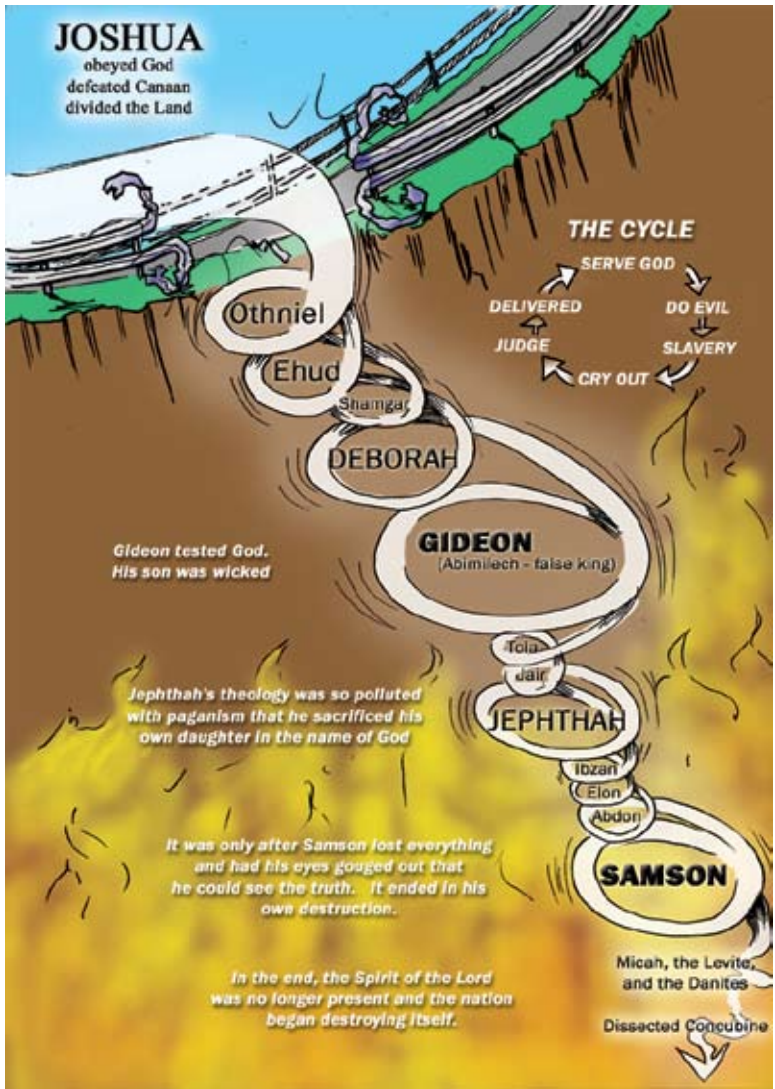


Joshua - Judges



Monday: Joshua 18-22
Tuesday: Joshua 23-Judges 2
Wednesday: Judges 3-5
Thursday: Judges 6-9
Friday: Judges 10-15

Introduction

Starting new things is a great adventure. We love it when we buy a brand new car, start a brand new job, think of a new concept and watch it get off the ground, start a new church, or say “yes” to Jesus for the first time. During this initial phase of any project there is great excitement, energy, enthusiasm, and graciousness. But then what happens? You’ve heard the old saying, “The honeymoon is over!” Once the excitement and the newness of the endeavor is over, the reality of daily life sets in. That new car that was once everything you dreamed of is now completely filthy, needs an oil change, and has been in the shop twice. The new job has an annoying person in the next office and it still requires you to set your alarm for an hour earlier than you would prefer. This new life with Jesus isn’t just a waltz through the park on a sunny spring day. You have been attacked daily by a ruthless enemy, your Christian friends have shown signs of hypocrisy, and the spiritual disciplines are sometimes plain old hard work.

How do you feel now? What is the temptation at this point for most of us? We want to run away! We want to find another new adventure so we can get another buzz off the euphoria of something new and exciting.

This “post-newness letdown syndrome” is exactly what Judges is all about. At the end of Deuteronomy Moses had warned them about this. He told them

that, if they were not careful to guard their hearts, they would forget all the miraculous things that God had done for them and would become bored with “the good life.” He knew that the exciting and alluring religions and cultures of the Canaanite tribes around them would become an enticing and intoxicating aroma that would tempt them to stray from the path that God had laid before them. On the road to Zion, that place of true intimacy with Yahweh, there are guard rails along the side to keep the follower of God safe from going over the edge. These guard rails are the laws of God. The laws were given, not to constrain the people, but to protect them from the devastating consequences of plummeting over the edge. But, as with any mountain road, when a car is speeding around the hairpin turns, seeing how close it can get to the guard rails, those little metal barriers will melt away like paper when the car goes spinning out of control.

As you can see on the chart, the book of Judges is the story of how the nation of Israel burst through the guard rails of God’s Law and went careening down into the valley of curses. Notice how, with each judge, there is a momentary upward cycle of repentance, but the inertia of this downward spiral quickly pulls the nation deeper into a self-destructive pattern. Each upward cycle is actually lower than the low point of the previous generation. Things got so bad that the goodness of the last judge Samson was actually wretched. Then, finally, there were no longer any judges and the nation began cannibalizing itself. Just like Moses had predicted.

There is a story about a queen who was looking to bring on a new driver for her carriage. When interviewing each candidate she would ask them how close they could get the carriage to the edge of the road on a mountain pass without slipping over the

edge. The first candidate boasted that he could get within a foot of the edge. The second puffed up with pride as he claimed to be able to get to within an inch of the edge and safely pull it back. The last candidate humbly admitted that he didn't know because he always tries to stay as far away from the edge as possible. The queen chose the third man.

So it should have been with the nation of Israel. Moses warned them not to flirt with the guardrail. We will read this week that Joshua echoed his mentor's words in his own final speech of warning and invitation. So, too, do we stand on the road to intimacy with God. Once the newness of a new life in Christ wears off; once the excitement of a newly formed church settles down; we see that the road before us is winding, steep, and narrow. We can hear the party going on just on the other side of the guard rail, and it is calling our name. Beware the song of the siren. Yes it is sweet. Yes, it seems far more enjoyable than the march of faithfulness you are currently on.

Recently, Mel Gibson was interviewed about making his movie, *The Passion of Christ*, and was asked about his casting choice for Satan and why he chose a beautiful woman. Mel said that he wanted Satan and evil to be attractive. He said it is wrong to portray it as a hideous beast. Who would follow that? He wanted Satan to be beautiful and mysteriously alluring; something that we would want to stare at. That's exactly what evil is. We want to stare at it. The pull to move away from the center line of God's directives and hang over the edge of the railing is a strong and powerful force. Yet, behind the beautiful face is the face of death. Over and over again the nation of Israel, flipping wildly over the edge, saw the face of death.

There are two notes about Judges:

1. One should be wary to try to find positive examples of Christian behavior from the likes of Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. The book of Judges is a negative example of what happens when you step out of bounds from God's laws. Judges is Mount Ebal in action. Even the best of Judges is corrupt.
2. There is hope. God is faithful to His covenant. He let Israel suffer the consequences for their choices, but He also maintained a remnant of hope. We will see it next week when we read the story of Ruth that takes place during the same time period as Judges. God will never give up on His people. He will never give up on you. If you are finding yourself hanging over the edge, flirting with sin, or even spinning out of control and falling into the valley below, just call on His name and He will reach down and grab you. He will bring a "judge" into your life to help you to be delivered from whatever has gotten a destructive grip on you. All you need to do is admit that you are wrong, ask for help, turn away from the sin that you are doing, and follow the path that God has laid before you.

Outline of Judges

Introduction: They Didn't Drive out Every Nation 1:1-3:6

The Judges

Othniel 3:7-11

Ehud 3:12-30

Shamgar 3:31

Deborah 4:1-5:31

Gideon 6:1-8:28

[Abimelech] 8:28-9:57

Tola 10:1-2; Jair 10:3-5

Jephthah 10:6-12:7

Ibzan 12:8-10; Elon 12:11-12; Abdon 12:13-15

Samson 13:1-16:31

Corruption beyond what a judge could do
17:1-21:25

Monday: Conflict Resolution

Joshua 22

Why did the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Mannaseh live on the east side of the Jordan? (the answer is found in previous chapters)

How did Joshua feel about these tribes? What did he do for them? (vv. 1-9)

What did these tribes do as soon as they crossed the river? (v. 10)

How did the rest of Israel feel about this action? What did they do? (vv. 11-20)

What was the response from the Eastern Tribes? (vv. 21-29)

What was the resolution to this conflict? (vv. 30-34)

Food for thought:

When we see behavior in another person's life that doesn't make sense to us and appears to be "wrong," what do we typically do? The average person would jump to a conclusion about the other person, get reactive or defensive about it, and launch an accusation against that person. The bold person would launch a frontal assault and confront the person about their sinfulness. The less bold would harbor ill feelings and possibly gossip about the "strange behavior" that the person was exhibiting.

You probably have never fallen into the trap of judging someone's behaviors, jumping to conclusions, and getting into messy conflict. Of course not. But I'm sure you know someone who has and would probably benefit greatly from today's lesson!

Conflict is one of the greatest forces that will pull a church apart. We are all people that are on different legs of our journey with God. We are all battling with different enemies that pester us along the path. We all have different personality traits and different "hot buttons" that, when pushed, can set us off. Conflict in an intimate community is inevitable. We will step on each other's toes in the dance of life. It's not a question of "if" it will happen, but "when" it will happen.

One of the best tools and skills we can use to become better travelers together is that of resolving conflict. If we track with today's story we will see some excellent principles for how to avoid unnecessary conflict. Notice how I said "unnecessary" conflict. Sometimes conflict is necessary. Remember, God told them to go to war against the Canaanites. But, in this situation, we see brothers who are on the verge of conflict. The western tribes observe the large altar that the Eastern

tribes have just built. At first glance it looks to the Westies that the Easties have already broken over the guard rail established by Moses and are falling into the pit of false worship. Had this been true, then, according to the Law, they were supposed to rush in and eradicate this cancerous tumor in the nation. Fortunately, they took a slightly different approach and made a bad thing into a good one.

1. When you have a question about a person's behavior, ask, don't accuse. In his book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey teaches the principle "Seek first to understand, then be understood." The majority of conflict that we encounter is the result of misunderstanding. The Westies interpreted the building of the altar as an act of pagan worship, an offense that required harsh punishment. Had they come in with spears raised and stones in hand, the Easties would have naturally risen to arms to defend themselves. That is only natural. Then a war would have happened, people would have died...for nothing.

We typically make this mistake. We approach this kind of situation with a pointing finger saying, "you have sinned, what were you thinking?" When a person feels attacked, even if they are innocent, they will almost always kick into a self-defense mode that, to the attacker, will prove their guilt. Stop. Ask for clarity. Seek to understand.

2. Actually listen to the answer given to your question. Many times people learn lesson #1 and begin a conflict by asking a question, but while their mouth may be verbalizing the question, their heart is still clenching a stone

and is ready to hurl it. When you ask the question, ask it with your whole self. Actually seek to understand the point of view of the accused. Try to crawl into the mind of the other person, see the world through their eyes, and try to understand what their thinking was when they made the decision to do what they did, even if it is different from yours. When the Easties were given an opportunity to explain themselves, there was a total reversal, a “paradigm shift” for the Westies. This action that they thought was sin, was actually a noble action of faithfulness.

3. Be willing to admit you were wrong. Many times, when we jump to conclusions and accuse someone, even when we find out that they were not doing what we thought they were doing, with the motives we had placed in their heart, we don't want to admit it. Suddenly we find that we are in the wrong and our own tainted motives are exposed to the world. That is a vulnerable place and a scary feeling. The accuser is suddenly the accused. In that moment, stop. Take a deep breath. Admit that you were wrong in your interpretation. Seek forgiveness. And then, rejoice in the fact that you left that meeting with no needless casualties. The Westies went home rejoicing that the nation of Israel was united and worshipping God.

Tuesday: Choose This Day!

Joshua 24:14-24; Judges 2:6-23

In Joshua 24, what was Joshua's challenge to the people?

What was the response of the people?

In Judges 2, what was the pattern that the people followed. Create a chart that lists each step that the nation followed in the cycle. The first two steps are written for you to get you started:

1. They served the Lord (v. 7)
2. The next generation did evil and served the Baals. (vv. 10-11)

Why did God let the nations remain in the land?
(v. 22)

Food for thought:

There are a few lessons for today:

- 1. The choice is a continual process.** Moses laid before the people a choice between life and death. Now Joshua stands before the people and says, “choose this day whom you will serve.” Just because the people had obeyed God and followed Joshua into victorious battle, doesn’t mean that they were automatically going to do right for the rest of their lives. As the blood on the swords was beginning to dry and the crops in the fields were beginning to grow, Joshua knew that the people would have the tendency to forget about the miraculous deliverance of God in their lives. Joshua knew that the only way they would be able to stay within the guardrails of God’s plan was if they made a conscious choice to do so. The same is true for us. Each day we must wake up and choose to live in the Kingdom of God.
- 2. You can’t choose the Kingdom!** What? One of the most perplexing verses in this passage is Joshua 24:19-20. After Joshua told them to choose, he said, “you are not able to serve the Lord.” Why would he say that? Was he messing with their heads? The key to this is found in v. 23. Joshua said that the people must throw away their foreign gods and “yield your hearts to the Lord.” That is the key to living in God’s Kingdom. God does not ask you to work harder to obey His commands. He does not ask you to wake up every morning and say, “by the power of my own will I will not steal, not lie, not lust, etc.” That mentality will drive us into burnout and idolatry faster than anything. What God asks of us is to wake

up every morning and say, "God, I give up. I am not strong enough to follow you. I die to myself. Please fill me up with you and lead me in the paths that you would have me to follow." The key to the kingdom is to yield your heart.

3. Parenting is a key to the Kingdom of God.

When we move into the Judges passage, notice that Joshua's generation followed God's laws. But as soon as that generation died off, the next generation quickly strayed and began to follow the baals of Canaan. How can this happen? While the point I'm making is not explicitly in the passage, it is one that can be drawn from simple observation in our own culture. Many times one generation can find an external pattern of worshipping God that flows from an authentic desire to know God, and they can follow that pattern of worship their whole lives. The problem is that they bring their children up in that pattern of worship and believe that by "taking their kids to church" their children will learn to love God as well. There's the fatal flaw. That pattern of worship may be authentic for the older generation because it flows from their heart for God, but for the children it is nothing more than an external behavior. God has not yet gripped the heart of the child. The best place for the Kingdom of God to be authentically and effectively transferred from one generation to the next is in the home. The parents need to love God with their whole self, and serve the Lord in everything they do. If God is real at home, then the children will meet God and come to know Him. But if God is just something that is talked about

at church then “God” will be nothing more than an empty concept, one idea among many, that will potentially get swept away when the child enters into the whirlwind of competing worldviews in the adult world.

- 4. The battle is healthy.** It was not God’s desire to have Israel spare the nations around them. In the same way, it was not God’s desire for Adam and Eve to turn away from Him. God’s desire and His purpose for us is to live in perfect unity with Him. Yet, He knows the poor choices we continually make and He makes concessions for us, as good parents do. Notice in v. 22-23 what attitude God takes towards the nations that were left behind because of Israel’s disobedience. He says, “I will use them to test Israel...The Lord had allowed those nations to remain.” The fact is that the struggle is good for us because it makes us stronger. That is what exercise is for the physical body; it’s a struggle. When you lift weights you put your muscles under stress that actually tears them down a little. As the body heals the micro injury it becomes stronger and more resilient. In our spirit it is the same way. I believe that is what James meant when he said, *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”* (James 1:2-4) Stay strong, and thank God for the struggles that you face. Keep your eyes on Him and remember that *“in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.”* (Romans 8:28)

Wednesday: From Bad to Worse

Typically in this devotional we take a large section of scripture from the assigned reading and narrow it down to one passage for the purpose of closer investigation. Today we are going to do just the opposite. We are going to broaden the field of our lenses and look at the entire book of Judges from a satellite view. As you work through this exercise it may be helpful for you to refer back to the main chart in the introduction and track with the downward spirals.

Below you will find a chart that indicates all the Judges listed in the book and the passages in which they can be found. Next to the key judges there is the word "result." Look up the verse and, next to this word, answer the question, "after the judge delivered the nation from their bondage, what did the nation experience?" The purpose of this observational chart is to see if you can discover a pattern in the book of Judges.

Othniel 3:7-11

result 3:11

Ehud 3:12-30

result 3:30

Shamgar 3:31

Deborah 4:1-5:31

result 5:31

Gideon 6:1-8:28

result 8:28

Tola 10:1-2; Jair 10:3-5

Jephthah 10:6-12:7

result 12:1-6

Ibzan 12:8-10; Elon 12:11-12; Abdon 12:13-15

Samson 13:1-16:31

result 16:30

from chapter 17 on there are no judges and it is a story of bloody civil war that tears up the nation.

Food for thought:

What happens when you take a video tape and record a program on it, then make a copy from it, then make a copy from that copy, then a copy from that copy, and so on? Each “generation” of copies gets more and more grainy and has less and less integrity to the original. If you were to continue this process of copying copies, you would eventually have nothing but a nasty blur of snow and garbled sound to show on your television screen.

This principle is true in the spiritual life as well. One of the greatest mistakes that people have made over the centuries of church history is that of copying the external patterns of someone else’s spirituality or forms of worship and trying to conform their external behavior to those patterns.

In the sixteenth century the Spirit of God poured out onto the great reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin and these men forged new ground for the body of Christ. Then, within one generation, the authentic, Spirit-led ministry of the man John Calvin became Calvinism; a dogmatic, spirit-quenching legalism. In the 18th century the Spirit gripped the heart of an Anglican man named John Wesley and motivated him to pursue a life of holiness. God inspired him to create a “method” of study, prayer, and fasting that opened up the door for the Spirit to do His transforming work in him. Within a generation this “method” became “Methodism” and a member of that church became more of a “Methodist” than a Christian. At the turn of the 20th century the Spirit poured out on a group of Seminary students on Azusa Street in Los Angeles and revitalized the gifts that were mentioned in Acts on the day of Pentecost. This Spirit-led, catalytic event became the normative

pattern and, within a generation, Pentecostalism was born and the “Freedom in the Spirit” became a legalistic form of bondage for many people. In 1972, the Spirit of God poured out on a group of college students, led by a man named Bill Hybels, and gave them a vision for a fresh way to present the gospel message to the people of the northwest suburbs of Chicago. The Spirit’s ministry through Willow Creek Church brought thousands of people into the Kingdom in an authentic way. Then pastors from all over the country began flocking to Willow to copy their methods and try to implement them in their own context. This inauthentic copying has led to some spiritual disasters.

What’s the point? We must remember that copies are not the original. It is not methodologies that bring people into the Kingdom of God. It is the Holy Spirit that brings people into His Kingdom. It is a broken and open heart that is the conduit through which the Holy Spirit does His work in the life of an individual. Through that individual the Spirit will reveal methodologies that will create the space for people to enter into the presence of God, know Him, and be transformed by Him.

Methodologies are not bad. They are necessary. You need to have some level of order and structure to your forms of worship and the spiritual disciplines you use to open your heart to God. Even something as “simple” as house churches need to have structure and order to them. Otherwise, there is anarchy. God is not a God of chaos. God is the God that brings order out of chaos. Yet, we need to be careful to never believe that it is our methodologies that are “saving” us, or that our methodologies are the end-all to how the church should be. The Kingdom of God never changes, but methodologies must change for every specific culture.

What does this have to do with Judges, and why are we spending a day talking about it? First of all, as you filled out the chart, you can see that each generation of Judges became increasingly wicked. The first few judges reestablished peace in the land. But then Jephthah's ministry only provoked civil war. Samson, even though the Spirit of the Lord was upon Him, was corrupt even when he was at his best. His self-centered ministry ended up in self-deception and self-destruction. Finally, at the end of the book the nation was left without a judge and left to absolute self-mutilation. I believe this happened because the nation never caught sight of what Moses and Joshua really had. It was not the Law that made Moses and Joshua great men. It was their friendship with God. It was their ability to speak with God and know His will in an authentic way that allowed them to lead the people and keep the nation between the guardrails.

Early on the people rejected the presence of God and allowed the priests to be their go-between. Once Moses and Joshua were gone the people were left with a deep separation from God and nothing but rituals performed by priests at a tent. By focusing on the methods of worship passed down to them rather than the reality of relationship with the Living, Eternal God that lie behind the methods, the people were easily distracted by the very sensual, physical worship practiced by the Canaanites.

In our church, today, we are faced with the same choices. In the wake of dying denominations and the reality of empty church buildings all around us we see new movements of God springing up with fresh new ideas on how to "do church." There are church growth conferences in abundance. If you surf the net you will be overloaded with the ideas on the "right" way to do church. You will even find very dogmatic-sounding language coming from people who claim to

be all about the freedom that comes from “simple” or house church. It is easy to get overwhelmed by the information overload and the competitive “keeping-up-with-the-Jones” mentality that is pervasive in the arena of new ministry formation. “We’ve got to do it like those guys,” or “these guys are doing it this way so we can’t do it that way,” becomes the driving thought pattern. If you ever find yourself getting caught up in that mode...stop! Take a deep breath. The answer to your questions is on your knees. You have the scripture, you have the Holy Spirit, and you have a community of people who are faithfully committed to following God and asking Him to lead them. That is all you need. Take your eyes off someone’s method, and put your eyes on Jesus, through the study of His Word, and build a method that is authentically coming from Him to you.

That is not to say that you shouldn’t study church history or listen to the ideas of your peers in the world. Far from it. Just remember that we are all journeying together. We are not in competition. Jesus is our only shepherd and the human leaders that He raises up to shepherd His sheep are just sheep themselves in need of a shepherd. Listen to the true shepherd and follow Him.

Thursday: A Legacy of What?

Judges 8:22-9:57

After Gideon delivered the people from their oppressors, what did they want him to do? (8:22)

What was Gideon's response?

Gideon made an ephod. What is an ephod? (look in Exodus 28:28-30)

What did the people do with the ephod?

The story of Gideon's son, Abimelech, is found in Judges 9. Read his story and try to summarize it in two or three sentences.

Why do you think Abimelech ended up the way he did?

Food for thought:

Today's devotional is specifically targeted at leaders in the church and fathers. The truth of these words is for everyone, but the cross-hairs are on these two types of people for the moment.

If you grew up in the church you probably heard the story of Gideon. He was generally portrayed as a great hero and a man of faith. Rightly so. He did obey some strange directions from God that went against conventional wisdom and brought deliverance for the people. So, he was a hero and did do great things. Yet, look how he ended his journey.

Here is a principle to soak on: "Let us not evaluate a person by the way they begin the race, but by the way they end the race." Many people start strong. They talk about all the great things that they are going to do for the Lord. They are bristling with excitement and vigor. Many of the talkers even become very successful in the ministries they talk about and there is great "fruit" that results. Gideon was like that. He had a great run for a long time. He was so successful that the people wanted to make him king. They gave Gideon all the credit for the great things and the great deliverance that they had experienced. They were practically worshipping him.

How would you feel in that moment? How would you feel if you had just experienced great success in ministry and the people were surrounding you and applauding you and saying, "you are amazing! Look at what you have done?" Would you puff up in pride and say, "why yes, you must be right. I am an awesome guy?" or would you cower in false humility and say, "oh no, I'm really nothing. It was all God, I didn't do a thing."

Look what Gideon did in that moment. He did one thing right, then he made one fatal mistake. Correctly, he said to the people, "I will not rule over you, the Lord will rule over you." Bravo, Gideon, that was a good answer. But then he turns right around and asks the people to give him gold so that he can make an ephod. What's going on here? Because of our modernistic perspective and Christian heritage this key point may slip past us. The ephod was an instrument that God had given to Aaron, the first high priest, designed to be a means of communication between God and the high priest. It was like a divinely inspired 8 ball (do remember those little toys from the 70's where you shake the eight ball and a message appears in the window?) It was a piece of clothing, a breast piece, that had two stones embedded in it called the *Urim* and *Thummim*. One meant yes and one meant no. Apparently, when the high priest went before the Lord in the tent of meeting, God would cause these stones to glow in accordance with His answer to the priest's inquiry. So, Gideon made himself a beautiful, golden ephod. What's the big deal? Didn't God ordain the use of the ephod? Yes, God did ordain its use. The question is, to whom did he ordain it? According to God's plan there was to be only one ephod in Israel, and only one man who could use it; the high priest.

Essentially this is what Gideon was saying (please allow me a little artistic license here), "Wow, God really did use me. I must be pretty tight with God. I know you guys want me to be your King, but I know that I can't do that. However, I can build my own ephod and have direct access to God. That's spiritual, right? You can come to me to get to God. He's your ruler, but I've got the Ephod." Gideon took something that appeared spiritual, and, in the right context was a correct form of interacting with

God, and distorted it. He went outside of God's boundaries for its use and made a good thing into a form of idolatry. In his final moments, probably because he started believing his own press releases, Gideon planted the seeds of corruption in the hearts of his children and those that followed him.

The consequences of this distortion of God's truth were devastating. Gideon's illegitimate son, Abimelech (we could write a whole devotional on the distortion of Gideon's man/woman relationships as being a huge part of his downfall as well), murdered his 70 brothers and took over the rule of the city. Judges chapter 9 is a depressing story of corruption, deception, vengeance, vindictiveness, and bloodshed. These were the fruit of Gideon's seed.

Now, to the leaders and fathers. There is one word for today...beware. In every moment of your life you are sowing seeds into the fields of the generation that follows you. The measure by which you will be evaluated in the eternal scales of the Kingdom of God have nothing to do with the external results that your ministry produced. It doesn't matter how big your church gets. It doesn't matter how many "giants" you have slain. It doesn't matter what results you get in the polls, or how many accolades you get from people who are observing the external indicators of your physical ministry. The value of your ministry will be measured by the level to which the next generation authentically knows God, loves Him, and authentically follows Him in the paths He has directed for them. This is a matter of the heart. This is a matter of integrity in the deepest recesses of your inner self. How do you behave when you don't think anyone is looking? How do you deal with your children when the eyes of the church are not on you? Are you as kind and nice with them in private

as you are when those you are trying to impress are watching?

As we lead our church and as we lead our children, let's remember this lesson from Gideon. Don't listen to the accolades of the crowd. Don't start believing the hype that follows after God does a great and miraculous work. Remember that you perform for an audience of one. The crowds will come and go, and will evaluate you on your external "results." God cares only about your heart and the "results" belong to Him.

Also, remember that God has established only one High Priest, Jesus Christ. The ephod belongs to Him. May we never try to mimic the ephod by believing that what we have to offer is anything special or wonderful, any more than anyone else. May we lead people to follow Jesus Christ in all His ways, to love God with all their heart, so that they see through our ministry and get a clear view into the heart of God. May we start well on this path, and more importantly, may we finish strong on this path and pass it on to our children.

All for Him.

Friday: Watch Your Vows!

Judges 10:6-12:7

What was God's attitude towards Israel at this point in the story? (10:13)

What criteria was set for who would be the next leader of Israel? (10:18)

Who called Jephthah to be the leader of Israel? (11:4-9)

What vow did Jephthah make to the Lord in exchange for victory in battle? (11:30-31)

What did Jephthah have to do in order to keep his vow? (11:34-39)

Food for thought:

Here are a few observations from this very confusing chapter:

In spite of the fact that God had told the people that He would not save them from their enemies, the people went ahead and made a battle plan. In the past, it was God who had chosen the judge, raised them up, and then used that judge as a conduit for His justice on the enemy of Israel. In this case, the elders decided that they could set their own criteria for who got to be their leader and they moved ahead without God in front of them. In many ways this is like what happened after the nation blew it at Kadesh-Barnea with the 12 spies. God had already punished them, but, in an attempt to win God back, they went ahead and attacked the city without God's blessing. It was the right action, but the wrong heart and the wrong timing. In this chapter, the elders of Israel were using "spiritual language" but were operating completely out of their own flesh and human wisdom.

Their choice of leader was based on externals. Even though Jephthah was the son of a prostitute and had been driven out of Israel by his brothers, now, because he was a mighty warrior, his brothers wanted him back in order to fight against the Ammonites. They were so focused on their physical needs that they were willing to betray their inner convictions (which is what motivated his exile in the first place) in order to gain short term success.

Half-baked theology led to tragic results. Jephthah is a confusing character. On one side he sounds very correct in his language about the Lord. He seems to want to honor the Lord in the correct way,

according to the directions of Moses and Joshua. But then he turns around and makes a “vow” to God. He basically bartered with God. He promises to sacrifice whatever walked out of his house if only God would deliver the Ammonites. This action was based on a misunderstanding of God was the result of Canaanite influence in Jephthah’s theology. In Canaanite religion the gods did not care about the people. The people had to manipulate and coerce the gods to pay attention to them and help them. By this time the Israelites were so polluted by the Canaanites that their theology had become a hybrid of Moses’ law and Canaanite superstitions. So, Jephthah made a pagan-like barter with God and ended up having to sacrifice his only daughter as a result.

Here is the take home for today. We need to be very careful when we start to move ahead and do something for God and make sure that we have our priorities right and our filters calibrated to the right settings. The problem in this story is that the people had their focus completely wrong. They were focusing on their physical needs (the Ammonites) and not on the proper worship of God (they still had idols). They didn’t listen to God. They reacted to their physical needs and made decisions based upon physical evidence and human wisdom. They thought, “If you have a battle to fight, hire a warrior, it doesn’t matter if his theology is off.”

Many times churches look at the path that they are on through physical lenses rather than spiritual ones. They look at the demographics of the neighborhood, the physical structure of the building, the “felt needs” of the hurting people, and they react to these physical indicators. Churches typically are quick to hire the bold and the beautiful who have the “right stuff” to meet these physical challenges head on do the “work

of the ministry.” They operate under the philosophy that “we need a 10” in this position of leadership if we are going to be “successful.” The drive for success often leads a church to compromise on fundamental issues of integrity in order to “get the job done.” While that kind of behavior is done every day in corporate America and has been accepted as “good business sense” in our culture, it is just plain wrong and can lead to devastating spiritual consequences when employed within the body of Christ.

God does not operate like that. We will see this lesson again in 1 Samuel when it comes down to choosing a king for the nation. The people wanted the obvious choice of “tall Saul,” but God wanted the little shepherd boy, David, to lead His people.

So far in the story of the Bible, how many times has God worked for His people according to ordinary, human wisdom? When God does something He does it in a way that defies human wisdom. He calls a man from Ur to go to Canaan, but doesn’t tell him why or what to do when he gets there. He promises that man a child in his old age, and then tells him to kill the boy. He throws His number one draft choice into slavery and prison for many years before He is ready to use him. He calls a murderer and an exile to be the deliverer of His people from Egypt. He leads His people into the country where crops can’t grow, and then feeds them with Heavenly bread. He tells His general to defeat a city by walking around its walls for seven days and then blowing trumpets. He tells a judge to send the vast majority of his warriors home and only attack the enemy with 300 men armed with clay jars and torches.

If God is going to do something in the church you can guarantee that it will not be because of anything the leaders have done in their own strength and wisdom.

Just like with Joshua, the church and its leadership is not called to exercise its fleshly prowess, it is called to focus on the Word of God, meditate on it day and night, and follow the leading of God. The theological and ethical compromises that Israel made in calling Jephthah to be their judge led to a tragic mistake that ended up in civil war. As the church today, let's stop and examine our hearts and our motivations and our value systems. Are we following God's leading in our personal lives and in the decision making process of the church, or are we reacting to the physical issues around us and making decisions based upon "conventional wisdom?"