

Read Judges 1

It came about when Israel became strong, that they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but they did not drive them out completely. Judges 1:28 One of my favorite movies is "The Patriot" with Mel Gibson playing a militia commander during the American Revolutionary War. In the last open field battle, you see the insanity of 18th century warfare; to stand shoulder to shoulder 50 yards from each other, as riflemen alternate taking shots at each other. In these kind of battles, your biggest concern was to hold the line. If one section of the line retreated, then the sides that remained would be in trouble. With the line broken by a section that had left, you now had other parts of the line that could be completely surrounded. It would get awfully lonely on the front line if the men to your right or left suddenly ran off.

Here as we enter the book of Judges we see a similar circumstance. You cannot blame disobedience on one or two in Israel, but on many. There is a list of those who did not drive the Canaanites completely from the land, and so together they put the brakes on the plans that God had for them. Clearly God had been with the people as they entered the land, but now the inhabitants were too strong for God's people. But was this the fault of a God who abandoned Israel, or Israel who abandoned God? Clearly the people had sin that was separating between them and God, and so they were simply making slaves of the Canaanites. This will allow not only rebellion by those people in the future, but infiltration of false gods and beliefs into the camp of God's people. **Let me ask you a question: are you holding the line? Are there things going undone in your personal life because of your sin and selfishness? Are there things going undone in your church because you are not investing your time? A church's success is not measured in numbers but by it's obedience to the Lord. I'd rather worship with 20 people who are completely sold out for Jesus, than to worship with 200 who are marginal and generally unconcerned with their Christian walk. Hold the line. Hold fast to the Word of God. Deal with sin quickly. Put God's purposes first in your life.**

Read Judges 2

Now the angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you Judges 2:1 When you first arrive at basic training, the instructors try to scare you to death and there are lots of mental games. During the first day or two you can actually choose to leave basic training, and they'll let you go. I'll never forget the drill sergeants giving us an option to leave after the first day, and about 15 guys left! It wasn't fun, and I was tempted, but I decided to keep my commitment because of the opportunity to serve and the college benefits. During week 5 of 8 they asked again who would like to leave. A few people raised their hands, and they were berated, but not allowed to leave. The cost for putting a soldier through basic is over \$100,000/soldier. They didn't want to lose that investment and expected us to keep our end of the bargain.

While the army wants commitment, so does Jesus. It says in this verse that the messenger is the "angel of the Lord". But notice that he does not deliver a message from God, but speaks as if he is God Himself as He says "I" often. When you see "angel of the Lord", you are looking at an appearance of Christ in the Old Testament days. Jesus being fully God can also talk of the covenant the people have with Him to remain from false gods, but there is now another, or new covenant. Old Testament believers trusted in a Messiah who was to come, and New Testament believers, including us today, trust in a Messiah who has come. Even the first book, Genesis, is filled with information, prophecy, and pictures of Christ. **So if Jesus came to you today, would He call you a covenant-fulfiller or a covenant-breaker? Remember, we will never be perfect, but Israel continued to go down this road of habitual sin as they worshipped false gods repeatedly. Do you have sin that is repeated in your life? Are you making a choice to stay away from it, and asking for God's help? It doesn't mean that if you sin again, that God dropped the ball. He allows us to work with Him as areas of our life come in line with Jesus. But, the Bible is very clear that we have to take those steps of obedience, and then He will bless them. I pray that if you are dealing with the same sin repeatedly, look at what God says about Israel here. Don't you think He is just as distraught over you doing the same thing as a believer today?**

Read Judges 3

They were for testing Israel, to find out if they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers through Moses Judges 3:4 I truly despise expiration dates. I've always loved milk, and I remember the first time as a child, not knowing about these dates, I drank some milk out of the fridge that nearly turned me off of milk forever. Or what about gift certificates that you get as gifts? How can a company take money from someone, gift a certificate, and say that the money eventually expires if the certificate is not used? Even our soda now has a date for it's best taste (which I think is because of the evils of switching from glass to plastic bottles).

Here in the beginning of the chapter, we see that God's commandments have no expiration date. Israel was expected to still follow the commandments that were handed down through a leader who had come two generations before. God's Word does not expire, or become culturally irrelevant. His Word and instructions are completely right and proper even today, and deserve our immediate obedience. My children sometimes will allow a 2 day-old command ("don't jump on the furniture), to mean that now the rules have reset and they must be retold. There is no such expiration date with God. **Are you obeying the rules of the Lord? Are you telling yourself that certain sins aren't really sins for you, or that you have different circumstances? Sin is sin, because God says it is. It is comforting to notice that every time Israel called out to God instead of the false idols, that God rescued them, but when the people went back to their wicked ways, God gave them over to their idiocy.**

Read Judges 4

Deborah said to Barak, "Arise! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hands; behold, the LORD has gone out before you." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. Judges 4:14 I have seen two examples of women who at one time have led a church. Elizabeth Elliott shares about when she was helping to plant churches in Africa. She would take a man who seemed to be spiritually sensitive and would mentor him and train him during the week. She would preach for the first weeks or even months until that man was ready, and then when he was, he became the pastor, and Elizabeth would sit in the congregation under his authority. On the other hand you have Paula White, or even Joyce Meyer who doesn't lead a church but does proclaim herself a preacher. Both of these women see the Bible as granting them authority to preach, because they believe Paul's writings on pastoral requirements was simply influenced by cultural norms. As we have seen before, God's word doesn't expire, so if the message of the Bible changes it's only because we say it does and not because the unchanging God did it.

Here in Judges 4 we see a great example of a woman who led out of necessity, but made the attempts to place a man in charge. Deborah really set the model that Elliott would later use. Barak the general of Israel wouldn't go fight without her, so she finally goes. But, when they get to the battlefield, she then charges Barak to take the army and go down, and he finally does. This is the model of leadership in the Bible. Men are to lead in ministry (which is what Deborah was doing), just as they are to lead in the home. If men lead at home, but not at church, you have a broken system of leadership. **If you're a man, I ask you, do you lead your household? If you're married, do you care for the spiritual condition of your family? If you're not married, do you handle your money and time responsibly? If you are a woman, do you allow your husband to lead in your family? It doesn't mean that you have no say in discussions, but do you nag or encourage? Many men today are poor leaders, because they grew up under a generation of under-involved dads. Encourage your husband to be the leader God wants him to be. My wife has even gotten me back on track if I've neglected spiritual priorities in our home. You'll receive the blessing when you honor the Word of God.**

Read Judges 5

Thus let all Your enemies perish, O LORD; But let those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might." And the land was undisturbed for forty years. Judges 5:31 How do we reconcile passages like this that calls for the enemies of the Lord to perish, yet we are commanded to "love our enemies" by Jesus in Matthew 5:44? It's not so difficult if you compare the passages. In Judges 5 the enemy is an entire nation, and war was the only choice in the situation. When you're fighting for the Lord, your prayer is that the enemies of God will not stand. However, in Matthew 5, Jesus is talking about our individual one-on-one relationships (read the chapter if you need to). Certainly they do not hold the weight of country vs. country, and when we have personal enemies, we are to love them. The greatest reason, is that one day they may no longer be our enemy,

but our brother in Christ, perhaps even won by your attitude towards them. Truly in America, we don't really have persecuting enemies as our brothers and sisters in other countries do. But, those we perceive as enemies are not to receive our animosity, but our love.

How do you love someone you don't like? Well, this is a difficult thing, and I would be a liar to say that I've done it perfectly in my personal and ministry life. Ephesians 4:32 has always spoken to me "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." Now if the person continually seeks to do you harm, you may have to "love them from a distance" as a good friend once said. **Analyze yourself right now: do you have someone who is an enemy, or that you treat as one? As Christians, this should not be so. I understand, I don't know what they did to you. However, if that person knocked on your door today and asked for your forgiveness, would you grant it? God can do what He wants with His enemies, because He is right and just in every situation, and clearly even the book of Revelation shows the final showdown in that realm. But, what about yours? Are your fights really worth it? Are they over things of the Bible, or over petty personal squabbles? If believers would fight for the right things, maybe non-believers wouldn't write us off as no better than them. For the sake of other believers, and your own walk (staying angry makes you bitter, not better), love the person, even if they don't love you. Remember, Jesus loved you before you ever thought about loving Him.**

Read Judges 6

But Joash said to all who stood against him, "Will you contend for Baal, or will you deliver him? Whoever will plead for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because someone has torn down his altar." Judges 6:31 I enjoy reading this account from Gideon's life. It shows a lot about Him, and why God used Gideon to deliver Israel. When Gideon is first told that this will be his task, he has concern because he is no one of great stature or fame. However, he accepts the call and then another from the Lord (again, this angel is clearly Jesus). Gideon is instructed to remove the Baal altar, and build one to God and sacrifice on it. This is to allow those who followed Baal to see a very clear indicator that God was moving. Gideon does it at night, which was probably better anyway, and then the people wake up the next morning and find their Baal worship center destroyed, which was actually owned by Gideon's father, Joash. However, this act seems to wake up even Joash as he wisely tells the people that if Baal is upset about this, Baal should take care of it. No one pleaded when God's sacrifices and altar were neglected, but the false god with no voice had plenty of people coming to his side.

When the commands of God are neglected, swift and certain action must be taken. Gideon delayed doing this in the daytime, which wasn't an unwise move, but it appears he tore the altar down the same day that God told him to. **There was no delay, which brings the account back to us: Where are you delaying in your life? What sin are you holding back, or refusing to address? What situation in a friend or family**

member's life are you ignoring because it will be too painful to go through? I'm sure it wasn't easy for Gideon to do this thing to his father, and wondered how Joash might react. Great love is always shown through sacrifice. If we sacrifice what people think of us, in order that we do the right things, then we have in fact shown the greater love. Do not delay to obey. Be ready to be the man or woman God calls to set a situation right.

Read Judges 7

The LORD said to Gideon, "I will deliver you with the 300 men who lapped and will give the Midianites into your hands; so let all the other people go, each man to his home ." **Judges 7:7** I was thinking about the different kinds of ministries we try to do through churches. I remember the Easter Cantata at our first church. It required lots of people and we always took anyone who would be involved in some way. Of course, during Vacation Bible School, we're always looking for people who will come and work. Filling all those positions is often difficult because there is so much that needs to be done, and a week long commitment to go with it. Usually to pull things off in church, we're looking for numbers.

To bring about this victory for Israel against the Midianites, God was looking for numbers too, but He was looking for smaller numbers. God gives an opportunity for those who are scared to leave, and then does the water test. Soon what had been an army of 32,000 for Israel, turns into 300, versus a large unnumbered Midianite force. Much is made of the fact that the 300 who God kept, were those who brought water up to their mouth so they could continue to be alert and looking around, and those who stuck their face in the water were removed. I think what's more remarkable, is that when the army is cut to 300, that those who are left don't ask for a second chance on the leaving if you're scared! Your army is cut to barely a fraction of the original, and now as far as you know, you're supposed to go fight a battle. But, they all go, and are obedient to act in the way that Gideon led them, and gain the victory. **Here is the important part for us: Do you require an army to be obedient, or can you do it amongst just a few? There will be times in your life as a believer that there will be others around you to stand with you, but there are other times that you must stand with a few or even by yourself. Ask God to strengthen you and give you a boldness when you're on your own. Maybe at work or school, or possibly even at church. Simply be obedient to what God calls you to do, regardless of those who may or may not come with you.**

Read Judges 8

But Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you." Judges 8:23 As the presidential elections draw near, I can't help but think, "Who cares?" There seems to be no less influential person than the president, and you can never really trust them. The great statesman, Henry Kissinger said "90% of all politicians make the other 10% look bad." The majority of what you see is people who start with lofty ideals and a desire to change things, until they get to Washington. Suddenly they're disillusioned with the bureaucracy, the attitudes of the

people, and the slow pace of change. Soon these men and women simply become a small part of the big problem. We even need independent voter organizations to provide us with details of what candidates believe, because they are so ambiguous about it. Clearly, good leaders are hard to come by now, but that's been true throughout history. That's why great leaders are held in such high esteem.

Looking at Gideon, he wasn't the best leader to ever step to the front in Israel, but he had a clear understanding of his role. He tells the people that it's not possible for him to rule over the people, because that is the role and responsibility of God. However, Gideon's personal life is questionable and he puts himself in a position to take something from those he led, which is not a good trait of a leader. But, he at least understood that he was not the leader, and I have to respect that. **Who's the leader of your life? Before you bought your house, did you pray about it? Before you bought your car, did you pray about it? Before you married your spouse, did you pray about it? Do you tend to just run headlong into things, or do you seek out a peace from God. Don't attempt to run your own life...people who do that and never find Jesus, run their lives straight into Hell. So why would you for even a moment allow yourself leadership over your life? Start by giving God this day. He has a plan for you even in a simple Thursday.**

Read Judges 9

if then you have dealt in truth and integrity with Jerubbaal and his house this day, rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. Judges 9:19 Working with teenagers over the years, I have been privileged to teach them the "True Love Waits" abstinence message over the years. Did some make and truly keep the pledge? I believe that out of all the kids I taught, some did. Were there some that made the pledge, and didn't keep it? Probably, but as a side note, I still believe in teaching sexual abstinence to teenagers. One of the questions I would often get, even in different churches, is "How far is too far?" This is not a question designed to protect them from moral failure, but one that puts them in danger. I like the illustration about the cliff. If you were walking up to the edge of an enormous cliff, how far would be too far? Probably being within a couple feet of the edge would make you nervous. I told them they need to set their convictions about physical encounters now, instead of at a moment where they are losing control of the situation. If a teenager has guilt about what they have done or are doing, it's because they knew that they were doing the wrong thing.

The same thing happens in most sinful situations. We argue with God or ourselves that doing something is ok for us, but when we get caught we have shame and fear. In this passage you had a large group of people who were resisting the leadership of Gideon, led by one of his sons, and this rebel force is challenged that if they're being open and honest with Gideon, then they have nothing to worry about. However, they had not dealt with truth and integrity. **Even if you never say a word to a person, as soon as you begin hiding things from them and going behind their back, you have lost integrity. Is there a situation that you have not been handling with all truth and integrity? You've been lying to yourself and maybe even others regarding how serious the**

situation is. **Let all your dealings with others be out in the open. A good friend once told me "Things done in the open honor God, but things done in secret are pleasing to Satan."**

Read Judges 10

So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD; and He could bear the misery of Israel no longer. Judges 10:16 Well Christmas is over. I know as a pastor that technically it goes on all year long, but realistically we've had decorations up as long as we can. Some ornaments have gone back into their boxes and soon my wife will decide she can replace the snowman dishes with our regular dishes. Once all the Christmas items are put away, they're not gone forever. We can go out in the garage and simply rummage around until we find them and pull them all out again. We would never take those decorations and throw them out, because we plan to use them again.

Israel was putting away what they should have been throwing away. Whenever they would be confronted with their sin of worshipping false gods, they put them away. Gideon didn't put away their altar to Baal, but he destroyed it. Joshua said to choose whom the people would serve. The problem was, the people of Israel always kept an out available to them. So they are oppressed and being defeated and they call out to God. He truly is long suffering towards us and toward this people Israel. It makes me think of the passage when Jesus says if your brother sins and asks you to forgive him, you should do so seventy times seven times (Matt. 18:22). God certainly forgave enough times to prove His love. **So what are you putting away that you should be throwing away? Is there some sin or disobedience that you simply put away as you acknowledge your sin? Repentance means to turn from sin. Not that you're just sorry, but that you commit to refrain from the sin in the future. Israel continues to fall into sins that they only temporarily put away. Are you ready to bring about a more permanent solution to your sin, or are you happy with your disobedience?**

Read Judges 11

Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering." Judges 11:30-31 Jephthah's folly has been often cited by preachers and teachers. Just what did he think was going to run out of his house first? Maybe he hated his dog or cat, and hoped it would be one of them that came out. An offering to the Lord wasn't just supposed to be whatever you found lying around, but a sacrifice of first fruits. When his daughter comes out, he is deeply troubled. However, I do not believe that he sacrificed her on an altar. It says in verses 37-39, that his daughter left and wept for her virginity. If she were going to die, I would think she would weep for her life. It seems that the sacrifice was that she was in some way devoted to God, and unable to marry. Perhaps she became a servant to the priests, we really just don't know. But, God clearly doesn't want human sacrifice. Even when He

tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God stops it, never intending for sacrifice, but testing the obedience of a man who would father an entire nation. Many of the nations that worshipped false gods sacrificed humans, and God called them detestable. It's clear that even if Jephthah made this promise, God would not accept or allow it to be done for His name.

Do you find yourself making foolish or unrealistic promises? If you will seek to do what is required of you as a child and servant of Jesus, you will need to make no special promises. Just do what you should do. Keep your word to all people, but most of all to the Lord. Use wisdom before you open your mouth. Trying to make people happy by promising difficult or possibly unrealistic things, will not benefit you when you fail to deliver.

Read Judges 12

Then the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you Judges 12:1 When you're in basic training you're constantly taught that your branch is the best. In the Army we always heard that the Navy is a vacation, the Air Force is for people who can't run, and the Marines were for people who had lots of fight and little brains. I don't think the drill sergeants necessarily believed this, but it's what they said to us. Later in artillery school, we found that the Army and Marines train together so they can coordinate missions in combat situations. As a result, you had two groups who thought poorly of the other, and both had just gone through basic and knew how to fight. There were fights all over the place. Finally one fight was broken up by an Army drill sergeant and a Marine Instructor. The Army sergeant brought up battles where the Marines had come in and totally saved Army platoons from annihilation, to which the Marines cheered. Then the Marine instructor told of countless times the Marines had been pinned down and found themselves rescued by Army units that came to their rescue. It was a neat moment, when we realized we were fighting the wrong people.

This situation in Judges 12 is similar. You have the tribe of Ephraim upset that their leader, Jephthah, had not waited for them to go into a fight. At first this seems like they have a point, but if you'll recall in Judges 8, they got upset at Gideon over the same thing, and Gideon reveals that it's because they wanted spoils from the battle. The great preacher Matthew Henry says the big issue in this passage is pride: "Pride was at the bottom of the quarrel. Only by that comes contention." Henry is right, that fights usually start when people think more highly of themselves than they ought. **Do you have issues with pride? I have dealt with pride in my life and often still do. I thank God for some of the different ways He keeps me humble, sometimes through people who call me out, and sometimes through a personal thorn in the flesh that He has not removed from me (and I know as Paul knew, that His strength is sufficient for me to work through it). If you find yourself in constant contention with others, especially believers, it may be because pride has taken hold in your life. This is one of the most difficult issues to deal with in life, because it requires us to honestly look at**

ourselves. I ask you to do that, because God "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). Ask God to show you if pride holds you, or if humility does.

Read Judges 13

Manoah said, "Now when your words come to pass, what shall be the boy's mode of life and his vocation?" Judges 13:12 A jet pilot, police officer, crocodile hunter, and zoo keeper. These are the jobs that my six-year old son seems to be settled on. Not that he will be one of them when he grows up, but he will be ALL of them! One night after we prayed, I talked to him about how he should ask God what God might want him to do when he grows up. Tyler seemed concerned that he wouldn't get to make his own occupational choice as an adult. But, I explained that ministry was never on my mind growing up, and that I just kept asking God what he wanted me to do. I explained that doing God's will in my work has made the ministry I do very fun and rewarding. I think he understood towards the end, but I pray that God will fulfill the desires of his heart and use Tyler's love for animals one day in a job.

In this account, the father Manoah really asks a great question here. He knows that they have been unable to have children, and so to see a child being born must mean that God has a purpose and plan for the child. So the father asks how the boy is to be brought up and what kind of job will he grow up to have? **If you have children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews, this would be a great prayer for you to lift up to God on their behalf. How can I raise my kids to serve you Lord? Lord, place my child into the vocation one day that will honor you and be fulfilling to them. No matter the age of your children, praying for them to stay in God's will as they grow older is a good prayer. I pray that my kids will find themselves fulfilled as they do exactly what God has led them to do.**

Read Judges 14

However, his father and mother did not know that it was of the LORD, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. Now at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel. Judges 14:4 As I read this text I find myself somewhat torn as I understand it. Clearly, it was the desire of the Lord that Samson take a Philistine wife, because it would help bring the downfall of the Philistines. However, you want to see the people of God marry others who love the Lord as they do. In this case, Samson was willing to marry someone based on looks, and quite honestly, she causes him a lot of grief. Could God have delivered the people through Samson in a different manner? I believe so, but the lesson was not only for the Philistines, but for Samson. God doesn't make him do the unwise things that he does, including marrying a pagan wife, but God worked it out for good in the end. A side note: sometimes people feel that Samson is on a murderous rampage in this and the next chapters, but he is a warrior fighting a war against the Philistines who were ruling in Israel. These are battles, even if Samson may have been the only man fighting. God gave him supernatural strength to accomplish the victories.

We have all seen situations in our life when we have experienced sinful failures, and yet we have seen God glorified in the end. Do you realize that doesn't mean that God's desire was for you to sin? James 1:13 makes it clear that using sin or temptation is not God's method. It is clear that God hates sin, but He can take situations that were intended for evil and for harm, and work them for good. In this case, that's what God did with Samson, and took his desire for this pagan wife, and used it that desire to bring down the Philistines, and will ultimately wake Samson up to his unwise ways. **Even though God has worked in bad situations in your life, do you realize how much more He desires to work in godly ones? When you are obedient to God, His plans in your life are easier to accomplish and easier for you to recognize. The Bible is clear that we should keep ourselves from sin (1 Tim. 5:22). Keep these thoughts in mind over the next few days, as we see Samson used by God, despite himself.**

Read Judges 15

When he had set fire to the torches, he released the foxes into the standing grain of the Philistines, thus burning up both the shocks and the standing grain, along with the vineyards and groves. Judges 15:5 Foxes burning fields with fire tied to their tails. The Red Sea splitting open for the people of Israel to cross. The walls of Jericho falling down simply because a bunch of people yelled really loud. Do you believe this stuff? These are the kinds of accounts that allow people to say that the Bible is no more than a book of fables and fabrications. They quickly dismiss the miraculous and write off the ability of a Creator God who can manipulate His creation. However, when archaeologists discovered Jericho, did they find a pristine community from times gone by? No they found walls that had been utterly torn down on top of each other. What about the mysterious chariot wheels found with bones at the bottom of the Red Sea? God even submitted the animals to Noah so that they came to him, and I'm sure he took the fight out of these foxes until it was time.

If there is a part of the Bible that we can't trust, then we can't trust any. You think it's hard to believe foxes burned down these fields, I'd say it's equally hard to believe the Son of God came and died on a cross to pay for the sins of every living person! But He did. I believe Samson tied fire to the foxes tails. I believe Israel crossed the Red Sea on dry land. I believe that Jericho's walls fell with a shout. And I believe that Jesus died to save me from my sins. Faith is not about what we can see, but what we cannot. **Are you placing your faith in what you see? If so, you're missing out an unseeable eternal Kingdom that has not come fully to earth yet, but one day will. It's a sight that will end disbelief for many, but by then it will be too late. Do you live in belief or disbelief? Which one do you think is going to take you farther? I've heard many lives changed by their faith in Christ. I've heard of none changed by their lack of faith in Him.**

Read Judges 16

However, the hair of his head began to grow again after it was shaved off. Judges 16:22 When I used to help with insurance claims, I would often take the initial phone call after a policyholder's car or home claim. There were many times I would have to stop in the middle because the person was crying or clearly still upset thinking about their accident or their flooded basement. I would try to help them calm down and let them know that this is what insurance is for, and that we would work to make everything the way it was before their accident. Usually it seemed to help them to know that I cared about them as people and wanted to reassure them that this situation wouldn't last forever. I certainly don't want to call sin "accidents", but in the life of a Christian, sin is supposed to be an unfortunate incident that the Christian calls on God to fix in his or her life. I think about times I have come to God to confess my sin, and I was broken and sad, and He not only forgave me of my sin, but reassured me of His love for me.

Here in Judges 16 we see the weakness Samson had for women finally bringing him down, and his hair is shaved as he is captured and blinded. But, while he was in captivity the Bible makes a simple statement in saying that his hair grew back. Obviously this is how hair works, but the Bible mentions it for a reason. If Samson had been brought into the temple of Dagon and pushed in his own strength, I don't think it would have worked. But, he sought for the Lord to strengthen him again, and use him despite who he was. I'm sure in all that time that Samson was grinding grain, he probably spoke with God regarding his sin. And the hair growing back was a subtle way of telling us that God was ready to forgive Samson and that God could and would still use him if Samson would ask. **Have you had a sinful failure in your life, and you don't know what to do? You've got to just lay it out before your Savior and Friend, Jesus. He already knows so you can't shock Him, and He's simply waiting for you to confess your sins anyway. Anyone who seeks God will find that He's not far from them and ready to provide forgiveness and restoration TO THOSE WHO ASK. As Christians we're forgiven for all our sins, even those we may forget to confess, but only by repentance can we be free of the guilt and move forward with Jesus.**

Read Judges 17

Then Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest." Judges 17:13 One of the frustrating things for me as a minister is to see how much faith people place in me. Now people should be able to trust me or count on me, but I'm talking about the kind of faith that belongs only to God. You could send 50 people to pray for someone, but when a pastor comes it's a different ballgame. Now people think they're being prayed for by someone with a hotline to God. While it's true the ministers have a special position as full-time servants of the Lord, people should be insulted to be told that their prayer is not as good as that of a pastor. Proverbs 15:29, James 5:16, and 1 Peter 3:12 all say that we must be righteous to be effective in our prayers. Our righteousness comes from Christ, so if we're living that Christ-like life as a believer, God is willing to hear our prayers.

This man Micah made a similar mistake. He believe that if he had a priest of God in his house to serve over his idols, that God would bless that somehow. This man was putting his stock not only in man-made idols, but in a man himself. This priest should have run far away to be asked to do such a thing, but instead sold himself out for money to serve a false, unhearing god. **Who do you trust in, men or God? Most of us would say God, but do you tend to pray to God or talk to people when life is troubling? Do you find yourself trusting in created things like money, a house, even your job, over the Creator? Don't do something just because a pastor or minister tells you. Test their words with the Word of God. This Levite priest had a chance to choose between the scripture or money, and he sold himself out for something that was simply created.**

Read Judges 18

So they set up for themselves Micah's graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh. Judges 18:31 I remember the commercial slogan that became big when I was in Junior High: "It's gotta be the shoes!". Everyone wanted a pair of Air Jordans and we truly thought that if you had better shoes, you'd be a better player. I had wanted a pair of Air Jordans since I first saw our school's basketball team wear them. Not only would the shoes make you a better basketball player, but also a better person because you were cool enough and had enough money to own a pair. Of course, every once in a while I'd see a guy wearing Walmart specials and wonder how he was a better basketball player than the people wearing the Jordans. Maybe it wasn't the shoes.

In this chapter, we learn the tribe of Dan hasn't taken their inheritance. They had been given a lot, but apparently hadn't taken possession of it (the city of Laish is the same as Leshem in Joshua 19:40-48). So now that are going to, and they meet the priest of Micah's house on the way. It says they recognized his voice, probably meaning his accent or speech and not him as an individual. They see this man has turned from worshipping the Lord to just serving false gods and idols. Instead of chastising him, they join in his failure. So they took the idols and then credited a victory that God had set for them long ago, to the idols. When it was all over, instead of crediting a promise of God, they credited the man-made things. **Why do good things happen in your life? Is it because you do a good job of taking charge of your life? Is it because you are extremely lucky? Or do you realize there is a God who loves you and is looking over your life like a conductor of an orchestra. He seeks to fix the squeaky notes of sin in our lives, and encourage the beauty of obedience in other areas. Give God the credit in your life. 1 Thess. 5:18 says that it's God's will for you to give thanks, which means to do God's will, you must be a thankful person. Don't thank your shoes or even yourself, but God and the people He uses to bless your life.**

Read Judges 19

When her master arose in the morning and opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, then behold, his concubine was lying at the doorway of the house with her hands on the threshold. Judges 19:27 In this day of women's

"liberation" we attempt to refrain from commenting on the inadequacies of women. We speak of women in the military as if we have done them some great service for allowing them to die in battle. We speak of women in the workplace as if a 40-hour work week makes life worth living. Women are nurturing by their nature and generally are very sensitive to the needs of others. As I say this, I assure you that I am fully aware of the inadequacies of men (usually the words "listening" and "romance" come to mind). But, women are a treasure and God has placed men in charge of watching over them, especially our wives. I have only a modest concern regarding what happens to me. However, the Bible is clear that as a man I am to watch over my wife as a "weaker vessel" in 1 Peter 3:7. Literally the Bible says that a wife is a delicate and intricate person, who must be honored and protected like you would a piece of fine china or a family heirloom. Husbands must handle with care.

This story is painful to read. It's similar to the situation that happened with Lot, when two angels visited his home, and the men of the city wanted to engage in homosexual relations with them. In that case, Lot offered his daughters, but didn't give them. In this case, the homeowner offers the Levite's wife (it says concubine, which was the term used of a wife married to a man who owned little to nothing, like a Levite priest). First of all, that Levite should have said "wait a minute, if you think you're putting my wife out there. I'd rather go out swinging than to do that." But, this man consents to his wife being given to this evil mob, and the Bible wraps up the horrible account by saying in verse 25, they "abused her all night until morning". The next morning the man found his wife dead on the doorstep. In cutting up her body and sending it out, he was calling for the people of Israel to come together and avenge his wife. **The only person who was responsible in this situation was the Levite. If all in that household died at the hands of the mob, I would have thought that better than to find my wife in that condition. Are you a protector of your spouse? Clearly there is a message for husbands here, but wives also should protect their husbands. Do you place the well being of your spouse above your own? The two of you should act like two old couples fighting over who gets to pay for a meal. You should insist! Pray for your spouse. Lift him/her up before the Lord. Treat him/her as if they are special treasure from God, because that's the nature of a marriage relationship. Never allow your spouse to fight a battle without you.**

Read Judges 20

Shall I yet again go out to battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin, or shall I cease?" And the LORD said, "Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand." Judges 20:28 Have you ever held back part of the truth in order to turn a story in your favor? Sometimes we may have had someone treat us harshly, but perhaps they did so as a result of being provoked by us. But we withhold the details of our mistakes, and only tell others of how we were mistreated. This is exactly what happened in this passage. The Levite tells them all the details of how the men from the tribe of Benjamin abused and murdered his wife, but he doesn't tell them that she was essentially thrown to them to spare his own life. He withheld details in order that revenge would be exacted.

How might Israel have responded if he had told the whole truth? Maybe they would have approached the people of Benjamin differently, seeing the responsibility that this husband had in the situation. Ultimately, the men of Benjamin did an evil thing, but I think the reason that Benjamin won the first two battles was because of the dishonesty of this husband. After Israel returned defeated the first time, I'm sure he was shocked, and probably considered telling the whole truth. Finally the third time God tells Israel they will win the victory, but in the meantime many had lost their lives because of the dishonesty of this one man (much like Achan at the battle of Ai). **Do you tell the whole truth? Or are you willing to withhold certain details in order to put yourself in a better light? Christians must be people of integrity. Not that we tell the truth, but the whole truth, holding nothing back, and leaving nothing out.**

Read Judges 21

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Judges 21:25 I have had many conversations in recent days regarding the salvation of certain people. The Bible is clear that we are supposed to live lives that are different after we come to Jesus Christ. The Bible talks of walking in light instead of the darkness (1 John 1:6-7) and that our lives produce spiritual fruit (Gal. 5:22-24). If a life doesn't produce fruit or seems to dwell in darkness more than light, there is a good indication that the person is unsaved. Simply praying a prayer doesn't make you a Christian. Romans 10:9 says that we confess WITH OUR MOUTH and BELIEVE IN OUR HEART. Lots of people confess with their mouth, but never made a heart change. We cannot judge with all certainty who is saved, but there should be a standard of living for the Lord that can be seen.

If this chapter of Judges seems messed up, that's because it is. People are hunting wives and crying over how the "Lord" cut off a tribe. God certainly did this, but it was in accordance with His character of punishing sin. So finally the chapter ends that there was no king and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. First of all, whether we have a leader or not, we have a responsibility to serve the Lord even if we're the only one who wants to. However, if Israel had a king who would follow the Lord, or if they would recognize God as their king, the nation could change direction. **Do you make an impact on the way others live their lives? Do non-Christians see your life and the differences you have (peace, kindness, joy) that most people lack? Do Christians see you and become encouraged because you don't live the Christian life in spurts, but you live it all day every day? The Kingdom needs some people to lead by example. Christ should be our example, but even Paul told people to live as he did, because he was confident he honored Christ, and was helping to set an example for people who needed one. Consider how your life can lead others to Christ and lead fellow brothers and sisters to a closer walk with their God.**