. Our own Judy Squier was honored last November in Washington at a special dinner to honor the handicapped. Maybe you saw the article in this month’s “Focus on the Family” magazine. Judy was born without legs, and she has been walking on artificial limbs since she was 10 years old. When she was born, the obstetrician told her father, “Your daughter is going to live, I’m sorry to say.” But at 10, Judy was able to ride a bicycle that her father had modified. At 16, she was able to drive a car that had been equipped with hand controls. Social workers told her not to bother thinking about college, but that made her even more determined. She graduated from the University of Illinois with undergraduate and graduate degrees. Now she and her husband have three beautiful daughters. At the dinner in Washington, she said, “I am convinced that this old world needs handicapped people. God designed it that way. Handicapped people make a unique contribution that cannot be synthesized.”

To me, this is the miracle of Christianity, the miracle of Christ. We live in a world that loves the miraculous and the dramatic. It was the same in Jesus’ day. Those who wanted to be healed thronged to him. They wanted him to heal them and cast out demons, and he did that at times. He does some of that today, too. But to me, the real miracle is when God takes someone ordinary, someone just like you and me, and uses him or her to his glory. He doesn’t heal all the problems or the handicaps at first. The miracle is, he uses us when we’re limited. This is how he used Ehud and Shamgar. He takes a life that the world discards and uses it to his glory. Paul says in 1 Cor 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.” Sometimes it takes only one person to motivate many to righteousness. That’s what happened in Ehud’s case. He was willing to go on the attack first, but then he blew the trumpet and all of Israel joined in the battle, routing the enemy.

There may be just one person here this morning who wants to influence his or her generation for Jesus Christ. We live in similar times to the book of Judges, don’t we? Everyone “does what is right in his own eyes.” The cover story in *Time* magazine last week was “The Fraying of America.” We’re coming apart at the seams. Candidates for public office are put on trial by the tabloids. We even have ticket scalping at rape trials. But then there are the Ehuds, the Shamgars and the Othniels. You’ve got to love them! These men would make the All-Madden Football Team. They get down and dirty. Whatever God wanted them to do is exactly what they wanted to do, using whatever God gave them. Do you believe that about yourself? Do you believe that God can use you in these ways, that

you're valuable and important to him and that you can make a difference?

A little boy was heard talking to himself as he walked across the backyard, baseball cap in place, ball and bat in his hands. "I am the greatest hitter in the world," he said. He threw the ball up, swung and missed. "Strike one," he said. But again, he told himself, "I am the greatest hitter ever." He threw the ball up again, swung and missed. He looked at the ball, and at the bat, and said, "I'm the greatest hitter that ever lived." He threw the ball up again and swung and missed a third time. This time he said, "Wow! Strike three! What a pitcher! I'm the greatest pitcher in the world!"

God thinks you're great at something. It may not be what you envisioned, but you're great in his eyes. He sees your heart; he knows what you want to do. He will take you, with your limitations and weaknesses, and use you to his glory.

The third area of application (and it falls closely on the heels of the second) concerns the resources to do what God wants us to accomplish. The thing that allows us to have victory, to serve God and to be used by God, is not our own strength, or our list of credentials, it's our faith in God. We're not "adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves; our adequacy is from God," as Paul reminds us (2 Cor 3:5). The Spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel, says our text, and the Moabites were given into the hand of Ehud. Shamgar used what was available to him, which was an oxgoad. But he used it, trusting God for the results. God asks us to do the same, to use whatever he has given us, and then trust him. The Spirit that came upon Othniel is the same Spirit that lives in you and me. In the church of Jesus Christ we don't need more knowledge, more programs or more degrees. What we need is simple faith and trust in God. We need to believe that God is alive today and that as we step out in faith he, not us, will empower us and strengthen us. Hannah waited a long time to have a son. Through many years she prayed to God. God at last remembered her, and Sam-

uel was born. Hannah exulted, "He keeps the feet of His godly ones, but the wicked ones are silenced in darkness; for not by might shall a man prevail" (1 Sam. 2:9).

Last week, I was at a high school meeting where parents were up in arms about a change in the high school curriculum—and for some very good reasons. One man said, "I'm the vice president of a research and development firm, and I want the best curriculum for my child." Another said, "I'm the president of my own company, and I have to have the best for my child." There were a lot of good arguments raised, but as I sat there my heart began to sink. The pressure on our children is intense. If you don't get the right classes in the seventh grade, you can be prohibited from going to certain schools. The push for degrees, credentials and requirements is almost overwhelming in our society, especially in this valley. This is how the world views effectiveness and importance. But it's not so in the kingdom of God. What God requires is faith and faith alone. This is why he chooses the weak and the limited—because he can't use the proud. It's only when we become weak that we are willing to trust in him, and then he can use us. The people who are handicapped and limited are rich in faith. They have the great resources in God made available to them. This is why he uses the weak, like Othniel and Ehud and Shamgar, to topple the proud. Hudson Taylor said, "God is sufficient for God's work . . . God chose me because I was weak enough. God does not do his great works by large committees. He trains someone to be quiet enough and little enough, and then he uses him."

Our text this morning encourages us in three ways. First, we need to be willing to confront areas of sin in our lives, even if they are ugly. When we do this, we can enter into God's rest. Second, we need to see how valuable we are in God's eyes. No matter how weak or limited we might feel, we are capable of great things for God. And third, we need to remember that it is unreserved faith in the strength and grace of our living God that will enable us to do what he wants us to do. We may be weak, but he is strong.

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## AN INCREDIBLE WOMAN

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Judges 4:1-24  
Fifth Message  
John Hanneman  
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The Women's Movement has been with us for 20 years or so, and all would agree that women have made dramatic advances during that span in every sphere of life. According to Naomi Wolf, the author of the new book, *The Beauty Myth*, however, women still feel they are judged primarily on their appearance. Studies indicate that women's self-esteem is still closely connected to how they look. Ms. Wolf writes: "More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition that we have ever had before, but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers."

In our study in Judges today, we will encounter Deborah, a wonderful woman of God. Obviously, her view of herself was not shaped by Hollywood. She had a clear understanding on how valuable she was in the sight of God, and she had a biblical perspective of how God wanted to use her to do marvelous things. Deborah, therefore, is a great model for us today in a world where, despite all the advances made by women, many are still confused about their role.

Our study is in chapter 4 of Judges, the narrative of Deborah and Barak, and the problems they faced in Israel. Next week, we will look at chapter 5, a poem written by Deborah, recounting this story in verse form.

**Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. And 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. And 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. (4:1-3, NASB)**

Once again, we note the cycle of sin in Israel. As we have already seen, the first stage is apostasy. The sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot God and served the Baals. This phrase, "The sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD," is our transition, our bookmark phrase, and this is the fourth time we have encountered it in our studies. It seems Israel had not learned anything from their previous lessons. The next stage of this cycle is servitude: The Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin ("enlightened one"), the king of Canaan. He was headquartered at Hazor, a large city and the capital of the northern Canaanite confederacy, in what was northern Israel. It's interesting to note that Joshua had defeated Jabin's grandfather and burned Hazor to the ground 100 years earlier. But Israel had let their enemies live in the land, and these people had rebuilt the city and grown strong once again.

Jabin's commander was Sisera, and his strength is de-

scribed as having 900 iron chariots. This man probably was a Philistine who had come from Greece. He was a commander at Harosheth-hagoyim, meaning "smiths of the Gentiles." The Philistines had learned how to work with iron, and they maintained a monopoly in this field. Whenever anyone wanted anything made out of iron, they had to go to Harosheth-hagoyim to get it. Israelites who wanted to buy an iron tool, or even to have farm implements sharpened, had to travel to Harosheth-hagoyim. This was how the Canaanites kept the nation enslaved. Thus Jabin and Sisera oppressed Israel for 20 years.

Chapter 5 describes this oppression and gives a picture of how bad things were in Israel.

**In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath,  
In the days of Jael, the highways were deserted,  
And travelers went by roundabout ways.  
The peasantry ceased, they ceased in Israel,  
Until I, Deborah arose,  
Until I arose, a mother in Israel.  
New gods were chosen;  
Then war was in the gates.  
Not a shield or a spear was seen  
Among forty thousand in Israel. (5:6-8)**

The highways were deserted, there was no communication, no travel. The peasantry had disappeared, which meant there was nothing produced on the land. Everybody from the country had moved to the cities for safety. There was no loyalty to Yahweh. New gods were chosen in hopes that they might deliver Israel from this oppression. There was no safety; there was war in the gates. There was no defense; no spear was seen among 40,000 Israelites. The two names mentioned, Shamgar and Jael, were not even Israelites. There was no leadership in the nation until Deborah arose. Life was fruitless, barren and bankrupt. Jesus said that everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin, and this was what Israel was experiencing—slavery under the hand of Jabin and Sisera.

After 20 years of oppression, the nation cried out to the Lord, and the Lord raised up a judge. Verse 4:

**Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. And 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. (4:4-5)**

Appropriately, the name Deborah means "honey bee," implying that Deborah was a sweet presence in a society that was barren, godless, immoral and decaying. Her way was committed and devoted to the Lord, and the life of God filled her and directed her path. Deborah's role in Israel was both as a prophetess and judge. There are other

prophetesses mentioned in the scriptures. Huldah and Miriam are spoken of in the OT, while Anna and the four daughters of Philip are mentioned in the NT. Deborah sat under a palm tree between Bethel and Ramah. This was the same tree under which Rebekah's nurse, who was also named Deborah, was buried. Now in order to get from the north, where all the trouble was centered, to where Deborah sat under this palm tree, one would have to pass through Shiloh, the spiritual center of leadership in the nation, where the ark of the covenant was located. One would think that in times of oppression and trouble, people would go to Shiloh to receive wisdom and insight, but they obviously bypassed Shiloh and came to this woman of God who sat under a palm tree in order to hear the voice of God.

Now when Israel cries out to God, Deborah has a plan. Verse 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. And 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.'" Then Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." And she said, "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." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali together to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up with him; Deborah also went up with him. (4:6-10)**

Deborah sends for Barak and confronts him with a decision he must make. What she says to him here is really not a statement, it's a question. "Has not the Lord, the God of Israel, commanded you to go up to Mount Tabor and the Lord will give this enemy into your hands?" she asks. In other words, Barak already knew what he was supposed to do. He lived in the very heart of the area under oppression. He had already received a responsibility from God, and now Deborah calls on him to make a decision, to take action, to do what God commanded him to do. She had a clear understanding of her role. Perhaps she wanted to pick up the sword herself and lead the nation of Israel into battle, but she knew that that was not her place. She realized that God wanted a man in leadership against the Canaanites, and this was why she called Barak and was willing to give him her support.

Notice Barak's reluctance. He says to Deborah, "If you will go with me, then I will go. But if you won't go with me, I won't go." Barak was like Moses and Gideon and Jeremiah. He was low in faith. The gas gauge was on empty and he needed the help of another. He did not think he had the resources required for what God wanted him to do. And notice that Deborah does not chastise him, reject him, put him down or rebuke him. She encourages him and tells him, "I will go with you." She says that there will be one limitation or provision, however: "The honor will not be yours on the journey you are about to take. The honor will be with a woman, but I will go with you, Barak,

and I will support you and be by your side." Barak calls Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh and they gather together 10,000 men. The stage is set. "Honey Bee" and "Lightning" are going up against "Enlightened One" with his 900 chariots, for the heavyweight championship of the world! This would be like Cupertino High playing Notre Dame in football!

Verse 11:

**Now Heber the Kenite had separated himself from the Kenites, from the sons of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the oak in Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh.**

**Then they told Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor. And Sisera called together all his chariots, nine hundred iron chariots, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. And Deborah said to Barak, "Arise! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hands; behold, the LORD has gone out before you." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army, with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot. But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not even one was left.**

Now Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And 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. And he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." So she opened a bottle of milk and gave him a drink; then she covered him. And he said to her, "Stand in the doorway of the tent, and it shall be if anyone comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there anyone here?' that you shall say, 'No.'" But 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; for he was sound asleep and exhausted. So he died. And behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." And he entered with her, and behold Sisera was lying dead with the tent peg in his temple.

**So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the sons of Israel. And the hand of the sons of Israel pressed heavier and heavier upon Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin the king of Canaan. (4:11-24)**

Deborah and Barak go to Mount Tabor, located at the end of the Megiddo Valley—Armageddon, in other words, the place where great battles have been fought throughout history. Alexander the Great fought there. So did Napoleon, and General Allenby. Other important battles will be waged there also. At the end of the valley, Mount Tabor rises about 1800 feet above the valley floor. You would think that this might be an advantageous position, a van-

tage point where an army could command the valley floor. But, Israel had become sitting ducks. This was ludicrous. Sisera could bring his 900 chariots, surround Mount Tabor, cut off all Israel's supply lines, and simply wait and starve them out. What an absurd battle plan! Sisera got wind of this rebellion and set out through the valley with his 900 chariots, probably anticipating a great victory.

But suddenly, something amazing happens. In order to understand this we have to turn to chapter 5, verse 19:

**The kings came and fought;  
Then fought the kings of Canaan  
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;  
They took no plunder in silver.  
The stars fought from heaven,  
From their courses they fought against Sisera.  
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,  
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.  
O my soul, march on with strength. (5:19-21)**

As Sisera and his 900 chariots were coming through the valley floor, suddenly the heavens opened. God sent a torrential downpour of rain down on the valley. The River Kishon was a dried up riverbed, but suddenly it sprang to life and water flooded the valley so that the whole area became a sea of mud and water. At this point Deborah tells Barak, "Charge! The Lord has given Sisera into your hands!" So the 10,000 Israelites charged down off the mountaintop. The 900 chariots become bogged down in the mud, and the Canaanites had to abandon them and run for safety. The Israelites followed them as far as Harosheth-hagoyim, and there they destroyed them completely. The chariots were neutralized, and Israel had a great victory. The text says that it was the Lord who did this; faith was what was required of Israel.

In a fitting epilogue, Sisera tries to escape, and he arrives at the tent of Heber, the Kenite. There's peace between Jabin and Heber, so he thinks he's safe. Jael meets him and says, "Come on in and take a little nap." She gives him milk to drink and deceives him through her hospitality. When he falls asleep, we learn that Jael is very adept with a hammer and peg. Deborah's word is fulfilled. The honor did not go to Barak, but to a woman named Jael: "So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan." At the end of chapter 5, the text says that the land was undisturbed for 40 years.

As we have already seen, the book of Judges is rich in spiritual truth. I want to talk about two areas of application today. First, with regard to our enemies. God is able to defeat very powerful enemies in our life, even those that are fortified with iron chariots. There are certain enemies we're willing to take on because we think we can defeat them, but there are others that are so strong we don't even bother because they are fortified with 900 iron chariots. Sitting here this morning are people who are oppressed with enemies. Perhaps the enemy is the pain of a divorce. Perhaps it is the pressure of being a single parent. Perhaps it's the anguish and the hurt of being abused or molested as a child. Perhaps it's loneliness or rejection. Perhaps it's a troubled marriage. But there's a tremendous message of hope in this passage. God can defeat powerful enemies in your life! To do so, he is able to unleash all the forces of creation if necessary. The stars fight from heaven for the cause of our living God. "The LORD," says our text, "has given Sisera into your hands. Behold, the LORD has gone

out before you. On that day, God subdued Jabin and all the Canaanites." Notice that the text is not about what man does. The focus is on what God does when his children step out in faith. Paul says, "Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph." He says also in 2 Corinthians, "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Cor 10:3-4).

God can do amazing things! The question we have to ask ourselves is, "How big is our God?" When we face powerful enemies, the root of our problem is usually not physical, but spiritual. What we need is not an iron smelter, but a living faith in God. Just like Barak, at times we are reluctant to step out in faith. Just like Barak, we do not believe that God can deliver us. But we learn from our text that when we go against our enemies, God sends an encourager, a comforter, in the person of the Holy Spirit, who can lead us and direct us through these battles.

Last week, I heard a young woman share about the journey God had taken her on. She talked about the darkness and the oppression that she had been through her entire childhood, through her teenage years and into her twenties. She shared about how desperately she had tried to be released from this oppression, but that the harder she tried, the more desperate she became. Then she told us how last week, finally, she had given everything over to God. She came to the conclusion that she could not defeat these enemies, so she gave the whole situation over to God. And she told us, through tears of joy, that last week God had broken the chains of her oppression. For the first time in her life she felt freedom from oppression and a closeness to God. The iron chariots can be neutralized! God can defeat enemies that seem invincible.

Our text gives us another area of application, and this has to do with the ministry of men and women. We live in confusing times with respect to the roles of men and women, but God has designed each to have a very valuable ministry, as we have learned from our text. God called Barak to be a leader. Scripture is very clear that God has called men to be leaders in the home, to be leaders in the body of Christ. But oftentimes we are reluctant to do this, as was the case with Barak. Like Barak, men at times lack the spiritual sensitivity and the faith that is required. And some women who are rich in faith will gladly pick up the reins of leadership, if men will allow them to do so. But men: God has called you to be leaders. It's no great honor, it's a responsibility. It's the way God has designed you to function. Now this does not mean you are to be dictators or tyrants. Yours is a high calling—to be shepherds and caretakers in the home and in the church. You are designed to be Christlike in your leadership. You're called to sacrifice, to give up your own wishes in order to take on this responsibility that God has given you. Paul instructs men in 1 Timothy, "I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension" (1 Tim 2:8). This does not come naturally, but it is something that God has called men to do, through his grace.

In addition to the ministry of Barak, our text gives a marvelous, rich picture of Deborah, this woman of God. She models perfectly the text of Proverbs 31—a gifted, talented, capable woman with a deep faith in God. She's a prophetess and a judge, an extremely valuable ministry,

yet she understands that she was not to be the leader in Israel. God had called Barak to that role, and she was content with that. Deborah wanted a man to act on the basis of Scripture and on the basis of faith; she saw her job as being a helper to a man who was reluctant to be a man. She describes herself as a mother in Israel, a nurturer, an encourager, a supporter who could build up the faith in a man.

Even though Deborah and Barak were not married, I think this is a great word for marriage. Marriage is one of the saddest areas of struggle and pain today. Even our own congregation is not immune. Now the root of this problem can often be traced to a lack of leadership and tension over that lack in the home. Men are reluctant to lead, and women really don't want to, but they feel they are forced to. A pattern soon develops. A wife can grow resentful and she begins to nag and criticize. She sees her role as pointing out all the failures in her husband's life. She tells him all the ways he blows it, and he feels pressure to perform. He feels like a failure, so he withdraws and abdicates even more of his leadership. There is nothing more harmful to marriage than this type of behavior. It's absolutely devastating. But this wasn't how Deborah functioned. She saw herself as an encourager, a supporter. She knew there was no limit to the good a woman could do for a man when she saw her role as one of support for his faith and his leadership.

Now we need to deal with this in a godly way, and the way we can begin is to admit that tension over the issue of leadership is a problem. Genesis tells us that, following the fall of Adam and Eve, it's going to be a problem. We need to acknowledge this. Then we need to decide to encourage one another in the roles and ministries that God has given to us, and to regard them as valuable and essential in the sight of God. We need to serve one another, to build up one another so that both men and women will profit from who God designed us to be. We need to work together for the common good. It's interesting that in Hebrews 11, the hall of fame of faith, Barak's name is mentioned and Deborah's is not, although she succeeded in making him a man of faith. So to the men, I say: God has called you to be leaders. It's going to be difficult, but that's your calling. To the women, I say: God has called you to support and encourage the leadership of men, even when there's failure, even when there's disappointment. Do not become negative, but continue to build up and encourage.

Several women in my life have been a great encouragement to me. My grandmother prayed that I would become a Christian. After I came to Christ, I read her Bible and found a list of people she had prayed for. By the time she

died, every one of those people had become believers in Jesus Christ. Shortly after I became a believer I visited the home where she spent her last days. When I entered her little room in the back of the house, I felt the presence of God very powerfully. I knew then that the prayers of this godly woman must have had a great influence on me.

The first Bible study I ever taught came about through the encouragement of a woman I worked with. I was a brand new Christian, and she was much older in the faith than me. One day, she said to me, "Let's start a Bible study." I said, "That's great. Who do you think ought to lead it?" She replied, "I think you should." She supported, encouraged and prayed for me, one who had very little faith.

Another time when I was working as an engineer, the people I worked with developed a very negative attitude towards the project on which we were working. I was so concerned that I wrote a letter to my co-workers to help change the attitude and tell them why work was so frustrating. The letter was very spiritual in nature, as I referred to the curse in the garden after Adam and Eve had sinned. One of the women who was working with me was a Christian. When I showed her the letter, she typed it and passed it around to everybody. I would never have done that; I didn't have that kind of faith. The letter had a very favorable response, but it was all through the ministry of a woman who had faith.

But the woman I owe the most to is my wife of 17 years. She is my best critic. I can't hide anything from her. I'm not the world's greatest leader, but when she supports me and affirms me, the effect on me is unbelievable. There are things I have done that I never could have done without her support and encouragement. I feel there is nothing I could not do if she is for me. Rather than putting me down for something I've failed at, if she supports me and builds me up, it puts wind in my sails and I feel free and rich in God. My wife has a simple faith, but it's a very deep faith, a reservoir I have drawn upon continually over the years.

What a great story, this saga of Deborah and Barak! It is a story of hope and encouragement. Here we see that we have reason to hope although we face strong and fortified enemies. Through the power and grace of God we can defeat enemies in our life that we would not otherwise even think of facing. Further, this story encourages us as men and women to accept the ways God as designed for us to function, both in the home and in the church. May God grant us the insight to see how valuable these ministries are, and the faith to trust him for his design.

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## INCREDIBLE PRAISE

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Judges 5:1-31  
Sixth Message  
John Hanneman  
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Five weeks ago we began this series in the book of Judges on a negative note. We talked about oppression, sin and slavery. Our key verse was this: "In those days there was no king in Israel, and every man did what was right in his own eyes." Israel did not drive the enemies out of the land, and another generation grew up who did not know the Lord nor the deeds that he had done. As a result, the nation began to experience a vicious cycle of sin. But today we will end on a positive note, one of victory, celebration and praise.

Last week we looked at chapter 4, the narrative portion of the story of Deborah and Barak. Jabin, the king of Canaan, and Sisera, with his 900 iron chariots, had oppressed Israel for 20 years. Finally, Israel cried out to the Lord and God raised up a judge named Deborah, a prophetess. She summoned Barak and encouraged him to call upon the nation and lead them against the Canaanites. Ten thousand men responded to the call, and at Mount Tabor, at the end of the Megiddo Valley, they took on the Canaanites and gained a miraculous victory. Our focus this morning, therefore, is praise and thanksgiving. We will look at the song that Deborah offered in thanksgiving for the victory.

Chapter 5, verse 1:

**Then Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying,**

**"That the leaders led in Israel,  
That the people volunteered,  
Bless the LORD!**

**Hear, O kings; give ear, O rulers!**

**I—to the LORD, I will sing,**

**I will sing praise to the LORD, the God of Israel.**

**LORD, when Thou didst go out from Seir,**

**When Thou didst march from the field of Edom,**

**The earth quaked, the heavens also dripped,**

**Even the clouds dripped water.**

**The mountains quaked at the presence of the LORD,**

**This Sinai, at the presence of the LORD, the God of Israel. (5:1-5, NASB)**

Israel responded to the victory in a very public way, lifting up their voices in worship of God. They didn't schedule an appreciation dinner for a month later; they did it on that day. And they sang so that the kings and the rulers of all the nations could hear of what God had done in their midst.

They praised God for two reasons. First, they praised him because the leaders led and the people volunteered. The victory was not just the work of one or two people; it was the work of the entire community. Second, they praised him because he had unleashed all the forces of creation to bring salvation and peace to the land. God had moved across the plain from the south, from the wilderness where he had lived with his people, across from Seir

through the land of Edom, through the Megiddo Valley and right to Mount Tabor. The heavens opened up, and the Kishon river flooded, neutralizing Sisera's 900 chariots. In her song, Deborah compares this presence of the Lord to the way God shook the earth when he delivered the law to Israel on Mount Sinai. God had fought on their behalf and freed them from their oppressors.

As we continue through this we find the story of Deborah and Barak retold in poetic form. First, in verse 6, we have the results of the oppression which Israel was suffering.

**In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath,  
In the days of Jael, the highways were deserted,  
And travelers went by roundabout ways.  
The peasantry ceased, they ceased in Israel,  
Until I, Deborah, arose,  
Until I arose, a mother in Israel.  
New gods were chosen;  
Then war was in the gates.  
Not a shield or a spear was seen  
Among forty thousand in Israel. (5:6-8)**

The highways were deserted, there was no communication, no travel. The "peasantry ceased"; in other words, everybody moved to the cities; there was no agriculture. There was no loyalty to God as new gods were chosen. There was no security because there was war in the city gates. There was no defense, not a single weapon was to be found among 40,000. There was no Israelite leader until Deborah arose in Israel. Shamgar and Athniel are mentioned, but they were not Israelites. Thus we have described the barren and fruitless condition of Israel as a slave to sin. All the joy had been sapped from their life.

But verse 9 is an invitation to rejoice:

**My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel,  
The volunteers among the people;  
Bless the LORD!  
You who ride on white donkeys,  
You who sit on rich carpets,  
And you who travel on the road—sing!  
At the sound of those who divide flocks among the  
watering places,  
There they shall recount the righteous deeds of the  
LORD,  
The righteous deeds for His peasantry in Israel.  
Then the people of the LORD went down to the gates.  
(5:9-11)**

An invitation to rejoice is given because the people volunteered. And the invitation is given to rich and poor, those who have wealth and ride on white donkeys, and those who simply walk in the city streets.

When Deborah and Barak went out to face Sisera, they

called on all of Israel to fight. We discover that some came and some did not. Verse 12:

**Awake, awake, Deborah;  
Awake, awake, sing a song!  
Arise, Barak, and take away your captives, O son of  
Abinoam.**

**Then survivors came down to the nobles;  
The people of the LORD came down to me as warriors.  
From Ephraim those whose root is in Amalek came  
down,**

**Following you, Benjamin, with your peoples;  
From Machir commanders came down,  
And from Zebulun those who wield the staff of office.  
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;**

**As was Issachar, so was Barak;  
Into the valley they rushed at his heels;  
[But] Among the divisions of Reuben  
There were great resolves of heart.**

**Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,  
To hear the piping for the flocks?  
Among the divisions of Reuben  
There were great searchings of heart.**

**Gilead remained across the Jordan;  
And why did Dan stay in ships?  
Asher sat at the seashore,  
And remained by its landings.**

**Zebulun was a people who despised their lives even  
to death,  
And Naphtali also, on the high places of the field.  
(5:12-18)**

Some tribes came with an eager spirit to volunteer on behalf of the nation. Ephraim came, following Benjamin. “Machir” refers to the half-tribe of Manasseh, on the west side of the Jordan. Zebulun, the text tells us, despised their lives even to death. Issachar came right on the heels of Barak. Naphtali was willing to take on the high places; they wanted the toughest part of the battle. But some of the tribes did not show up. Reuben had great resolve of heart, but he took no action. He stayed with the sheep “to hear the piping for the flocks.” Gilead refers to Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh, who stayed beyond the Jordan. Dan stayed in their ships. This is an obscure phrase. Bruce Waltke translates it thus, “Dan stayed at ease”—where it was comfortable. “Asher sat at the seashore,” we read. One commentator writes, “None of these tribes ever again made a significant contribution to the cause of God. Asher virtually vanished, except for a brief involvement with Gideon. Dan nosedived into apostasy. The two and a half tribes on the east side of the Jordan were overrun repeatedly. The chief victims of the reluctant spirit were the possessors of that spirit. They lived for themselves, refusing to risk what they had and, as a result, they lost what they had.”

In verse 19, Deborah describes the battle itself.

**The kings came and fought;  
Then fought the kings of Canaan  
At Taanach near the waters of Megiddo;  
They took no plunder in silver.  
The stars fought from heaven,  
From their courses they fought against Sisera.  
The torrent of Kishon swept them away,  
The ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.  
O my soul, march on with strength.**

**Then the horses’ hoofs beat  
From the dashing, the dashing of his valiant steeds.  
‘Curse Meroz,’ said the angel of the LORD,  
‘Utterly curse its inhabitants;  
Because they did not come to the help of the Lord,  
To the help of the LORD against the warriors.’ (5:19-23)**

Deborah and Barak had led the 10,000 men down to the Megiddo Valley and up on Mount Tabor. Sisera and Jabin heard of the rebellion and they responded with their 900 chariots, probably licking their chops at the prospect of the victory to come. Suddenly, “the stars fought from heaven.” The heavens opened and a torrential downpour transformed the dried-up Kishon riverbed into a wall of water. Sisera and his army of chariots were routed. The flooding of the Los Angeles River following the rainstorms of the past few days is a reminder of how rapidly this phenomenon can come occur.

Next, we discover Sisera’s fate. Verse 24:

**Most blessed of women is Jael, The wife of Heber the  
Kenite;**

**Most blessed is she of women in the tent.  
He asked for water and she gave him milk;  
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.  
She reached out her hand for the tent peg,  
And her right hand for the workmen’s hammer.  
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;  
And she shattered and pierced his temple.  
Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay;  
Between her feet he bowed, he fell;  
Where he bowed, there he fell dead. (5:24-27)**

This is rather gory, but this woman Jael was blessed because she came to the help of the Lord. In contrast, the inhabitants of Meroz were cursed because they did not do so.

Verse 28 details the scene as the mother of Sisera waits for her son to come home from the battle:

**Out of the window she looked and lamented,  
The mother of Sisera through the lattice,  
‘Why does his chariot delay in coming?  
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots tarry?’  
Her wise princesses would answer her,  
Indeed she repeats her words to herself,  
‘Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoil?  
A maiden, two maidens for every warrior;  
To Sisera a spoil of dyed work,  
A spoil of dyed work embroidered,  
Dyed work of double embroidery on the neck of the  
spoiler?’ (5:28-30)**

As the mother awaits Sisera’s delayed arrival, her imagination begins to take over. She thinks, “They’re probably just enjoying the maidens; two maidens for every warrior. And they’re dividing the spoil. I can see my son now with the spoil of dyed work. No, it’s a dyed work embroidery—dyed work of double embroidery!” But she will be wearing sackcloth and ashes of mourning, not dyed work embroidery. What a contrast between the mother of Sisera, who will be lamenting the death of her son, and Deborah, the mother in Israel, who will be rejoicing at the salvation of God.

Verse 31 concludes the poem on a note of praise and triumph:

**“Thus let all Thine enemies perish, O LORD;  
But let those who love Him be like the rising of the  
sun in its might.”  
And the land was undisturbed for forty years.**

As we saw earlier, there are two reasons given for the praise, and they are service and salvation. Why did Israel praise God? And why can we as a body of believers praise him? The first reason for Israel's praise is that the leaders led and the people volunteered. That phrase is repeated twice in our text, in verses 2 and 9. The great thing about the victory is that the entire community of faith was drawn together. They had faith together, they experienced victory together, and they praised the Lord together. There was praise for the service they entered into.

This is one reason why we can praise God and why we should praise him when we see the community of faith functioning as the body of Christ and using their gifts. We come here on Sunday mornings, we talk to people out in the foyer and we see life happening. Whether it's formal or informal, we see people who are investing in each other's lives. When I see this, my natural response is to praise God for the community of those who love the Lord. We see people excited about God and using their gifts, and it gives us reason to praise him. An executive was once asked, “What was the happiest time in your life?” The man thought for a moment and then said, “The three weeks I spent in the hospital in a strange city, ill with typhoid fever. The hospital was crowded and short of nurses, and we patients were a difficult and a demanding lot. But there was one nurse on our ward who, though overworked and tired, took our complaints with a smile and served us as if we were royalty. She never entered my room without bringing joy and love with her. I asked her how she could always be so happy, and she said she was only trying to give to others what God had given to her.” Service is making a decision to invest our lives in the heart of the community, and that gives us a reason to praise God.

There are many wonderful characteristics of service in the text. First, the priority of service. It was mandatory. Some of the tribes volunteered for service and they experienced life together. But there were other tribes who did not respond, and they were rebuked. We learn later that it was in their own best interests to come because the result of their not coming was devastating. Serving within the community is not really an option. “You are not your own,” Paul reminds us, “you have been bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:19-20). This is why God wants us to enter into what he calls us to do. Paul writes in Romans 12:1, “I urge you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God which is your spiritual service of worship.”

The next thing we see is the requirement for service. And the only requirement is willingness. Over and over again we learn from the book of Judges that God was able to use ordinary men and women of faith who were simply willing to show up. At times we say, “What can I do? I feel inadequate, incapable.” Well, that's the point at which God can use us. The requirement at that point is simply willingness. If we are willing, God is capable.

Next we have the motivation for service. Verse 23 mentions the fact that the inhabitants of Meroz did not come to the help of the Lord. When we think of service we think of serving God, coming to the help of God instead of being

motivated in other ways. Oftentimes what we want is to please other people or to get something out of it for ourselves. Meroz did not come to the help of the Lord, but Jael was blessed because she did.

Then we see the attitude of service, which should always be one of eagerness. This is implied in the word volunteer. Sometimes there's duty but little love in our service to God. We serve grudgingly or reluctantly, or we do it to gain something for ourselves. We say, “If I'm drafted, then I'll serve. Maybe if I enlist early, I'll get an easy job.” Or we say, “If I'm not in charge, then I'm not interested.” But service in the body of Christ is to be accompanied with eagerness. Listen to this word from 1 Chronicles 29:9, “Then the people rejoiced because they had offered so willingly, for they had made their offering to the Lord with a whole heart.” Peter says to elders, in 1 Peter 5:2, “Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness.”

Finally, our service, our investment within the community of faith, has a direct effect on other people. We can affect people either positively or negatively. If we are willing and eager to be used by God, that affects other people and fills them with joy. But if we respond with a negative, grudging spirit, that has a negative effect on others. The congregation begins to manifest a selfish attitude. But, just like the tribes that did not respond to Barak's call, if we do not respond positively we will injure ourselves and shrivel up in our own little shell. Our sense of worship and praise depends upon our priority and attitude toward investing our lives in the community of faith. A farmer was working in his field and a stranger passed by. The traveler said, “What kind of people live in the next town.” Without pausing from his work the farmer replied, “What kind of people live in the town you just left?” “They were horrible,” the traveler said. “People were dishonest, selfish and inconsiderate.” Looking up, the farmer shook his head. He said, “I'm sorry to say that's probably what you'll find in this town, too.” The stranger groaned and walked away. Later, another man happened down the same road. When he saw the farmer, he called out, “What kind of people live in the next town?” Without looking up the farmer responded with a question: “What kind of people live in the town you just left?” “They were thoughtful, friendly and kind,” the traveler beamed, “I hated to leave them.” The farmer pulled down his hoe, extended his hand and smiled, “I'm pleased to say that that's about how you'll find folks here,” he said. Our attitude and perspective towards service has a great effect on how we view God, our circumstances, and other people. If our body is willing to serve, then we have reason to praise God because we become a worshipping community.

The second reason they praised God was for his salvation. Israel was oppressed and enslaved; the life of the nation was barren. They cried out to God, and God delivered them through the work of Deborah and Barak and the 10,000 who volunteered. The chains of bondage were broken; there was freedom and rest in the land. This gave cause for public singing and praise.

The judges, as we have seen, are a type of Christ and his work in delivering us from slavery to sin and to the flesh. In fact, each judge portrays a slightly different representa-

tion or manifestation of the person and work of Jesus Christ in our lives. If we take all the judges as a group, we get a composite picture of the person of Christ. Othniel, for example, had the right family line, as did Jesus, who came from the line of David. Ehud was ruthless with sin in the same way that Jesus was uncompromising. Shamgar used a weapon of wood to remind us of the cross, the weapon that Christ used. Deborah was an encourager. She manifests the encouraging and supportive ministry of Christ to help us do what we never could imagine doing. And we will discover Samson was born in a miraculous way, as was Jesus. These judges delivered Israel in the same way that Christ delivers us and saves us from bondage to sin.

Now just as Israel praised God for salvation, we, too, as a community of faith have much cause to praise God for his salvation. We can readily identify with the enemies we let live in the land and with the cycle of sin we see manifested in our lives. The word of God encourages us to take a hard look at sin and to root these areas out of our lives. But at times we tend to dwell on these and become preoccupied with the negative side of our life. We all struggle with sin and areas of weakness, but I would venture to say that every believer here this morning has experienced God's salvation in some way, shape or form—so you, too, have reason to praise God! Maybe it happened just last week. Perhaps it was six months, even a year ago. But you know the work of God in your life. As a result, like Israel, you can lift up your voices and praise him. Perhaps God is acting right now in some miraculous way to deliver you from an enemy. We need to have balance in our worship. At times we need to confess our sin, but then there are times when we should praise God for his deliverance. There is a time to weep, but there's also a time to sing. There is a time to mourn, but there is also a time to dance.

The NBA All-Star game last week was really a celebration for Magic Johnson. He had a terrific game and was selected the game's most valuable player. But what was all

the praise for? Was there a victory to be celebrated? It seemed to me that the praise was an illusion. It was not born out of truth or repentance or a heaviness of heart. The real issues were being ignored, I felt. What a contrast when the community of faith praises God! We can have genuine and real praise as we dwell upon what God has done in our lives, not what we have done or are capable of doing. We might have traveled some dark roads, we might have been enslaved to some powerful enemies, but the book of Judges tells us that God can free us when we have faith in him. Our sorrow can turn into joy.

Now how do we praise God? Sometimes we praise him in private. That's a right and proper thing to do. But Judges 5 encourages us to praise God as a community and to share our praise publicly. When God does something, we need to share it. This is what encourages the whole body. We can share it with our family, with our church family, or with our home fellowship group. Perhaps we should build a memorial stone, or hang a picture on the wall. When God does something in our life, we need to put a road marker in our path so we're not just reminded of the down times, we're also reminded of his marvelous work. Then, when we see these things, just like the song of Deborah, our hearts will be lifted up into worship and praise of God. Can you imagine what heaven is going to be like? Can you imagine not having to think about your failures and being free to simply praise God? We can begin to experience that even now. Praise and worship should be a very real response when God acts to deliver us.

The psalmist put it best:

I will bless the Lord at all times;  
His praise shall continually be in my mouth.  
My soul shall make its boast in the Lord;  
The humble shall hear it and rejoice.  
O magnify the Lord with me,  
And let us exalt His name together. (Psalm 34:1-3)

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## GIDEON: CALLED OUT OF WEAKNESS

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Seventh Message  
John Hanneman  
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When we think of heroes, we think of strong, capable people. Tennyson's King Arthur, for example, is a prototype hero. Recall the memorable words as he grasps hold of his sword, Excalibur:

"There likewise I beheld Excalibur  
Before him at his crowning borne, the sword  
That rose from out the bosom of the lake,  
And Arthur row'd across and took it — rich  
With jewels, elfin Urim, on the hilt,  
Bewildering heart and eye — the blade so bright  
That men are blinded by it..."

Others, as the song goes, always think of their heroes as cowboys. We tend to identify as heroes those who are strong and rugged — people who are sufficient for just about any task. It seems odd to us, therefore, that God, by contrast, does not have the same criteria as ours when it comes to identifying heroes. His ways run quite contrary to how the world thinks. Today, in our study of the life of Gideon, from the Old Testament book of Judges, we will see just how true this is.

Gideon is the heart and soul, the pivotal figure of Judges. This man pictures for us a God of salvation and redemption. Surprisingly, when we first meet him he is a picture of humanity in weakness and fear. But this account of Gideon, which we will be looking at over the next four weeks, is a story of growing faith and trust in a living God.

A brief review of the historical context of this book will be helpful. Following Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, Joshua at last took the nation into the land of Canaan. There he defeated 31 kings in battle, and Israel took possession of the land. Following the death of Joshua, however, Judges says that there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. The nation fell into a pattern, a cycle of behavior that is repeated six times in the book. The sons of Israel would do evil in the sight of the Lord, forsaking him and serving the Baals. Then the anger of the Lord would burn against Israel. He would sell them into the hands of their enemies, and Israel would become enslaved. Following years of oppression, the nation would cry out to the Lord. God would be moved to compassion, and he would raise up a judge to deliver them from the hands of their enemies. Israel would then enter into a period of rest and peace all the days of the judge. But, when the judge died, the nation would revert to their former ways and act more corruptly than their fathers. Their evil would intensify, their idolatry become more blatant, and the cycle would repeat itself.

In our previous studies we have encountered several of the judges whom God raised up to deliver the nation. In chapter 3 we met Othniel, a faithful warrior who captured the area of Kirath-sepher, and married Caleb's daughter, Achsah. Then we encountered Ehud, a left-handed man, who delivered Israel, and in the process thrust his dagger in Eglon's obese belly. We have met Shamgar, an obscure peasant, who struck down 600 Philistines with an oxgoad. Then in chapter 4 we read the marvelous narrative of Deborah, the prophetess and judge. It was she who called Barak into service and supported

him in leading the nation to victory against Sisera and Jabin.

Today we come to chapter 6, and once more we see the cycle repeating itself. Judges 6:1-6:

**Then the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and the LORD gave them into the hands of Midian seven years. And the power of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of Midian the sons of Israel made for themselves the dens which were in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. For it was when Israel had sown, that the Midianites would come up with the Amalekites and the sons of the east and go against them. So they would camp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel as well as no sheep, ox or donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, they would come in like locusts for number, both they and their camels were innumerable; and they came into the land to devastate it. So Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried to the LORD. (6:1-6, NASB)**

Again we observe the formula for failure: "the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord"; and the results of their apostasy: "the Lord gave them into the hands of Midian" (6:1). Midian was the son of Abraham by his wife Keturah (Gen. 25:1-6). The Midianites, a desert people who lived east of the Jordan, were the first warriors to use camels. This gave them mobile, long-range, swift-attack capability, enabling them to gain military superiority over their enemies. So the Midianites ruled over Israel for seven years. And the method they used was to "destroy the produce of the earth." Every year they swept into Israel, robbed all of their produce, and returned to their homes. The effect was devastating, as we see in verse 6: "Israel was brought very low." This word means "to hang down." They were left dejected, with heads hanging low. Israel was in a hopeless situation. They were defeated, discouraged and helpless. They began hiding out in caves and dens in the mountains.

This pictures for us what happens when we regard as right in our own eyes that which is evil in the eyes of the Lord. All the resources, all the fruit, is stripped from our lives. We hide out in caves, living in darkness and isolation. We are defeated and beaten down. Our lives become a waste land. Even if we are not blatantly sinning, this is what happens when we do not trust in God. The land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey, is a picture of our life in Christ, the Spirit-filled life. But when we do not walk with the Lord in this land, our enemies, sin and the flesh, come in and enslave us. They overpower us, robbing us of all our vitality. What should be a life of joy, love and peace becomes instead a life of despair, hopelessness, hatred and conflict.

So what did Israel do? Verse 6 tells us: "The sons of Israel cried to the Lord" — and the Lord raised up a judge.

**Now it came about when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD on account of Midian, that the LORD sent a prophet to the sons of Israel, and he said to them, "Thus says the**

LORD, the God of Israel, 'It was I who brought you up from Egypt, and brought you out from the house of slavery. And 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, 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."'

Then the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, O valiant warrior." Then Gideon said to him, "O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian." And the LORD looked at him and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?" And he said to Him, "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manassah, and I am the youngest in my father's house." But the LORD said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man."

So Gideon said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Thy sight, then show me a sign that it is Thou who speakest with me. Please do not depart from here, until I come back to Thee, and bring out my offering and lay it before Thee." And He said, "I will remain until you return." Then Gideon went in and prepared a kid and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour; he put the meat in a basket and the broth in a pot, and brought them out to him under the oak, and presented them. And the angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so. Then the angel of the LORD put out the end of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. Then the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight. When Gideon saw that He was the angel of the LORD, he said, "Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." And the LORD said to him, "Peace to you, do not fear; you shall not die." Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD and named it The LORD is Peace. To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. (6:7-24)

This text identifies a two-pronged revelation to Israel. The prophet of the Lord speaks corporately, and the angel of the Lord speaks individually. The prophet of the Lord calls the nation to repentance; the angel of the Lord calls Gideon to be an instrument of salvation. This two-pronged approach calls to mind John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. Repentance, a turning or returning to God, must come before salvation. And so the prophet comes and tells Israel that they have not listened to the voice of God. He talks about God's faithfulness in the past, and the faithlessness of Israel in response to the covenant God.

And then the Lord comes and talks to Gideon. We understand this angel to be the Lord himself, the pre-incarnate Christ. Obviously, this is what Gideon concluded, as we see at the end of our text. The Lord has come to call Gideon into service, to make him an instrument of salvation, to mold him into an example of faith.

He finds Gideon beating out wheat in a wine press. Gide-

on is hiding, trying to save a little food. Even though his name means "smiter," from the verb "to hew down, to cut in two," he is hiding, fearing for his life. Normally the work of threshing was carried out with a threshing-sledge drawn by oxen, and it was done in an exposed place so that the wind could carry away the chaff. But Gideon is trying to stay out of sight of the marauding bands.

Let's listen in on the conversation between the Lord and Gideon.

God: "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior."

("Who? Me?" Gideon must have wondered.)

Gideon: "Why has the Lord abandoned us?"

(This is what Gideon is thinking — that God had abandoned Israel.)

But God does not even answer his question. Instead he says: "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel."

God doesn't argue with Gideon about his theology of expectations. He simply gives him an assignment. He is not calling Gideon to go in his own strength, but in the strength of the Lord — and he is promising to be with him. God's answer to discouragement is never positive thinking, but rather the promise of his presence.

But Gideon responds, in effect, "How can I do that?"

God: "I will be with you"

Gideon: "Show me a sign."

God: "All right, if that is what you want."

So Gideon goes into his house and prepares a very costly offering, especially so considering his circumstances. The angel ignites the offering, right on the rock, calling to mind the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 18. It is then that Gideon recognizes he has been talking with the Lord himself. He has seen God face to face, and he is fearful of dying. But the Lord assures him, saying, "Peace to you." Then Gideon builds an altar to "Yahweh Shalom."

So here we have the opening encounter in this story of Gideon from the book of Judges.

I will make five observations from the narrative. First, *it is obvious that in Gideon, God chose a weak, fearful man*. Gideon is characterized by fear and inadequacy; he has little or no self-confidence. God comes to him as he is beating out wheat in a wine press. He is hiding because he is afraid. Gideon has three problems. First, he has a problem with discouragement. Together with all of Israel he is disillusioned with God. He is blaming God for his circumstances.

Second, Gideon has a problem with inadequacy. When God gives him his assignment to deliver Israel, he responds in amazement, "How can I deliver Israel? My family is the least of all Manassah, and I am the youngest, the baby of the family." Third, he has a problem with faith. This is why he asks God for a sign. At last, however, he goes into his house and prepares an offering. We do have to give him credit because his offering is very expensive, considering the depressed times in Israel, but it is fair to say that Gideon is a physical and spiritual wimp. He is like the man who went to a psychiatrist because he felt he had an inferiority complex. After a while, the doctor told him that he had some good news and some bad news for him. "The good news is that you don't have a complex," said the doctor, "the bad news is that you are inferior!" Gideon is inferior all right, yet God chose him.

I can relate to Gideon. I recall many difficulties and struggles in my life, but at the root of several of those things lay a deep sense of inadequacy. Like Gideon, I was the youngest in

my home. My family was not wealthy or socially prominent, so I could take no confidence in that. Between 7th and 8th grade we moved, and I remember going to my first class in my new school. It was a drafting class. I had never had a drafting class before, but obviously everyone else had. When the teacher gave the first assignment, everyone knew what to do — everyone except me, that is. I was overwhelmed to the point of tears with my feelings of inadequacy.

For many years I felt that everyone but I knew what they were doing. That wasn't true, of course, but that was how I felt. Now I can see that everything I did or tried to do was motivated wholly or partly to build self-confidence. I was trying to build walls to protect my feelings of inadequacy, to build callouses so as to become a hard person because, of course, feelings of inadequacy make one very sensitive, and that is just not approved of in our society. I became an 'A' student and had a tuition scholarship all through school. I became a very good golfer, and I put great stock in that. I worked at being popular in college, to the point that I became my fraternity social chairman. But none of these things could take away my feelings of inadequacy. They were merely callouses to hide an underlying softness.

I can relate to Gideon. I can feel his deep ache of inadequacy, the pain of unworthiness. It is an ache that really isn't based on reality — it is based on feelings, not facts — but it is real nevertheless.

This is probably the most difficult problem facing young people today. We have many social problems — AIDS, rape, abuse, sexual promiscuity, economic upheaval — but I would say that these deep-seated feelings of inadequacy, which are at epidemic proportions, often lie at the root of other social problems. Manifestations of anger, depression, jealousy and strife often arise out of these feelings.

In his book, *Men and Women, Enjoying the Differences*, Larry Crabb points out that this is man's, as opposed to woman's, biggest need. Here is what he wrote:

Every man, somewhere deep within his soul, struggles to feel adequate. It is true that some men, including forceful Christian leaders whose strength is more intimidating and distancing than attractive, would report no such struggle. Typically, they have covered over their worry with such a thick blanket of success (business, ministry, financial, athletic, and social) that the only evidence of internal inadequacy is a strength that seems more displayed than deep. Exhibited strength always has in mind one's own welfare and, as a result, is experienced by others as less than caring. Most men, however, in moments of painful honesty, would admit to some uncertainty about their own effectiveness in achieving something of real value.

Here is my second observation: *God meets Gideon in his weakness*. Thankfully, the Bible never leaves us in despair. We despair because we encounter difficult circumstances and we think that God is not working. But the reason we are not left in despair is because there is a God and he is working. There is a clue in the text that Gideon is thinking about God while he is in that winepress. The first thing that came out of his mouth reveals what he is thinking: "Why did God leave us in such a mess? How could God do this to me and to our people? I wouldn't be hiding if God was truly thinking about me." Don't you find it amazing that God meets Gideon in his place of weakness? It is he who approaches Gideon. God speaks first. He initiates.

This is where God begins too with us. Like Gideon, our theology might be wrong. We might feel that God is not working, but this is where God meets us — where we are, not where we would like to be. He doesn't start by requiring us to

meet him where he is. He comes to earth, down to our level, and he accepts us in our fallenness. No, we don't meet God in our strength, through our accomplishments, on our terms. We meet him in humility and prayer, in our place of deepest need. Jesus taught the disciples to pray: "give us each day our daily bread." He went on to say: "ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you." We meet God in our need, in our want, in our fear, in our inadequacy. And if we do not sense our need, we will never see him.

The very reason we feel inadequate, of course, the reason we come up short, is so that we can meet God. All too often we seek to build self-confidence by taking classes, by trying to achieve a goal, etc. Now these are not bad things, but there is something much better: it is meeting God and building God-confidence. The reason we are such an emotionally impoverished society is not because we lack talent, degrees, capabilities and awards; it is because we don't meet God in our weakness, in our need. We would do well to remember Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Here is my third observation: *God had a vision to make Gideon different*. When God came to him, he addressed him as a valiant warrior. The word "warrior" comes from the verb "to be mighty, have strength, be great." It is clear that Gideon was far from being a mighty warrior at this point in his life, but it was not who Gideon was at the time, it was who he was going to become that was important to God.

Others look at us and they see our flaws and failings. We look at ourselves and we see our fears and insecurities. But God looks at us and sees our possibilities. Deep down all of us want to be something different from what we are. We earnestly seek to achieve, to accomplish, to create. Unfortunately, however, we bypass God in our attempts to change. We seek to do this in our own effort, by our own strength, motivated for our own glory, in order to rid ourselves of our feelings of inadequacy. But we often crash and burn, don't we? We lose heart and we hide in a winepress. But then God finds us and, beginning in weakness, he starts to mold us and shape us into the image and character of his Son. We begin a journey — a journey of faith.

This is what God did with the heroes of faith in the Bible, isn't it? Abraham is an excellent example. God made a promise to him, and chapter after chapter of Genesis tell the story of this man's journey as he pursued God's promise by faith. Jacob, a deceiver, a manipulator, tried to do everything on his own — at least he thought so. Then one night, after wrestling with God, he finally came to that place of faith where God wanted him. Judah, the scoundrel, the rascal, at last was willing, for the sake of his father, to be a substitute for his brother Benjamin. Moses, the man who was commissioned by God to lead the nation of Israel out of captivity, demurred, saying he couldn't speak. But by faith he set out to do what God asked him to do.

Then we have the examples of the New Testament heroes of faith. Peter started out pretty confident in his own abilities, but he crashed and almost burned on the night when he betrayed his Lord. It was only then, through his weakness, that God was able to lead him on his journey of faith. Saul, the zealous persecutor of Christians, began his journey as an enemy of the cross. But then God met him on the Damascus Road. Blinded, struck down and weak, at last Saul was ready for his journey of faith in the risen Christ.

And this is how each one of us came to faith in Christ, isn't it? God had a vision to make us into something different, so he called us, and we began our journey of faith.

Here is my fourth observation: *God promises Gideon that he will be with him.* "I will be with you," a phrase repeated twice in the text, is the promise that God makes to him. Gideon imagines that the God of his fathers has deserted them but, on the contrary, God appears and reasserts his covenant promise to Gideon: "I will not forsake you or leave you, I will be with you."

This striking phrase, "I will be with you," occurs 104 times in the OT. It is a dominant promise throughout the Bible, given by a covenant God to a covenant people. This word of promise and assurance is repeated to Isaac and Jacob no less than 14 times. When God told Moses to deliver the sons of Israel from Egypt, Moses replied, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" God said to him, "Certainly I will be with you." Then God told Moses his name: "I AM. I AM with you, and everything that you are not, I AM." When Joshua was about to enter the land, God said to him, "Be strong and courageous. Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Josh 1:9).

This promise of God, this reminder, forms book-ends for the gospel of Matthew. In chapter 1, Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, 'God with us'" (1:23). And then the last word spoken by Jesus after his resurrection is a repetition of this promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (28:20).

Two and a half months ago my mother with diagnosed with a brain tumor. She had surgery, but it was discovered that the cancer was extensive and very aggressive. She has not recovered and she will never go home. On the day of her surgery I remember feeling her presence in our house. I could see her sitting in a chair by the front door. I saw some of her clothes hanging in the garage and I envisioned her wearing them. As I stood in the kitchen I had a strong feeling of her presence there. Everywhere I went in the house, she was there. Last week, I flew home again to see her. She can no longer speak or see. She is very close to going home to be with the Lord. My overriding emotion is that she will no longer be present with me. I will not be able to call her on the phone. There will be no more trips to Nebraska. I find myself thinking about what her presence meant to me: steak every Saturday night, pot roast on Sunday, rhubarb pie, playing canasta, getting grocery coupons and clippings of Nebraska football games in the mail. There are many reminders, but her presence will shortly be no more.

But God is transcendent. For three years the disciples walked with Jesus. They heard him teach in Galilee; they were on the road with him in Samaria; they entered Jerusalem with him to shouts of "Hosanna!" But they were left in despair as he went to the cross. His presence was no more. Their dreams were shattered, so they locked themselves in a room, fearful and trembling. Then his presence ignited them. At Pentecost, his Spirit empowered them, and then they understood what he meant when he said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

We are not alone. As weak and inadequate as we might feel, God is with us. He is calling ordinary people, men and women like you and me, and when he calls us into service or into battle, what matters is who God is, not who we are. He does not call us without providing us with the same resources he promised to Gideon.

One man has written,

One of the great truths of Scripture is that when God looks at us, He does not see us for what we are, but for what we can become, as he works in our lives. He is in the business of taking weak, insignificant people, and transforming them by his presence in their lives. He begins with us where we are, as we are. He knows our weaknesses, failures, discouragements, doubts, and inadequacies, but he does not say, "You get rid of those, and then I can use you." Rather, he comes to us in our weakness with the promise of his presence that will transform our inadequacy into his strength.

Hudson Taylor said, "All of God's great men have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on his being with them; they counted on his faithfulness."

Here is my final observation: *Peace is the result of Gideon's encounter with God.* Gideon prepared an offering, and the Lord ignited it with fire. Immediately Gideon recognized that he had seen the angel of the Lord face to face, and he feared for his life. But the Lord said to him, "Peace to you, do not fear; you shall not die." So Gideon built an altar, a place to worship, a place where he invited God into his life, and he named it "Yahweh Shalom" — the Lord is peace. This reminds us of the Lord's words, spoken in the Upper Room: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful" (John 14:27). After the resurrection, the disciples were downcast, hiding in fearful seclusion, but then the Lord entered the room and said to them, "Peace be with you."

Gideon was a troubled, confused, disenchanted young man, but then he encountered the living God and he built an altar and named it Yahweh Shalom — the Lord is peace. Why do you think he named it that? Certainly he was concerned about dying after seeing the angel of the Lord — although his fears subsided following God's reassurance. But I think it was more than that. Gideon had admitted his weakness and yet he was accepted. He had expressed his confusion and had not been hammered. He had expressed his lack of faith and yet had been given an assignment. There is a great deal of freedom that comes with being honest with yourself and with God. Gideon admitted his weakness, and then he was free and at peace. That was why he built an altar and named it Yahweh Shalom.

So we have had our first encounter with Gideon — a weak, failing, insignificant, inadequate and fearful man. But God called him out of his weakness to a life of faith in him. I am reminded of the apostle Paul's wonderful words in 2 Corinthians, "And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God" (2 Cor. 3:4-5) On his own, Gideon was a weak faltering, doubting man. But he had first-hand contact with the Lord Jesus and he was never the same again. May God grant us the grace to find God in our weakness; to allow him to accept us where we are; to know that he is at work to mold us and shape us beyond what we could ever imagine; to be confident in his presence with us; and to experience the God of peace. Amen.

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## LOOKING FOR ROAD SIGNS

Catalog No. 742  
Judges 6:25-40  
Eighth Message  
John Hanneman  
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When we invite the Lord Jesus into our lives, we begin a journey of faith. And, as is true with many journeys that we embark upon over the course of our lives, we usually set out with enthusiasm and anticipation. We meet fellow-travelers on the road, compare destinations, and recommend various side-trips. But after a while, our initial excitement subsides. We grow weary. It seems to take longer and longer to get to the next town, the next rest stop. We become irritable, and conscious of our lack of progress. We begin to realize that our journey will probably take much longer than we thought. The roads are more traveled than we had imagined. Detours have to be made and near collisions avoided. Sometimes the directions are not quite clear. We watch for the road signs, but we don't want to stop and study the map. That is when we wish the path was more clearly marked. We would like to have a navigator simply tell us where to turn.

During our summer vacation, my family and I were driving around a small island in the Caribbean. Our map was not very detailed, and the roads were not well marked. I was doing the driving, while my son navigated. At one point we didn't know where we were. The girls were complaining that we were lost. It was hot, and we were tired. There was no place to pull off the road. But my son, completely confident, said, "I know exactly where we are. Just take a left at the next fork in the road." As we rounded a corner, there it was: standing in someone's lawn was a nine-foot long, green fork! My son was the first to spot it. Calmly, he said, "There is the fork in the road; just take the next left."

In the journey of faith, we begin with enthusiasm and abandon, but before long we begin to look for giant green forks in the road. We think we know where we are headed, but sooner or later we find the travel is a bit more strenuous than we bargained for. At times, we sense we are lost. The way is not as clearly marked as we would like. Progress is slow. The directions we get from fellow-travelers often conflict. Uncertainty sets in, and we grow fearful and insecure.

Figuring out God's will and his direction for our lives surely is one of the most confusing things about being a Christian. If we could just talk to God for 15 seconds, we think, just to get one simple yes or no answer, our path could become clear. Grippled with anxiety over something, some Christians resort to opening their Bibles, closing their eyes, and placing their finger on a verse, hoping that God will speak directly to them.

We are traveling with Gideon, from the book of Judges, on his journey of faith. Last week, we saw that God approached this timid, fearful man as he was beating out wheat in a winepress. The Lord's salutation shocked Gideon: "The LORD is with you, O valiant warrior" (6:12). Of all people, God was calling Gideon to deliver the nation of Israel from the bondage of the Midianites. So God, we learned, initiated this whole adventure. In response, Gideon invited the Lord into his life of weakness and uncertainty, and he began to worship God.

Today, we will continue with Gideon on his journey. We will learn that this valiant warrior looks for road signs when he is confronted by his own doubts.

We take up Gideon's journey in chapter 6, verse 25:

**Now the same night it came about that the LORD said to him, "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; and build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of this stronghold in an orderly manner, and take a second bull and offer a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah which you shall cut down." Then Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had spoken to him; and it came about, because he was too afraid of his father's household and the men of the city to do it by day, that he did it by night. When the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was torn down, and the Asherah which was beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar which had been built. And they said to one another, "Who did this thing?" And when they searched about and inquired, they said, "Gideon the son of Joash did this thing." Then the men of the city said to Joash, "Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has torn down the altar of Baal, and indeed, he has cut down the Asherah which was beside it." But Joash said to all who had stood against him, "Will you contend for Baal, or will you deliver him? Whoever will plead for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because someone has torn down his altar." Therefore on that day he named him Jerubbaal, that is to say, "Let Baal contend against him," because he had torn down his altar. (6:25-32, NASB)**

Cleaning up his own back yard is the first step on Gideon's journey of faith. He had put God to the test, and God had responded by igniting his offering. Now God puts Gideon to the test, instructing him to tear down the altars to Baal and Asherah and build an altar to the Lord. God tells Gideon to take two bulls to accomplish this. Joash, his father, may well have intended to sacrifice the first bull to Baal, but instead, Gideon uses it to tear down the altar. The second bull was seven years old; exactly the length of the Midianite oppression. This was no small request. If you remember, the Midianites swept into Israel every year and devastated the produce of the land, capturing all the livestock in the process. So this was a costly offering.

Gideon obeys, but he fearfully carries out his instructions at night. And he does so with ten servants to help bolster his flagging faith. He still lacks confidence. He is weak and timid, but he obeys. The people of the city awaken in the morning, angry at what has happened. They want to kill the person responsible, but Joash intercedes on Gideon's behalf, saying, "If he (Baal) is a god, let him contend for himself." Joash might well have felt shame at this point, and he, too, is transformed. Perhaps this is why he names his son, Jerubbaal (lit. "let Baal contend"), which came to mean "Baal-fighter" or "Baal-conqueror."

God had entered into Gideon's life, promising him his presence, granting him his peace. But the first order of business for Gideon was the Lordship of God in his home. Until he put things right in his own backyard, God would not and

could not use him to deliver his people. Baal must go before Midian could go. God's altar could not be built until Baal's altar was destroyed. Thus the place Gideon had to begin was in his own backyard.

This is where our journey begins, too. We do not embark on a long automobile journey without first checking under the hood to see if everything is functioning properly. Similarly, when God calls us to embark with him on a journey of faith, the first order of business is our own heart condition: worship, obedience, and purity. God is not satisfied with double loyalties. There is no victory where there is idolatry or a divided heart. This is the first priority. God tells Gideon (verse 26) to arrange the offering in an orderly fashion. It is because God is orderly. Things must be done in an orderly progression. Our worship of him as the one true God must come first. The main thing must become and remain the main thing.

Oftentimes this is difficult for us. We must be willing to burn the bridges of sin in our lives and not look back. We must sever relationships that lead us into evil. We must throw away books and magazines that catapult us into destruction. We must begin to arrange our lives in the worship of God. We must lay the foundations for a relationship that will encourage and edify us until we are strong enough to venture out.

And we discover that the most difficult place to begin is at home. Representing Jesus Christ among our own family and our closest friends is difficult. They are aware of our altars, our places of worship. But this journey of faith must begin at home. If our commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ does not first affect our home life, it very likely will be superficial and hollow. The progression is, heart to home.

Supposing you bought a fixer-upper house that needed a lot of remodeling. You wouldn't begin by painting the walls, wallpapering the bathroom and hanging pictures, would you? No, you would start with the foundation, the plumbing, the electrical circuits. You must begin with the interior structure before the house starts to look good outside. This is the proper order for building anything, and that includes a solid spiritual life.

Last week, I visited a young man in prison. He had been a part of our young singles group several years ago. My heart ached as I talked with him. He said that he often thought of our talks over the past six years, but he had remained outside the church. This young man did not tear down the altars in his own backyard, and the results are devastating.

Gideon made a good beginning — he started in his own home. Now he is ready to travel a bit further down the road. Verse 33:

**Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the sons of the east assembled themselves; and they crossed over and camped in the valley of Jezreel. So the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; and he blew a trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called together to follow him. And he sent messengers through Manasseh, and they also were called together to follow him; and he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they came up to meet them. (6:33-35)**

The Midianites and Amalekites are beginning their annual assault upon Israel as they come up and camp in the valley of Jezreel. We read that the Spirit of the Lord "came upon Gideon," literally, "clothed Gideon." This word is used of a man putting on his clothes (Gen. 28:20), or a warrior putting on a suit of armor (Is. 59:17). The Holy Spirit wore Gideon in the same way that a man puts on a suit of clothes. And his own family, the Abiezrites, came up to follow him, together with their allies, Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali.

But at this point Gideon becomes a little nervous. The enemy has come up and taken their positions. Gideon enlists the aid of his own people, the Abiezrites, and also the help of four other tribes, Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali — 32,000 men. This is a large army, but the enemy is described later as being "as numerous as locusts." Their camels are without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore (7:12). The situation is getting extremely tense. Gideon responds by proposing a little test. He needs a 9-foot, green road sign.

Verse 36:

**Then Gideon said to God, "If Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou hast spoken, behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou hast spoken." And it was so. When he arose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he drained the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water. Then Gideon said to God, "Do not let Thine anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground." And God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground. (6:36-40)**

This is the second of three signs that we encounter in the life of Gideon. (The first was the offering which was ignited by the Lord; the third will be a dream, as we will see next week.)

"Fleece-setting" is often recommended as the way to discern God's will and direction for our lives. (Gideon's example is held up as a positive sign.) But a careful reading of the text reveals four problems with this method of discerning God's will.

First, the text is quite clear: Gideon already knew God's will. Twice he admits, "as Thou hast spoken" (6:36-37). God had given him a clear statement of his will. He had given him a clear revelation of his person, and an experience of his power. God had ignited the offering; he had helped Gideon tear down the altars to Baal in his own backyard; he had helped him gather 32,000 men; he had clothed him with the Spirit. So Gideon knew what God's will was in this situation.

The second problem is that fleece-setting does not increase true faith. Faith is what God wants to teach each one of us. Faith is believing something you do not see, but fleece-setting attempts to remove the need for faith. It is an attempt to bypass faith. It is an "end-run" around faith.

Third, fleece-setting is tantamount to dictating to God. It is telling God our program, telling him what he needs to do for us. But when we propose a test to God to discern some course of action, it is really preposterous to think that he should alter the laws of nature because we ask him.

Fourth, fleece-setting does not really solve problems. Gideon has to try it twice just in case the first time was a coincidence. He wants to go two out of three. Fleece-setting didn't produce a certainty. It doesn't yield the confidence that faith brings. It doesn't bring about the result that God desires.

Recently, a friend of mine told me a story of his friend who was trying to decide whether to enter into the ministry full time. He decided to propose a test to God. There was an old, rotting tree in his back yard, and he said to God that if the tree fell down that week, he would go into the ministry. A few days later, he awoke to find that the tree next to the one he had designated had fallen down! Now what should he do? Was that close enough, or does close count only in horse-shoes? The man was still left in uncertainty.

If fleece-setting is not what God desires, then how are we to discern his will? First, we need to be clear about how we define God's will, because this is a key issue in the Christian life.

We need to be aware that there are two aspects of the will of God for our lives: God's will is both general and specific. First, the general. This is what God's will is for every believer, and it involves the whole realm of our moral and ethical choices. This statement of God's will is revealed in the Bible. Technically, God's will is for us to become like Christ. This is his primary concern for each one of us. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Paul says: "this is the will of God, your sanctification." It is that we be holy, that we be set apart to be who he wants us to be, morally, ethically, and spiritually. In another place, Paul says that Christians are to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess 5:16-18). Technically, God's will is that you mature spiritually, that your life reflect his holiness and love, that you manifest the fruits of the Spirit, for faith to be completed in your life. His will majors on character, faith, and holiness.

And the blueprint for all of this is in the Bible. God's word is God's will for your life. Therefore, we know what God's will is for every moral decision we are faced with:

- Should I marry a non-believer? No.
- Should I sleep with my boyfriend or girlfriend? No.
- Should I cheat on my taxes or my expense report? No.
- Should I love my neighbor? Yes.
- Should I know how to share the good news with a friend? Yes.

God's will primarily deals with what kind of a person you are. If you are not the kind of person the Scripture exhorts you to be, then it will do you little good to be in the right location or to have the right vocation.

And next, the specific. What does God want you to do specifically with your life? With many of these choices, the answer is, it doesn't matter; it is not a moral decision. God doesn't have any preference whether you want to be an engineer or a doctor. In a very real way, it doesn't matter whether you live in Omaha or San Francisco, or whether you work at Hewlett Packard or IBM. It simply depends on your preference. If it pleases you, then God is pleased. What really matters to God is that you are being the right kind of person where you are — growing in faith and love — rather than your thinking the right circumstances will make all the pieces of the puzzle fit into place. There is no perfect job, no perfect place to live, no perfect spouse. These things will not make your life "right." The job doesn't make you; you in Christ make the job. Marriage doesn't make your life right; you in Christ make the marriage right. If you are not the type of person you think you should be here in Cupertino, then you will be the same person in Seattle. There is a right way to live in relationship to God and to the world. This is God's primary will for your life. As long as you have that as your goal, then everything else will follow.

But this is not quite enough, is it? We face many difficult decisions on this road of faith. These decisions are important to us. We need some guidelines by which we can feel confident about God's specific will in our lives. Let me mention six:

1. *God does not give us road signs as much as he gives us a guide.* Which would you rather have? A map or a guide? God is a guide. The psalms are a wonderful source of help and encouragement here. For example, Psalm 32:8 says: "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go, I will counsel you with My eye upon you." Psalm 37:23-24 says: "The steps of a man are established by the LORD; and

He delights in his way. When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong; because the LORD is the One who holds his hand." Hear the encouraging words of Psalm 48:14, "For such is God, our God forever and ever; he will guide us until death." And Isaiah 58:11, "And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail."

When Jesus told the disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them, Thomas said, "Lord, we do not know where You are going. How do we know the way?" Jesus said to him: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:5-6). Discovering the will of God is not a mechanical process. Discovering God's specific will for our lives is the means by which we get to know the Guide — to know God and to grow in our faith in him.

2. *Guidance is sought and confirmed though prayer.* Our usual way of making a decision is to check for road signs and begin to consult with other people. However, if we really want to know where God wants us, then we need to first ask him. The book of James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach" (James 1:5). At times, the last thing we do is pray about a decision. But, James continues, "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives" (4:2-3).

Douglas Webster, in his book, *Finding Spiritual Direction*, writes:

We no longer pray for wisdom, we pay for advice...In a busy world of hyperactivity, prayer seems dysfunctional, unproductive, a waste of time. We ought to be out there doing something. But it all amounts to chasing the wind...The wisdom required to live in the world cannot be bought, earned or invented. The wisdom of God is given by God and must be asked for. This does not mean that when we pray, everything will be placed in order and we'll feel great. Prayer does not tidy up life and arrange it in labeled file folders. It focuses and intensifies life. Prayer orients our thinking, directs our actions and prepares us for God's work. Through prayer I am brought face to face with my Creator. Prayer centers my life in the will and work of the living God. Instead of grabbing, clutching and scratching, I receive God's understanding of how to live in a world unlivable without him.

When we seek guidance, what we are really looking for are deep, internal convictions. But road signs don't often yield this result. Rather, these convictions are arrived at by entering into prayer, by talking to the Guide, by being humble and quiet. The best guidance gives us deep confidence, deep peace, deep assurance.

A few years ago, my family and I were considering a ministry opportunity in Kansas City. All the road signs pointed toward moving. For one thing, we had relatives living near the city. That was a plus. We had our house for sale and were having trouble selling it. We had a marvelous time at the interview, and we loved the city. But as my wife and I prayed together, we became convinced that this was not where God wanted us. Had we looked at the "road signs" we would have been led astray. Subsequent events have led us to believe that we made a good decision in remaining on in this area. What we needed was a deep conviction, and we found this through prayer.

3. *Guidance may or may not be confirmed by circumstances.* When we make a decision, we usually wait to see how things will pan out. If the results are favorable, then we think we made the right decision, that we are in the will of God. But God does not necessarily view favorable circumstances as a

sign of success. Sometimes good decisions will yield good things, and sometimes the circumstances may not go the way we envisioned. But this does not mean we missed out on God's will. The job may be satisfying, but we have a terrible boss. The boss may be great, but we don't like the work. The neighborhood may be just right, but the neighbors are too noisy. Our spouse may not be the kind of person we thought. These things do not mean it is the wrong job, the wrong neighborhood, the wrong spouse. This is why we need deep internal convictions of how God is leading us. If we do not have these convictions, then we will continually second-guess ourselves if things do not go well according to our estimation.

Stuart and Jill Briscoe, that delightful English couple, were called by God to take up a ministry in Milwaukee a number of years ago. When they applied for visas, however, they were refused, and they had to remain in England for another year. They finally got to Milwaukee, but people thought, based on the circumstances, that they had missed out on God's will. The Briscos needed the deep conviction of their hearts to help them weather that storm.

*4. Guidance is communicated through the desires that God gives us.* God doesn't want us to be miserable. We must be willing to follow him, to do whatever he wants — and he wants to give us the desires of our hearts. We can be assured that he loves us. And if we really want to do something, it doesn't necessarily follow that God will be against it. The psalmist says, "He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him; He will also hear their cry and will save them."

*5. Guidance is confirmed through the counsel of other believers.* Even though we arrive at deep convictions, we do not live in a vacuum; we live in a community. And there is a great deal of wisdom that comes through the counsel of others. Our family knows us well and they can help us sort through our motivation. Friends in the body who have been through similar things can give us valuable insights. Once we arrive at some convictions, therefore, it is wise to check them out with people we trust. If no one shares our convictions, then we would do well to rethink everything.

*6. God's will is often very logical.* If it makes sense, if it is logical, then there is a good chance that God is in it. God's will is not wild and bizarre; it is not something that is arrived out through hocus-pocus. At times we will have to make decisions and we will have no clear-cut choice. But God has given us a mind. We can list the pros and cons, and ask him to direct us. Decide what to do, based upon logic, then move out and trust God. Flipping a coin or pointing to a verse is illogical. And then, after we have made a decision, we should trust God for what follows. He cannot work if we don't trust him. He will open and close doors as he desires. So make a decision, go with it, and then see what God does.

Perhaps these principles have raised some questions in your minds. I hope I may have stimulated you to discuss and share with each other the ways that God has led you on your own personal journey of faith. We could easily add to this list, and there are many exceptions to these guidelines. With God, you can never say "always." God is not always logical. At times he calls us to do things contrary to our desires. But we would be wise to work along these guidelines most of the time.

Now let us sharpen our focus a little. Let us not leave here merely thinking about our jobs, our neighborhoods, etc. We need to relate to God on this issue of finding his will. As I study Gideon's journey of faith, two thoughts immediately

come to mind. First, the process of the journey is essential. Gideon has begun his own journey of faith: faith is the destination, but what he is learning is that the process is key. The process is the means by which we get to the destination, the means by which we come to know and trust the Guide, the means by which we acquire the desired faith. We are not on a scavenger hunt acquiring information about God. We are here to acquire skills in faith itself. The process cannot be bypassed.

When I was in college, I travelled with some fellow-students to Miami for the Orange Bowl one year. One leg of the journey was from New Orleans to Miami, and we travelled all day and night in order to arrive in time. I love to drive long distances, but during the day everybody seemed eager to drive, so I held back. I knew they would tire. When night fell, one by one they slacked off and went to sleep. That was when I took the wheel. I drove all night, arriving in Miami just as the sun came up. I loved that journey. I loved the process of driving all night to get to our destination. The other guys just wanted to get to our destination; I wanted the process.

Our journey in faith is not a short, weekend jog. We are in this for the long haul. Many decisions must be made. The road is not always well-marked. There are not many 9-foot, green forks in the road. But we need to enter into the process, to experience it and allow it to build faith in our lives. The destination is not easily achieved. Faith is not as easy to come by as fast food. We can't get it at the drive-up window. We can't microwave it. Everyone is in a hurry, and we, too, want shortcuts and quick answers. We are liable to fall prey to what one writer describes as "today's passion for the immediate and the casual." We are attracted to any spiritual leader who might help us. But when we do this, we only get in the way of what God is doing. Our marriage may be difficult, our job may be painful, our family circumstances trying, the unwanted divorce or separation might be gut-wrenching, the lack of finances might be worrisome, but these are often the roads we have to travel to learn faith. If we insist on throwing out fleeces, we reduce the need for a deep, personal faith.

Secondly, God is very patient. How did he respond to Gideon? Verse 40 says, "And God did so that night." God responded with patience. Gideon was short on faith. He was fearful, weak and confused, and he put God to the test, but God reassured him. God is understanding.

God is patient with slow learners. And when it comes to faith, most of us are slow learners. All summer long while I was on sabbatical, as I thought through my relationship with God, this theme has been on my mind. I talk a lot about faith, but I don't "do" it very well.

God is well aware of the fact that our journey of faith is hard work. It is long, and often painful. He knows that at times we would like some positive proof along the way that we are headed in the right direction. He knows that we are fearful and timid at times, and yet he is patient with us. He loves us. If we ask him to do some little thing for us today to show us that we are headed in the right direction, he will respond. This is the wonderful thing about God. He is our loving heavenly Father.

So we begin our journey of faith looking for road signs. May God grant us grace to trust the Guide more than the signs; to acquire faith in him, not just information about him, on our journey.

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## FALLING AT THE FINISH

Catalog No. 744  
Judges 8:22-35  
Tenth Message  
John Hanneman  
September 13, 1992

The American sprinter and hurdler, Gail Devers, was one of the major stories of the recent Olympic Games. She won the 100 meter dash, and was favored to win the gold medal in the 100 meter hurdles, a feat that had not been accomplished since Fanny Blankers-Koen won both these events in the 1948 Olympics. From the start of the hurdles race, Devers forged ahead of the field. With one hurdle to go, she had an insurmountable lead. Then disaster struck. Her foot caught the last hurdle and she toppled forward, staggered and fell. Several runners flashed by her. She lunged at the finish line, but she had to settle for fifth place. The prize was in sight, but just as she neared the finish, she fell.

In our study on the life of Gideon from the book of Judges, we have been talking about acquiring a personal faith in God. The journey is fraught with obstacles, but there is one supreme danger: no matter how far we travel on this road, no matter how far in front of the pack we are, no matter what we have achieved, there is always the danger of falling at the finish. We are in danger of being tripped up when we are running well.

As we come to the last chapter in the life of Gideon, we find that his saga ends on a sobering note. The book of Judges tells the stories of people very much like ourselves — people with God-given potential for greatness and an unflinching capacity for catastrophe. We have seen the greatness of God demonstrated in Gideon's life, a hero who began in weakness and obscurity. We witnessed his struggle as he learned to believe in God without depending on fleeces and road signs. At last we saw his triumphant faith as he led the nation of Israel in a rout of the Midianites — a battle against insurmountable odds, fought with very questionable weapons. But, unfortunately, the story does not end there. Today we will look at the catastrophic conclusion of this story for, like Gail Devers, Gideon falls at the finish.

Our study now brings us to chapter 8 in the book of Judges. Following the rout of Midian in the valley of Jezreel, and the death of Oreb and Zeeb, Gideon and his 300 men pursue the enemy across the Jordan. (There is a descriptive phrase in verse 4 of chapter 8 that says that Gideon was "weary yet pursuing.") Gideon sought to enlist the aid of two cities, Succoth and Penuel. He needed food for his weary troops, but he received nothing. Undaunted, he pursued until he had wiped out the rest of the enemy and captured two more leaders, Zebah and Zalmunna. On his way home he executed judgment on the two cities that did not help him and his men, and finally he killed Zebah and Zalmunna.

Gideon's resounding victory moved the people of Israel to want to crown him king. Let's pick up the story in verses 22-23 of chapter 8:

**Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son's son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian." But Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you." (NASB)**

Certainly the idea of installing Gideon as king would be attractive to the Israelites. They would have a leader with proven abilities to defend them against other enemies. While there was provision in the law for a king to rule over them, it is clear that this request of the Israelites was outside of the will of God. Deuteronomy warns that the king must be one whom the Lord chooses, and God had given no such directions. Secondly, the people do not recognize God's provision in the victory. They praise Gideon for delivering them from the Midianites, giving him credit he didn't deserve. One of the prevailing tendencies of our sinful hearts is to exalt men to the place that belongs only to God. If someone came along today who could solve our economic woes, he or she could become a candidate for President overnight and would win in a landslide.

Certainly the idea of being made king over Israel would be attractive to Gideon. Men love power and prestige. But Gideon declines the tempting offer, saying that the Lord must rule over Israel. As was the case with his victory over the Midianites, this stands as a high point of Gideon's faith.

But failure is in close attendance. Verse 24:

**Yet Gideon said to them, "I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil." (For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) And they said, "We will surely give them." So they spread out a garment, and every one of them threw an earring there from his spoil. And the weight of the gold earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the neck bands that were on the camels' necks. And Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household. So Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not lift up their heads anymore. And the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon.**

Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house. Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. And Gideon the son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash, in Ophrah of the Abiez-

**rites.** (8:24-32)

Here we learn that Gideon was having problems in four areas. The first mistake he made was with worship. He took the spoils of victory and made an "ephod," which is either a garment or a free-standing image. Historically, the ephod was a garment resembling a fancy apron which was worn by the high priest. It may be that Gideon, who had refused to be king, was setting himself up as a priest, and was shifting the worship of Yahweh from Shiloh to Ophrah. But God had not told him to do this.

What was the result of this action by Gideon? Verse 27: "and all Israel played the harlot with it." Harlotry implies that this ephod caused the nation of Israel to fall into idolatry. Also, his decision to make an ephod from the spoils became a "snare" to Gideon and his household. A snare is something that draws one away from his real purpose and then destroys him. Not only did the ephod become a snare to Israel, it also affected Gideon and his household. Gideon failed to obey the warning of Deut. 7:25: "The graven images of their gods you are to burn with fire; you shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them, nor take it for yourselves, lest you be snared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God."

Gideon's second problem area was that he enjoyed luxury, in defiance of Deut. 17:17, which says a king shall not "greatly increase silver and gold for himself." Gideon began life as "the least in Manasseh," but at the end he lived in extravagance. We could say that his desire for wealth was masked in spiritual clothing.

His third problem was with women: "He had many wives" (verse 30), and he also had a concubine in Shechem. But Deut. 17:17 says, "neither shall [a king] multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away." Gideon had not only adopted the Canaanite standard of polygamy, but with his taking of a concubine, he also took on their moral standards.

Fourth, Gideon had a problem with pride. He named the son whom he had with his concubine, Abimelech, meaning, "my father is king." The implication is that even though Gideon declined the offer for him and his sons to be kings over Israel, he secretly coveted this title and position. Even though he did not carry the mantle of king, he saw himself in that light. It is easy to say one thing and to do or think something else. But this pride was to cost the nation a civil war, for later, Abimelech would kill all but one of the 70 sons of Gideon.

Worship, women, pride, wealth. Gideon hit them all. When I was young, I told my mother that I would never drink or smoke, and that I would get a scholarship to college. When I got my scholarship, I thought to myself, "one out of three isn't bad!" But Gideon was 0 for 4. We find the sorry results of his failings in verses 33-35:

**Then it came about, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god. Thus the sons of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon), in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel.**

The result of all of this was the falling away of Israel.

Even though the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon, and even though Midian did not lift up their heads anymore, the fruit of Gideon's choices was devastating for the nation. As soon as he died, Israel once again fell into idolatry. They began to worship a new god, Baal-berith. They did not remember the Lord their God, the one who had delivered them. Furthermore, "they did not show kindness to the household of Gideon in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel" (v. 35). Sometimes the consequences of sinful choices don't show up for awhile, but eventually they become evident.

I will make four observations and conclusions from this closing account of the life of Gideon. Here is my first observation: *The journey of faith never ceases to be dangerous; opportunities to be misguided abound.*

When my family and I were returning from our sabbatical this summer, we changed planes in Dallas/Ft. Worth. We arrived at our gate with a few minutes to spare. Sara, my fifteen-year-old daughter, and I waited with the luggage while the rest of the family checked out the airport. When the plane began to board, my wife and our two other children were nowhere in sight. After a bit my daughter went ahead to board the plane while I waited. At last the other three members of the family arrived and we proceeded to board. There was a long line, and when I looked up ahead, I didn't see my daughter. Then I noticed that the gate we were waiting at serviced two different flights, one to San Francisco and the other to Albuquerque. When I didn't see my daughter in line, I sent my wife on ahead to see if she was on the plane. So she pushed her way through the line with great difficulty. A few minutes later, she pushed her way back for her boarding pass so she could get on the plane. Later she returned and said there was no Sara. I told her that she should check the other plane, and she went to do so. When she got to the cabin of the plane, she told the stewardess what might have happened. The stewardess picked up the intercom and said: "If there is a Sara Hanneman on this plane, please get off. You are on the wrong plane." By this time, my two other children and I had arrived at our seats. After a little bit, my wife arrived with my daughter, who was trying to look as small and as inconspicuous as possible, walking behind her. We asked her what happened, and she said no one had checked her ticket, but she was confused when she saw that someone was sitting in her seat! We could hardly stop laughing, but Sara didn't think it was funny. She said she wished she had gone to Albuquerque.

Unless we remain alert, it is easy to head off in the wrong direction. No one is checking tickets to see where we are going, and we can go wherever we desire.

Gideon had won a wonderful victory. With his 300 men he had destroyed Midian and his 135,000 men. He had killed the leaders, Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah and Zalmunna. He had declined the people's offer to rule over them as king. But then he retired to his own house. He thought the battle was over, and he stopped taking into account the danger he still faced. He needed someone to say, "If Gideon is on board, you are headed in the wrong direction."

We are on a journey of faith. We grow closer to God and more dependent on him. While he gives us great victories, there is still danger ahead and we must stay on guard. There is no free space, no retirement on the journey of faith. We can retire from our careers. Our children will

grow up and move out of the house, but we cannot retire when it comes to faith. We must not be deluded into thinking that we can coast to the finish. We must not be tricked into thinking that we have arrived at a place in our lives where we are safe from sin and temptation. We have an enemy, the devil, and he “prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). And our enemy is very tricky. He does not fight fair. God gives us the land and defeats enemies that outnumber us and enslave us, but the land must be held and maintained. We may defeat the enemy on one front, but he is sure to attack somewhere else.

The story of Gideon reveals one of Satan’s most insidious tactics. Often our biggest defeats come on the heels of our greatest victories, after we have been empowered by God to do his will. We are most vulnerable when we are least fearful. This is the time when we are likely to feel secure, confident, and prideful. God gave us such a great victory that we thought we were invincible. But, Paul warns in 1 Cor 10:12, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” The proverb says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (Prov 16:18).

Here is my second observation: *The danger on our journey is often very subtle, and it begins with a slight deviation.* Gideon was on top of the heap. God had given him victory, and the people wanted to make him king. But Gideon did not fall for the obvious. His failure began with the less obvious and grew from that point on until he named his son Abimelech, “my father is king,” and thus arrived at the place where he would have been if he had fallen for the obvious. He had many wives until he fell prey to a concubine. Gideon masked his desire for wealth with spiritual clothing. He did not fall off a cliff; he wandered from the path little by little, walking ever closer to the edge.

Most of us are smart enough to avoid the obvious. We know truth, and we are involved in the community. We don’t just fall off the cliff. The things that get us in trouble are usually subtle and disguised. We don’t rush headlong into sin, rather we compromise with evil and play with temptation. Sometimes, like a child playing with a snake, we are unaware of the danger. But before long we find ourselves ensnared, just like Gideon. Our sense of worship slowly erodes. We keep to ourselves, in our own house, so that others will not be aware of our sin. We don’t keep a concubine in our own town, but we go down to Shechem, where we think no one will know our sin. But we must never compromise with evil. If we do, defeat will certainly follow.

And the areas we must constantly examine are the very ones that Gideon fell prey to. We must guard our worship of God. This does not mean we can never miss church on Sunday. It means that we can never stop worshiping God in our lives, privately and corporately. The ephod today may well be the electronic church. Our place of worship changes to our own house in Oprah rather than the community of faith in Shiloh. Our worship becomes convenient rather than meaningful.

And we must be on guard against a love of wealth. Like Gideon, we can try to disguise our desire for riches with a religious dressing. It is a great temptation to live in the lap of luxury, without fear of financial strain. We even excuse this, saying that we are going to amass wealth to use for

the glory of God. I am reminded of the words of Agur, from the book of Proverbs:

“Give me neither poverty nor riches;  
Feed me with the food that is my portion,  
Lest I be full and deny Thee and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’  
Or lest I be in want and steal,  
And profane the name of my God” (Prov 30:8-9).

We must be on guard against misplaced affection. How many spiritual leaders, how many Gideons have been destroyed by uncontrolled lust! There is a close tie between spirituality and sexuality. If worship is not in order, that will become evident sexually. Again, this will happen little by little. It begins in the mind, and this is the place where it must be fought.

And then there is pride. God gives us wonderful victories, but it is easy to take the credit for ourselves, to let people exalt us, to accept the praise so that we feel good about ourselves. In Regent College this summer I enjoyed two classes taught by brilliant and spiritual men. What was evident about these men was that even though they were deeply intellectual, they were deeply humble as well. We must bring ourselves low and keep ourselves low. If we are to receive any exaltation, let God do it in his own time. It is better we receive it at the end than too soon.

Here is my third observation: *Endurance is an essential ingredient to our faith.* Endurance is the quality that Gideon displayed when he was “weary yet pursuing.” Our journey is not a sprint, it is a marathon. We are in it for the long haul. Faith outlasts all the opposition — the oppressors and the temptation both. Faith maintains the sense of opposition to sin. That doesn’t mean we never sin. It doesn’t mean we are perfect. It means we maintain our purpose. We don’t give up or give in. We continue to confess our sin. It means we stick with God. Faith with endurance means we keep going, we stay the course. This is the kind of faith that lasts.

Along these lines, the prophet Jeremiah once asked this demanding question:

“If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out,  
Then how can you compete with horses?  
If you fall down in a land of peace,  
How will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?” (Jer. 12:5)

This is the kind of faith that Jesus demonstrated when he was tempted three times in the wilderness. Paul expresses this thought in Philippians 3:14, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Heb. 12:1-2 puts it this way: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, *let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*”

Eugene Peterson, in his book, *Run With The Horses*, has a good word for us here:

The mark of a certain kind of genius is the ability and energy to keep returning to the same task relentlessly, imaginatively, curiously, for a lifetime. Never give up and go on to something else. Augustine wrote fifteen

commentaries on the book of Genesis. He began at the beginning and was never satisfied that he had got to the beginning. He never felt that he had got to the depths of the first book of the Bible, down to the very origins of life, the first principles of God's ways with us. He kept returning to those first questions. Beethoven composed sixteen string quartets because he was never satisfied with what he had done. The quartet form intrigued and challenged him. Perfection eluded him — he kept coming back to it over and over in an attempt at mastery. We think he did pretty well with them, but he didn't think so. So he persisted, bringing fresh, creative energy to each day's attempt. The same thing over and over, and yet it is never the same thing, for each venture is resplendent with dazzling creativity.

Our faith in God, our opposition to sin, needs to be anchored in endurance — doing the same thing over and over again, but with freshness and creativity.

Here is my last observation: *The final goal on our journey of faith is to finish well.* Now that I have lost both of my parents, I have been thinking a lot about them lately. I have spent time looking at old photographs of them, contemplating some seventy years of history. Both my mother and father grew up in poor surroundings. Neither of them went to college. They never enjoyed much glory or glamor or riches. They were everyday people, everyday moms and dads, working faithfully year after year. They were not perfect (they had their share of weaknesses), but there was a quality in their character that I came to admire more and more. They lived every day and they finished well. They maintained loyalty and faithfulness. They remained devoted to God. They kept growing in faith. In fact, they were more involved spiritually in their later years than at any time in their lives. They invested a lifetime in people, and they were rich with friends. And they didn't do these things just to be seen, or just on Sunday; they did it every day. They finished well.

So we are on a journey of faith. As we have seen, the road is difficult and tiring. When at last the end comes into sight, we might be tempted to let down. We don't feel like studying for the last test of the quarter. We don't work as hard on the last assignment as the first. We don't invest as much care in the last child. We change to a pass/fail system. We do just enough to get by. Statistics show that most automobile accidents occur within 25 miles of home. The time to be most cautious is when our journey is nearing the end. When we read the story of Gideon, we want very much to hear of his steadfastness and faithfulness all the way to the end. We want to read that he restored worship in Shiloh, that he tore down all the altars of Baal in Israel, that he named his son, "the Lord is king," not "my father is king." But, Gideon "retired to his own house." He didn't finish well.

The attitude we must maintain is reflected by Paul in 1 Cor. 9:24-27, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. *Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not*

*fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize"* (NIV).

Our goal should be to strive to finish well, like the apostle Paul says in 2 Tim. 4:7-8, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (NASB).

Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame. At the end, he said, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). He finished well.

Pyambuu Tuul was not in the spotlight during the Summer Olympics, but his achievement was probably more noteworthy than any of those who were honored on the medal stand. As the only member of the Mongolian track and field team, he was the first ever Mongolian entered in the marathon. Before the race, he said, "I do not want to lag too far behind all the fantastic runners." Tuul was a construction worker when he lost his sight during an explosion, in his home town of Ulan Bator, in 1978. After two unsuccessful operations he gave up hope of ever seeing again. Then the New York Achilles Track Club, which promotes athletics for the disabled, invited him to participate in the 1990 New York Marathon. Led by a guide, Tuul walked much of the way and finished the course in just over five hours. The club also arranged for a cornea transplant for him, and surgery was performed in New York in January 1991. For the first time, he saw the faces of his six- and eight-year-old daughters. Tuul was the last runner to finish the Olympic marathon, in four hours and 44 seconds, but 25 of the 112 marathoners had already dropped out of the race. He didn't finish to the roar of the crowd. He finished away from the stadium, in obscurity and quiet, while the crowd cheered at the closing ceremonies. But he finished, he stayed the course, he endured.

In our journey of faith it matters not when we finish, but how we finish.

While we must take into account the failings of Gideon's later years, lest we become discouraged, we can also note that he is remembered as a man of faith despite his failings. I say this not to soften the message of the text, but to remind us and encourage us that his faith was not nullified. The final word on Gideon, which we find in Hebrews 11, the Hall of Fame of faith, says of him, "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, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight" (Heb 11:32-34).

Gideon learned a personal faith in God. He was called out of weakness to learn of God's greatness. We do not want to diminish this great story, but let us be sobered by his later years, that we might pray for endurance to stay the course and finish well in our own journey of faith.

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## SIGNS OF TROUBLE

Catalog No. 919  
Judges 17:1-18:31  
Eleventh Message  
John Hanneman  
January 3, 1993

Three years ago, I enlarged the lawn area in my back yard. I uprooted bushes, rototilled the soil, leveled the entire area, and planted grass seed. The grass began to grow, but so did the weeds. I took samples of them to a local nursery, and I was advised that a spray would take care of all the weeds except one species, Bermuda grass. No weed killer on the market would get rid of it, I was told. The only way to kill Bermuda grass was to kill everything in the area where it was growing and plant grass seed again. That sounded like a lot of work, so I decided to spray the other weeds and try to control the Bermuda grass. There wasn't much of it, and I didn't want to replant the entire area where it was growing. So I let it live. Over the past two years, that Bermuda grass, which began as a small patch, has taken over more than half my lawn. I have learned that its roots grow very deep and there is little chance of getting rid of it. "Devil's weed," the nursery man called it. Every week when I mowed, I couldn't even see the healthy grass; all I could see was Bermuda grass everywhere. It drove me to distraction. I decided to get ruthless. I bought the most potent vegetation killer I could find and put five applications of it on the areas where the devil's weed was growing. I turned the soil over by hand, rototilled again, and replanted grass seed over about half of the yard. I wish I had dealt with the problem earlier, when the weed was more manageable, rather than waiting until it took over half of my lawn. I suppose the Bermuda grass will probably come back, but for now my yard is "sin"-free!

Sin is like Bermuda grass: it begins its assault on our spiritual life by creeping in, little by little. We don't think it's a big deal; it's nothing to get too worked up about. But before long, we find ourselves completely entangled in and overwhelmed by foreign elements that have invaded our spiritual soil. What seemed a relatively minor problem at first grows into a monster of overwhelming magnitude.

How is it that we become so easily entangled in sin and spiritual darkness? And what signs do we need to be on the lookout for? This is the theme of the Old Testament book of Judges. Judges is the story of God's people, the nation of Israel, of their entanglement with sin and spiritual darkness, and how God delivered them time after time when at last they called out to him.

In our studies in Judges, we come now to the saga of that well known biblical character, Samson. Before we begin his story, however, I want to set the stage today by looking at events in Israel during the time of the Judges. We find this background information in the marvelous narrative of chapters 17-18 of this book. Chapters 17-21 do not follow chronologically the story of Samson, but rather are flashbacks to the period that followed on the heels of the death of Joshua. Chapters 17-18 form one unit of study, and chapters 19-21 another. Within these chapters we find two mentions of the verse that we have already found to be the theme verse of this book: *"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes."* (Judges 17:6; 21:25). So these accounts in chapters 17-21 give a flavor of the sin and the darkness that had begun to penetrate Israel in the days of the Judges. These ancient narratives will help to alert us to the signs of trouble, for signs of sin, the virulent weed that can sneak into our lives.

Our story this morning is built around two characters, a man named Micah, and a Levite named Jonathan, and one tribe, the

tribe of Dan. Our focus will be on these elements as we begin reading our text.

Now there was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. And he said to his mother, "The eleven hundred pieces of silver which were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse in my hearing, behold, the silver is with me; I took it." And his mother said, "Blessed be my son by the LORD." He then returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother, and his mother said, "I wholly dedicate the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son to make a graven image and a molten image; now therefore, I will return them to you." So when he returned the silver to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver and gave them to the silversmith who made them into a graven image and a molten image, and they were in the house of Micah. And the man Micah had a shrine and he made an ephod and household idols and consecrated one of his sons, that he might become his priest. In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite; and he was staying there. Then the man departed from the city, from Bethlehem in Judah, to stay wherever he might find a place; and as he made his journey, he came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah. And Micah said to him, "Where do you come from?" And he said to him, "I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to stay wherever I may find a place." Micah then said to him, "Dwell with me and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, a suit of clothes, and your maintenance." So the Levite went in. And the Levite agreed to live with the man; and the young man became to him like one of his sons. So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in the house of Micah. Then Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest."

In those days there was no king of Israel; and in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for themselves to live in, for until that day an inheritance had not been allotted to them as a possession among the tribes of Israel. So the sons of Dan sent from their family five men out of their whole number, valiant men from Zorah and Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to search it; and they said to them, "Go, search the land." And they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there. When they were near the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young man, the Levite; and they turned aside there, and said to him, "Who brought you here? And what are you doing in this place? And what do you have here?" And he said to them, "Thus and so has Micah done to me, and he has hired me, and I have become his priest." And they said to him, "Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether our way on which we are going will be prosperous." And the priest said to them, "Go in peace; your way in which you are going has the LORD's approval."

Then the five men departed and came to Laish and saw the people who were in it living in security, after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and secure; for there was no ruler hu-

miliating them for anything in the land, and they were far from the Sidonians and had no dealings with anyone. When they came back to their brothers at Zorah and Eshtaol, their brothers said to them, "What do you report?" And they said, "Arise and let us go up against them; for we have seen the land, and behold, it is very good. And will you sit still? Do not delay to go, to enter, to possess the land. When you enter, you shall come to a secure people with a spacious land; for God has given it into your hand, a place where there is no lack of anything that is on the earth."

Then from the family of the Danites, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, six hundred men armed with weapons of war set out. And they went up and camped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. Therefore they called that place Mahaneh-dan to this day; behold, it is west of Kiriath-jearim. And they passed from there to the hill country of Ephraim and came to the house of Micah.

Then the five men who went to spy out the country of Laish answered and said to their kinsmen, "Do you know that there are in these houses an ephod and household idols and a graven image and a molten image? Now therefore, consider what you should do." And they turned aside there and came to the house of the young man, the Levite, to the house of Micah, and asked him of his welfare. And the six hundred men armed with their weapons of war, who were of the sons of Dan, stood by the entrance of the gate. Now the five men who went to spy out the land went up and entered there, and took the graven image and the ephod and household idols and the molten image, while the priest stood by the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men armed with weapons of war. And when these went into Micah's house and took the graven image, the ephod and household idols and the molten image, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?" And they said to him, "Be silent, put your hand over your mouth and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be a priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?" And the priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod and household idols and the graven image, and went among the people.

Then they turned and departed, and put the little ones and the livestock and the valuables in front of them. When they had gone some distance from the house of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house assembled and overtook the sons of Dan. And they cried to the sons of Dan, who turned around and said to Micah, "What is the matter with you, that you have assembled together?" And he said, "You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and have gone away, and what do I have besides? So how can you say to me, 'What is the matter with you?'" And the sons of Dan said to him, "Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest fierce men fall upon you and you lose your life, with the lives of your household." So the sons of Dan went on their way; and when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his house.

Then they took what Micah had made and the priest who had belonged to him, and came to Laish, to a people quiet and secure, and struck them with the edge of the sword; and they burned the city with fire. And there was no one to deliver them, because it was far from Sidon and they had no dealings with anyone, and it was in the valley which is near Beth-rehob. And they rebuilt the city and lived in it. And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father who was born in Israel; however, the name of the city formerly was Laish. And the sons of Dan set up for themselves the graven image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. So they set up for themselves Micah's graven image

which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh. (17:1-18:31, NASB)

## I. Micah's Self-Made Religion (17:1-6)

Micah's name means, "who is like the LORD?" His character, unfortunately, falls far short of his exalted title: Micah was a thief. He stole eleven hundred pieces of silver from his mother, a considerable amount when we take into account the fact that a year's salary for a priest came to only 10 pieces of silver (17:10). Micah may well have learned his sharp practices from his mother for she, too, was a thief. She dedicated the silver to the Lord, but only gave 200 pieces. Furthermore, she compromised truth, and she neglected to correct or discipline her son for his misdeeds. Instead, she canceled out the curse with a blessing and dedication. Then she led the way to idolatry, giving the silver to a silver-smith.

Obviously, Micah's sin was idolatry. This was his area of darkness. He made a graven image (a carved idol coated with silver), and a molten image (an idol of poured silver), in violation of the third commandment, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth" (Exod. 20:4-5). Micah had a shrine, a place of worship; he had an ephod, priestly garments; he made household gods ("teraphim"), many of them small carvings used in the practice of divination, like the ones that Rachel stole from her father; he established a false priesthood, consecrating one of his sons as a priest in the house; and later he hired a Levite, Jonathan, to be his personal priest.

What was Micah's motivation in all of this? It was to gain favor with God, to advance himself with Yahweh. When he appointed a Levite to be a priest, he was so thrilled that he said, "Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest." Later, according to our text, the tribe of Dan used Micah's idols to the same end.

In a word, then, idolatry was Micah's sin. He had established a household worship system. His was a self-made religion. He could have written the "Sunset" book on do-it-yourself religion. It was religion without revelation; religious practice without God's truth; a religion of convenience rather than a religion of obedience; a private religion rather than community involvement. But it was really worse than that. What is being referred to in this text is not some pagan idol or abomination. We don't find the names "Baal" or "Ashteroth" here. What Micah did was something much more subtle and dangerous. He had the right God (he called him "the LORD"), but he had a wrong worship. He was making images of God and worshipping this god falsely.

The key to understanding all of this is found in the last verse of chapter 18, "they set up for themselves Micah's graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh." God's house was not far away. Worship was to be carried out only at the place designated by God, as the book of Deuteronomy stated, "the place which the LORD your God chooses" (Deut. 12:5, 14; 16:1-7). Micah had the right God but the wrong worship. He had taken religion into his own hands and placed it in his own home. The result of this was that nothing that he was doing distinguished him from the worship of all the Canaanite tribes. This was how they worshipped. Even though Micah proclaimed service to Yahweh, he acted like all the other peoples around him.

When God condemns idolatry, he not only forbids the worship of false gods, he forbids the worship of himself, the one true God, by images. Such false worship robs God of his glory and leads people into spiritual darkness. Luther said, "Anything that one imagines of God apart from Christ is only useless thinking and vain idolatry." John Calvin wrote, "A true image of God is not to be found in all the world and hence His glory is defiled, and His truth corrupted by the lie, whenever He is set before our eyes in visible form. Therefore to devise any image of God is it-

self impious: because by this corruption His majesty is adulterated and He is figured to be other than He is.”

This then is the first sign of trouble, the first way we allow darkness to grow in our spiritual soil: our worship becomes man-made, convenient, and isolated. We think we can bless ourselves through self-devised ritual and routine. But this is not worship as God designed it, in the place he has designated, among the community he had chosen. We cease to worship the God of creation, the God of salvation, the God of redemption, in spirit and truth. Instead, motivated by our own personal desire for prosperity, we fill our lives with carvings and images. We begin to worship the teraphim.

It is obvious how this has happened throughout history. When the nation of Israel divided into two kingdoms, Jeroboam invented a rival worship in the northern kingdom. He had the right God, but the wrong worship. We see this in the ornate churches of Europe that are now empty and lifeless. Right God, wrong worship. We see it in our own nation as the church has begun to stray from God’s truth, seeking to satisfy society rather than God. Right God, wrong worship. The weeds of self-made religion begin to grow, almost unnoticed at first, but before long they squeeze the very life of God out of our worship.

It’s easy to point the finger and say that this is what is happening in other churches, but not here among ourselves. But we must be careful here. Our own minds and hearts are equally susceptible to systems of worship that are not God-centered. We must evaluate our own worship, our own involvement with God. In our approach to God it is easy to allow ritual, routine, performance and self-invention to replace truth, obedience and holiness. When we think of idolatry, we shouldn’t confine our thoughts to the obvious things like sports, cars and careers. Our idols can look spiritual, and they can be approved by society. They can be things like images of Mary, church attendance, good deeds, a particularly spiritual friend, our spouse or children.

When I was a young Christian, a friend gave me a cross to wear as an identifying mark of my new faith. Soon that cross became a symbol of protection for me, signifying that God was with me. If I forgot to wear it, I felt a little unsure and tentative, uncertain whether God was with me. Now there is nothing wrong with wearing a cross, but if we look to it rather than God himself, we can fall into idolatry. One day I discovered that I had mislaid my cross and I was dismayed. Later, however, I came to see that God designed things that way because he wanted me to know that his presence with me did not depend on some outward symbol or image.

Whenever we look to anything or anyone other than God himself, we can fall into the trap of idolatry. The weed of self-made religion robs us of true worship.

## II. A Levite’s Self-Seeking Service (17:7-13; 18:11-20)

Next, we encounter a Levite, a priest named Jonathan, “the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh.” Jonathan’s sin was selfish service. He was a spiritual ladder-climber, committed only to self-promotion and personal betterment. Now, make no mistake. There is nothing wrong with trying to better yourself, but in this case, Jonathan’s service was completely contrary to the will of God because Jonathan used God’s name to bring him advancement.

Jonathan had a storied career. It began in Bethlehem (17:7-8), which was not a Levitical city; thus he probably should not have been there in the first place. So he departed there to stay wherever he might find a place to settle down and begin to advance himself. He was not content with where God had him. He did not have the call of God on him. In his travels, Jonathan stumbled across Micah’s house and Micah, hearing that he was a Levite, made him a priest to himself and to his house. This, of course, was not God’s, but man’s call — a direct denial of the word of God. This was no small matter, as we see in the OT.

Once, when an ordinary Levite named Korah tried to act as a priest, God intervened by causing the ground to open up and swallow him (Numbers 16).

Later, the spies of the Danites entered Micah’s house and stole his idols. At first, Jonathan tried to stop them, but then the Danites made him an offer he couldn’t refuse: “Is it better for you to be a priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?” they asked. What was Jonathan’s response? “And the priest’s heart was glad” (18:20). He was nothing more than a servant for hire, a priest who would serve the highest bidder. He was using the supposedly spiritual community to increase his status and wealth. His service was not intended to help others find God, nor was his desire to bring glory to God. His apparent service for God, in the name of God, was self-service.

Failing to be content with who we are and using service to selfish ends is a sign of trouble. If we allow it, this is a weed that can grow unchecked in the spiritual community. We are not successful in finding our place in the world, so we begin to look around for a spot where we can fit in. So we begin to serve within the church because that brings attention, status, influence and a sense of identity. Soon, instead of serving others simply for the joy of serving, because we have no interest other than self-advancement, we begin to hire ourselves out to the highest bidder: to the situation that carries the most honor; to the opportunity that will bring the most recognition; to the need that will bring us closer to the pastor or the people we most want to associate with. Our desire for service is merely a mask, and we use the spiritual community for our own advancement. This is a dangerous weed that can choke and stifle our own spiritual life and the life of the body of Christ where we worship.

Gaston, the villain in the recent Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast*, took pains to appear caring and serving, but all of his service was only self-service. Although he wanted everyone to believe he was a great guy, all he was interested in was his own advancement. At times, it is easy for us to see this trait in our children. When one of my children comes to me and says, “Can I vacuum?” or some other high-sounding, apparently self-sacrificial thing, I know something is up: they want something from me. When we grow older, of course, we become more subtle and thus much less obvious. We become better at masking our ulterior motives, and we take great pains to cover up the desires of our selfish hearts.

The apostle Paul has a salient word for us here: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:3-7). Paul has another appropriate word, in his letter to Timothy: “godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment” (1 Tim. 6:6).

The weed of selfish serving robs us of the joy of true spiritual service.

The final element in our story centers around the tribe of Dan.

## III. The Danites’ Easy Living (18:1-10, 27-31)

The goal of the Danites was simple: they wanted to gain an inheritance. We find this in 18:1, “in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for themselves to live in, for until that day an inheritance had not been allotted to them as a possession among the tribes of Israel.” Joshua 19 records that Dan’s assigned inheritance lay between Ephraim and Judah, but in the first chapter of Judges, we see that they failed in this assignment: “Then the Amorites forced the sons of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the valley”

(1:34). So the tribe of Dan was scouting around, looking for a place they could call their inheritance, when they found this nice little spot. Laish at first glance might seem to be a real prize, but on closer examination it turned out to be a quiet colony of Phoenicians, isolated from their allies, far from Sidon. Easy pickings for the Danites. They knew Laish was there for the taking.

The sin of the Danites is not hard to recognize. Easy living was their devil's weed. They had not taken what God had given them; instead, they grabbed what he had not given them. They looked for a comfortable place where the natives were unprepared, undefended, and thus vulnerable. The Danites chose a place and a people they knew they could defeat — and they didn't have to trust God for the results. They chose the easy place and the easy way. God had called Israel to war, and Dan had refused to fight his battle. And it was not that they were committed to peace, but because they were dedicated to ease of life. In the song of Deborah, from chapter 5 of Judges, the prophetess and judge asked the question, "Why did Dan stay in ships?" (i.e. stay at ease?) (5:17). It was because ease was what they were looking for.

The judgment of the tribe of Dan was severe. In 1 Chronicles, where the list of tribes and families in Israel is given, Dan is the only tribe that is totally ignored. In Revelation 7, when 144,000 Hebrews carry out a special ministry, Dan is not mentioned. "Dan did not take what God had given to them," wrote one commentator, "and they took what God had not given them. In the process, they lost all that they had."

This sin that is pictured for us by the tribe of Dan, the sin of easy living, is another sign of trouble, a weed that can strangle the spiritual life that God wants us to enter into. This sin of not taking on what seems difficult, and being content fighting with and defeating only what we know we can conquer, must be rooted out.

I want to apply this text on two levels. The first has to do with sin. The land of Canaan, as we have already seen, represents the Spirit-filled life in Christ. Christians are to enter into that life in the same way that Israel was to enter in and possess the land of Canaan. There are enemies in the land, of course. Even though God gives us the land and promised victory, we must enter into the battle by faith, rooting out the deeply entrenched habits and patterns that hold us captive. The temptation we face, however, is the same temptation the tribe of Dan faced. The enemies seem very powerful, so we are tempted to look around for an enemy, like Laish, that is isolated and unfortified, one that we know we can defeat in a battle that does not require faith; then we hold up our victory as a monument to our faith. It looks good, but the trouble is, we stop there. We take it easy, and don't take the land that God wants us to possess. We stop using bad language, but we do nothing about gossip. We cancel our subscription to Playboy magazine, but we do nothing about our lust-filled thoughts. We give a monetary gift to an individual or a church, but we do nothing about our greed-infested hearts. We open up our home to people we enjoy being with, but we turn away from the unlovely.

The second way of applying this text has to do with our being careful to not put ourselves in situations where too much faith is required of us, in circumstances where too much risk is involved. Thus, we always take the path of least resistance. Easy living. We don't reach beyond our known capabilities. We don't want to leave our comfort zone. This is the way to a dull life, however. There isn't much adventure involved, and thus vital faith in Christ is never truly experienced.

I grew up with this kind of mentality. I was always afraid of anything I felt was too difficult for me. While I did very well in school, I always took the path of least resistance lest I fail. I took

only the courses I knew I could conquer, so I virtually guaranteed my own success. I worked as an engineer for 10 years, and soon that career became a comfortable and safe haven for me. But then I became a pastor. When I took that step 10 years ago, I had no idea how much that would stretch me. I have experienced some very difficult times in the ministry, times of great doubt and confusion. It would have been easy for me to quit, and, in fact, quitting would have been consistent with my past. But for some reason this time I didn't want to take the path of least resistance. I wanted to confront the most entrenched and fortified cities in my life. I guess I was willing to risk more to experience God's power beyond what I already knew about. This is how God wants us to live. He wants us to bypass Laish and go on to take the cities and fight the battles we feel we cannot win. It is then we will experience the surpassing greatness of his power at work in us.

Here is how one writer has put it: "There is no greater danger faced by North American Christians than the love of ease. It is so tempting to carve out a Laish for ourselves — a quiet little island of peace where we can live in affluence and forget all about the needy world outside, and the enemies of the gospel, and the radical claims of Jesus Christ on our lives. Why fight when we can sleep? Why sacrifice when we can settle down?"

The weed of easy living robs us of a true experience of the power of Christ.

This then is the historical, cultural, and spiritual framework of the book of Judges. These are the three weeds, signs of trouble leading to darkness and slavery to sin, that can grow in our spiritual soil: self-made religion, like the religion practiced by Micah; self-seeking service, like Jonathan practiced; and easy living, the downfall of the Danites. These weeds begin to grow almost unnoticed. At first, it doesn't seem they will become major problems. Bermuda grass is green, and as such it doesn't look that much out of place in a lawn. You think you can control it. If you keep the grass cut short, it won't appear all that bad. But if you don't deal with it, soon it will take over completely. In the same way, if we don't deal with the weeds of darkness, they will take over and ruin our spiritual garden. This is the message of the book of Judges.

"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." The book of Proverbs has a counterpoint to this theme verse from Judges: "*There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death*" (Prov. 14:12). The framework of the book of Judges may be spiritual darkness, but this very book also declares that God's light shines in the darkness; that his life can resurrect us from the dead; that his power can release us from bondage. Just as God raised up judges to save the nation of Israel, so too God has sent his Son Jesus to save us and set us free from these trappings of darkness. And when we see this God for all his glory, then we indeed worship in spirit and truth and serve with a pure heart, confident that the God of creation and redemption is with us to take on the most overwhelming foes.

It is often in the midst of darkness that God's light is most clearly seen. This is where we will begin next week in the story of Samson. God raised up Samson and brought him to faith, and he used the mighty warrior and judge to deliver the nation of Israel almost in spite of himself.

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## GOD'S INVASION

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Judges 13:1-24  
Twelfth Message  
John Hanneman  
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A couple of months ago, our pastors held an all-day staff meeting and afterwards we went out to dinner together. Before we left for home, we all made a trip the men's room. One of our pastors, the prankster among us, turned out the lights, making the restroom pitch dark. We began to whoop it up. Joel Werk, our high school pastor, pretending that someone was attacking him, screamed, "My watch! My watch! Someone is stealing my watch!" After about 30 seconds the lights came back on, the noise subsided and order was restored. Then the door to one of the stalls opened and a man came out. Unknown to us he had been in there all the time. He had a surprised look on his face, to say the least. We could only imagine what he was thinking. As he exited the restroom rather quickly, quite disheveled, with shirt tails hanging out, he muttered, "Where is that guy?" Unexpected, and certainly unsolicited, we had invaded this man's privacy.

We will discover in our opening study on the life of Samson this morning that God, too, invades our lives in most unexpected ways. Our text, from chapter 13 of the book of Judges, concerns an invasion by God into the history of the nation Israel. To accomplish this, God invaded the lives of a man named Manoah and his wife. It was an invasion designed to accomplish the birth of a son for the salvation of Israel.

### I. The Reason For God's Invasion

The opening verse of chapter 13 repeats the theme phrase which gives the historical context of the book of Judges:

**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 forty years.** (13:1, NASB)

After the death of Moses, Joshua took the nation of Israel into the land. There he defeated 31 kings, and took possession of the land. After Joshua died, according to Judges 17:6, "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." The nation fell into a pattern, a cycle of behavior that is repeated six times in the book.

Verses 11-19 of chapter 2 describe how this four-step process developed. Here is the first step (verses 11-12): "*Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them.*"

The second step is illustrated in the words of verse 14: "*And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that*

*they could no longer stand before their enemies.*"

The third step was initiated when the nation cried out to the Lord for deliverance. Verse 16: "*Then the LORD raised up Judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them.*" Following this, Israel would enjoy a time of rest and peace all the days of the judge.

Then would come the fourth step, however (verse 19): "*But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways.*" Thus the cycle would continue into the next generation.

Verse 1 of chapter 13 sets the stage once more, therefore, as we come now to the last reference in Judges to this cycle of sin and deliverance. First, the apostasy: "*Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD...*" And then the servitude: "*...so that the LORD gave them into the hands of the Philistines forty years.*"

This time the enemy was the Philistines. These were a seafaring people who had been forced out of their homeland in the area we now know as Greece and the islands of the Aegean Sea. Around 1200 B.C., the warriors had set out to look for a new home, and the main force of these "Sea People" attacked Egypt. They were defeated, their invasion repulsed, and so they moved up the coast to the southern coastal plain of Palestine, and there they settled down. By the time of this incident in Judges they had established themselves in five main cities: Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath. Trade and intermarriage were the main weapons used by the Philistines. If the Israelites needed a plow or an axe, they had to go to the Philistines to get one. And, contrary to how God had instructed them, when the Jews wanted to marry their sons or daughters, the Philistines raised no objection. Thus it was through compromise and assimilation that the Philistines gained a stranglehold on the Israelites. Israel did not become enslaved by military dominance as much as they were slowly led astray by spiritual and cultural seduction.

It is noteworthy that there is no reference in this account to Israel's crying out to the Lord, contrary to the usual pattern that we have already seen throughout the book. The reason for this was because the cycle of sin had become so entrenched that Israel by this time was willing to remain in bondage. They were content with oppression, having become comfortable with their enslavement.

This is one of the tragic consequences of sin. When we continually fall into sin, each time we sink to a deeper level. The sin becomes more intense, the darkness darker, the duration of our bondage longer. Our hearts become hardened; our consciences dulled; our minds desensitized. We do not have the ability, even the desire to cry out to God. We become content with darkness and enslavement. No

matter how terrible our circumstances, we fear changing them. This happens because we become comfortable with our circumstances; we find them normal. This is what Jesus said, isn't it? "Men loved the darkness rather than the light" (John 3:19).

Once I went jogging with my dog at the field house on the campus of the University of Nebraska. While I was running, someone locked all the doors at the field house and I could not get out. It was the afternoon of my first wedding anniversary, and my wife was expecting me home any minute. At last I found a window that was open a little, leading to a ledge from which I could jump to freedom! The problem was in getting the dog to follow me. Try as I might I could not coach him to come out the window and join me on the ledge outside. I had to wait a long time until someone finally came along and called the campus police to open up the door.

Where sin is concerned, many instinctively act like my dog did that day. Freedom is within our grasp, yet we are imprisoned by our iniquity. God is coaching us to flee the darkness and oppression, but we demur. We are so afraid of trusting, of moving out in faith, of giving up the familiar and the comfortable, that we balk at the freedom that is beckoning to us.

This, too, was Israel's condition at the time of our story, and it was in the midst of this kind of darkness that God invaded the life of the nation.

## II. The Announcement Of God's Invasion (13:2-7)

**And 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. Then the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman, and said to her, "Behold now, you are barren and have borne no children, but you shall conceive and give birth to a son. Now therefore, be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing. For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines." Then the woman came and told her husband, saying, "A man of God came to me and his appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome. And I did not ask him where he came from, nor did he tell me his name. But he said to me, 'Behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and you shall not drink wine or strong drink nor eat any unclean thing, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death.'" (13:2-7)**

Manoah was a Danite. From Judges 18 we know that by this time the majority of the tribe of Dan had moved north, to Laish. (Zorah was a border city, wedged between Israel and the Philistines.) Manoah's wife, who "was barren and had borne no children," was visited by the angel of the Lord, the pre-incarnate Christ. He told her that she would "conceive and give birth to a son," and instructed her "not to drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing." Next, the angel of the Lord gave instructions regarding the son who would be born to her, that "no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God."

And then he stated the purpose behind the birth of the son: "he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines."

Manoah's wife was barren. This was a severe limitation for an Israelite woman. Every Jewish woman wanted a son to carry on the family name, and every Jewish woman hoped that she would be the one who would give birth to the Messiah. This woman's barrenness symbolized the barrenness of Israel's spiritual life. But it is in the midst of aridity that God invaded, among a people who were not even crying out for help, a nation that had become comfortable with sin and spiritual darkness.

This is the amazing story of the Bible, isn't it, of God invading dry and unfruitful lives? The barren woman is a type common throughout the Scriptures. Manoah's wife had the same limitation as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth. This theme of barrenness culminates, of course, in Mary, the mother of Jesus, a virgin who conceived and gave birth to the God-Man. The indication of all of Scripture therefore is that God keeps breaking through barrenness. God's light is made manifest in the midst of deepest darkness. The culmination of this truth was the incarnation.

This theme is repeated throughout the book of Judges. For 330 years, God raised up judges to lead Israel to salvation and redemption, freedom from bondage, slavery, and oppression. This process began with Othniel and ended with Samson (or, more technically, with Samuel). If we extrapolate this theme, again it leads us to Jesus, our Redeemer and Deliverer. Once more, the culmination was in incarnation.

God-invasion, then, is the story of the Bible. The spiritual principle is this: God is so faithful, so loyal to his commitment, his love and his covenant, that he invades our lives to deliver us and save us. And at times he does so without our asking. This is what happened with Abraham. God invaded the patriarch's life while he was living in Haran, and brought him into the land of Canaan. Consider Saul. God invaded his life on the road to Damascus, and Saul went on to become Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. Consider the Ethiopian eunuch. God invaded his life on the road to Gaza, and he became the first African convert to Christianity.

God invades history and he invades hearts. Most of you here this morning are thankful that God has invaded your lives. You were in darkness, headed down a dead-end road, and God suddenly broke through and invaded your life. If, on the other hand, your life is filled with darkness, the hope that is held out by the Scriptures is that God wants to invade your life. And he can do it! You are never too far gone for the hand of God. It is because he works in barren lives.

The older I grow, the more this truth baffles my understanding. Knowing that God has come into my life, a life filled with selfishness, pride, immaturity, and sin, drives me to my knees in wonder and humility. I remember one night as a college student, more than 20 years ago, when my life was dark and depressed. Everyone and everything had let me down; there was nowhere to turn. I wasn't even looking for God, but God invaded my life.

There is another principle here. When God invades our lives, he calls us to separation and consecration. The angel

of the Lord gave instructions to Manoah's wife concerning how she was to care for herself and for the promised child. Her child was to be a Nazirite, meaning he was to be separated and set apart to God from his mother's womb. He was to drink no wine or strong drink; no razor should touch his head (his uncut hair would be a public sign of his dedication to God); and he was to have no contact with a dead person. All the days of his separation he was to be holy to the Lord.

When God invades our lives, he call us to separation, too. The way to begin to deal with barrenness is to set your life apart to God. This is the process of sanctification. Samson's strength was due not to the length of his hair, but to his being separate, his being set apart. Israel's problem was assimilation through marriage with the Philistines, of compromise in terms of their relationship with God. But when God invades our lives, he calls us to walk a different road from the highway the world travels on.

This can be a major problem for some. We know that God has invaded our lives, and yet we behave as if he had not. We do not separate ourselves in a biblical sense and live lives holy to God. Separating ourselves does not, of course, mean that we should make a list of things that we resolve not to do. The point of the Nazirite vow was not separation from, but separation *unto* something. Paralysis does not equal spirituality. God does not call us to isolationism. One writer says, "Isolation, external separation, is no more biblical separation than assimilation. We are not to be chameleons, conforming to our environment, but neither are we to be hermits, sealed off from the world of men." Like Samson, our spiritual strength is enhanced when we set ourselves apart. But, like Samson, our spiritual strength is depleted when we don't set ourselves apart and we continue living like the world lives. This was Micah's problem, as we saw last week in chapter 17. He knew God's name, yet he took from the Canaanites all their paraphernalia of worship and made his own religion. He did not set apart his life for God.

When God invades our lives, he calls us to separation.

### III. The Wonder Of God's Invasion (13:8-23)

**Then Manoah entreated the LORD and said, "O Lord, please let the man of God whom Thou hast sent come to us again that he may teach us what to do for the boy who is to be born." And God listened to the voice of Manoah; and the angel of God came again to the woman as she was sitting in the field, but Manoah her husband was not with her. So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, "Behold, the man who came the other day has appeared to me." Then Manoah arose and followed his wife, and when he came to the man he said to him, "Are you the man who spoke to the woman?" And he said, "I am." And Manoah said, "Now when your words come to pass, what shall be the boy's mode of life and his vocation?" So the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, "Let the woman pay attention to all that I said. She should not eat anything that comes from the vine nor drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing; let her observe all that I commanded."**

**Then Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "Please let us detain you so that we may prepare a kid for you." And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah,**

**"Though you detain me, I will not eat your food, but if you prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the LORD." For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the LORD. And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that when your words come to pass, we may honor you?" But the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?" So Manoah took the kid with the grain offering and offered it on the rock to the LORD, and He performed wonders while Manoah and his wife looked on. For it came about when the flame went up from the altar toward heaven, that the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar. When Manoah and his wife saw this, they fell on their faces to the ground. Now the angel of the LORD appeared no more to Manoah or his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the LORD. So Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." But his wife said to him, "If the LORD had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from our hands, nor would He have showed us all these things; nor would He have let us hear things like this at this time." (13:8-23)**

Since he was not present when the man appeared the first time, Manoah wanted an "instant replay" of the angel's visit. God answered his request, and in response to Manoah's question, the angel repeated his instructions. Then Manoah prepared an offering for the Lord, much like Gideon did, and the Lord performed wonders while the man and his wife looked on. The Lord then ascended in the flame of the altar. Manoah and his wife recognized the angel to be the Lord, and they feared for their lives because they had seen God.

Manoah strikes me as a man of little faith. His question to the angel reveals this: "When your words come to pass, what shall be the boy's mode of life, his vocation, etc.?" He is a typical father, asking questions like, "Where will he go to college? How can I pay for it? Where will he work?"

Notice that the Lord disregards Manoah's question. He does not give any more information. What he does is reveal more of himself, performing wonders in their presence. He asks, "Why do you ask my name seeing that it is wonderful ...and He performed wonders while Manoah and his wife looked on."

"Wonder" or "incomprehensible" here is the same term used to refer to the Messiah, in Isaiah 9:6, "and his name shall be Wonderful Counselor." "Wonder" is the word used to describe the acts of God and his historical achievements on behalf of Israel. When this word is used of man, however, it speaks of things beyond man's capabilities. Ultimately, the purpose behind God's wonders is not merely to demonstrate power, but to make mercy available to the one who witnesses the demonstration. The psalmist wrote, "Blessed be the Lord, for He has made marvelous (wonderful) His lovingkindness to me in a besieged city" (Psa 31:21). God's wonders evoke astonishment and worship. This is exactly what happened to Manoah and his wife when they presented an offering to God. An ironic twist here is that in one verb form, "wonder" means to fulfill a vow. (It is actually used in Numbers 6 in the instructions for a Nazirite.) One could say that because God is committed to fulfill his word, his vow, he acts in incomprehensible, wonderful ways to demonstrate his mercy and love.

And how does this apply to us? Like Manoah and his wife, we are merely spectators. The only thing left for us is to worship God and trust him for what he will do in our lives.

Often, when God invades our lives, he does not answer our questions, but instead he reveals his wonder. We want to analyze and question, but God wants us to marvel. We want answers, but God wants us to worship. We want to know how his words will come to pass, but God wants us to trust.

God calls us to enjoy him. We have seen him and what he can do. He has invaded our lives. We know that he can accomplish anything he desires, that he can do what we cannot do. He will fulfill his vow. He will complete his covenant. We do not have to worry about it, so our response should be to enjoy his presence and his wonder.

Six years ago we wanted to change homes and move. We tried to buy a house, but could not because the sellers would not accept our contingency to sell our home. So we decided to sell our house first and then buy another. We sold it, but then we couldn't find a house that met our needs. (This was a time when prices were escalating rapidly and listings were scarce.) Anxiety and depression became daily experiences. Finally, I made a decision and forced my wife to buy a house neither one of us really wanted. I took my son over to the house the night before we were to move in. He looked around and said, "This is not the right house." What an encouraging word! We moved in anyway, but our hearts were heavy. A few months later, I told my realtor we were still not settled. If he saw anything that might suit us, I said, we might be interested. He said that he had just seen a house for sale and had actually thought of us, but he was afraid to call us. We looked at the house, and we made an offer under the asking price. The owners accepted it, and our contingency to sell our house. The only thing was that, for us to be able to afford the move, we had to sell our house by ourselves. A week later, God worked his wonder and we sold our house.

This experience showed me that God could do things that seemed impossible to me. I could never figure it all out, and he never answered all my questions. After I had thrown in the towel, admitting to myself that there was nothing I could do to accomplish this thing, God invaded. He did the incomprehensible to demonstrate his loyal

love, simply to let me know how much he loved me. He revealed himself, and all that was left for me was to marvel, like Manoah and his wife, at what he had done.

Many of us, like Manoah, try to figure everything out. We want to analyze and dissect our happiness and joy. But we can't do it. What God wants us to do is stop striving and instead look to the One whose name is Wonderful. Worship is what we will be doing for eternity, and we have the opportunity to begin to worship now. Our goal may be to achieve, to accomplish, and to know, but God's purpose is to do what we cannot fathom and in the process reveal himself in all his wonder. It might be a house, a miraculous adoption, a job offer. It might even be the greatest blessing of all — his nearness.

God invades, and his name is "Wonderful."

#### IV. The Form Of God's Invasion (13:24-25)

And now the epilogue to this opening chapter in the life of Samson. Verse 24:

**Then the woman gave birth to a son and named him Samson; and the child grew up and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol. (13:24-25)**

God did accomplish his word and perform his wonderful act: "The child grew up and the LORD blessed him"; "the Spirit of the LORD began to stir in him."

This phrase, "the child grew up and the LORD blessed him," is similar to the words used of Samuel, of John the Baptist, and of another remarkable Son, Jesus, who came to save (1 Sam. 2:21, 3:19; Luke 1:80, 2:40). In the postscript to this chapter we are reminded once more of God's purpose to invade our spiritually darkened world.

So here in this opening account of the birth of Samson we discern four spiritual principles:

1. *The darkness can be so severe in our lives that we cease to cry out to God for help and deliverance.*
2. *God is so faithful to his loyal love that he invades our lives often without our even asking.*
3. *When God invades our lives, he calls us to separation, not assimilation.*
4. *When God invades our lives, he does not answer all our petty questions. Instead, he reveals his wonder in order to evoke our worship.*

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# INFATUATION BLUES

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Judges 14:1-20  
Thirteenth Message  
John Hanneman  
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Our study this morning on the life of Samson, from chapter 14 of the book of Judges, deals with a case of falling in love, what I call the “infatuation blues.”

Country and western singer Patty Loveless sings these words in one of her hit songs:

The right time, the right place,  
The right body, the right face.  
Timber! I'm falling in love!

It started slow, it's coming fast,  
I gotta feeling, its gonna last.  
Timber! I'm falling in love!

You're so pretty, you look so sweet,  
Your love is sweeping me off my feet.  
You're the only one I'm dreaming of,  
I can't believe that I'm falling in love.

Who knows how love starts,  
I woke up with you in my heart.  
Timber! I'm falling in love!

## I. The Temptation (14:1-4) — “I saw a woman in Timnah”

**Then Samson went down to Timnah and saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines. So he came back and told his father and mother, “I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife.” Then his father and his mother said to 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?” But Samson said to his father, “Get her for me, for she looks good to me.” However, his father and mother did not know that it was of the LORD, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. Now at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel.** (NASB)

Samson had a problem with lust. He saw a Philistine woman in Timnah who looked good to him and he told his parents to get her for him. He acted on his desires. This story is probably the ultimate example of what the Bible calls the “lust of the eyes.” In the Garden of Eden, Eve “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6). Our eyes stimulate our desires. We see something, we are tempted, and we want to possess it. I can be walking through the men’s department at Nordstrom and suddenly something will catch my eye. I am drawn like a magnet and I want it. And at times, I don’t just want one thing, I want one of everything in the store.

Samson saw the Philistine woman and she looked “right” in his eyes. This is the literal meaning of the

phrase, “she looks good to me.” This, too, is what the song says, isn’t it? “The right time, the right place, the right body, the right face.” The word “right” here is the same word that is used in the theme verse of Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6). Compare this verse with the words of Deuteronomy 6:18, “You shall do what is right and good in the sight (eyes) of the LORD, that it may be well with you and that you may go in and possess the good land which the Lord swore to give your fathers.” This word “right” is used of straightness, of uprightness. When we do what is “right” in our own eyes as opposed to what is “right” in the eyes of the Lord, then we have changed the standard. We have veered away from the directions which God has given to us.

There is a second sin involved here. Samson sought to marry outside the covenant family. God was very clear about this matter in his instructions to Israel: they were not to marry outside the nation. Marriage itself was not the problem — a Nazirite could marry — the problem was intermarriage. The Philistines used intermarriage, assimilating the Israelites into their culture, as a way of dominating and controlling the nation. The woman at Timnah was a daughter of the uncircumcised Philistines. Marrying into that society involved marrying into their religion, their gods and their worship. Samson, a Nazirite, was set apart by God to deliver Israel from the Philistines who had enslaved the nation for 40 years, but this deliverance was at risk due to Samson’s own personal desires. He was rejecting both the authority of God and the wisdom of his parents.

There is an interesting phrase in verse 4: “He [the LORD] was seeking an occasion against the Philistines.” God did not direct Samson to disobey, but, at the same time, he was not about to abandon his program because of Samson’s sin. God’s sovereignty overruled Samson’s choices. God overrules evil with good. This does not grant us freedom to do what we want to do, of course, trusting that God will over-rule if need be, but it does demonstrate that God can use even our mistakes for his glory.

## II. The Lion and the Honey (14:5-9)

**Then Samson went down to Timnah with his father and mother, and came as far as the vineyards of Timnah; and behold, a young lion came roaring toward him. And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily, so that he tore him as one tears a kid though he had nothing in his hand; but he did not tell his father or mother what he had done. So he went down and talked to the woman; and she looked good to Samson. When he returned later to take her, he turned aside to look at the carcass of the lion; and behold, a swarm of bees and honey were in the body of the lion. So he**

scraped the honey into his hands and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them and they ate it; but he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey out of the body of the lion.

As he was walking down to Timnah, Samson came upon a lion. The Spirit of the Lord rushed upon the Nazirite, and with his bare hands he tore apart the predator. In this first reference to Samson's strength, God was showing our hero that his strength lay with him. God was demonstrating to him that he could deliver Israel and break the chains of the Philistine rule, but Samson did not see this. The lion here may represent the devil. Peter reminds us that "the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). But, God's strength can defeat this lion. As was the case with Samson, at times the lion rushes at us and we do not have time to think. On such occasions we are forced to trust in God's strength, not our own.

However, and here is yet another instance of his sin, Samson did not tell his mother and father about the lion. Later, we will see that although he withheld this information from his parents, he told his wife. Samson handled a carcass, violating his Nazirite vow. And he gave honey to his mother and father, thereby involving them in his sin. Samson had his eyes on one thing and one thing only.

### III. The Feast and the Riddle (14:10-14)

Then his father went down to the woman; and Samson made a feast there, for the young men customarily did this. And it came about when they saw him that they brought thirty companions to be with him. Then Samson said to them, "Let me now propound a riddle to you; if you will indeed tell it to me within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen wraps and thirty changes of clothes. But if you are unable to tell me, then you shall give me thirty linen wraps and thirty changes of clothes." And they said to him, "Propound your riddle, that we may hear it." So he said to them,

**"Out of the eater came something to eat,  
And out of the strong came something sweet."**

**But they could not tell the riddle in three days.**

Samson became a party animal. He made a feast for the Philistines, assimilating with them instead of remaining separate from them. And he probably drank wine, in violation of his vow.

Selfish ambition was his sin here. He propounded a riddle, hoping to gain thirty changes of clothes. The garments mentioned here were very expensive — and the riddle would be impossible to solve. It could only be known by him. He thought he was betting on a sure thing, hardly the proposal of a Spirit-led man.

### IV. The Deceit of His Wife (14:15-20)

Then it came about on the fourth day that they said to Samson's wife, "Entice your husband, that he may tell us the riddle, lest we burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us to impoverish us? Is this not so?" And Samson's wife wept before him and said, "You only hate me, and you do not love me;

you have propounded a riddle to the sons of my people, and have not told it to me." And he said to her, "Behold, I have not told it to my father or mother; so should I tell you?" However she wept before him seven days while their feast lasted. And it came about on the seventh day that he told her because she pressed him so hard. She then told the riddle to the sons of her people. So the men of the city said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down,

**"What is sweeter than honey?  
And what is stronger than a lion?"**

**And he said to them,**

**"If you had not plowed with my heifer,  
You would not have found out my riddle."**

**Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily, and he went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty of them and took their spoil, and gave the changes of clothes to those who told the riddle. And his anger burned, and he went up to his father's house. But Samson's wife was given to his companion who had been his friend.**

So much for the sure thing! His wife's family threatened her life and the life of her father. Nice family! When you marry someone, you also marry their relatives. Samson's wife wept before him for seven days, frustrating him emotionally and probably sexually. She continued to press him, saying, "You only hate me and you do not love me." The tears and nagging of a wife can break the strongest resolve.

Then, says the text, "The Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily." Samson went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty men, a situation that the Lord began to use. Samson's anger "burned," landing him into a lot of trouble. And finally, "Samson's wife was given to his companion"

### V. Principles and Application

This text highlights some sobering spiritual principles. I will mention four.

*A. We can have all kinds of talents and gifts, and we can be empowered by God, yet it takes a life of discipline, wisdom, and submission to the Lordship of Christ in order for us to utilize these things.*

Samson had a special strength and a special calling, yet it was not the word of God but his passions and his desires that controlled him. For all his strength he was a weak man because he never learned to control himself. The proverb says, "He who rules his spirit [is better] than he who captures a city" (Prov. 16:32) Although he was fully capable of capturing a city single-handedly, Samson did not discipline and rule his own desires and lusts. As a result, for all his strength, he was a weak man.

Christians are filled with the Spirit of God who has given us resources, gifts, and talents, and yet, the Spirit-filled life and our utilizing these resources is not an automatic response on our part. Our spirit needs to be fed by prayer and by the word of God. We must pray for wisdom and submit to discipline. Self-discipline is not denying our drives and desires; it is submitting them to the will of God and to his timing. One of the fruits of the Spirit, of course, is self-control. We are not invincible. If we do not disci-

pline our lives, then our power dissipates and we squander our resources. The tragedy of Samson is that although he was a man of great potential, he wasted much of his promise. Why? It was because he was ruled by his passions. The same scenario can befall any one among us. There is a lion on the loose and he is seeking someone to devour.

What a great word this is for young people! There is much in our society today that is wasteful and destructive — drug abuse, the AIDS disaster, we could go on. As I look back on my own life I am saddened as I recall the years that I wasted. I went into a “sophomore slump” in college and it took a long time to come out of it. Now I work with young singles, and one thing that is close to my heart is that they not squander their early years. It is a sad thing to see lives ruled by passions. It is a sad thing to see potential squandered. There is nothing better than Christ going to come along. So engage your life in Christ now, grow in him and become mature men and women of faith.

*B. When we open the door to sin, we become slaves of sin. This leads to compromise in many areas of our lives, and draws others along with us.*

Samson gave into temptation. Both he and the Philistine woman were consenting adults, he reasoned, and no one would be affected by his behavior. But he was wrong. His acting on the temptation led to the following progression of sin: He went against the authority and wisdom of God and his parents; he disobeyed God by marrying a Philistine; he was not to associate with anything dead, but he did anyway; he deceived his parents and gave them unclean food to eat; he was not supposed to drink strong drink, but he probably did so; his selfish ambition drove him to try to gain 30 expensive garments; his rage was uncontrollable; he compromised his Nazirite vows and drew his parents into his disobedience. Samson had become a slave of sin. Listen to the words of the apostle Paul from Romans: “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?” (Rom. 6.15-16).

Like Samson, Christians, too, have been set apart to God. When we came to Christ, we become a new creation. Our sin nature was crucified with Christ. We have been raised with him; we have been given the nature of the Father through the Spirit; and now we can walk in newness of life. Sin is not a mandate; it is an option. Sin is not our master, God is. We no longer have to be slaves of sin. We no longer have to listen to what sin tells us to do. When sin barks an order, however, we are so used to responding to the voice or the mood or the feeling that we sometimes obey. As Christians, we can choose to sin, and when we do so, we become a slave to sin. We start down a path that will lead to further sin, compromise, and the involvement of others. There is a natural progression. This is what is illustrated in Samson’s life, and this is what happens to us as well.

This principle is further illustrated in the life of David. One spring, the time of year when kings went out to war, David was lazy and he remained in Jerusalem. After he had taken a nap, he went up on the roof, and he saw a woman bathing. She looked good to him (lust of the eyes),

and lust was born. This in turn led to adultery. David deceived Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, and this eventually led to the murder of Uriah.

You cannot choose to sin in a vacuum. If you choose to sin, you will become the slave of sin.

*C. If something is truly good and God wants you to have it, then, firstly, God will give it to you without your having to take it, and, secondly, you do not have to compromise in order to get it.*

Samson compromised his Nazirite vow to get what he wanted. This man was obsessive-compulsive. He had to have this woman, no matter what the cost. And so he did what was right in his own eyes.

Although the text says that God used him anyway, we should not emulate this practice and use it as a pattern for our lives. If God wants us to have something, he will bring it to pass. We don’t have to force it to make it happen. If we compromise, we may end up with something we don’t want. God’s gifts are the best gifts. The gifts that he gives, without manipulation on our part, are the ones that bring the greatest joy. This is God’s very nature. He is our Father. Would he withhold anything from us that is good for us? James wrote in his letter, “Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow” (James 1:17).

God will not withhold good things from us. Samson had a problem believing this, as did Eve in the Garden of Eden. They wanted to be God and decide what was good for them. When I was younger, I had a goal to buy myself snow skis. I graduated from college, and when I finally began earning money, I decided to buy ski equipment. I bought everything I needed, but I was strangely unfulfilled because I felt I was being selfish and obsessive. I didn’t use good sense in my purchase; I just had to have it right then and there. I ended up hating the skis, and the boots hurt my feet. Finally, I sold everything because it had left such a bad taste in my mouth.

At this point I want to talk about love and marriage. Certainly, marriage is one arena where this principle is put to the test. Like Samson, many are tempted, because of infatuation, to choose to marry the person who looks good to them. People ask, “How can something that feels so good be wrong?” Samson desired a relationship based solely on physical attraction because he was controlled by his lust. Spiritual life and family backgrounds were not discussed. This is a very poor foundation for married life.

The desire to marry can be very strong. But so too can the temptation to be swept away by infatuation. The temptation to become involved physically before marriage fans the flame and distorts the vision even more. The temptation to marry a non-believer in order to satisfy the inner desires of the heart is very strong. The temptation to make a relationship work because we are tired of being single can be especially deceptive. Given the choice of following God, or having the possibility of romance and marriage, many choose romance.

But the Scripture says that God gives the best gifts. We don’t have to force things to happen. We don’t have to lie to ourselves. We don’t have to compromise our relationship with God in order for his will to be implemented in

our lives. If you want to marry, if you desire love, it is very much to your advantage to wait upon God. A relationship that might look good at first glance can sour very quickly. What we think we need can turn out to be the worst thing for us.

In all probability there are married couples here this morning who have been victimized by making bad choices in this area. They can identify with Samson, having married for the wrong reasons. Most couples are madly in love when they get married, but marriages are often undertaken for the wrong reasons, or they are based on an unhealthy foundation. You may be thinking to yourself, "I wish I had been more level-headed and God-centered when I first contemplated marriage." Perhaps you feel that you married the wrong person. Do not despair. As we learned in our study last week, God invades barren lives and barren marriages. He brings light out of darkness and redeems human life from the pit. He is capable of working in your life and in your marriage if you begin to cultivate your relationship with your spouse in a healthy way.

Let me make a few suggestions in this respect. (By the way, these are suggestions that all married couples need to attend to.)

1. If you are having marriage problems, talk to a professional counselor, a pastor, or a friend who can bring objectivity. Have someone pray with you. Do not be embarrassed to seek help. Most married couples, if they were honest, would admit to some difficulties in their marriages. The body of Christ is designed to care for you and to help you.

2. Be honest, and deal with your negative thoughts and feelings. Don't dwell on the past; you cannot change it. And forgive yourself. You can change the patterns of your relationships. Don't imagine that your life is ruined. God is faithful to bring all of us to a place where we become broken. This is not a bad thing, because it humbles us and draws us closer to him.

3. Stop gazing at what you don't have and instead, look at what you do have. There was a time in your relationship with your spouse when there was friendship and mutual attraction. You have some positive things to build on. Don't be deceived by thinking that everything would be perfect if you were married to someone else. Why start over when you have many good things to build upon?

4. Get back to wholehearted commitment to one another. Give all of yourselves to each other and affirm your commitment to each other. And do this often, not just once a year. Marriage needs this atmosphere of total commitment in order for both partners to feel secure enough to open up to each other.

5. Begin to serve one another. Most negative feelings and disappointments arise from selfish reasons. If you are thinking only about yourself, you are sure to be disappointed. Love, by its very nature, reaches out. Stop thinking about what you are not getting and begin to serve your partner independent of what he or she is doing. Love focuses on another. It is not concerned with self.

If your marriage is troubled, get back to the foundations and begin to build again in healthy ways. This will take time and effort, but remember, as we saw last week, our God's name is "Wonderful." He can restore life to a barren relationship.

If you are single, be wise about how you select your marriage partner. Make sure you go beyond the surface things, and remember to wait upon the Lord.

*D. Sometimes, even when we sin and choose wrong things, God overrules our choices for our own good.*

Despite his desires, his manipulation, etc., Samson did not end up with the girl. God saved him despite himself. He kept Samson separate for his own purposes. God is faithful to us. Like a parent who walks behind a child who is learning to walk, God protects us from danger. Sometimes, he allows us to fall and we suffer scrapes, but other times he catches us and saves us from disaster. We desire what seems right in our eyes, but what may look right often is not right, so God intervenes for his glory and our benefit.

Last week, I shared about a dilemma that my wife and I had concerning a house we bought. We had sold our house and we were looking for another, but nothing suitable was on the market. Prices were escalating and time was running out. As our dreams faded, our anxiety grew. At last we found a house. It wasn't really what we had in mind, but we felt we could make things work. We made a verbal agreement with the owner, but problems arose when we sat down to sign the documents. The owners wanted everything their way. They demanded that we pay most of the closing costs, and to accept the property as it was. While I in turn asked them to take responsibility for certain things, my anxiety was so great I was willing to do almost anything to have the situation resolved, to get on with life, to force my dream, so I kept compromising. Finally, I asked the owner to fix just one window, but he refused. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. For several months, my wife and I lamented. Maybe we should have made it work, we felt. But God saved us. We had to endure and wait longer, but when he gave us his gift, and paved the way so that we did not have to compromise, it was perfect and it was right. Now, every time my wife drives down our street, she thanks God for what was right in his eyes. This was just a house, of course — it was not a problem marriage situation — but the principle is true nonetheless.

God loves us so much he saves us from our own worst enemy — ourselves. May he grant to us the wisdom and the self-control to not waste our years, to not squander our resources, or be ruled by our passions; to not reach for what might be second best, but to wait on him and trust him for his perfect gifts.

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# THE POWER OF FLESH AND SPIRIT

Catalog No. 922  
Judges 15:1-20  
Fourteenth Message  
John Hanneman  
January 24, 1993

I once read a newspaper story about a man in Enumclaw, Washington, who became so enraged over his wife's filing for divorce that he bulldozed his three-bedroom, \$85,000 home. What he did was perfectly legal because he had taken the time to pick up a demolition permit! The neighbors called the police and their arrival halted the debacle momentarily, but then the man produced his demolition permit which he had obtained for \$11.50. He was within his rights, so he leveled the place.

Our hero, Samson, whose life and exploits we are studying in this current series from the book of Judges, had a couple of things in common with this demolisher of his dwelling house — unrequited love and uncontrollable rage. Samson, however, would not have needed a bulldozer to destroy his home.

Jealousy, greed and anger are powerful, destructive forces. How can we get control over them and render them powerless so that we can enjoy peace within and healthy relationships without? Our text today from Judges will help us greatly.

Samson was born to Manoah and his wife to accomplish the task of delivering Israel from the Philistines. He was to be a Nazirite from the womb, and his ministry would be to save Israel from an enemy who had ruled over them for forty years. But Samson did not get off to an auspicious beginning. To begin with, he fell in love with a Philistine woman, a no-no for an Israelite. Then, as he described it, utilizing an agricultural metaphor, his companions "plowed with his heifer," with the result that he lost a bet he had made with them. He returned home in a rage, and his wife was given to his companion.

In chapter 15, where we pick up the story today, Samson gets his revenge.

## I. The Power of the Flesh (15:1-8)

**But after a while, in the time of the wheat harvest, it came about that Samson visited his wife with a young goat, and said, "I will go into my wife in her room." But her father did not let him enter. And her father said, "I really thought that you hated her intensely; so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please let her be yours instead." Samson then said to them, "This time I shall be blameless in regard to the Philistines when I do them harm." And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took torches, and turned the foxes tail to tail, and put one torch in the middle between two tails. When he had set fire to the torches, he released the foxes into the standing grain of the Philistines, thus burning up both the shocks and the standing grain, along with the vineyards and groves. Then the Philistines said, "Who did this?" And they said, "Samson,**

**the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he took his wife and gave her to his companion." So the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire. And Samson said to them, "Since you act like this, I will surely take revenge on you, but after that I will quit." And he struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter; and he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock at Etam. (15:1-8, NASB)**

After Samson had taken time to cool down, he was ready to forgive and forget. While his anger subsided, it may well be that lust began to control him again. So he went back to Timnah, carrying a young goat as a gift for his wife, just in time to learn that she had been given to another man. Her father offered Samson a younger, more beautiful daughter, but he was not interested. He wanted his own "heifer."

Although Samson maintained that he would be blameless this time, it is obvious that he wanted revenge. Certainly, this was the occasion that the Lord was seeking (14:4). But Samson should never have been in this situation. In reality, it was his own sin that was driving him to seek revenge. Taking matters into his own hands, he captured 300 foxes and sent them into the fields in pairs, with torches attached to their tails. These animals might well have been jackals, since jackals run in packs and thus would be easier to capture. Samson's unique plan resulted in the destruction of the wheat, the vineyards and the groves. The Philistines did not have to guess at who was responsible. Samson's reputation had gone before him.

The consequences were tragic. Human life, not wheat and grape vines, became the prey as the Philistines raised the ante. They now carried out what they had threatened to do earlier if Samson's wife would not tell them the answer to his riddle: "they burned her and her father with fire." She had caved in under the earlier threat, yet this was exactly the fate that befell her and her father. Satan is a hard taskmaster.

Samson retaliated once more, "striking them ruthlessly with a great slaughter." The consequences of his sin continued. Following his revenge he promised to quit but, as we will see, this was not the end of matters. The text then says that "he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock." He was now alone, out of touch with God and out of touch with his people.

Samson was a man who was ruled by his passions. In our last study we saw that lust was his master; today we see that he was ruled by anger and revenge. Although we know that God was using all of these circumstances to accomplish his plan, Samson in his early years walked in the flesh, sowed to the flesh, and reaped from the flesh.

Revenge, anger, jealousy and greed are powerful emotions. They can control us and consume us, leaving in their

wake a trail of destruction and severed relationships. When I was about 11 or 12 years old, a boy I knew wanted to fight me. I had no idea why, and even as we “put up our dukes” I wasn’t taking him seriously. Then he suddenly hit me in the face and bloodied my nose. I might not have been ready to fight up to this point, but the sight of my own blood enraged me. He saw the fire in my eyes and he took off running. I chased him for three hours, but I never caught him. Revenge was never far from my mind, however. During the winter, I came upon him and I pounded him with snowballs and shoved his face in the freezing snow. The desire for revenge was strong, and I had gained mine. This was what Samson was feeling.

What causes anger? The following verses from the book of James leave no doubt: “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:1-3).

Anger, according to James, arises as a consequence of our inability to satisfy our selfish desires. We have desires that are God-given, but we are a fallen humanity and the flesh perverts these desires, making them self-centered demands. We think that if we can satisfy our desires that we will be fulfilled, but when we do not get what we want, we respond with anger and hatred. We become even more self-centered because we see something or someone blocking our ability to gain happiness and rest. We are obsessed because we are not satisfied. We are not satisfied because we are self-centered rather than God-centered.

This is what is illustrated in the life of Samson. He saw a woman in Timnah (lust was conceived) and he wanted her. He became enraged when others “plowed with his heifer,” and he lost his bet for 30 changes of clothes. He couldn’t satisfy his desires for lust and companionship, and he couldn’t satisfy his selfish ambition. He wanted and could not have, so anger took over and he threw a temper tantrum.

We become angry and engage in temper tantrums over the silliest things, don’t we? A couple of years ago, the remote control to our television disappeared. We searched the house, but it never turned up. Finally, we bought a replacement, but after a few months that, too, disappeared. We searched the house again, but it was nowhere to be found. In December, a friend gave me another one and I put it in my wife’s stocking for Christmas. Last Saturday night, I couldn’t lay my hands on it. It was gone, just like the others. My wife and I were almost obsessed. How could this be? How could we lose three channel tuners? We turned the house upside down, but we couldn’t find it. I told my wife to get my daughter, who was visiting a friend. Nobody was going anywhere until we found this latest channel tuner, I fumed. (My father-in-law, who was over for dinner, became anxious when he heard this.) We sat around the family room and quizzed the children about who was the last person to use it. Then my wife squeezed her smallish hand way down underneath a couch cushion and found not one or two, but all three channel tuners! The mystery had been solved.

When we want and can’t have, we become angry — an-

gry at our spouse when he or she doesn’t give us what we want; angry at our children when they interrupt us; angry when we lose some silly game. And what will be the result when we walk in the flesh and fall captive to anger? The book of Galatians tells us: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:7-8). If we sow to the flesh, then we will reap the fruit of the flesh, which is immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, and carousing. James adds a word of caution here: “Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (James 1:19-20).

We become obsessed with what we can’t have, and we employ anger and engage in strife to get it. But, ironically, the very means we employ work against what we are trying to achieve — and the harder we try, the more elusive our goal becomes. Again, this is graphically illustrated by Samson’s behavior. Even though God was using him to deliver Israel, Samson was reaping corruption. He was losing the very things he wanted most — his wife, his community, his purpose — with the result that he ended up in the cleft of a rock, all by himself.

I see this principle at work at times when I attempt projects around the house — especially plumbing. I take out the tools for a 15 minute job, but things don’t work out, so I become angry. Three trips to the hardware store don’t improve matters. Then in my anger I do something that makes matters worse. Now when my children see me reach for the tools, they plead, “Hire a plumber!”

Anger will not help us accomplish anything. If we become angry, we will end up in a worse pickle than when we started.

What, then, can we do about anger, hatred, strife, and jealousy? Is there a solution? Let us see if we can learn from the life of Samson. At this point in the story our hero at last begins to change his behavior. God begins to replace self; faith begins to replace discontent; love begins to replace hate; Spirit begins to replace flesh.

## II. The Power of the Spirit (15:9-20)

**Then the Philistines went up and camped in Judah, and spread out in Lehi. And the men of Judah said, “Why have you come up against us?” And they said, “We have come up to bind Samson in order to do to him as he did to us.” Then 3,000 men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam and said to Samson, “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?” And he said to them, “As they did to me, so I have done to them.” And they said to him, “We have come down to bind you so that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines.” And Samson said to them, “Swear to me that you will not kill me.” So they said to him, “No, but we will bind you fast and give you into their hands; yet surely we will not kill you.” Then they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.**

When he came to Lehi, the Philistines shouted as

they met him. And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily so that the ropes that were on his arms were as flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds dropped from his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, so he reached out and took it and killed a thousand men with it. Then Samson said,

**“With the jawbone of a donkey,  
Heaps upon heaps,  
With the jawbone of a donkey  
I have killed a thousand men.”**

**And it came about that when he had finished speaking, that he threw the jawbone from his hand; and he named that place Ramath-lehi. Then he became very thirsty, and he called to the LORD and said, “Thou hast given this great deliverance by the hand of Thy servant, and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” But God split the hollow place that is in Lehi so that water came out of it. When he drank, his strength returned and he revived. Therefore, he named it En-hakkore, which is in Lehi to this day. So he judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines. (15:9-20)**

Now it's the Philistines turn for revenge. They came up and camped in Judah, but Israel was no threat, so they encountered no resistance. The extent of the nation's compromise was so pronounced that, far from coming to Samson's aid, they sent 3,000 men to deliver him over to the Philistines. They had become thoroughly accommodated to the spiritual status quo. Slavery was more preferable than freedom; compromise was more preferable than commitment.

But Samson began to catch a vision of God and how the Lord wanted to use him. He began to actively participate with God rather than just going along with him. Notice his responses. When the Israelites came to deliver him over, he was gentle with them, a far cry from what they were expecting. “Swear to me that you will not kill me,” was all he asked. Then, when he encountered the Philistines, he remained calm in the face of their shouts, waiting for the Spirit to act. He had learned his lesson from the time the lion had leaped out at him (chapter 14). He grabbed the first thing he could lay hold of — the jawbone of an ass — and with this unlikely weapon killed 1,000 Philistines.

Following his victory, he prayed because he was thirsty and he feared he would die. Not only did he depend on God for victory, he prayed for refreshment and renewal. He asked for water, and God split the hollow place in Lehi so that water came out of it. The result was that Samson “judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines.” He had a renewed sense of purpose and calling.

Samson had been sowing to the flesh and reaping corruption. But now he was sowing to the Spirit and he began to reap eternal life. What caused this change? The key to our text, and to understanding the turnaround, is the Spirit of God. For the third time in the story of Samson the text says that the Spirit “rushed upon Samson.” The first occurrence of this phenomenon was when the lion leaped out at him; the second, when he went down to Ashkelon and killed 30 men for their garments. The third time, however, was the charm. Samson at last was becoming a willing participant in God's program.

The flesh and its manifestations, anger, revenge and

jealousy, are powerful, but the power of God is greater. The Spirit of God is the solution to gaining control over these things of the flesh. As Christians, we are “sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance.” No longer does the Spirit come and go, as in the OT, to accomplish specific tasks. He now permanently resides within us. We are not a flesh, but a Spirit people, and it is through the work of the Spirit that we live redeemed lives.

How does this work? The apostle Paul tells us in these words from Galatians, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please...If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:16-17, 25).

Practically speaking, this means that we must give our lives over continually to the control of the Spirit. This is a daily walk. We must acknowledge God and become aware of his provision. We must look “not at what is seen, but at what is unseen.” We must make choices to sow to the Spirit rather than the flesh — and we must make these choices over and over again throughout the day.

Personally speaking, I know that no matter what mood I am in, I can make a choice to walk in the Spirit. I can be angry with my wife or my children, or with circumstances, but I can put off that anger instantly and begin to walk in the Spirit. If I do not do this, I am making a conscious choice to remain in my anger. Our text illustrates that even when we have sown to the flesh, and we are in the midst of sin, we can choose to stop walking according to the flesh and begin to walk in the Spirit.

Samson's revenge had led him down an ugly trail, but at last he began to walk with God.

And what is the result of walking in the Spirit? It is that we will experience the fruit of the Spirit. When we sow to the flesh we reap corruption, but when we sow to the Spirit we reap eternal life — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. We experience a transcendent, an eternal life. When Samson sowed to the flesh he experienced strife, anger, hatred, and revenge, but when he sowed to the Spirit he reaped a relationship with God, a renewed spirit, a place in the community, a purpose in life.

Several years ago, my favorite football team lost a game one Saturday, and that put me in a bad mood. We had plans to spend the evening with my wife's family, and as we drove to their house I began to sow to the Spirit rather than the flesh; I let go of my bad mood. That evening, someone asked what was going on in church next day, and I said I was teaching a Bible study in the book of James. They asked me if I would teach them what I would be sharing in the morning, and I had an opportunity to open up the Scriptures and teach people who did not know God. As a result of sowing to the Spirit I began to reap eternal life.

All this is well and good, you say, but isn't there something more? I agree. When I reached this point in my study, I, too, felt there had to be something more in the text. I needed further motivation to act righteously. It occurred to me that there is a deeper issue here. Samson became angry because he wanted that which he could not

have. The more elusive his goal became, the harder he tried, and the greater the resultant corruption. But something significant occurred at the end of chapter 15. After the victory, Samson was thirsty, and he told God that unless he provided for him, he would die. (I am not sure he understood the full significance of his statement at this point in his life, but he certainly did by the end of it.) The point is this: Samson could not fulfill his own thirst — for lust, for greed, or for water. Despite his best efforts he could not satisfy his appetites. This was why he told God that unless he satisfied his thirst, he would die. At this point he looked to God to fill him rather than trying to satisfy himself. He had learned that God was the only one who could satisfy his inner thirst.

We become angry because we want and we want because we are thirsty. We try to satisfy our thirst, but when we fail we become obsessed and angry. We want and we cannot have. The choice we face is giving up trying to get what we want, giving up that which cannot quench our thirst, to gain that which can. Unless God can quench our thirst and satisfy our need at a deep level, then we are in trouble. Certainly, the water that Samson desired is a reminder that the Spirit of God that can flow through our life, quenching our thirst and making us full. Jesus claimed that he could give living water. He said to the woman at the well: “Everyone who drinks of this water [the water at the well] shall thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14). The Spirit of God not only gives us victory over the power of sin and the power of the flesh, he also quenches our deep thirst. And if our thirst is quenched, we will not want so desperately. And if we do not want, we won’t resort to anger to obtain. The antidote to anger at this deep level is a quenched thirst.

This truth motivates us to walk by the Spirit because the Spirit quenches our thirst. But it also confronts us with a difficult choice when we decide to do so. The deep choice

we must make is to stop trying to quench our thirst and to look instead to God, to drink of his Spirit, a “well of water springing up to eternal life.” The result is that we will be full, we will be satisfied. We may not get what we think we want, but we will have everything we desire.

Are you ready to make these choices in your life and start drinking of his Spirit? Are you willing to give up what you want? Are you willing to accept that your spouse will never be what you want him or her to be? Are you willing to give up the endless pursuit of pleasure? Are you willing to stop being a workaholic and cease trying to find fulfillment in your career? Are you willing to give up your dream of owning a big house and a three-car garage? Are you willing to let your children be what they want to be rather than what you would like them to be? Are you willing to lose a game? Are you willing to yield on the freeway? These are not easy choices. But here is an our motivation for making these choices and walking in the Spirit: only God can quench our thirst. If he does not provide, we will die.

It feels good to turn 40. In our 20’s, we try to fulfill our dreams. But in our 30’s, we must deal with the disappointment of unfulfilled dreams, so we try to live our dreams through our children. When we turn 40, however, it doesn’t seem to matter anymore. All I want now is to drink of Jesus and enjoy the fruit of the Spirit. Some of the things that I once thought were so important are just not going to turn out, but that does not mean that God will not quench my thirst and make me full. The ultimate form of anger is to never give up on what you cannot have — to grow bitter, to reject God and to remain all by yourself in the cleft of the rock.

The flesh is powerful, but its fruit is death. Choosing to give up what we desire and to walk by the Spirit is a hard process. But the Spirit is powerful also. He leads us in victory and quenches our thirsty souls. May we begin today to look to the One who can grant us what we really desire, rather than using anger to gain that which will not satisfy.

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## LOOKING FOR LOVE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Catalog No. 923  
Judges 16:1-21  
Fifteenth Message  
John Hanneman  
January 31, 1993

A few years ago, we spent our family summer vacation in Lake Tahoe. One evening, following a relaxed day at the beach, my seven-year-old son and I were sitting at dinner. Everyone else had finished and left the table. He began to say something to me, but he was having difficulty expressing himself. With his head bowed, he was nervously playing with his food. "Oh good," I thought to myself. "He is going to ask me something with spiritual implications." At last he gathered himself and said, "Dad, when we were down at the beach today, why were you looking at that woman so much?" I almost gagged on the hot dog I was eating. "Oh," I said, in full retreat, "I just like to watch people to see if I can figure them out." I think he was young enough to "buy" what I said. So much for that "teachable moment." It was intended, not for my son, but for me. That which is obvious to a child certainly cannot be hidden from a God who watches over our path and knows all the vain imaginings of our hearts.

Lust and sexual fantasy are extremely powerful forces. If you do not have problems with sexual sin, then this message is not for you. If you say you do not have struggles in this regard, however, then I would say you are lying to yourself.

We live in a sex-saturated society. Sex is openly discussed in the office, in the home, on television, and in every newspaper and magazine we read.

Ever since the fall of man, our world has been looking for love in all the wrong places. Samson, whose life and exploits we have been studying in this series of messages from the book of Judges, is a good case in point. In Judges 16, we come now to what is perhaps the best known episode in his life, his affair with Delilah.

### I. Samson's Wandering Eye (16:1-3)

**Now Samson went to Gaza and saw a harlot there, and went in to her. When it was told to the Gazites, saying, "Samson has come here," they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the gate of the city. And they kept silent all night, saying, "Let us wait until the morning light, then we will kill him." Now Samson lay until midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the city gate and the two posts and pulled them up along with the bars; then he put them on his shoulders and carried them up to the top of the mountain which is opposite Hebron. (16:1-3, NASB)**

In chapter 15 we saw that Samson had a great victory over the Philistines. He had learned important lessons about God and about his own desires, so much so that he became a judge in Israel for 20 years. But here, once again, he began to look for love in all the wrong places. He journeyed to Gaza, one the Philistine capitals, "and saw a harlot there, and went in to her." He should not have gone to Gaza in the first place. Foolishly, with a self-confidence

bordering on carelessness, in the spiritual as well as the physical realm, he opened himself up to his old enemy: he "saw a harlot." Lust of the eyes was to become his downfall again, just like the time when he saw the woman of Timnah who "looked good" to him (14:3).

The Philistines set a trap for Samson, but he arose at midnight and ripped the city gates from their foundations, carrying them with their posts to the mountain opposite Hebron, an uphill journey of 38 miles. Perhaps he was letting the Philistines know that he still had his "stuff." Perhaps he was angry with himself for falling into temptation and sin. Though he had sinned, he still retained his strength, however. On this occasion, in his mercy, God withheld judgment.

This episode in Samson's life highlights the sobering truth that if we do not deal with areas of sin in our lives — especially lust — sooner or later they will surface again. Even though Samson had judged Israel for 20 years, without a hint of sexual failure, he had not really dealt with the sins of lust and adultery. His weakness had plowed a furrow in his flesh. The power of the flesh, he learned to his cost, could surface at any time.

We must never let down our guard. Satan is always ready to pounce upon us and devour us. What a frightening proposition! We may have been walking with the Lord for years, but in an instant, in an unguarded moment, we can fall into sexual immorality. Men, especially, can be overpowered in this regard. We can never say that we are free from temptation, that we are safe. No one is immune. How many times have we have seen godly men and women whom God has used greatly, fall into temptation and adultery, just like Samson? If we have a weakness in this area, it doesn't take much pressure to make us succumb.

Unfortunately for Samson, his sin did not end in Gaza. How true are these words that someone has written of him, "Samson had power without purity, strength without self-control, and because he did not know holiness, he would know a crushing defeat." What he had sown in Gaza, he would reap in Sorek.

### II. Samson's Fatal Attraction (16:4-5)

**After this it came about that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. And the lords of the Philistines came up to her, and said to her, "Entice him, and see where his great strength lies and how we may overpower him that we may bind him to afflict him. Then we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver." (16:4-5)**

The name Delilah means "the weak one." How ironic! Delilah, the weak one, would make the strong one weak. She became Samson's fatal attraction. This time our hero went even further. According to the text, he "loved" Delilah. He gave his heart to her.

Samson made the mistake of not separating himself

from the Philistines. When we choose the wrong company, temptation is always close at hand. Paul put it this way, "Do not be deceived: bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Cor. 15:33). Samson thought he was safe from harm, and that the consequences of his sin would not overtake him. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling," says the proverb (Prov 16:18). "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:12).

The Philistines were catching on to Samson's weakness. So the lords of the Philistines, of which there were five, one for each of the major cities, made an offer that Delilah couldn't refuse. (This sounds like a replay of the situation between Samson and the woman of Timnah, when her family pressured her 20 years earlier.) Delilah stood to make 5,500 pieces of silver, about \$5,000 — a lot of money in those days. She agreed to the deception, and so began her game.

**So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me where your great strength is and how you may be bound to afflict you." And Samson said to her, "If they bind me with seven fresh cords that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man." Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh cords that had not been dried, and she bound him with them. Now she had men lying in wait in an inner room. And she said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" But he snapped the cords as a string of tow snaps when it touches fire. So his strength was not discovered.**

**Then Delilah said to Samson, "Behold, you have deceived me and told me lies; now please tell me, how you may be bound." And he said to her, "If they bind me tightly with new ropes which have not been used, then I shall become weak and be like any other man." So Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them and said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" For the men were lying in wait in the inner room. But he snapped the ropes from his arms like a thread.**

**Then Delilah said to Samson, "Up to now you have deceived me and told me lies; tell me how you may be bound." And he said to her, "If you weave the seven locks of my hair with the web and fasten it with a pin, then I shall become weak and be like any other man." So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his hair and wove them into the web. And she fastened it with the pin, and said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" But he awoke from his sleep and pulled the pin of the loom and the web. (16:6-14)**

Here, Delilah's scheme of enticement and deceit is revealed. How well she fits the description of the adulterous woman in Proverbs: "With her many persuasions she entices him; with her flattering lips she seduces him" (Prov 7:21). Three different times Delilah begged and enticed, but Samson did not reveal the source of his great strength. Neither fresh cords nor new ropes succeeded in binding him. Weaving the locks of his hair and fastening them with a pin did nothing to sap his strength. Notice, however, that he was coming closer and closer to revealing his secret. We don't often fall into obvious deception. Slowly, our will wears down until at last we tumble headlong over the precipice. We want to see how close we can come to sin and still remain in control, but suddenly, things begin to move so fast we cannot stop ourselves. The first steps

are determinative. This was what happened to Samson.

**Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have deceived me these three times and have not told me where your great strength is." And it came about when she pressed him daily with her words and urged him, that his soul was annoyed to death. So he told her all that was in his heart and said to her, "A razor has never come on my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaved, then my strength will leave me and I shall become weak and be like any other man." (16:15-17)**

Delilah had a novel approach: she accused Samson of deception. But she herself, of course, was the deceiver. Even worse, she "pressed him daily...his soul was annoyed to death." His patience wore thin. The woman of Timnah also pressed him hard until she finally extracted from him the solution to the riddle. It is apparent that Samson had not learned his lesson.

Delilah won, of course. Sadly, the text reveals, Samson "told her all that was in his heart." What fools sin makes of us! We may toy with temptation for a while, but if we dare to do so, in the end we will succumb to its allurements. Proverbs has a word here, too:

*Suddenly he follows her,  
As an ox goes to the slaughter,  
Or as one in fetters to the discipline of a fool,  
Until an arrow pierces through his liver;  
As a bird hastens to the snare,  
So he does not know that it will cost him his life. (Pr 7:22-23)*

A prisoner of his own lust, Samson, like a helpless ox, was led to the slaughter. Delilah's nagging had brought the world's strongest man, weak and compliant, to his knees.

If sex is the only basis of a relationship, the man loses his ability to lead, to think clearly and objectively. People who rely solely on physical affection will compromise anything, even God, even a Nazirite vow, to gain love.

And now the consequences of Samson's sin.

**When Delilah saw that he had told her all that was in his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, "Come up once more, for he has told me all that is in his heart." Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her, and brought the money in their hands. And she made him sleep on her knees, and called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his hair. Then she began to afflict him, and his strength left him. And she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and said, "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free. But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him. Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison. (16:18-21)**

Samson had already had several hair-raising escapes, but God did not bail him out this time. The fact that judgment wasn't visited upon him up to now, however, does not mean he was in the clear. He had used up all his "Get out of Jail" cards. The Lord had departed from him. Samson did not even know that his strength had left him. How sad! He expected to be able to shake himself free, as he had at other times when he had sinned, but he had lost touch

with God.

Appropriately, God's judgment fit Samson's sin: "the Philistines...gouged out his eyes." God finally dealt with the source of Samson's problem — his lustful eyes. Paul warned, "Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body" (1 Cor. 6:18). We may be thankful that God does not deal with us in the same way he dealt with Samson.

And second, Samson lost his pride: he became a "grinder in the prison." Nothing, not the lion, not the Philistines, could defeat him, but now he was a slave, laboring in Gaza, where he had visited a prostitute and ripped out the city gates, escaping without harm. He had pursued Philistine women; now the strong man was reduced to doing a woman's work for the Philistines.

*For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,  
And smoother than oil is her speech;  
But in the end she is bitter as wormwood,  
Sharp as a two-edged sword.  
Her feet go down to death,  
Her steps lay hold of Sheol.* (Prov 5:3-5)

*Can a man take fire in his bosom,  
And his clothes not be burned?  
Or can a man walk on hot coals,  
And his feet not be scorched?*

*So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife;  
Whoever touches her will not go unpunished.* (Prov 6:27-29)

An illicit affair, which seemed so sweet at the beginning, ended in disaster for this Nazirite of God.

The lesson we learn from this sorry episode in Samson's life is this: What appears to be life-giving can, in fact, be death-producing.

There are consequences to sin. Although we may evade them for a while, we cannot escape forever. "The wages of sin," says Paul, "is death" (Rom 6:23). If we will not listen when God whispers in love, he will force us to listen when he shouts in discipline. Ambrose, an early Church Father, wrote, "Samson, when brave, strangled a lion; but he could not strangle his own love. He burst the fetters of his foes; but not the cords of his own lusts. He burned the crops of others, and lost the fruit of his own virtue when burning with the flame enkindled by a single woman."

Lust and sexual immorality have destroyed the strongest and most self-assured men and women. The allurements, of course, is invariably intoxicating. Even though people may have witnessed the disastrous consequences of wrongful sexual behavior, however, they are still susceptible.

With this monster on the loose, how should we live? How can we be godly men and women in the face of the ever-present enticement to sexual sin? I have three exhortations for us this morning.

First, Christians must cultivate intimacy with God. Lack of such intimacy frequently is the root of the problem of lust. According to Scripture, there is a close connection between sexuality and spirituality (1 Corinthians 6; Song of Solomon). We desire intimacy and oneness, to possess and to be possessed. When we are in love, we have similar emotions and feelings as we have in worship. Our sexual desires are indicators that we have a deep hunger for intimacy and worship. When we do not have intimacy with God, however, we seek to fulfill these desires in another way, and sex becomes our worship. But sex will never ful-

ly satisfy. This was Samson's problem. As long as he looked to God to quench his thirst he was all right, but when he stopped looking to God he became thirsty and succumbed to temptation.

This can become a pattern. We become addicted to sex because we thirst, and we drink to satisfy our lust. We are okay for a while, but then we become thirsty again and we end up looking for love in all the wrong places. So we must begin with God. We must seek to have our thirst quenched at a deeper level, by Christ, by him abiding in us, and we abiding in him.

Marriage does not solve the problem of lust. We can never satisfy lust by our own resources. At its deepest level, lust is a spiritual problem for a fallen humanity. Our worship is misguided, and we need to deal with it sooner or later if we truly want what God desires for our lives. Even when we are married we can fall into Samson's pattern. We are not intimate with God, so we become addicted to sex. We compromise everything to achieve the love and affection we so desperately want. We may not have an affair, but we strive to satisfy our lust with our spouse. This is selfish love.

If we want to experience a godly rather than a lustful love, then, we need to cultivate intimacy with our Lord. If he fills us, if our thirst is quenched in him, our need for intimacy will be satisfied at the deepest level and we will be less likely to look for love in the wrong places and the wrong ways. We will be much more likely to love our spouse with an attitude of giving rather than taking.

Secondly, we must cultivate a ruthless attitude toward lust and sexual fantasy. If we do not judge ourselves and take a drastic stand against sexual misconduct, sexual fantasy and lustful thinking, the text says that God will do this for us. Jesus had a word for this: "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Matt 5:29).

There are several things that can help us in this regard. First, we should deal ruthlessly with our thought life. Listen to this proverb,

*Do not desire her beauty in your heart,  
Nor let her catch you with her eyelids.* (Prov 6:25)

Lust begins with the thought life, in the mind. Samson's life demonstrates that the first steps are determinative. We cannot toy with temptation. If we do, we will get burned. The way to fight lustful thoughts is to nip them in the bud.

My son used to have scary dreams when he was little boy. One day he told me that he had developed a plan to deal with things that frightened him. Whenever he had a scary thought, he told me, he "changed the channel." If you don't get in the habit of "changing the channel," then sooner or later you will act on your musings. Even if you don't act on them, the intimacy you enjoy with your spouse is proportional to the purity of your mind. If you fantasize all day, then you will try to satisfy your selfish lust with your spouse.

Second, think critically and objectively about what you see and hear. If you think about it, fantasies are really stupid and illogical, aren't they? When those alluring commercials are shown on television, ask yourself, "Is this really portraying life? Would my life really be like this, an endless beach party in the company of gorgeous looking people, if I drank their beer?" How many of us are likely

to have an affair with Christie Brinkley or Tom Selleck? Think critically and objectively about what you see and hear.

Romans says we must “renew our minds.” We cannot satisfy our own lusts. We have neither the authority nor the power to give pleasure to ourselves. This is what Paul says in 1 Cor 7:4: “the wife does not have authority over her own body but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” Rather than having a selfish attitude toward sex, we are to develop a giving attitude, an unselfish love with our spouse. A paradox in life is that when we seek our life we lose it. When we lose our life, on the other hand, we gain it. Sex is a gift, and husbands and wives should offer themselves as a gift to one another in marriage.

Third, be accountable to your brothers and sisters in Christ. James says we are to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another “so that you may be healed” (5:16). This is how to stay out of the emotional emergency room. We need Christian friends to share with and pray with. If we go on a business trip, we need friends who will call us or whom we can call — even in the middle of the night. When we return home, we need people who will ask us how we fared. We need to remember that others struggle with the same things. Last week, I was with a group of young men whom I meet with regularly and we were talking about this very thing. One of the men remarked how helpful it was for him to be able to discuss these matters with other men and share his struggles in this area.

Fourth, we need to be wise in where we go, what we see, and what we hear. The proverb says,

*Keep your way far from her,*

*And do not go near the door of her house. (Prov 5:8)*

*“Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways,*

*Do not stray into her paths. (Prov 7:25)*

Recognize what gets you in trouble and where you get in trouble, and then avoid these things and these places. The answer is, do not enter the door, because once you do, you are finished. If this means you can’t watch certain movies, then don’t watch them. If it means you can’t listen to certain music, then don’t listen. If it means you can’t hang out at certain places, then don’t visit those places. If you are tempted by pornography, don’t drive down the street where the bookstore or the video store is located; find another way home. If a television commercial sends you into cardiac arrest, turn the channel before your heart gives out.

Flee these things. This is the word that Paul uses: “flee [sexual] immorality” (1 Cor 6:18); “flee from idolatry” (1 Cor 10:14); “flee from these things, you man of God” (1 Tim 6:11); “flee from youthful lusts” (2 Tim 2:22). What a contrast Joseph was to Samson! Samson hung around when he was faced with temptation, leaving himself open to further temptation, but when Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph, he fled so quickly he left his coat behind him.

Commit yourself to dealing drastically with this beast called lust. This takes work. We must be on our guard at all times. I don’t say these things in a legalistic sense. It is

wise to live this way. Our goal should be to know how to possess our own vessel in sanctity and honor; that Christ, not we ourselves, controls our bodies; that we rule over lust rather than lust ruling over us. Then we can enjoy intimacy with God and with our spouse as God intended.

Finally, we should cultivate romance with our spouses. I despise what the world has done to this wonderful expression of our humanity. Sin has perverted the love that was created and designed by God to be shared in marriage. Pornography, rape, abuse, movies, etc., cause us to have either a negative or a carnal view of sex. God intended neither.

Sex is a gift of God, given to married couples for their enjoyment. Let us have a healthy attitude toward sex, and elevate our view of this part of creation. In marriage we are free to enjoy, not worship, but to enjoy this gift as God designed. This is what the proverb says,

*Rejoice in the wife of your youth.*

*As a loving hind and a graceful doe,*

*Let her breasts satisfy you at all times;*

*Be exhilarated always with her love.*

*For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress,*

*And embrace the bosom of a foreigner? (Prov 5:18-20)*

Be exhilarated, be intoxicated with your spouse. Stolen water may seem sweet, but if you drink it, as Samson learned, the consequences will be disastrous. Why become exhilarated with someone you don’t know, someone with whom you have no shared history? Why fantasize when you have someone to cultivate love with for a lifetime?

Last weekend, my children were looking through a couple of boxes in our bedroom and they discovered some old letters and love poems I had written to my wife years ago. I was a little embarrassed, but my wife pointed out that it was good for our children to see that we had romance in our relationship. She was right. Often, what our children see portrayed as romance is actually sexual impurity. They need to see real romance modeled, to see that we write love letters to our spouses, to see husbands and wives with their arms around each other.

No foreigner could plumb the depth of intimacy and the history I share with my wife. There is so much more involved in marriage than that which is merely physical. Cultivate romance with your spouse, therefore. Go out on dates together. Go away together for a weekend. Buy her flowers. Write poems to her. Make a loving fool of yourself! Be exhilarated with her love. You invest a lot of time and money on things that are not nearly as valuable. We must spend time with God to develop intimacy with him, and so it follows that we must spend time to develop intimacy with our spouse as well.

The life of Samson teaches some sobering things — principles that he had to learn the hard way. Fortunately, his story does not end there, as we will see next week in our final study in Judges.

We need to take these issues to heart. May we be godly men and women who seek to cultivate intimacy with our God, purity in our minds, and faithfulness and romance in our marriages. Amen.

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## THE JOY OF RESTORATION

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Sixteenth Message  
John Hanneman  
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When I was a high schooler in Nebraska, my family visited my aunt and uncle's ranch once and my girlfriend came with us. One evening she and I decided to go to a drive-in movie theater in a town about 20 miles away. I was in a hurry, and I was probably driving faster than I should on the gravel roads that made up much of the distance we had to travel to get to the drive-in. Somehow I took a wrong turn. We were traveling about 60 miles an hour on a gravel road when we came to a hill. At the crest of the hill, I discovered that the road ended right there. The car went airborne, shot right between two telephone poles and touched down in a pasture in the middle of nowhere. The engine made a strange sound before it died. Darkness was falling, and the nearest house was miles away. A sickening feeling, as they say, came over me. I felt my life was finished. Fortunately, I was able to get the car started again and we crawled back to my uncle's house.

Taking a wrong turn is often the first step we make before we dive headlong into sin. Overcome by passion and desire, we head at great speed down the wrong road. The road suddenly comes to an end, but we are going so fast we can't stop or swerve to avoid disaster and we crash. Alone, in the middle of nowhere, that sickening feeling takes over. We feel that our life is ruined, that it can never be put right again.

As children, we sang the nursery rhyme,

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.  
All the king's horses and all the king's men  
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.*

Can our life be put back together again when we crash? Our final study today in the life of Samson, from the Old Testament book of Judges, raises what is perhaps the most important question we will ever have to ask ourselves: Is there any way out of the tangled web of sin we so unwittingly fall into?

In the birth of Samson, God had invaded Israel at a time when "there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6). Samson was to be a Nazarite from the womb until the day of his death, and his mission was to deliver Israel from bondage — salvation through a son. But Samson's life up to this point, as we have seen, has been a litany of failures. (Last week, we looked at the sorry tale of his affair with Delilah.) Thankfully, our story does not end there. Today, in the closing verses of chapter 16 of Judges, we will find that our hero's life ends on a high note.

As we concluded our study last week we saw that Samson had fallen into the hands of the Philistines, delivered over by none other than his mistress, Delilah. Chapter 16, verse 21:

**Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison.** (NASB)

Samson had fallen into the Philistines' trap following Delilah's discovery of the secret of his great strength. Weak and humiliated, his head shaven, he was easy prey for his enemies. He lost more than his sight, however. He lost his freedom and his purpose, too. Does this sound familiar? These are the very things we lose spiritually when we continually give way to temptation and sin.

Was there any hope for Samson? Could he be restored? If he could, is there any doubt that no matter how badly we have fallen away, we, too, can be restored?

Verse 22, where we take up the story today, begins the process of restoration in Samson's life.

**However, the hair of his head began to grow again after it was shaved off.**

Restoration was set in motion as Samson's hair began to grow again — a visible indicator that his fellowship with God was being restored. God may have departed from him (verse 20), but he certainly had not given up on him. Samson still suffered from the consequences of his sin — he was still blind — but restoration had begun in his life.

"The hair of his began to grow again." This process of restoration was gradual, as it is with us when we are in need of restoration. The Spirit did not rush upon Samson in a dramatic way, as had earlier been the case. Forgiveness may be immediate, but restoration is gradual; it takes time. It may be a quiet beginning — it might even go unnoticed — but it begins.

The Philistines, however, were unaware that the process of restoration had begun. They set about rejoicing over the capture of their arch enemy. Verses 23-24:

**Now the lords of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, and to rejoice, for they said,**

**"Our god has given our enemy into our hands."  
When the people saw him, they praised their god, for they said,**

**"Our god has given our enemy into our hands.  
Even the destroyer of our country,  
Who has slain many of us."**

The Philistines went overboard. They praised their god, Dagon, for their victory, and they assembled for a great celebration at the expense of Samson and his God. They were raising the spiritual stakes. Now the name of God became the issue because Samson's failure had brought dishonor to the name of Yahweh.

We think our sin will not affect anyone except ourselves

but, because we are part of the community of Christ, our failure affects everyone in the body. And, most importantly, our sin causes the name of God to be mocked and cheapened. But God will not allow his name to suffer reproach for long.

When I was in college, I had a good friend and fraternity brother who became a Christian and he eventually led me to Christ. In discussions I had with fellow fraternity brothers about his newly found faith, many of them questioned the reality of this faith, casting doubts on it and ridiculing God. Although I was not yet a believer I went to my friend's defense and proclaimed the gospel. Even as a non-Christian, God still used me because his name was at stake.

The high-spirited Philistines didn't just celebrate, they made fun of Samson. Verses 25-28:

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

**Then Samson called to the LORD and said, "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."**

In a humiliating scene, the assembled Philistines made sport of their captive. But Samson prayed to his God to come to his aid. He had prayed once before, after he had slain 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Then, because he was thirsty, he prayed, "Thou hast given this great deliverance by the hand of Thy servant, and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" (15:18).

What a marked contrast between this prayer and the prayer he now uttered in the presence of the mocking Philistines! Notice the humility of his words here in contrast to his almost arrogant and sarcastic prayer of chapter 15. "Please remember me," Samson petitioned. There were no more demands, just entreaties to his Lord. He had learned there was no basis for God to act in his life apart from God's grace and mercy. At last he had learned he was unworthy and undeserving of God's favor. Samson's pride had been dealt with. He had accepted God's forgiveness.

His prayer also demonstrated that he had come to know God in a personal and intimate way. In these few words he called upon his Lord, using three different names for God, Yahweh, Adonai, and Elohim, in the process. God had become personal to Samson. He was a living and intimate God. He was Samson's Lord, master and owner, his strength and fortress.

Finally, Samson's prayer revealed his faith: "please strengthen me." Never before had he prayed for strength. He expected it to be there at his beck and call, just as we expect there to be milk in the refrigerator in the morning. But, on this occasion, Samson was dependent; he was ask-

ing, trusting that God would supply.

And how God supplied! Verses 29-31:

**And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he braced himself against them, the one with his right hand and the other with his left. And Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" And he bent with all his might so that the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life. Then his brothers and all his father's household came down, took him, brought him up, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. Thus he had judged Israel twenty years.**

God gave Samson a victory so great that "the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life." Samson died in the process, of course, but for all his past failure, at the end of his life he had become a man of faith.

As we come to the end of this account of the life of Samson, and close out the book of Judges, I want to highlight three spiritual principles from the life of this judge of Israel.

Here is the first principle: *The purposes behind God's discipline are love and redemption.*

Samson insisted on going after and taking whatever he wanted. He gave himself over to his passions even though he knew he was acting contrary to God's will. On several occasions in the past God had bailed him out — at the wedding at Timnah, on the occasion when he took his personal revenge, after his capture, and during his tryst with the prostitute at Gaza, etc. Samson was getting used to this pattern. But with Delilah, he went too far. He insisted on his own way, and God did not stop him. He finally suffered the consequences: he lost his sight, his freedom, and his purpose. His life, you could say, was reduced to a slow grind.

God speaks to us and warns us through his Word. He woos us and whispers to us through his Spirit. He gives us wise counsel and advice through family and friends. But, if we will not listen when God whispers in love, he will force us to listen when he shouts in discipline. His purpose is not to destroy us: it is to break us so that he can build us up and teach us to trust in him. God's purpose is always to refine us, not to punish us. Discipline is designed to produce maturity and to restore us to usefulness. Sadly, much of the discipline that we undergo, even in our homes, is punitive in nature — punishment without a goal. But this is not God's perspective.

God's redemptive action can be seen in the garden, when he disciplined Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve sinned and God pronounced his curse. The woman would have pain in childbearing and in relationships; the man would experience pain and frustration in his work. However, God's discipline was designed to protect mankind from finding fulfillment in anything but God himself. Far from abandoning Adam and Eve, he clothed them in elegant robes to hide their nakedness. Adam even named his wife "Eve" ("Life"), because he believed that through her would come the seed who would bring redemption.

At Ray Stedman's memorial service, a pastor who

shared during a body life time was a good illustration of the kind of discipline I am referring to. This man said that he had fallen into sexual sin and everyone condemned him and turned away from him — everyone, that is, except Ray Stedman. Through his tears, the man recounted how Ray continued to stand by him, support and encourage him through his time of discipline. Ray never gave up on him because he understood God and his ways of discipline.

God may discipline us, but he does not forsake us. He wants to redeem and restore us.

When discipline is set in motion, then restoration and healing can begin. This is God's purpose in disciplining us. During the dark days of Allied failure in World War II, Winston Churchill said this: "This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps the end of the beginning." Discipline is not the end; it is the entrance to redemption and restoration.

Here is the second principle: *The path of restoration travels through humility and brokenness.*

Samson was humbled finally, his pride shattered, his strength dissipated. But, ironically, this was the very place where he found deep intimacy with and dependence on God. This was where he found inner joy and contentment. He finally stopped trying to satisfy his own lusts. He was now so satisfied with what God offered that he was full, so full that he could even face death. He had to become weak before he found true strength.

My son asked me once whether it was better to become a Christian early in childhood or to come to Christ later in life. Naturally, I responded that it was better to become a Christian early and thereby avoid the traps, the deceptions and the pain that result from falling into sin. But he made a keen observation. He had perceived that people who had been Christians all their lives do not exhibit the same joy, enthusiasm and genuineness as those who had found Christ following a Samson-like experience. Christians can live technically correct lives, but my son noticed that there is a quality of sweetness of faith that comes from travelling the road of humility and brokenness.

Given the opportunity, however, most of us would not choose the biblical road to restoration, would we? Certainly, the world is not familiar with this road. We were exposed to the best that the world has to offer last Sunday during the Super Bowl halftime show, when Michael Jackson sang "Save the World." The message seemed to be that if people work together, if they think good thoughts and grab their bodies in the right places, they can heal and restore their world.

The true road to restoration, however, as we learn from the life Samson, is the road of dependence on God, on prayer and humility. This road brings us through discipline into a deep relationship with God. The death of Samson shows that it takes a death to free us from bondage. Dying to our own selfish desires is the necessary first step to bringing spiritual enemies under control and subjection. The result will be that we will experience greater victory than we could possibly have produced by ourselves. As our text points out, Samson killed more Philistines in his death than in his life.

An evangelist whom God had used in a significant way in the British Isles lost interest in spiritual things and drift-

ed into a life of sin for a time. Some of his sin was done in secret, but ultimately it became public knowledge. At first, he thought he had been ruined for life, but finally he realized what a fool he had been. He came back to God, like the prodigal from the pig pen. And he found exactly the same thing the prodigal did. The Lord welcomed him with open arms and began to strengthen him and bless him.

After a time, he felt pressed to go back into a public ministry for the Lord. He was afraid that his sin would be found out and brought up all over again. But, after he felt sure it was hidden and tucked away in the past, he went back to preaching, rejoicing in the forgiveness of God. One night in Aberdeen he was handed a sealed letter. He read the unsigned letter just before the service began. It described a shameful series of events he had been engaged in. His stomach churned as he read the words, "If you have the gall to preach tonight, I'll stand and expose you." He took the letter and fell on his knees. A few minutes later, he was in the pulpit. He began his message by reading the letter from start to finish. Then he said, "I want to make it clear that this letter is perfectly true. I'm ashamed of what I've read, and what I've done. I come tonight not as one who is perfect, but as one who is forgiven." God used that letter and the rest of his ministry as a magnet to draw people to Jesus Christ.

Samson killed more Philistines in his death than in his life. The road to restoration is a road of humility and prayer. Dying to self is the necessary road to healing and greater life.

Here is the third principle: *Any person, regardless of their sin, can experience God's forgiveness and restoration.*

This is a most amazing truth that is revealed in the life of Samson. Certainly, he failed in many ways, but God forgave and restored him. I agree with these words of David Roper, "we focus too much on success stories. Christians, like the champions of Homeric epics, always make it big... Personally, I'd like to hear a few more stories about failures like me...I need some failures to look up to now and then." Left to his own devices, Samson was a failure, but God was committed to restoring him.

We sin. We experience limitations. We taste death. We think our life is ruined and we can never be put back together again. But over and over, the Bible reveals this great truth: No matter how far we fall we never fall beyond the reach of God's forgiveness. We can never out-sin the grace of God. Even in the midst of our worst failures God does not give up on us. If we are willing to accept his discipline, and if we are willing to walk the road of restoration, he can turn the consequences of our sin into instruments for his glory. He can redeem a life that has been wasted. He can restore failures like you and me. He can grow us into godly men and women.

Last year, my mother passed away. On the day when I was to leave her home in Omaha, Nebraska for the last time, I took several photographs of a red oak tree in the front yard. This tree is very significant to me. My parents planted it when we moved into the house 30 years ago, when I was 13. For many years it didn't do much. It just stood there, stark, barren and leafless. Year after year my mother faithfully watered it, using one of those watering tools that goes deep into the ground. Although it hardly needed pruning, she'd prune it in the fall; she'd support it

during the harsh winter winds. She never gave up on that tree. One spring, a few buds appeared. Soon, a few leaves sprouted, and then a branch began to grow. Growth was gradual and slow, but it was growing at last; a few more years, a few more leaves and a few more branches. Her work had paid off.

This tree is significant to me because, in a sense, it mirrors my walk with God. We planted that tree about the time I wandered away from God. I, too, was spiritually dormant and barren for years. But God was always there. He watered; he never gave up. Around the time I came to faith in Christ, that tree in Nebraska began to grow. Every time I returned home from school or visited after I moved to California, I would look at it and reflect on my spiritual growth. Even when I arrived at night I would stand there in the dark and ponder how much it had grown since the last time I had seen it. During telephone calls home I occasionally would ask my mother how the tree was doing. "Oh, it's growing," she'd say. As a matter of fact, it was growing so well she told me once that she even had to hire a man to prune it. One day, when she told me that it had contracted some kind of disease, I almost went into cardiac arrest! But she cared for that tree and it recovered.

That is how God works. There's a tree on Ogden Street in Omaha, Nebraska that will forever be a reminder to me that God restores failures and redeems lives. Even when a life is barren and dormant, he never gives up.

Are you in need of restoration this morning? Do you feel that God has given up on you? Do you think you have outsinned his grace and you are beyond repair? Then remember this: God loves you even though he may discipline you. God is with you even though he may humble you. God forgives you even though you think your sin is beyond forgiveness.

The psalmist wrote,

*How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,*

*Whose sin is covered!*

*How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity,*

*And in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Ps. 32:1-2)*

*He has not dealt with us according to our sins,  
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.  
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.  
As far as the east is from the west,  
So far has He removed our transgression from us.  
(Ps. 103:10-12)*

Quoting David Roper again, "God doesn't look for perfection. He knows the miserable stuff of which we're made. The godly will surely sin and just as certainly their sins will be found out. God reveals our waywardness to heal us. We will notice defilement because He will show it to us; such work in us is the sign of His presence. And when the sin is faced and repented of, it is forgiven. Then we can go on. And going on, after all, is what matters. God doesn't require perfection, only progress."

The joy of knowing God is the joy of knowing forgiveness and restoration.

The final word on Samson is found in Hebrews 11, in the "Hall of Fame of Faith," as some have called this chapter. The writer says,

**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, who [who committed adultery? who walked in disobedience? who threw fits of anger and sought revenge? who didn't have any faith? No, that's not what this text says.] who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. (Heb. 11:32-34).**

Like Samson, our names, too, are written in the book of life because God forgives and restores.

If God can restore Samson, he can restore anyone. The cross of Jesus is forever a reminder that he never gives up on sinners.

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