

April 5: Judges 12-14 and Luke 9:37-62

The Ephraimites are again upset that they were part of Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites. Unlike Gideon's response the first time they were upset about this, Jephthah is not diplomatic at all. He calls them out for not coming when he requested help. Jephthah gathers his fighting men and they defeat Ephraim. To ensure they have not missed any Ephraimites, any time a fugitive came across the fords of the Jordan, they asked the fugitive to pronounce "Sibboleth". If they pronounced it correctly, they were Gideonites, if not, they were deemed Ephraimites. This shows us that there are differences in dialects amongst the tribes. They all speak the same language, but their pronunciation is different.

We read about the birth Samson, the last judge. The Israelites have been taken captive by the Philistines because of their evil. The Angel of the Lord approaches Manoah's wife, explaining that she will conceive a son. He will be a Nazirite all of his life, so it is important that she avoid eating or drinking anything derived from the grapevine. When she takes this news to her husband, they consult The LORD and ask what they are supposed to do to properly raise the child. Since he is a Nazirite, he cannot consume anything derived from grapes and he cannot cut his hair. When Samson grows up, he wants a wife from the Philistines. His parents disagree with his choice, but we see that God had ordained this marriage so that Samson could be used to defeat some Philistines. He marries the woman and places a bet with some men at the marriage festival. If they can solve his riddle, he owes them. If they cannot, then they owe him. When no one can figure out the meaning, his wife nags him to the point that he gives up the answer. The Spirit of the LORD takes control of him and he kills 30 men, returning in a huff back to his father's house.

In the New Testament reading, Jesus again shows His power over a demon. The disciples had been unable to drive it out, but Jesus got rid of it quickly. Jesus again predicts His death, but the disciples have no clue of what He is talking about.

Several come to Jesus asking to follow Him. When Jesus tells one man to follow him, he replies that he wants to bury his father first. The man's father was not dead. We know this because the man would have been involved in the burial rites and unable to talk to Jesus at this time. The man simply wanted to delay following Jesus. Another comes and wants to follow he goes back and says goodbye to his family. He wants to look back and say goodbye to the old life. If we want to follow Jesus and feel so inclined to, we should jump at the opportunity ASAP. No need to waste time with the trivial things of the world. No sense in looking back at the old life. If we keep looking back, we won't move forward.

April 6: Judges 15-17 and Luke 10: 1-24

Samson decides to return to his wife. When he arrives, he finds out that his father-in-law has given her over to one of his traveling companions. This highly upsets Samson. He takes vengeance by gathering 300 foxes, tying their tails together, fastening torches between their tails, and releasing them to wreak havoc on the grain supply. The fire from the torches consumed the grain, the vineyard, and olive groves. The Philistines learn that Samson had done this, so they tie him up, thinking they will be able to handle him. Samson snaps through the ropes, grabs a

donkey's jawbone and slaughters 1,000 men. Chapter 15 ends with the refrain that Samson judged Israel for another 20 years. However, there is still more to the story.

We read about Samson's drift from The LORD. He goes to Gaza, the Philistine city furthest from his home. This shows just how far he has drifted. We also read about his behavior with the prostitute he finds. After a while, he meets Delilah and falls in love with her. The Philistine men ask that Delilah find out what makes him so strong. Samson gives her false information three times. Every time he tells her how to take away his strength, she performs the action and calls in the Philistines. That makes it even more insane that he tells her the truth about how to take away his strength. Her nagging must have been incessant! She learns the truth that if his hair is cut, he will become weak. After his hair is cut, she calls the Philistines and announces their presence. Samson gets up, thinking he will easily break the ropes again, but finds that he cannot. Verse 20 is one of the scariest Scriptures I have read, "But he did not know that The LORD had left him". Samson's assumption was that God was always with him. He had drifted so far away from fellowship with God, he did not recognize it when His power had left him. I pray that we are in tune with The LORD always.

We then read about Micah. Micah stole some silver from his mother, but when he hears her cursing the thief, he gives it back. The mother is grateful and decides that she is going to consecrate it to The LORD. This is only partly true. Out of the 1,100 pieces of silver, she only dedicated five pounds (about 200 shekels). Further, that silver was used to make an ephod and idols! The people have forgotten about God. They are not following the Levitical law. Instead, they all just do what they want to do.

In the New Testament reading, Jesus gives instructions to the 70 as they go out to tell people about Messiah's arrival. Jesus pronounces judgment on the unrepentant towns. Christ has spent some time in Chorazin and Bethsaida, towns in Galilee, performing miracles. These folks have seen these signs, but they continue in their sin. They do not express belief in Jesus. Instead, they continue their lives uninterrupted. Jesus juxtaposes their behavior with the behavior Tyre and Sidon, two Gentile towns, would have had if they had seen the miracles and wonders.

April 7: Judges 18-19 and Luke 10:25-42

The Danites are on the move now. They are looking for land to take since they have not captured any territory. They send out five spies to explore. The spies stop at Micah's house and hear the Levite priest's accent. They implore him to come along and be their priest. They explain that it would be better for him to be the priest for a whole group instead of just a household. The priest agrees and takes the ephod and household idols with them. Micah confronts the Danites about it, but backs down after he realizes that they are stronger than his people. The Danites defeat the people in Laish and then set up a carved image for themselves. It was there as long as the Tabernacle was in Shiloh. The Danites had created a rival for the true worship of God.

We see that things continue on a downward spiral for the Israelites. A Levite from the hill country of Ephraim gets a concubine from Bethlehem. She deserted him, but after four months, he went to her father's house to retrieve her. After a few days, they start making their way out. They come to Gibeah and no one will take them in. This was counter to the rules of hospitality.

There should not have been a problem finding someone willing to take them in. Finally, a man from Ephraim staying in Gibeah finds the man and his concubine in the square. He invites them back to his home where he will take care of everything for them. Just as in the narrative with Sodom and Gomorrah, the men of the town come to the door demanding the visitor be sent into the square. The host will not send the man out, but offers his daughter, similar to Lot's offer. The men will not listen, so the man sends his concubine out. Unlike the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, there are no angels to rescue them. Instead, the concubine is killed. The man defies the normal respect for a dead body. He cuts her into 12 pieces and sends them to the tribes of Israel. The entire Israelite nation had gone to a terrible place. This man sent them a call to arms to see just how far they had gone.

In the New Testament reading, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan after He is asked what constitutes a neighbor. A man was headed to Jericho when he is robbed and left for dead. A priest comes along, but doesn't want to defile himself by touching a dead body, so he ignores the man. A Levite did the same. A Samaritan, a group the Israelites hated, found him, bandaged and anointed him, put him on his donkey, and took him to an inn where he paid for all of the man's expenses. Who acted as the neighbor to the man? We are called to take care of each other. We help where we can. Who is our neighbor? Anyone we meet is our neighbor.

We also read the story of Jesus's visit to Martha's house. Martha is busy getting things done to serve Jesus and the disciples, but her sister is sitting at Jesus's feet learning from Him. Martha approaches Jesus demanding that He make her sister work. Jesus explains that Mary has chosen what is better.

Service is important, but we must ensure that our service does not interfere with our time with God. It is important for us to get away during the day and spend time praying and reflecting on His word.

April 8: Judges 20-21 and Luke 11:1-28

After the call to arms that the tribes received, they decide to wage war against the Benjaminites. When the armies march against Benjamin, Benjamin has great success at first. In the first encounter it seems like victory is almost guaranteed.

After suffering terrible losses, the Israelite army went to Bethel and asked God if they should continue with their quest. God tells them to go and fight since He will deliver them tomorrow. The Israelites take their battle positions and slaughtered 25,100 men of Benjamin. Even though they had killed so many, there were 600 Benjaminites that escaped to the rock of Rimmon.

The Israelites swore that they would never allow their daughters to marry a Benjaminite. However, when the survivors come back it is discovered that there are not enough wives for the Benjaminites. The Israelites feel bad and devise a plan to make sure the Benjaminites can marry without breaking their vow. They tell the surviving Benjaminites to go and wait for the young women of Shiloh to come perform dances at a festival. When the young women come out to dance, the Benjaminites can come in and take as many as they need. This is ridiculous. They are condoning the kidnapping of these young women, giving permission to kidnap their girls so the

Benjaminites can have wives. How is this any different from them giving their daughters as wives? It is not. They convince themselves that it is okay. Ridiculous.

In the book of Judges, we have read some pretty messed up stuff that the Israelites did to one another. It must be made abundantly clear that when they were doing these things against each other, they were acting in their own interests, they were not following Yahweh and His commands. If they had drawn near to Him and sought Him while they were making decisions, things would have been a lot better for them. The problem is that they did not even see God as king and so they just did whatever they want. The atrocities they commit were not ordained by God. God did not call them to do any of that stuff, they did it on their own. If we want to make sound and right decisions, rather than do what we feel like, we can consult The LORD and get His guidance. If we want to make good choices, we should seek Him first!

In the New Testament reading, Jesus gives the model prayer. He is also accused of driving demons out with the power of Beelzebul. Jesus explains that a house divided against itself will not stand. A demon is not going to drive out a demon.

Jesus also talks about an unclean spirit that leaves a person. When an unclean spirit leaves a person, it roams around for a while. When it returns to the person, he sees it is empty and clean, so the spirit brings back seven other spirits to inhabit it and now the person is worse off than before. In this hypothetical scenario this shows us that the person that was clean did not do anything to fill his heart with The LORD. Instead, it remained open and vacant. When we come to have faith in Christ as Lord and Savior, we should strive to fill ourselves with His word and be filled with His Spirit. In my regular prayer time, I ask that The LORD would fill me to the brim with His Spirit so that there is no room for sin in my life.

April 9: Ruth and Luke 11:29-54

Ruth is a nice escape from what we have read previously in the book of Judges. Ruth, a Moabite that was widowed, decided that rather than stay in Moab, she would travel to Judah. Despite Naomi's efforts to get her to stay back, Ruth refuses.

Ruth goes out to glean the fields. Gleaning was a practice established in the Levitical law. It ensured that there were scraps left behind in the field so that the less fortunate could gather food from it. Ruth goes to Boaz's field and gleans there. She is shown great favor by Boaz because he has heard about her dedication and kindness to Naomi. As a result, he shows kindness in allowing her to drink from the cups that his men have poured and ensures that no one will harm her.

Boaz is a relative of theirs. He is a "family redeemer". Family redeemers were relatives who were obliged to buy back family members from debt or slavery and to redeem their field if they had to sell it. Naomi instructs Ruth on how to see whether Boaz is a willing redeemer or not. He is willing, but there is someone closer than him. Boaz is an upright man and must give the other redeemer a chance to redeem. If the other does not, then Boaz will. The man is willing to take the field, but unwilling to take Ruth as a wife, so Boaz winds up marrying her.

Boaz and Ruth have a son named Jesse. Jesse will father David. David will become a great king in Israel. Jesus Christ, will also trace His lineage to David. It is significant to see just where David traces his ancestry to. He is linked back to Perez. Perez was the child born in Genesis 38 from a dubious relationship between Judah and the foreign woman Tamar.

On the surface, Ruth is a story of a woman who is dedicated to her mother-in-law and marries a family redeemer. However, this narrative is a story of how God is working His plan despite the anarchy that the period of Judges brought about. The people were not seeking Him, but He was still moving forward with His plan of salvation! Thank The LORD Almighty for not turning His back on us, when we turn ours on Him!

In the New Testament reading, Jesus again prophesies about His impending death. This time, He relates the story of Jonah who spent three days in the belly of a large fish. Jesus will spend three days in the grave before He resurrects. Jesus also tells the believers to let their lights shine. If we light a candle, we don't put a bucket over it to hide the light. Likewise, we should let our light shine before all people.

Jesus again rebukes the religious hypocrites. He compares the Pharisees to a dish that is clean on the outside. However, just because it is clean on the outside, does not mean it is clean on the inside. I have seen what this looks like. For the most part, Navy Chiefs never clean the inside of their coffee cups. The cups are seasoned with years and years of layers of coffee. That way if we ever run out of coffee, we can just fill it with hot water and there is still a coffee taste! The cups look cool and clean on the outside, but once you look on the inside it is dark and foreboding. The Pharisees were only concerned about looking pristine and clean on the outside, they were not concerned about the darkness that was inside of them.

April 10: 1 Samuel 1-3 and Luke 12:1-34

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel deal with the time of transition for the Israelites. The period of judges is coming to an end and they will transition to having a king. Unfortunately, there will be periods of good leadership and bad leadership throughout their history.

Eli is priest at the tabernacle when we begin the reading. Eli's sons are wicked men. They defy the Mosaic Law, taking the sacrificial meat raw instead of waiting for the fat to be cooked off. When the people would say the fat had to be cooked off, they would simply respond that the priest would only accept it raw. Further, they were guilty of sexual immorality. So, God pronounces judgment on Eli's family. He will make them weak and ensure that they do not live to a ripe old age.

Meanwhile, Hannah has been upset that she is unable to have children. Her husband tries to console her by asking if he is not better than having ten sons. Of course, the husband was probably hurting too. Children, especially sons, were a mark of wealth back then. Hannah is so desperate to have a son that she promises if The LORD gives her one, she will dedicate him to God's service. God answers her prayer with a yes and she names the boy Samuel. When he is weaned, true to her word, she takes Samuel to the tabernacle to be God's servant.

As Samuel grows a little older, he is lying down in the tabernacle of The LORD when he hears someone calling him. He thinks it must be Eli since prophetic visions and callings had become so rare. After mistaking the voice to be Eli twice, he tells Samuel when he hears it again to respond with “Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening.” Samuel is obedient and God reveals to him that there is judgment headed to Eli and his family.

In the New Testament reading, Jesus continues blasting the religious hypocrites. He also warns the people to not fear the people that can just kill the body. Instead, they should fear the one that can throw people into hell after death. Jesus explains that God knows all of the details of our lives, to the point that He knows the number of hairs on our heads. We cannot hide anything we do from God. He is well aware of what we do in the darkness.

Jesus also tells the people that if they acknowledge Him before men, then He will acknowledge them before God. I read recently that there are some folks that will not confess Jesus as Lord and Savior out of fear. They are worried how their family or friends will react. So they avoid coming to faith because of that fear. If they do come to faith, then some tend to hide it out of the same fear. I am not saying that we should be Bible bashing people, but we should live a life that reflects a walk with Christ.

April 11: 1 Samuel 4-6 and Luke 12: 35-59

Israel goes out to meet the Philistines. They take the ark of the covenant with them. The Philistines see the ark and are overcome with worry. They have heard the stories of God overcoming the Egyptians on Israel’s behalf. It is interesting to note that the Philistines refer to their deliverance by the gods. They think it was the gods that delivered the plagues. Either the Philistines are confused about the One True God that the Israelites follow, or they have seen such pagan practices from the Israelites, the Philistines assume that they are pagans as well.

This time God does not give the Israelites a victory. Instead, many are slaughtered, including Phinehas and Hophni. A messenger delivers the news of Eli’s sons. He also informs Eli that the ark had been captured by the Philistines. At that, Eli falls back, lands hard on the ground, and breaks his neck.

Eli’s daughter in law gives birth to a son. It should have been a happy occasion, but she names the boy Ichabod, meaning “where is the glory?” The glory of God had departed Israel.

The ark is taken to the temple of Dagon. When the people of Ashdod got up to look at the ark the following day, they see the statue of Dagon fallen with its face toward the ark. They set the statue back up and got the same results, only this time the head and hands of the statue broke off when it fell. The Philistines begin suffering from the ark. Many are killed and those that are not suffer from tumors. They decide they need to get rid of it. They bring priests and diviners from among them. They suggest sending it back with five gold tumors and five gold mice. This was not customary in the restitution offering. However, it was common in those days to offer a gold emblematic of whatever was afflicting the person making the offering. The ark makes it to Beth-Shemesh, an outer territory of the Israelites. However, the men of Beth-Shemesh did not know how to properly approach the ark. They open it up and look inside. Many of them died as a

result. They send word to Kiriath-jearim saying, “the ark has been returned, come and get it.” They want the power and the peace, but they do not want the responsibility for it. Can we fall into that trap, wanting God’s power and peace, but not the responsibility of serving Him?

In the Luke reading, Jesus warns the people to be ready for the Master’s return. He also warns that He has not come to unify. Instead, there will be division. Certainly, we would like everyone to unite under the banner of Christ. However, not everyone will. The name of Jesus is anathema to some folks, despite all the good things He taught and practiced (not to mention the whole victory over death thing). If everyone were to come to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, they would be united under His rule. It is not so much that He is creating the division, the people and their response creates the division.

April 12: 1 Samuel 7-9 and Luke 13:1-21

The ark is retrieved by the men of Kirithah- jearim. Twenty years passes. A lot can happen in two decades. The house of Israel begins to seek The LORD, but they are only seeking Him half-heartedly. Samuel explains that they must give up their pagan practices. Their other gods and Ashtoreth poles have got to go. The people are obedient, they repent, and a sacrifice is made.

Samuel gets older and appoints his sons as judges over Israel. Unfortunately, Samuel’s sons did not take after their father. They were dishonorable men, seeking ill-gotten gain, taking bribes, and perverting justice. The people see what these men are doing so they confront Samuel about installing a king. Samuel tries to dissuade them from gaining a king. He explains that the king can do pretty much whatever he wants. If he wants to take someone’s land, then he can do just that. The people will not back down, though. They want a man that will judge over them and go out before them to fight their battles. The irony here is that God had already been doing that for them. They were seeking to put a fallible man in the place of God. Samuel is distraught over this and he does the only logical thing. He takes his concerns to The LORD. God tells him to listen to the people and give them a king.

Saul will be the first king of Israel. He is taller than everyone else in the land and will start off as a capable leader. We see some of his leadership skills when searching for the lost donkeys. One of his traveling companions suggests that they seek the man of God to tell them where the donkeys are. Saul asks what they will bring to the man, knowing that it was customary to present a gift to the seer. When Samuel sees Saul, he knows that he is the one that God has set apart to be king.

In the New Testament reading, Jesus tells the people about their need for repentance. He brings up two examples of tragedies. One was man made and the other was a natural disaster. Some Galileans had been slaughtered and their blood was mixed in with the pagan sacrifice. Some other people were crushed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. The people viewed the folks that fell in these tragedies as cursed because of their sin. Their thought was that these things happened as punishment. Jesus minces no words with them when He explains that the folks still living are no less sinful than the folks that perished. They all need to repent. As we walk this earth, we are going to run into rough times. They will happen. Those tough times are not necessarily because of our sin. Sometimes they just happen.

Jesus then tells the folks to embrace when the tough times hit. He gives the parable of the barren fig tree. The vineyard owner comes to the tree for three years and for three years, it bears no fruit. So, he tells his worker to cut it down. The worker requests that he be able to fertilize it. In the original Hebrew the worker requests to “dung it up.” Sometimes, things are going to get dunged up in our lives. Those can be times of spiritual growth if we let them be. Of course, that is a lot easier said than done!