

STRANGE DAYS INDEED: THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Week One: A Job Unfinished (Judges 1)

Many of the strangest events in the Bible are found in the book of Judges. It was a unique era: during this time the Israelites were not under the direct control of a foreign ruler (though they were often oppressed by foreign nations), and they did not have any central government of their own. In some ways this is God's ideal for his people, since he has always desired for us to seek him for his own sake without the need for human authority. Yet it also brought out some inherent weaknesses in human nature.

Judges opens with Joshua's death, while the Israelites are in the process of occupying Canaan (Judges 1:1). For several decades, the people had relied on strong leaders - first Moses, then Joshua - to guide them and tell them what to do. But even the greatest human leader cannot meet our most important needs. We need God more than we need human authorities or protectors.

Although the Israelites of Joshua's era carried out some great acts of faith, they never really understood this. With very few exceptions, they put their trust in outward things such as their weapons or their leaders. As a result, when the situation changed and faith was called for instead of direct action, they did not always act as God would have wished.

Both the strengths and the weaknesses of God's people are shown in the attack on the Canaanite king Adoni-Bezek (1:2-8). The Israelites are not intimidated by this brutal, bloodthirsty ruler; and they do not hesitate to drive him and his army out of the land when God directed them to. But they allow Adoni-Bezek's inhumane character to rub off on them, as they senselessly mutilate his body after they catch him. This repellent individual probably "deserved" it, and he even admits as much - but this unnecessary cruelty towards a defeated foe is a bad sign.

God gave the people success in several other attacks on Canaanite tribes (1:9-26). One account continues the story of the family of Caleb, whose energy and courage were also described in the book of Joshua. Another account echoes Joshua's attack on Jericho, in that the Israelites make use of information from a local resident and then spare him when his town is attacked.

An important question for us concerns how we apply these accounts. It would be a crude error to think that they justify using physical force in the name of God today. The Canaanites were driven out not as punishment, but because God could not allow their uncleanness in his presence when he established his presence amongst his people. We have a different and deeper relationship with God through Jesus - it is our own lives, not others', that we need to purify today.

And so, when the narrative now recounts the many places that the Israelites did not occupy when they should have (1:27-36), we should take similar care in applying these passages. This is not a call to force others to behave the way we think God wants them to (even if they are clearly committing sins). It is, instead, a reminder never to become complacent in our own closeness with God or in our humble acceptance of his grace. His call to ancient Israel was to fill the land he gave them - but his call to Christians is to allow his Spirit and his grace to fill us.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2012

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STRANGE DAYS INDEED: THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Week Two: The Recurring Cycle (Judges 2)

After Joshua's death, Israel faced a new situation: the occupation of Canaan was still in progress, yet for the first time in memory there was not one strong leader to guide the people. This is actually good, because genuine faith in God cannot by its nature rely on human authority. But the conditions in the time of Judges brought out both the best and the worst in Israel. Genuine faith plus the weakness of human nature produced a recurring cycle that lasted many years.

God completely fulfilled all of his promises to the people, but they were never able or willing to do all that he asked them to do (2:1-5). When an angel confronts them with their reluctance to do away with the pagan altars in the land, the Israelites do not dispute the matter. But though they weep and offer sacrifices, they show no intention of reversing their negligence.

God wanted above all to live among his people, but the uncleanness of pagan idols hindered this desire. The Israelites failed to grasp this, seeing the things God asked them to do as commands for commands' sake. We can make the same mistake - seeing God's words as arbitrary expressions of his will, which we simply must "obey" - and we, too, can miss the fullness of his presence.

Many of the spiritual struggles in the time of the judges arose because the people forgot the things God had done to bring them to Canaan (2:6-15). It is an inherent aspect of knowing God that each generation and each person must seek him anew. There really is nothing that a previous generation can do to create faith in their successors - they can only provide their own example of faith, and try to create situations that encourage the development of faith.

After Joshua died, the Israelites adopted Canaanite idols, and at the same time they began to lose battles to pagan enemies. God did not - could not - help them to win, because they had drifted from his presence. His prohibition of idols was not arbitrary. When these unclean, blasphemous idols were present, God by his nature could not have close fellowship with his people.

Even when his people were faithless, God had compassion, and provided leaders called "judges" (2:16-19). From time to time, the oppressed people would genuinely cry out in pain and humility; and God always answers this. Since his Spirit could not yet live with each believer, he would provide a strong human leader who could respond to God's direction. Traditionally these leaders have been called judges, though their role was much different from what we call judges.

This initiated the cycle that runs throughout Judges. After a time of oppression, the cries of the people would be answered by a deliverer or "judge", who would help end the oppression. But after a period of peace, Israel would drift again into idolatry, leading to more trouble with their unbelieving neighbors. Thus the cycle would start over.

God knew that this situation would endure for some time to come (2:20-23). The application for today has nothing to do with nations and governments, but with individual souls. We all go through cycles of humility, divine deliverance, peace, idolatry, and suffering. God does not judge us for any of this - he just always waits for us to return to him in humility.

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Week Three: The First Few "Judges" (Judges 3)

After the death of Joshua, the Israelites settled into a recurring cycle. They never rid Canaan of idols or pagan worship sites, and they never finished the occupation of the land. Because of this, they encountered trouble from their pagan neighbors, who often attacked and oppressed Israel. The idols and uncleanness amongst God's own people made it impossible for God's presence to live among them as intimately as God wanted to, and thus hindered his protection of them.

Faced with the incomplete occupation of Canaan, God did not finish the job for them, but allowed them the choice of what to do (3:1-6). Unfortunately, they took God's love and protection for granted, and they took further liberties with idols and other indulgences.

The applications for us have nothing to do with our nation, or even with our church. In the New Covenant, God deals with each soul individually. The lesson for us is to remember that although God does not directly punish each sin or act of idolatry in our lives, these things always have the effect of pushing us farther from his presence. Materialism, selfish ambition, aggression, and the like may bring temporary fleshly pleasure or success, but this comes at the expense of knowing God more fully. In his extraordinary patience, God allows us to make our own choices.

After a period of suffering, the people came back to God and asked for help, so he sent them a deliverer (3:7-11). God chose Othniel, Caleb's nephew, and he sent his Spirit upon Othniel. After this leader or "judge" defeated the foreign king who had been most oppressive to the Israelites, the people then enjoyed a long period of peace and security.

All that God wanted was for the people genuinely to understand that God was always there, that he always wanted to be with them, and that he would always help them if they sought his help by grace and not as an entitlement. They could not 'make up for' their mistakes, but could only humble themselves and plead for grace - which God freely granted. "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Yet the time of peace did not last, and a repeating cycle now begins (3:12-31). The Israelites began to take God's protection for granted, and soon ended up being oppressed by Moab. When they finally humbled themselves before God, God called Ehud to deliver them. Ehud's methods were deceitful but effective, and soon Israel was free of Moab's oppression. For a long time afterwards under Ehud and his successor Shamgar, Israel lived in peace and security.

Although God allowed pagan rulers to oppress Israel, and though he used human leaders to help them, the real story of Judges is God's presence (or the lack of it). It is also God's presence through the Holy Spirit that protects us from spiritual harm. When our idolatry, fleshly passion, or divisiveness pushes us away from God, we too suffer from the lack of his protection and can more easily wander into temptation. Yet returning is not difficult, for God also asks us only to acknowledge him humbly, and he will quickly fill our hearts with the grace we need.

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STRANGE DAYS INDEED: THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Week Four: Deborah, Barak, & Sisera (Judges 4-5)

After Joshua's death, the Israelites had settled into a pattern in which a period of peace and security would cause them to become spiritually complacent, leading to a period of oppression at the hand of pagan rulers, which would be ended by a deliverer once the people humbly called out to God for help. Then God's presence would again fill the land, bringing peace and security, until again the people turned to idols and drifted away from God's presence - starting the cycle again. In Judges chapter 4, we come in at the bottom of this cycle, with Israel being oppressed.

The oppressors this time are the Canaanite king Jabin and his brutal general Sisera (4:1-3). This is an ancient example of a nation using its technological advantage to oppress others: Sisera's army is well supplied with iron chariots, while Israel at this time had not yet learned how to use iron to full practical effect. Human nature being what it is, societies blessed with such advantages prefer to use them to selfish advantage rather than sharing them freely.

The prophetess and judge/leader Deborah recognizes Barak, from the tribe of Naphtali, as the man whom God has chosen to defeat these vicious pagans - but Barak himself is not as responsive as God hoped he would be (4:4-10). Deborah gives him very clear directions and an unconditional assurance from God that he will succeed - yet Barak is fearful and unwilling.

We should not judge Barak too harshly, because he is merely showing honest fear. He admires Deborah's faith, and begs her to accompany him - this too is merely human nature, for Barak is more assured by the presence of a human with great faith than he is with the presence and blessing of God himself. For her part, Deborah criticizes him only mildly; but she also indicates that due to his timidity he will have to share the credit for the coming victory.

So Barak is eventually willing to go, and Israel wins the battle (4:11-16). The pagan armies are overconfident, and are only too happy to fight. But God had already determined - and had promised through the prophetess - that Israel would win. Even if Barak had refused to play his role, God was going to give the people victory after they cried out to him in humility and need.

Only Sisera survives the battle, and he soon meets the grim end that Deborah had prophesied for him (4:17-24). In what amounted to a small change of God's plans due to Barak's timidity, the distinction of killing the enemy general is given to Jael, a woman of Canaanite ancestry who nevertheless jumps at the chance to rid the world of a violent oppressor.

Afterwards, Deborah leads Barak and the rest of Israel in giving thanks for their deliverance (5:1-31). Their victory song expresses appreciation for God's great power and his protection of them, while also showing appreciation for the willingness of so many Israelites to join in the battle when God called them. While Christians will never be called to a battle involving weapons or force, this same combination is still effective. When we combine a humble acknowledgment of our dependence on God with the faithful willingness to go where he guides us, we are able to experience the full blessings of his grace and his presence.

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Week Five: A Timid Deliverer (Judges 6)

As Israel's cycle of idolatry/suffering/calling to God/deliverance continues, the peaks and valleys become more extreme and the deliverers God uses become more unexpected. After Deborah, the next judge/leader was Gideon, a man with sincere faith but a great deal of fear and timidity. When God calls him, Gideon is far more afraid than even Barak was (Judges 4). Yet that just makes Gideon someone whom most of us can relate to.

In Gideon's day, times were very hard (6:1-6). The Midianites and the Amalekites both made life horrible for Israel. The Midianites, in particular, were not satisfied with simply seizing whatever they wanted from Israel - they also practiced senseless destruction, ruining crops and killing livestock when they didn't need any more for themselves.

Again the Israelites finally cry out to God in humility and desperation; and God responds (6:7-10). This time, before sending a deliverer he sends a prophet to explain why the nation has ended up in such difficulty. God will endure this repetitive cycle many more times, yet he will also do everything possible to help the people understand the need for his presence in their lives. And to experience the full blessings of his presence, they need to get rid of those idols.

The newly chosen deliverer, Gideon, is hiding from the Midianites when God's angel first calls him (6:11-16). He is threshing his wheat in a winepress - an extreme measure to hide the wheat from invaders - so the angel gives him an ironic greeting, calling him a "mighty warrior." God already sees Gideon as what he will become, not as the timid man he is now. Gideon's initial doubts are the kinds of honest reservations that most of us have when first called by God.

God graciously indulges Gideon's desire for a special sign (6:17-24). Gideon makes what seems at first to be a routine sacrifice of a goat, only to see a sudden burst of divine fire come from a rock and consume the sacrifice. Even though Gideon had openly asked for a special sign of God's presence, he is surprised and frightened when it actually occurs - just as we sometimes are!

God now gives Gideon his first responsibility in the battle against the idols that plague Israel (6:25-32). His first job is to tear down the idols his own father has erected to the pagan false gods Baal and Asherah. Still fearful, Gideon does this at night, so that in the morning the town is surprised to see the pagan altars destroyed - but it is soon discovered that Gideon had done it.

At this point Gideon's father stands up for what his son has done - and he proves bolder than his son, pointing out to the angry townspeople that Baal could take care of himself if he really were a god. So the living God even uses an unbeliever to protect the faithful Gideon.

As God reveals more of his plans to Gideon, the still-timid deliverer asks for two more signs (6:33-40). On two evenings Gideon places some fleece on his threshing floor - on the first morning the fleece is full of dew yet somehow the ground is dry, and on the second morning the reverse occurs. Only then is Gideon really convinced that God is going to be with him. God has given a full measure of grace and patience to the fearful but faithful Gideon.

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Week Six: Testing & Assurance (Judges 7:1-15)

Suffering under oppression by the Midianites, Israel finally cried out in humility to God, who sent the timid but faithful Gideon to help. The fearful Gideon requested several signs from God before he was willing to proceed with his new responsibilities. And now, as he is about to lead Israel into battle against the intimidating Midianites, God gives him an unexpected test.

Gideon has responded to God's patience and grace by boldly assembling an army of over 30,000 men to fight Midian - but God has an entirely different plan (7:1-3). For someone timid and fearful like Gideon, it must have taken a great deal of faith and a great deal of self-denial to raise such a huge army. Imagine how he must have felt when God told him there were too many men!

God does not want Gideon or anyone else to assume that the battle has been won by human numbers, human ingenuity, or human power. God also knows that in any crowd there are plenty of persons who merely go along with things due to guilt or peer pressure. God wants each of us to seek him for his own sake, and to respond to him, not to the beliefs of others. And so he has Gideon quite openly ask everyone to go home unless they really want to fight Midian.

Gideon was probably relieved to have 10,000 men remain with him - but again God deliberately makes things much harder (7:4-8). All these men are sincere in their readiness, yet there are still too many of them to make the statement that God desires to make. So he has Gideon ask each of them to take a drink, and separate those who drink on their knees from those who "lap ... like a dog." This has no obvious significance, other than the need for a further division of the group, though some commentators suggest that the 'lapping' position may indicate a greater alertness.

This latest division leaves Gideon with only 300 men, less than one percent of what he started with. This is not an elite force, just a small one. Nor is it smallness for smallness' sake that God desires - his point is rather that numbers do not have any spiritual significance one way or another. It is unfortunate when so-called church leaders assume that numerical growth automatically justifies their policies. This can easily be justified by fleshly logic, but not by the gospel. If we truly follow Jesus, then there will be times when we must stand alone or nearly so.

But whenever God calls us to develop greater faith, he also provides renewed assurance (7:9-15). The night after God had required Gideon to cut his army so drastically, God awakens Gideon and directs him to a place where he can hear two of his men discussing a dream that has convinced them of victory in spite of the great numerical odds against them. Gideon takes courage from this, and is now ready to proceed into battle.

God always knows what we truly need. There are times when he takes away the things that we falsely rely on, and there are times when he graciously gives us extra assurances. If we listen to God's voice and not to human logic, then he can do both of these things for each one of us.

- Mark Garner, May 2012

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Week Seven: Victory At A Cost (Judges 7:16-8:28)

The once frightened Gideon rises to the occasion and leads a tiny band against the much larger Midianite army. The resulting victory is thus a striking demonstration of God's deliverance. In the aftermath of the battle, though, Gideon faces conflict and temptation. His leadership brings the land a period of welcome peace and security; yet we also see the roots of future trouble. In this world, victories are never final; so the faithful must learn constant humility and discernment.

After requiring Gideon to decrease his vast army into a small group, God provides Gideon with a simple stratagem by which Israel gains a surprisingly easy win (7:16-25). Relying on surprise instead of numbers, Gideon's men circle the edge of the Midianite camp and raise a ruckus that confuses the pagan army. The Midianites are then destroyed by their own aggression and violence, in the confusion killing each other while the Israelites simply round up those who flee.

Here we see God's wisdom in trimming Gideon's army so drastically. The pagan world and its idols always contain the seeds of their own destruction. When believers use force - whether weapons, politics, guilt, or manipulation - to achieve their goals, they both debase God's name and also make it harder to accomplish anything of genuine spiritual value. Gideon accepted the need to rely on God alone, and as a result he was able to participate in a dramatic success.

Sadly, though, there is dissension in Israel after the battle (8:1-21). First Gideon faces jealousy from the Ephraimites, who had not sent men to fight Midian. They did round up two of Midian's leaders after the battle, and Gideon uses this to assuage their wounded pride. But then he faces trouble from two other towns who both selfishly refuse to help any of Gideon's exhausted men.

Gideon finishes the job anyway by capturing the Midianite kings, but then gives in to frustration by ravaging the towns who didn't help him, in the latter case slaughtering all the men of the town. It doesn't lessen the significance of the triumph over Midian, but it is a bad sign for the future.

A further problem arises when other Israelites begin to worship Gideon, God's deliverer, instead of God himself (8:22-28). Gideon sensibly and wisely refuses to be made Israel's king, but he does request a lavish payment in gold for his services. He even makes himself a garment (an ephod) out of the gold, as a lasting reminder of his success. Predictably, this garment itself soon becomes the object of quasi-idolatrous worship, another worrisome development.

It is human nature that we struggle in the aftermath of our spiritual victories just as we do during difficult times. The tendency to view things from a worldly viewpoint leads us to seek and compete for human credit for everything; and the tendency to worship the seen rather than the unseen leads us to exalt humans and their methods instead of the living God.

Yet God loves us both in defeat and in victory, both when we are prideful and when we are humble. The story of God's people neither begins nor ends with Gideon; and it neither begins nor ends with us. God continues throughout all human time to guide us and care for us with unlimited grace and patience.

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STRANGE DAYS INDEED: THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Week Eight: How Soon They Forget (Judges 8:29-9:57)

After Gideon's great victory over the Midianite oppressors, Israel quickly began to drift away from God once more. Even in the aftermath of the victory, they bickered over taking credit and began to worship God's messenger instead of God himself. The sad fruits of these mistakes eventually become evident in the short, violent career of Gideon's son Abimelech.

Gideon's faithfulness allowed God to deliver the people from Midian, but it was not enough to avoid the seeds of future trouble (8:28-35). Besides the silly golden ephod that Gideon made for himself, Gideon also took advantage of his popularity to accumulate many wives and concubines. Gideon and the people were both at fault - whenever celebrities or "leaders" are the objects of idolatrous worship, they generally expect extravagant privileges in return.

It is thus no surprise that the people return to idolatry the moment that Gideon passes from the scene. They "did not remember the Lord their God", because they never really worshiped God to begin with - they worshiped Gideon the human deliverer, Gideon's wealth, and Gideon's family. Let us take heed, and beware of ever exalting humans or human organizations to god-like status.

With so many descendants of Gideon and so little understanding amongst the people, it is no real surprise that a bloodthirsty egomaniac like Abimelech is able to seize power in Israel (9:1-6). Abimelech is a horrifying person, eagerly killing off most of his brothers just to fulfill his selfish ambitions. But Israel's reaction is far worse. Like many humans in any era, the Israelites are so eager for strong-man 'leadership' that they willingly make the appalling Abimelech their king.

Gideon's lone other surviving son, Jotham, gives the people a warning, which they nevertheless ignore (9:7-21). Jotham's parable about the trees reminds them that we all best serve a useful purpose simply by being ourselves and living in consideration of others. Egomaniacs who seek out power and authority for themselves are in fact without real value to society, no matter what they may promise or claim to do. Jotham himself seeks no power or authority- he is merely warning against the folly of making Abimelech a ruler simply because Abimelech wants to rule.

After enduring this objectionable situation for three years, God himself acts out of mercy towards his wayward people (9:22-57). Yet because of the depths of their complacency and folly, the means of their spiritual deliverance is of necessity rather turbulent. Since Abimelech's own nature was so objectionable, the time came when parts of the nation turned against him; and God uses this to eliminate Abimelech. After a lengthy chain of unpleasant events, the prideful ruler is unceremoniously killed by a woman who, from the top of a wall, drops a large stone on his head.

It is human nature to forget spiritual lessons, both in times of trouble and in times of victory. The story of God's people - then, now, and always - is never one of a group of spiritual giants constantly learning, growing, and improving. It is, rather, the story of a gracious and ever-persevering God who lovingly and patiently teaches us and reminds us of the same important things, over and over and over. Yet he loves us so much that he will always care about us, and he will always rejoice in even the smallest steps forward that we take.

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STRANGE DAYS INDEED: THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Week Nine: Another Flawed Deliverer (Judges 10:1-11:40)

After Abimelech's violent reign, there was a period of peace, but it would not last. In the next stage of Israel's recurring cycle of idolatry/suffering/deliverance, they receive a human deliverer even more flawed than some of the previous ones. The people's back-and-forth spiritual swings get wider and wider, until by the end of Judges it is hard even to read about their sordid actions.

After two quietly effective leaders (or "judges"), the Israelites again turn to idolatry and other sins (10:1-9). If we get nothing else out of the book of Judges, it is good for us to accept our own persistent tendency towards similar problems. The ease with which churches today turn to trendy methods instead of sound teaching, and the eagerness with which many believers pursue worldly distinctions at the expense of ministry, reveal our own vulnerability to idols.

This time, when the people finally call to God for help, he is not as quick to send them a deliverer (10:10-16). He reminds them of how easily they forget him, and of how entrenched they are in their idols. But when the people honestly admit their faults, God's compassion replaces his righteous anger. God always wants to be merciful and to bring us closer to him; but there are many times when for our own benefit he must remind us of our folly and our idols.

The next deliverer, Jephthah, is chosen largely at the initiative of the Gileadites (10:17-11:11). A powerfully built man but a social outcast, Jephthah has spent most of his time carousing with a crowd of lowlifes (euphemistically referred to as "adventurers" in the NIV). Now, in a time of trouble, the other Israelites are desperate to please him so that he will come to their aid. And, perhaps surprisingly, both the people and Jephthah genuinely turn to God for guidance.

So, with the Ammonites threatening and oppressing Israel, Jephthah makes a sincere appeal to them for more friendly relations, but he is ignored by the brutish Ammonites (11:12-28). Jephthah's spiritual reasoning and willingness to be gracious reveal his trust in God's guidance. He makes no threats of his own, but merely points out that the living God has shown his ability to protect his people, whereas the Ammonites' idols have done nothing for them.

When the Ammonites refuse to listen, Jephthah relies on God's guidance and easily defeats them, ending their oppression of Israel (11:29-33). All would be well if not for a rash and unnecessary vow Jephthah had made (11:34-40). His success soon becomes an afterthought to the trouble caused by his vow to offer a random sacrifice in return for his success - the random choice turns out to be his daughter, precipitating an unnecessary tragedy. Jephthah wrongly thinks it is more important to fulfill his impulsive vow than it is to spare his daughter.

So again we can see human nature contrasted with divine providence. We have the uncanny knack of turning victory into trouble; and we struggle to see the depths of the abundant grace that God wants to pour out on us. What a blessing that God will never give up on us or stop being patient with us - and what a reminder to worship God alone and not human leaders or institutions.

- Mark Garner, May 2012

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**STRANGE DAYS INDEED:
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Week Ten: The Bitter Fruits Of Jealousy (Judges 12)

The flawed but energetic Jephthah delivered Israel from the persecutions by the Ammonites, though this victory was darkened by his inane vow that destroyed his innocent daughter. Now there is more trouble in Israel, this time caused by jealousy. No one is in the mood for a constructive solution, and as so often in the book of Judges, this passage can only provide us with examples of how not to handle our problems.

We have already seen the Ephraimites' fragile egos and hot tempers (see Judges 8:1-3), and now they are again roused to jealousy because of Jephthah's success against Ammon (12:1). This specific form of foolish pride involves insecure males who always feel a need to demonstrate their alleged virility; yet the general problem is common to human nature.

Jealousy of the accomplishments and successes of others is even deliberately instilled in us by the world's leaders and opinion makers, and so in Jesus we need to go out of our way to learn how we can sincerely "rejoice with those who rejoice" (Romans 12:15).

Unlike Gideon before him, and unlike his own previous efforts to deal graciously with Ammon, Jephthah reacts to Ephraim's challenge with violence (12:2-4). It is hard not to sympathize with him in part, because he has put himself at risk to protect the same people who had looked down on him and shunned him socially, only then to be insulted and attacked for his trouble. And many of the things that anger us and provoke us to hostility are, indeed, unfair or unjust. But grace is always in season, and it is always worth making every attempt to calm troubled waters.

Anyway, Jephthah's forces attack, and after they win the battle, Jephthah has his men cut down the fleeing survivors, in so doing providing us with a by-word for those who pointlessly persecute their own brothers (12:5-6). Since this conflict is between two different regions, Jephthah relies on their different speaking habits to identify the members of the "wrong" group in order to kill them. He would have lost nothing by showing some mercy, but his own sense of having been wronged and misjudged impels him to inflict as much harm as possible.

Thus, "Shibboleth" - the Hebrew tongue-twister that Jephthah uses to tell his men from the others - came to stand for a trivial matter that we allow to become a source of division, resentment, or conflict. We cannot judge Jephthah too harshly, for he merely illustrates our common human nature. It is hard for us to hold back our anger when we have been insulted, mistreated, lied to, or misrepresented. But it is always Christ-like to refrain from responding in kind.

Despite all of this sad and unnecessary violence, God still grants Israel rest and security for a good while afterwards (12:7-15). After Jephthah, God provides a succession of three more unofficial leaders (or "judges") to keep peace in the land. Fortunately, God never conditions his loving care on our own perfection, either in our behavior or in our understanding. He does want us to seek him and to understand our need for him - yet this too is not a "rule" but merely a condition necessary for us to gain the most benefit from his presence.

- Mark Garner, May 2012

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STRANGE DAYS INDEED: THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Week Eleven: A Child Full Of Promise (Judges 13)

With the account of the life of Samson, we come to the most flawed, most wayward, and most bizarre of all the leaders (or "judges") whom God used to protect his people in the years before Israel became a kingdom. Yet Samson's life was full of promise when it began. There were no signs of the profound character flaws and poor judgment that would later bring his downfall. His life story starts with the account of God providing a special deliverer in a time of great need.

With the Philistines now oppressing Israel, God makes preparations for a deliverer even before the people turn to him for help (13:1-5). It is a double act of grace on God's part, because for Samson's parents he chooses a faithful, childless couple who will also enjoy the child for its own sake. This is yet another example of God's ability to work out his plans on a large scale while at the same time showing special attention to the needs of humble individuals.

Although events in our own lives do not come with inspired biblical commentary, if we are perceptive enough we can see the ways God has done this for us also. Despite his exalted position, God is not distant and aloof like a human executive or authority. He is always aware of individual needs, and he often finds ways of including them even while he is meeting a broader need. The more we become aware of his presence, the more we can see him at work.

God goes to considerable lengths to prepare the way for Samson, even sending an angel to make an extended visit with the future parents (13:6-22). This is often forgotten when we think of the undisciplined brute that Samson later became, but God's preparations for his life are rather extraordinary in their detail. He carefully explains that the child will be brought up as a Nazirite, to dedicate him to God spiritually and to fill him with the strength he will so often need to use.

Indeed, his parents are quite frightened by the extended visit from the angel. This kind of visitation to prospective parents is seen only in very special circumstances in Scripture - it is no wonder that the parents are so unsettled. But we often react the same way when we come face to face with the true presence of God. The root teachings of the gospel (as opposed to dried-out human theological doctrines) and the powerful ways that he acts on our fleshly human nature, transcend anything we can expect from the world.

After the future parents overcome their fear and astonishment, they are able to appreciate what God is doing, and they watch Samson grow up in God's grace and strength (13:23-25). God has gone well out of his way to provide a powerful source of strength and protection for his suffering people. And even though Samson would become a great disappointment spiritually, God will still be able to use him in some important ways. For God can use us all, even though our faith may be fearful and small and our flesh weak.

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STRANGE DAYS INDEED: THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Week Twelve: Strength Used & Misused (Judges 14-15)

God has rarely made such extensive preparations for a specific person as he did with Samson, and this young man entered life with the full advantages of God's Spirit accompanying him. But though Samson at times used his strength to protect God's people from harm, he more often misused it, either for his own private purposes or for no worthwhile purpose at all. God still was able to use him in some positive ways, but most of the time it was no thanks to Samson.

Like many young males, Samson gets into difficulty through an infatuation with a member of the opposite sex (14:1-7). Though Samson's attraction to a Philistine woman would cause problems, God would still use it to help relieve Israel from mistreatment at the hands of the Philistines. Once Samson's personal interest was aroused, the situation would lead to a confrontation in which Samson's physical strength could come into play against Israel's oppressors.

Because God is well aware that even the best of us are motivated by a combination of good intentions and fleshly whims, he never minds using us just as we are. So he will often take even our more foolish ideas and turn them into something worthwhile. This says nothing one way or another about whether we are right or wrong - it just tells us how gracious and wise God is.

Unfortunately, Samson is oblivious to God's purposes, and he pursues courtship and marriage purely for his own ill-defined and ill-advised purposes (14:8-20). It leads to a thoroughly unpleasant situation, with Samson's wife deceiving him, Samson indulging in pointless brutality and destruction, and the Philistines developing a heightened sense of resentment.

By this time it has become clear that Samson has no appreciation for all the trouble that God went to in order to provide him with so much ability. Rather than humbly helping his people, Samson gives himself all the credit for his unusual strength, and he views the world solely as a playground on which to fulfill his self-centered desires; so he constantly misuses his strength.

Sadly, this is typical of so many who are blessed in this life, whether believers or unbelievers. We see this in celebrities, athletes, leaders, the rich, and the popular. God's blessings are given solely by grace, yet we too often we allow our past blessings to make us feel entitled to more, rather than humbly realizing that we already have more than we could ever deserve.

Samson's vain and violent nature generates even more trouble, yet amazingly God still channels some of Samson's antics into protection for Israel (15:1-20). Still seething over the events at his wedding, Samson carries out a series of elaborate and destructive pranks against the Philistines, provoking a confrontation that leads to a resounding victory for Samson and the Israelites.

God even pays special attention to Samson's needs after the strenuous battle - not because Samson earned God's care, but because God loved him in spite of everything. God allowed Samson to be Israel's leader for 20 years, now that the Philistines feared him. Samson's life is another reminder of how graciously God will use any means available to take care of his people.

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STRANGE DAYS INDEED: THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Week Thirteen: A Sad But Familiar Tale (Judges 16)

Samson both used and misused his strength. God often used him to protect his people from the Philistines, but this was usually no thanks to Samson, a vain and foolish man who invariably acted on impulse from poorly-considered motives. It is no surprise that Samson's final downfall eventually comes, and comes in a typically foolish and unnecessary fashion. The only surprise is that God arranges a final scene that keeps Samson's strange life from being completely pointless.

Samson's selfishness and lack of self-control always made it likely that infatuation would lead him into a disastrous situation (16:1-5). Overly secure in his own strength, Samson constantly acts strictly to indulge the desires of the moment, unaware of how much grace God constantly showed him. After acting selfishly so many times without suffering any significant consequences (though the consequences were often felt by others), Samson finally behaves so ignorantly that God has no choice but to allow Samson to experience his inevitable fall.

Samson is a reminder never to assume that God approves of our actions solely because in the short-term they produce the results we desire. Samson had outward success for 20 years as Israel's "judge", but this was entirely by grace, coming in spite of his oafish behavior and shallow relationship with God. Churches too often assume that some numerical result justifies manipulation, pressure, or deceit; but in the long run these things will always do more spiritual harm than any genuine good they can accomplish.

In the Philistine Delilah, Samson meets an especially treacherous and resourceful enemy (16:6-16). Samson is physically attracted to her, but he neither respects her nor sees her for what she really is - and so the two engage in an interesting but hollow battle of wits between two small and undisciplined minds. This is what it is like whenever believers lower themselves to the world's level by engaging in debate or arguments about earthly distinctions or other trivial things. We can set an example for them by avoiding such behavior, rather than indulging in it ourselves.

Eventually, even Delilah's unimaginative tactics wear down Samson, leading to his quick and permanent defeat (16:17-22). All at once, he suffers the physical pain, permanent disability, and complete humiliation that he has been risking all these years with his selfishness and folly. It is sad to see him reduced to such a pathetic state, yet there is no question that he had chance after chance after chance to avoid such an end to his life.

God allowed Samson to strike one more blow against the Philistines before he died (16:23-31). He was permanently blinded, but his strength slowly came back as his hair grew. As he endured taunts and mistreatment from the Philistines, helpless against them for the first time, Samson longed only for one more victory against them, even if it was his last living act. Thus God, once more using even the baser motivations of humanity, allowed Samson to bring down the temple of the false god Dagon while it was full of reveling idolaters. And so in death Samson gave Israel a last bit of protection from their enemies - yet his life once held the promise for so much more.

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STRANGE DAYS INDEED: THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Week Fourteen: The Past As It Really Was (Judges 17-18)

Although the whole book of Judges is full of strange and sometimes disturbing events, it is in the last few chapters that things get really bizarre. One of the purposes of Judges is to serve as a lasting reminder of Israel's history as it really was - not the story of a brave and faithful people who were always a credit to their God, but the story of an extremely patient and gracious God who protected his people despite their chronic idolatry, violence, and folly.

A new chain of events begins with the account of an unappealing young man named Micah (17:1-6). After stealing an enormous amount of money from his mother, this Micah brazenly admits his theft and gets her blessing after all. For whatever reason, the two of them think that by using the silver to create their own idol they can somehow bring glory to God. It is a bizarre idea, yet no more foolish than many of our own ideas when we think we are "glorifying God" by indulging our selfish ambitions or materialistic desires.

Micah even hires a wayward Levite to be his private "priest" (17:7-13). This style of do-it-yourself religion is popular in every era, since the flesh always enjoys this kind of thinly-disguised worship of self. No doubt these individuals felt quite fulfilled by all of the outward activity that they performed, just as we also place an enormous emphasis on things that 'prove' our righteousness, instead of humbly allowing God to fill us with grace and peace.

In any case, this odd family history becomes intertwined with the affairs of the tribe of Dan (18:1-10). When Canaan was divided amongst the tribes, the Danites had found it too hard to occupy the portion allotted to them, so they became vagabonds in search of places they could seize with less effort. So, when a gang of Danite raiders comes into contact with Micah and his private little 'shrine', there arises the kind of fool-versus-fool conflict we so often see in Judges.

The Danites have no problem resorting to violence, and they establish the new town of Dan at the expense of everyone in their path (18:11-31). First they use threats of violence to steal everything Micah has, including his private 'priest', and to set up an instant shrine to their tribe. This brings to an end our acquaintance with Micah, whose only ongoing relevance is his silly idols, which the Danites would adopt as their own and worship for some time to come.

After confronting Micah, the Danites commit acts of far greater violence. They find an unsuspecting, unguarded town and slaughter its inhabitants, renaming the doomed city after themselves and settling there to worship their new "gods". In later years, the tribe of Dan would no doubt celebrate the alleged bravery of these ancestors, but the book of Judges would always be there to testify to the truth.

This ugly sequence of events, like the even uglier one that follows, is preserved in Scripture as a warning not to glorify or romanticize the past. Humans in every era have a good side and a bad side; human nature never changes in any fundamental way. Worldly history is always full of underserved winners and victimized losers. Only in God can we all find a supply of spiritual blessings sufficient for all who desire them.

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STRANGE DAYS INDEED: THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Week Fifteen: Some Remarkably Unpleasant Events (Judges 19-20)

After the strange story of unappealing characters in Judges 17-18, we might hope for something better now, in keeping with Israel's pattern of swinging back and forth between faithfulness and idolatry, between victory and suffering. But the last three chapters of Judges may be the most disturbing and unpleasant part of the entire Bible. They show human nature at its most selfish and destructive. It can be a challenge merely to figure out why they are part of the Scriptures.

This chain of events starts with a seemingly routine family problem (19:1-15). A Levite had taken a concubine, but she tired of him and returned to her own home. He thus went to her father's house, was well-received, and eventually took her back with him on a return journey to his home. But they run into trouble when the Levite gets a bit fussy on the return trip and insists on making a stop in the unsavory town of Gibeah, in the territory of Benjamin.

An elderly man gladly offers the travelers a place to stay, but they are quickly besieged by a pack of licentious and violent townsmen (19:16-22). For whatever reason, these men want to subject the Levite to their sexual attentions, an idea that appalls everyone inside the attacked home.

But things get even worse when the Levite and his host decide that it would be appropriate to sacrifice the innocent concubine, rather than incur the rabble's displeasure (19:23-28). Their original plan, which was repellent enough, was to allow her to be gang-raped by these disgusting bullies. It should not have surprised them, though, that she could not survive this merciless assault - the next morning, when the Levite and his host awake from a night of secure sleep, they find the poor woman dead, a victim of both male sexual craving and male insensitivity.

Instead of accepting his part of the responsibility for her death, the cowardly Levite chooses to arouse the nation's anger against Gibeah and the Benjamites (19:29-20:11). Few things make us feel as self-righteous, and cause us to forget our own burden of sin, as the opportunity to make loud proclamations of someone else's sins. He even mutilates the dead body of his concubine to emphasize his point, and persistently arouses the nation until everyone is ready to send a firm challenge to the tribe of Benjamin.

For their part, the Benjamites respond in an equally foolish and oafish manner, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and the near extinction of the tribe of Benjamin (20:12-48). Both sides pay a tremendous price for their pride. Benjamin was known for its warriors, and in the first two battles they inflict heavy casualties on the rest of Israel. But God's displeasure with Benjamin is even greater than his displeasure with the others, and in the next battle he guides Israel to victory - a victory they then mar with a further spree of senseless killing that creates new problems.

At so many points in this chain of events, just a little human grace could have saved a lot of needless suffering. So too, the worst things that happen today should never come as any real surprise - they usually result from a long string of sad developments in which no one wants to be gracious to anyone else. At least we can learn that much from these hideous events in Judges.

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STRANGE DAYS INDEED: THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Week Sixteen: Israel Had No King (Judges 21)

The sequence of distasteful events beginning in Judges 19 continues through the end of the book. The only commentary offered by the inspired author is that "in those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (19:1 and 21:25). As we read the concluding stages of this massive outbreak of nauseating and unnecessary violence, we can only be amazed by God's grace in allowing such persons to retain his name after they indulge in such cruelty and folly.

In the fury against Benjamin for the outrages committed by the Benjamite residents of Gibeah, the rest of Israel had not only massacred nearly the whole tribe of Benjamin, but had also joined in a spiteful oath never to give a daughter in marriage to a Benjamite (21:1-4). This kind of thing happens when we allow self-righteous anger to motivate us - when our response is out of proportion to the original offense, it causes far greater injustices and problems than it resolves.

The Benjamites had indeed behaved both stupidly and brutishly at Gibeah, but they have paid a disproportionate price in being almost eradicated as a tribe, with many innocent persons dying because of the sins committed by a few hotheads.

But Israel's 'solution' compounds the violence and injustice (21:5-14). Remembering that the city of Jabesh Gilead had calmly declined to participate in fighting Benjamin, the rest of Israel attacks this peaceful city and kills everyone, even the children, except for virgin women of marriageable age. These few they give to the surviving Benjamites as wives, only to find that even this atrocity does not come close to providing a secure future for the reduced tribe.

To make sure that Benjamin recovers, they come up with still one more offensive idea, and then congratulate themselves on a job they think has been well done (21:15-24). This time they arrange a mass kidnapping, encouraging Benjamites without wives to seize one at Shiloh when the young women of that town come out in celebratory worship at a festival. By such repugnant means, then, was the tribe of Benjamin rebuilt. So much sadness and suffering arose from a simple series of events that got way out of hand due to a lack of responsibility and a lack of grace.

So what should we conclude from the fact that, "Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit"? (21:25). The problem was not a lack of government *per se*, for the same kinds of outrages occurred under the monarchy. The problem was the lack of God's presence. When idolatry and sin push God's presence away, he cannot be as active in shielding us from the consequences of human sin. In this era, the lack of government force simply magnified the good effects of faithfulness and magnified the bad effects of idolatry and selfishness.

Whenever God is present, even when we barely acknowledge him, his grace protects us from the worst potential consequences of human sin. He always allows each of us to exercise free will, and so some awful things still take place - but he protects us from many more. The last few chapters of Judges show us what life would be like entirely without God - one horrible thing after another. Instead of always questioning why God allows some bad things to happen, it is worth considering how much worse things could be without his constant presence and grace.

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