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LESSONS

Judges

Deterioration and Deliverance



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Judges

Deterioration and Deliverance

The book of Judges recounts the up-and-down experience of the Israelites during the centuries between Joshua and Samuel (about 1400-1050 B.C.). The author of the book is unknown, but the date of writing was probably between the institution of the monarchy under Saul and David's capture of Jerusalem from the Jebusites (Judg. 1:21; 2 Sam. 5:6-9).

The name of the book comes from its title for the leaders after Joshua (Judg. 2:16-19). It appears that their "judging" primarily involved gaining justice for the Israelites by delivering them from oppression (verse 16).

Under Joshua, the Lord defeated powerful forces opposing the Israelites. Following generations had the task of completing the conquest through faith in God's power. But their military momentum ground to a halt and went into reverse in proportion to their disloyalty to Him.

Because the Israelites broke the Lord's covenant by mixing with the inhabitants of the land and worshiping their gods, He could not complete the fulfillment of His promises to them. He allowed the inhabitants of the region to harass and oppress them. This is one way the Lord sometimes punishes His unfaithful people; He withdraws His protection so that their enemies prevail against them. In their misery, the Israelites would return to the Lord, whereupon He would raise up a "judge" to deliver them. When this leader was gone, they would fall into worse apostasy than before. Thus, the period of the "judges" was characterized by downward spiraling cycles of apostasy, repentance, deliverance, and worse apostasy.

While the book of Judges provides many negative examples, there were those, such as Deborah, Barak, and Gideon, who were faithful to the Lord and stood out like bright lights amid the prevailing darkness. Risking everything, from a human point of view, they placed their lives in the hands of God and were victorious against seemingly impossible odds. These courageous individuals, "who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises" (Heb. 11:33, NRSV), teach us that there are no limits to what we can accomplish for God and for His people when we trust in Him and allow His Spirit to move us (Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29).

The most positive message of the book of Judges is the persistence and patience of God's love. His people abandoned Him time after time, but He was always ready to receive them back. The struggles of God's people at that time are typical of their struggles in every era and especially in our era, immediately prior to the final overthrow of the united forces of evil.

Unfinished Business



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judg. 1:1–2:5.

MEMORY TEXT: “I said, I will never break my covenant with you” (Judges 2:1).

KEY THOUGHT: Since God was always faithful in keeping His covenant promises to His people, the Israelites continued to be successful in occupying the Promised Land as long as they relied upon Him. But as they neglected their covenant with God and disobeyed Him, they failed to make headway against their enemies.

DISCONNECTED AND DISSONANT. A teenage student of classical piano discovered what it means to be disconnected and dissonant. He learned the first movement of Schumann's Piano Concerto in A Minor. His first performance of the work was memorable—too memorable for comfort. As always, he prayed before the recital that God would be with him. And He was. It was going well. Enjoying success, he forgot about God and began thinking about how good a pianist he was. Mistakes began happening, which led to insecurity, nervousness, and finally, sheer panic. The final arpeggio consisted of wrong notes all the way up the piano! Instead of bowing, he wanted to crawl underneath the Steinway grand piano and hide behind the pedals.

What went wrong? He had disconnected from God, forgetting that success depended upon Him. For the ancient Israelites, it was far more serious. They knew that God had covenanted to give them victory if they trusted in Him. The scale was much larger, and the consequences were tragic.

SUCCESS THROUGH FOLLOWING GOD (Judg. 1:1-10, 16-18, 22-26).

The book of Judges begins with the statement that after the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord who would lead them into battle against the Canaanites (Judg. 1:1). Joshua was their leader during his lifetime, just as Moses had led them earlier. But no single individual was named as Joshua's successor.

Whom did God intend to be Israel's leader after Joshua? Judg. 8:23.

God had promised that the Israelites would occupy the Promised Land completely (Exod. 23:31; Joshua 1:2-4). Now they took Him at His word and asked Him for direction, just as they previously would have asked direction from Joshua, who also received his orders from God (verses 1-9). The Lord had been Israel's real leader all along, but now the tribal leaders were directly under His command.

It appears that the Israelites inquired of the Lord at this time by the Urim and Thummim, precious stones in the breastplate worn by the high priest. (See Exod. 28:30; Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 28:6; *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 351.) At the end of the book of Judges, the Israelites again inquired of the Lord as to who should lead them into battle and, again, the answer was, "Judah" (Judg. 20:18; compare 1:2). Judges 20:27, 28 makes it clear that inquiry from God at this time was connected with the role of the high priest, who wore the Urim and Thummim (Exod. 28:30). Even if the Urim and Thummim could only reply "yes" or "no," answers such as "Judah" could be arrived at by a process of elimination. (Compare Joshua 7:14-18; 1 Sam. 10:20-22.)

Why was additional conquest necessary after the death of Joshua? Judg. 1:21, 27-33. Had the Israelites already conquered the land? Joshua 21:43-45.

God had fulfilled His promise of giving the land to the Israelites. Under Joshua, they had broken Canaanite opposition to their permanent residence in Palestine. However, the tribes had not yet fully occupied all the areas allotted to them. They needed to trust in the leadership of their divine King and move forward courageously. When they did so, their efforts were rewarded with success.

Are we following God's leading in our lives? What are the means by which we know His will?

PROMISES KEPT (Judg. 1:11-15, 20).

Caleb motivated Israelite soldiers by offering Achsah, his daughter, in marriage to the man who would conquer Kiriath-sepher. Othniel, a relative of Caleb, took the town, so Caleb gave her to him and granted her request for springs of water in addition to land in the Negeb, the arid southern part of Palestine.

In Judges 1, which primarily describes conquests by tribes, why should private matters of an individual family (verses 12-15) be significant? In other words, why is this story about Caleb and his family here in the book of Judges?

Which of the following answers are the most likely?

1. The story is here because it explains the conquest and distribution of part of the Promised Land.
2. Caleb is significant because he had been one of the 12 spies sent by Moses to spy out the land of Canaan (Num. 13:6). Only he and Joshua had faithfully brought back a good report of the land and encouraged the people to take it (Num. 13:30-33; 14:6-9). The story in Judges 1 shows that after the death of Joshua, Caleb was still working to take over the land.
3. Othniel is important because he later became the first judge to deliver Israel (Judg. 3:7-11).
4. The story illustrates the theme of faithfulness in keeping promises. Just as God kept His covenant promise by giving victory to His people when they kept their promise to serve and follow Him, Caleb kept a promise to his fellow Israelites by giving Achsah to Othniel. The theme of keeping promises is further illustrated in Judges 1:20, which states that Caleb received Hebron as Moses had said (Deut. 1:36; compare Joshua 14:9-14). Judges 1:24, 25 describes how the Israelites kept their promise to deal kindly with a man who showed them the way into the city of Luz.
5. The story describes good and honorable treatment of a woman, in contrast to later episodes in the book of Judges. (Compare Judg. 11:34-40; 16:1, 4; 19:22-30.)
6. Another answer:
7. All the above.

Do we keep our promises? (See Num. 30:2; Eccl. 5:4, 5.) Do we trust others to keep theirs? Do we pray as though we believe that God is willing to give good things to us, His children (Luke 11:9-13), just as Caleb was willing to give good gifts to his daughter?

FAILURE TO KEEP PROMISES (Judg. 1:19, 21, 27-36).

Judges 1:19, summarizing the conquests of the tribe of Judah, introduces a disturbing note: Although God was with Judah so that it succeeded in taking possession of the hill country, it failed to take the plain, where chariots of iron gave the Canaanites an advantage. Verse 21 gives a similar notice regarding the tribe of Benjamin: It could not drive out the Jebusites. While the northern tribes had some success (verses 22-26), they had a lot of failure, too (verses 27-36). The tribe of Dan had a particularly rough time (verse 34), to the extent that it later had to relocate (Joshua 19:40-48; Judges 18).

Why did the Israelites fail to drive out all the Canaanites? Judg. 1:19, 21, 27-36. What went wrong?

Judges 1:19 refers to chariots of iron as the reason for Judah's failure. But this was only a superficial reason. Deborah and Barak later led the Israelites to victory against an army that had 900 chariots of iron (Judges 4), showing that when the Israelites offered themselves willingly and wholeheartedly to God's service (Judg. 5:2, 9), nothing could stand in their way! The deeper reason for Judah's failure must have been a limited supply of commitment: They trusted God to give them victory as long as the enemy was not too intimidating and as long as the task did not require too much sacrifice.

Caleb was exceptional, as he had been years before when he spied out the land (Numbers 13, 14). Because he wholly followed the Lord (Num. 32:12), not even the sons of Anak, who were giants, could intimidate him. He asked for the territory of the giants so that he could drive them out of Hebron (Joshua 14:11-15; Judg. 1:20), thereby showing that the 10 unfaithful spies had been wrong in regarding them as an insurmountable obstacle.

The northern tribes failed not only because of the power of the Canaanites; in some cases, the Israelites were strong enough to drive them out but chose to benefit from their forced labor instead (Judg. 1:28, 30, 33, 35). These Israelites lacked sufficient commitment to cooperate with God so that His promise regarding the land could be fulfilled; they actually disregarded His promise and allowed Canaanites to dwell among them.

In our daily, individual battles with evil, are there "chariots of iron" or "giants" that intimidate us? How can we increase our commitment and courage? Mark 9:14-29.

PROMISES BROKEN (Judg. 2:1, 2).

The Israelites failed to occupy all the Promised Land. They lacked commitment and attempted to profit from Canaanite labor. In Judges 2:1, 2, the Angel of the Lord states a more serious reason. Although God had kept His covenant promise to give the land to the Israelites, they had not kept their part, which involved their making no covenant with the Canaanites and their breaking down the heathen altars. (See Exod. 23:23-33.) The Israelites had been commissioned to drive out and destroy all the Canaanites, without pity (Deut. 7:16).

Why did God call for such harsh treatment of the Canaanites? See, for example, Gen. 15:16; Exod. 23:33.

Which of the following best answers the above question?

1. The Israelites could not have covenants with God and with the Canaanites at the same time. Tolerance of Canaanite worship of other gods defiled God's sanctuary and profaned His holy name (Lev. 20:3). This was disloyalty to God and a breach of His covenant.
2. The Canaanites had progressively rejected God, who had been revealed to them by His created works, as well as by people such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Melchizedek. Romans 1:20-32 describes what happens to people when they turn away from God. This is an apt description of what we know about the Canaanites from the Bible (see, for example, Leviticus 18, 20) and from archaeological evidence. They emulated the immorality of their gods. They worshiped the creature rather than the Creator, engaged in sexual immorality, including homosexuality, and practiced all kinds of other sin. By the time of Joshua, the iniquity of the Canaanites was complete. (See Gen. 15:16.) Their probation had closed, and they deserved to die (see Rom. 1:32), just as surely as did the inhabitants of Sodom or the people who lived at the time of the Flood. God's sentence on the Canaanites was just. (See Judg. 1:7.)
3. The Israelites could not handle having idolatry in their midst, because they were likely to be attracted to it and to serve other gods themselves (Exod. 23:33).
4. Another answer:
5. All the above.

Are the covenants/partnerships that we make acceptable to God? (See Amos 3:3.) What is their influence upon us? (See 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1.)

LOST OPPORTUNITY (Judg. 2:3-5).

Having indicted the Israelites for failing to keep God's covenant, the Angel of the Lord pronounced their punishment: God would not fulfill His promise to drive the Canaanites out before them. (Compare Exod. 23:28.) The Canaanites would remain to cause them trouble, and the gods of the Canaanites would be snares to them. (See Num. 33:55.)

Since God did not want the Israelites to fall into false worship, why did He punish them by allowing the gods of the Canaanites to be snares to them? Judg. 2:3.

Having the Canaanites and their gods in their midst was the punishment for the Israelites, but it was also the natural result of the course that they had chosen. God was simply saying: "You refused to listen to Me when I warned you about the dangers of allowing the Canaanites to stay, so now you're going to have to learn the hard way."

In life, time is of the essence. An opportunity does not last forever, whether it is a clearance sale on clothes, an unusually low home mortgage rate, a friendship that could blossom into a marriage, a call to accept Christ, or something else. When the Israelites under Joshua entered the land and broke the main Canaanite resistance, the remaining pockets of Canaanite resistance were at their weakest. If they had kept up their momentum, they could have finished the job. But the Israelites lost their opportunity because, as time went by, they let their power deteriorate as the Canaanites recovered theirs.

Why should we now take full advantage of the opportunities God is giving us? Eccl. 9:10; Matt. 24:14.

God has called us, not to conquer human beings, but through fellowship with Christ to overcome the power of Satan in our lives (Eph. 6:10-18). We are to tell the world the good news of salvation through Jesus (Matt. 28:18-20). Time is of the essence. Today's decisions influence later decisions. Victories won make future victories easier. Cherished sins grow stronger. Conversations in which Christ can be introduced come to an end. Minds and countries open and close to the gospel message.

What kind of personal and corporate trouble do we avoid by following God's instructions?

FURTHER STUDY: The early failure of the Israelites resulted in long-lasting difficulties: Ps. 106:34-43.

Read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, "The Earlier Judges," pp. 543, 544.

"It is not safe for Christians to choose the society of those who have no connection with God, and whose course is displeasing to Him. Yet how many professed Christians venture upon the forbidden ground. Many invite to their homes relatives who are vain, trifling, and ungodly; and often the example and influence of these irreligious visitors produce lasting impressions upon the minds of the children in the household. The influence thus exerted is similar to that which resulted from the association of the Hebrews with the godless Canaanites.

"God holds the parents accountable for disregarding His command to separate themselves and their families from these unholy influences. While we must live in the world, we are not to be of the world. We are forbidden to conform to its practices and fashions. The friendship of the ungodly is more dangerous than their enmity."—Ellen G. White *Comments*, *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 1001.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How can we shield ourselves and our children from evil influences and at the same time be a good influence on others? If we are to spread the gospel to those who are perishing, what kind of contact should we have with them?
2. Both the period of the judges and the period of the kings began with high hopes and covenant promises, but both deteriorated into faithlessness and idolatry. Can you find other parallels between the two periods? Why did history repeat itself in this way?
3. Have some characteristics of the period of the judges been repeated in the Christian Era? Are some of these still present in our time and in our lives? (See Revelation 2, 3.) If so, what should we do?

SUMMARY: The success and well-being of the Israelites depended upon the health of their covenant relationship with God. He was eager to bless them in every way, but they neglected to cooperate with Him and chose to disregard His promises. He offers a covenant to us, as well, and our ultimate success depends upon the way we treat it.

The Spirit Tree, Part 1

James H. Zachary

One day, while working in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Atres Sreja purchased a book from a literature evangelist. Through that book he found Jesus as his Saviour.

As he studied his Bible, he was challenged by Ezekiel 3:18: "When I say to a wicked man, You will surely die, and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood" (NIV). Sreja thought of the people in his village. He realized that he must warn them of Jesus' soon return or be responsible for their blood. He resigned his position at the Addis Ababa Adventist hospital, sold his bed, and set out for his home village.

Members of his tribe, the Guragie people, practiced a fanatical mixture of Christianity and spiritualism. They opposed Atres' efforts to witness for the Lord. They even cast him into prison.

One day as he was leaving his mother's home, where he was staying, a voice commanded him, "Burn it." He was puzzled. Burn what? That evening as he entered his mother's yard, he saw the spirit tree. "That's it! I must burn that tree."

He set the tree on fire. A draft pulled the flames through the hollow trunk, and in moments the tree was a flaming torch. Villagers saw the flames and rushed to see what was happening. When they realized their sacred tree was burning, they knew Atres had burned it. The angry mob tried to set fire to his home and kill Atres. But his brother stepped forward, saying, "Leave him alone. If he has done wrong, the spirits will take his life."

The mob pulled back and watched as the fire they had set went out. Sparks from the burning spirit tree that fell on the grass roof of his house also smoldered and went out. Even the dry grass around the base of the tree did not burn. The God of Atres was stronger than the spirit gods! The crowd stayed by the remains of their destroyed spirit tree all night. But they knew that Atres' God was the true God.

(Continued)



Atres Sreja is a lay pastor in Ethiopia. James H. Zachary recently retired from the Ministerial Association of the General Conference.

Ups and Downs



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judg. 2:6-3:6.

MEMORY TEXT: "Nevertheless the Lord raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them. And yet they would not hearken unto their judges" (Judges 2:16, 17).

KEY THOUGHT: During the period of the "judges," God's people fell into a repeated pattern of apostasy, suffering at the hands of their enemies, deliverance through a "judge" sent by their merciful Lord, followed by worse apostasy.

ROLLER-COASTER RELIGION. (Some countries do not have roller coasters. A roller coaster is a miniature train with open cars. It runs up and down huge man-made hills on rail tracks. In some countries they are common in many recreation parks.)

The beginning of a roller-coaster ride isn't bad. There's a gentle *clickety-clack* as the mechanism pulls you smoothly up. The view becomes better. Soon you can see the whole park, and then the whole surrounding countryside. You can see just about everything—everything, that is, except the track. Where's the track? Oh no! There it is . . . wayyyyy down there! Before you can decide whether to have a cardiac arrest or to sink into a deep coma, down you go. You won't remember any thoughts after that, because there aren't any; just a long, horrifying feeling as you go down, up, down, up, down.

"Roller-coaster religion" has a lot of ups and downs, but it always ends on the down side. A roller-coaster ride takes only a few minutes, but "roller-coaster religion" lasts a lot longer. The Israelites had a chronic case of it for hundreds of years. (See Judg. 2:6-23.)

THE FAITHFUL GENERATION (Judg. 2:6-9).

The book of Judges begins with the words "after the death of Joshua" (Judg. 1:1), but Judges 2:6 goes back to the time when Joshua was still alive.

Why isn't the information given in Judges 2:6-9 placed at the beginning of the book, according to the order in which events happened?

Since the book of Judges is about the time after Joshua's death, it is appropriate for it to begin where it does. The account of military events in chapter 1 leads up to the pronouncement of the Angel of the Lord in Judges 2:1-5, which may be regarded as the overall theme of the book: By breaking God's covenant, the Israelites forfeited complete fulfillment of the covenant promises. They were in the Land of Promise but often ignored God's covenant terms. Judges 2:6-3:6 provides additional background to the pronouncement of the Angel of the Lord and shows how these words were subsequently fulfilled. Before describing the faithlessness of the generations after Joshua (2:10-3:6), it is fitting to mention Joshua and the faithful who entered Canaan with him (2:6-9).

Why was the generation of Joshua faithful? Judg. 2:7; compare verse 10.

Those who entered Canaan with Joshua saw special miracles wrought by the Lord, such as the parting of the Jordan River (Joshua 3:14-17) and the fall of Jericho's walls (Joshua 6:20). But of those who entered the Promised Land, only Caleb and Joshua belonged to the older generation who had witnessed the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 7-12), the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14), and the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19, 20). Most of the older generation had died in the wilderness (Num. 26:63-65). Those who entered the land were faithful, not simply because they saw what the Lord did for them, but because they chose to trust Him wholly. (See Joshua 14:8, 9, 14.)

The same motivation applies to us. We follow Jesus because of what He did for us (Phil. 2:5-8). If we, like Israel, forget the provisions of the new covenant and the gift of victory in Jesus, God cannot provide us with the complete blessing He wishes to give.

Have you seen God work for you? How did this experience affect you?

THE UNFAITHFUL GENERATION (Judg. 2:10-13).

In Judges 2:10, the words "another generation grew up after them, who did not know the Lord" (NRSV) remind us of Exodus 1:8: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (NRSV). God had delivered the Israelites from Pharaoh, and now they had become like their old master! Just as Pharaoh recognized no need for loyalty to the family of Joseph, so the Israelites after Joshua saw no need for loyalty to God. We can hear them saying with Pharaoh: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him?" (Exod. 5:2; NIV). Ignorance is often the basis for foolish behavior.

Why didn't the new generation of Israelites, who were enjoying the Promised Land, recognize God, who had given them the land? Deut. 6:10-12.

When the Israelites were comfortable in the land and occupied with their material well-being, they took their blessings for granted and forgot about God, turning to the gods of the Canaanites (Judg. 2:11-13), the snare of which the Angel of the Lord had spoken (verse 3).

Forgetting has various meanings and consequences, depending upon the situation. It may be a small matter, involving minor inconvenience, or it may be disastrous. Where relationships are concerned, forgetting can be a symptom of lack of concern for someone. That is what a wife fears when her husband forgets their anniversary. Is he beginning to forget about her?

Forgetting God shows lack of concern for Him, in spite of the fact that He is the Creator and Redeemer. There is evidence of His power and love all around (Ps. 19:1-10), so there is no excuse for forgetting Him (Rom. 1:20). Forgetting God is not simply an involuntary memory lapse of no consequence; it shows a break in the divine-human covenant relationship. In fact, God commands His people to remember Him on His Sabbath day once a week (Exod. 20:8-11), so forgetting Him is in itself an act of disobedience!

What provisions had God made to prevent the people from forgetting about Him? Deut. 4:9, 10; 6:4-9. Why did God's plan to carry faithfulness from one generation to another fail?

What are we doing to educate our children to follow God? What are we teaching them by our example? (See Deut. 6:4-9; Joshua 4:20-24.) What negative influences must we counteract to ensure that they will constantly be encouraged to serve the Lord?

FROM DISOBEDIENCE TO DISTRESS (Judg. 2:14, 15).

When the Israelites forsook the Lord and worshiped the gods of the Canaanites, they not only could not drive the Canaanites out of the land; the balance of power shifted in favor of the Canaanites and other enemies, who plundered and oppressed the Israelites.

At the beginning of the book of Judges, the Lord gave the enemies of the Israelites into their hands (Judg. 1:4). Now "the hand of the Lord was against them to bring misfortune, as the Lord had warned them and sworn to them" (Judg. 2:15, NRSV). Before the Israelites had entered the land, God had promised blessings for obedience and warned of punishments for disobedience. Among the blessings was military success (Lev. 26:6-8), and among the punishments was the withdrawal of God's support of their attempts to subdue their enemies (Lev. 26:16, 17).

Why were the Israelites miserable when they disobeyed God? If they didn't want to serve Him, why didn't He respect their choice and just leave them alone? Heb. 12:5-11.

Which of the following provides the best answer?

1. When the Israelites sinned, God was completely just in punishing them.
2. God wanted them to see the connection between blessing and obedience.
3. God's punishment involved withholding His protection, which was conditional upon obedience. Without Him, the Israelites suffered the consequences of their choices.
4. The Israelites belonged to God in a special way because of His covenant with them at Sinai (Exod. 24:3-8) and His earlier covenant with their ancestor, Abraham (Genesis 15, 17). His discipline demonstrated that He loved them as His children (Heb. 12:5-11).
5. God did not immediately take "no" for an answer, because He knew that they did not understand the full implications of what they were doing. He respected their freedom of choice but gave them an opportunity to taste the consequences of their decisions so they could choose more wisely in the future.
6. Another answer:
7. All the above.

How do you react to what you think might be discipline from God? Do you accept it as given in love for your own good, or do you become angry with God?

NOT LEARNING FROM MISTAKES (Judg. 2:16-19).

Why did the Lord raise up judges to save the Israelites from their distress (Judg. 2:16)? Judg. 2:18; 3:9, 15.

Discipline does not go on forever, or it becomes destruction. Discipline is not merely punishment; discipline is designed to redeem and transform. God wanted to rehabilitate His people, not to destroy them. So when they realized the folly of what they had done, He sent deliverers. But their repentance did not last. Like the proverbial dog (Prov. 26:11), they repeated their foolishness by turning to other gods (Judg. 2:17, 19).

Before the Israelites entered the land, God promised that while they followed Him, they would be upwardly mobile—as we may be if we allow Christ to rule in our hearts (2 Cor. 3:18). They would excel and be the head rather than the tail (Deut. 28:13, 14). This implies that disobedience would result in going down and being the tail. The Israelites went up and down through cycle after cycle of faithfulness and disobedience, with each period of disobedience taking them lower than the preceding one (Judg. 2:19). This was “roller-coaster religion.”

Why didn't the Israelites learn from their mistakes? Judg. 2:19. How could the downward trend have been stopped? Jude 24.

When Peter was walking on water, he became distracted by his surroundings and lost his focus upon Christ. Beginning to sink, “he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Jesus immediately reached out His hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ ” (Matt. 14:30, 31, NRSV). Peter was aware when he began to sink. Maintaining a connection with upward power is the key to preventing a spiritual downturn. Jesus made it clear to Peter that faith in Him was that connection (Matt. 14:31).

God lovingly picks us up and forgives us when we fall (Micah 7:8, 19; 1 John 1:9), but His ideal for us is to prevent us from falling (Jude 24; compare 1 John 2:1). If we do begin to go down, the sooner we are aware of our condition, the better. Once downward momentum develops, it is hard to stop it.

Are you having an up-and-down religious experience in your life? What causes you to slip? (See 2 Cor. 13:5.) What can you do to maintain a constant pattern of spiritual growth? What is the relationship between your efforts and Christ's power in the process of overcoming?

FAILING GOD'S TEST (Judg. 2:20–3:6).

As announced by the Angel of the Lord, because of the disobedience of the Israelites, God did not give them the ability to drive out the Canaanites who were left (Judg. 2:3).

Why hadn't God given the faithful Israelites under Joshua the ability to drive out all the Canaanites at once? Exod. 23:29, 30.

The remaining Canaanites became a means by which God could test the faithfulness of the Israelites (Judg. 2:22; 3:4). Total dependence upon the Lord in conflict with the wicked Canaanites was an important part of the test (Judg. 3:1, 2). Would the Israelites trust in God to overcome their enemies, or would they seek to avoid conflict by making covenants with them?

The Israelites failed the test (Judg. 3:5, 6). They intermarried with the Canaanites, against God's specific command (Deut. 7:3), and worshiped their gods. Thus, the Israelites became like the evil people whom they were supposed to dispossess and like the pharaoh who had not recognized the Lord (Exod. 5:1, 2). Later, the degradation of some Israelites reached the point at which they became like the people of Sodom (Judg. 19:22-25; compare Gen. 19:4-11), whom God destroyed by fire (Gen. 19:24, 25).

Why had God forbidden intermarriage with the Canaanites? Exod. 34:15, 16. How does this apply to us? See 2 Cor. 6:14-18.

Jesus said: "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (Matt. 5:13, NIV). Salt is valuable for its flavor enhancement and as a preservative. When it comes in contact with food, it is a positive influence because it improves the flavor of that with which it is mixed. If it loses that characteristic, it is worthless. Just so, God's people make a contribution when they are spiritually distinct and influential—in the world but not of the world (John 15:19). When they assimilate worldly ways and attitudes, they have nothing to offer.

How can we maintain our distinctness and influence as Christians, rather than being absorbed into the environment of unbelievers? Should we withdraw from the company of unbelievers? How can we be part of our society, yet spiritually apart?

FURTHER STUDY: To illustrate the lesson, study in Scripture the up-and-down experience of the following people: Solomon, Peter, Judas, Mary Magdalene.

On the beginning of the period of the judges, read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, "The Earlier Judges" (chapter 53), p. 545. On depending upon Christ, read Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, "A Night on the Lake," pp. 381, 382.

"At the present day, as in ancient times, the people of God plead their own ease or convenience as an excuse for neglecting divine service. They will devise means to preserve the Christian name without making any sacrifice of time or means. God requires his people to maintain his worship. And those who are burdened with care and responsibility, should be the last to excuse themselves from religious privileges. They need wisdom from above. They need to be constantly reaching upward to lay hold on the divine arm, lest they stumble and fall. They can walk safely, only as they fear God, and obey his voice."
—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, July 28, 1881.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Review Judges 1:19–3:6, and list as many explanations as you can for the failure of the Israelites. Then answer the following questions: Are there connections between these explanations? Which appear to be the most important? Which are surface factors, and which are underlying causes? How could each of these factors have been prevented?
2. Review your own life, and list reasons for your successes and your failures. Then answer the four questions given above under 1. With regard to the last question, consider especially the role of your daily devotional life. How could your personal Bible study and prayer be a more influential part of your life?
3. How can we tactfully help others in our religious communities to progress upward spiritually?

SUMMARY: The Israelites had an up-and-down experience because they failed to maintain a steady relationship with God, to learn from their mistakes, and to learn from God's leading in the past. In spite of their failures, God mercifully delivered them from the distresses that they had brought upon themselves. We can learn from their story and have a steady experience by maintaining our faith connection with Christ each day.



The Spirit Tree, Part 2

James H. Zachary

Atres was not welcomed home to his village in Ethiopia when he returned to preach the gospel. But after the miracle at the burning spirit tree, people in his village knew Atres' God was more powerful than their own. He began preaching with new courage. His mother was his first convert, and soon his brothers followed.

Although Atres has only a sixth-grade education, the Holy Spirit has used his willingness to witness among his people of the soon-coming Jesus. Recently a large baptism was celebrated among the Guragie tribe. Most of the baptismal candidates are Atres' converts. They lovingly call him Pastor Large.

Today Atres serves as an ordained pastor. God continues to do great things through him. Pastor Large has planted 19 churches and companies, and built three elementary schools and a clinic. Currently he is working on developing a secondary school to serve the needs of 24 villages of his tribe.

God is blessing Pastor Large, and he is respected for his work, even by Christians of other faiths. Because of his outstanding community leadership he was asked to chair the Catholic Relief Agency one year. Working with that program, he supervises the feeding of 3,000 malnourished children. He has built roads for his people and has improved many aspects of the community life. The Ethiopian government regularly takes foreign guests to see his development projects.

During recent evangelistic meetings held in Addis Ababa, the first public evangelistic meetings ever held in Ethiopia, Pastor Large, with four associate pastors and a team of lay persons, baptized 239 new believers. Hundreds more are in the follow-up baptismal classes.



Atres Sreja, known affectionately as Pastor Large, lives in Ethiopia, a country that has not been open to public evangelism until recently. Pray for him and all Adventist believers there as they witness of Christ.

James H. Zachary recently retired from the Ministerial Association of the General Conference.

For Current Newsbreak, Call 1-800-648-5824.

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Deliverers



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judg. 3:7-31; 10:1-5; 12:8-15.

MEMORY TEXT: "And when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer to the children of Israel. . . . And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him" (Judges 3:9, 10).

KEY THOUGHT: The "judges" were deliverers, impelled and empowered by the Spirit of God. These individuals gained justice for the Israelites by defeating their enemies, who were oppressing them.

HELP FOR THE HELPLESS: Little Johnny runs to his mother, complaining that big Bobby is picking on him. Mother investigates and discovers that the accusation is true. She sends Bobby to his room for a while to help him remember how to treat Johnny in the future.

A woman is harassed by an employer, who ignores her pleas to leave her alone. In desperation, she seeks and obtains a legal injunction to protect her.

A small country, attacked by a larger one, requests protection from United Nations peacekeeping forces. The request is granted, and the aggression is repelled.

In each of these cases, the stronger oppresses the weaker until the latter obtains help from a higher power. Such a power acts according to standards of fairness, which can be called "law," and enforces these standards.

When the Israelites disobeyed God, He allowed them to be oppressed by their enemies. But when they repented and cried to Him for help, He delivered them from oppression and gave them justice.

OTHNIEL (Judg. 3:7-11).

In summarizing the history of God's dealings with the Israelites after the death of Joshua, Judges 2:14 speaks of the Lord's giving them over to plunderers when they turned from Him. The first of these oppressors mentioned in the book of Judges is Cushan-rishathaim, king of Aram of the Two Rivers (Judg. 3:8), the land to the northeast of Palestine, which we call Mesopotamia (from the Greek meaning "between rivers," namely, the Tigris and the Euphrates).

The name of this king as it is given in the Hebrew text means "Cushan of two wickednesses." The latter part of the name, which seems to play on the fact that the king was from Aram of the Two Rivers, "was probably added by the Israelites to show their aversion for him."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 324.

The Bible does not say whether Cushan-rishathaim was allied with the Canaanites or whether he oppressed them, as well as the Israelites. The important thing is that the Lord "sold" the Israelites into his power because they turned to other gods (Judg. 3:7, 8).

What does Judges 3:8 mean by saying that the Lord "sold" the Israelites? Compare Judg. 2:14; Deut. 32:30.

God had ransomed, or redeemed, the Israelites from slavery to Pharaoh (Deut. 7:8; compare Micah 6:4). They no longer belonged to Pharaoh but to Him. But when they ungratefully rejected the Lord, He temporarily allowed them to be oppressed by another cruel master.

After eight years of oppression, the Israelites finally got around to turning in the right direction for help (Judg. 3:7, 9). When they returned to the Lord, He delivered them under the leadership of the first of the "judges": "Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother" (verse 9).

Depending upon whether the words "Caleb's younger brother" describe Othniel or Kenaz, Othniel was either Caleb's younger half brother (or full brother if Jephunneh, the father of Caleb, is another name for Kenaz; compare Num. 13:6; 14:6, 30) or Caleb's nephew. In any case, Othniel was also related to Caleb by marriage, having won his daughter by taking Kiriath-sepher (Judg. 1:12, 13). It is significant that Othniel was closely related to Caleb. Like Caleb, he was a courageous hero who won victories for the Israelites because he wholeheartedly followed the Lord.

Have you personally experienced deliverance by God from another master? (See John 12:31; 1 Cor. 7:23; Titus 3:3-7.)

JUDGES MEANS “DELIVERERS” (Judg. 3:9).

When we think of a “judge,” we think of a person who sits in a courthouse and makes decisions on legal cases. Closest to this idea in the book of Judges is Deborah, a prophetess (Judg. 4:4, 5).

Aside from Deborah, the “judges” in the book of Judges may have engaged in some judicial activity, but they were primarily known as military leaders who delivered the Israelites from their enemies (Judg. 2:16). Thus, Judges 3:9, 10 refers to Othniel as “a deliverer [saviour] to the children of Israel, who delivered [saved] them.” In these verses, *judge* means “deliverer.”

In the book of Judges, why are deliverers referred to as “judges”? Ps. 82:3.

Which of the following best answers the above question?

1. The Hebrew word that is translated “judge” has a broader meaning than the English word. It can refer to a deliverer, as well as to a person who decides legal cases.
2. “Judging,” that is, “making decisions,” was an important function of a political organizer such as a king (1 Kings 3:9; compare 2 Sam. 15:2-4). Thus, before the Israelites had kings (Judg. 17:6), they referred to their organizers and decision makers as “judges.” Understood in this way, Judges 3:10 can mean: The Spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel, so that he assumed leadership of Israel as its organizer, following which he went to war and defeated the enemy.
3. A “judge” in a court of law has the power to make a decision that vindicates an oppressed person, thereby freeing him or her from an oppressor (Ps. 82:3; Prov. 29:14). Likewise, when the Israelites returned to God, the protection of His covenant then went into effect again. Their enemies were no longer instruments of God’s justice but, rather, unjust oppressors. Then “judges” acted for God in carrying out His sentences of judgment (compare Deut. 17:11) upon the enemies of the Israelites, freeing His people from oppression.
4. Another answer:
5. All the above.

What are the advantages of having God as your judge? Ps. 7:8; 26:1; Dan. 7:22.

IMPELLED BY THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD (Judg. 3:10).

Othniel did not appoint himself as Israel's judge-deliverer; the Lord raised him up (Judg. 3:9). "The spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel" (verse 10, NRSV). Likewise, the other "judges" were raised up by the Lord (Judg. 2:16; compare 3:15). In the cases of several of these people, the book of Judges states explicitly that the Spirit of the Lord played a major role in raising them up for special work. The Spirit of the Lord "took possession of Gideon" (Judg. 6:34, NRSV), "came upon Jephthah" (Judg. 11:29, NRSV), "began to stir" Samson (Judg. 13:25, NRSV), and "rushed on" Samson (Judg. 14:6, 19; 15:14, NRSV). These expressions give the impression that in various ways God's Spirit took control of certain individuals at crucial times, motivating and empowering them to do things that they otherwise would not or could not do.

What occurred in other instances when the Spirit of the Lord came upon believers? See 1 Sam. 11:6; 16:13; Acts 2:1-4.

The Spirit of the Lord (Holy Spirit) came upon people earlier, during the wilderness wandering of the Israelites (Num. 11:25-29), and later, in the time of the first kings of Israel (see the verses in 1 Samuel given above). In the book of Judges, activity motivated by the Holy Spirit's control was primarily military in nature. (Compare 1 Sam. 11:6-11.)

It is clear why God's Spirit would control a person in a military situation: to deliver God's people. Why was the Spirit poured upon people in other situations? Num. 11:25-29; Acts 2:1-4.

The Holy Spirit inspires and empowers special communication between God and human beings. The fact that there is a supernatural element involved means that people are likely to pay attention and gain the benefit of God's communication. Because such manifestations can be so influential, it is vital to test them "to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1, NRSV).

Are you willing for God's Spirit to control you? (See Joel 2:28, 29.) To which actions of the Spirit should we continually yield control? Gal. 5:22-25; John 16:13.

RETRIBUTION FOR AFFLICTING GOD'S PEOPLE (Judg. 3:12-30).

Again, the Israelites turned from the Lord, who this time gave them into the power of Eglon, king of Moab, who defeated Israel with the help of the Ammonites and the Amalekites (Judg. 3:12, 13). After 18 years of serving Eglon, the Israelites concluded that they would rather serve the Lord, so they cried to Him, and He raised up Ehud to deliver them (verses 14, 15).

Whereas Othniel had been from Judah, the largest tribe, Ehud's leadership ability was handicapped by the fact that he was from Benjamin, the smallest tribe. Moreover, his right hand was "restricted" (verse 15, Hebrew), meaning that he was left-handed.

Why does God at times choose as leaders people who seem unfitted? 1 Sam. 16:7; 1 Cor. 1:25-31.

Ehud's physical difference was an important factor in his success! In order to deliver Israel, he first needed to assassinate the leader of the oppressing power, Eglon. To kill Eglon, he had to be within striking distance with a weapon. He could come close by taking him tribute on behalf of the Israelites and then saying that he had a secret message from God (Judg. 3:15, 17-20). But how could he pass the Moabite guards with a weapon? Because he was left-handed, Ehud carried a concealed dagger on the right side (verse 16) rather than the usual left side. So the guards did not detect the weapon.

Ehud's assassination of Eglon is recounted in particularly gory detail (Judg. 3:21, 22). Why?

The Israelites deplored the cruelty of their oppressors. This explains why the king defeated by Othniel is called in Hebrew: Cushan-rishathaim, which means "Cushan of two wickednesses" (Judg. 3:8; see Sunday's lesson). Compare treatment of Haman in the book of Esther. Eglon's body resembled his character: repulsive. His name means "calf." As one who had filled up the cup of his iniquity, he was subject to the judgment of God.

Why was such retribution meted out by a servant of God appropriate in that setting but very wrong in our setting? (See Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 23:34.) What differences do you see between Israel under a theocracy and the social and political situations in which we find ourselves today?

GOADING ON TO VICTORY (Judg. 3:31; 10:1-5; 12:8-15).

After Ehud, Shamgar delivered Israel by killing 600 Philistines with an ox-goad (Judg. 3:31; compare 5:6). We are told in these verses that Shamgar was the son of Anath, but that is all we know about him. The book of Judges mentions five additional "minor" judges: Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. We are told nothing more than where they were from, some information about their families, and how long they judged Israel.

Why are the "minor" judges (Judg. 3:31; 10:1-5; 12:8-15) mentioned in the book of Judges at all?

Which of the following best answers the question?

1. The author wanted to present a complete list of deliverers.
2. The author wanted to acknowledge the contributions of people of various tribes and parts of the country.
3. Counting the minor judges, there are 12 judgeships mentioned in the book of Judges, just as there were 12 tribes of Israel: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah and Barak together, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson.
4. The brief notices about the minor judges (names in italics below) contribute to the book's structure:
 - I. Introduction to the Period of the "Judges" (Judg. 1:1-3:6).
 - A. Historical preface (1:1-2:5).
 - B. Summary with interpretation (2:6-3:6).
 - II. Accounts of the "Judges" (3:7-16:31).
 - A. Othniel (3:7-11).
 - B. Ehud (3:12-30).
 - C. *Shamgar* (3:31).
 - D. Deborah and Barak (4:1-5:31).
 - E. Gideon and his son, Abimelech (6:1-9:57).
 - F. *Tola* (10:1-2), *Jair* (10:3-5).
 - G. Jephthah (10:6-12:7).
 - H. *Ibzan* (12:8-10), *Elon* (12:11, 12), *Abdon* (12:13-15).
 - I. Samson (13:1-16:31).
 - III. Conclusion: Two Important Events.
 - A. Micah's idolatry and its transfer to Dan (17:1-18:31).
 - B. A Benjaminite crime and war with Benjamin (19:1-21:25).
5. Another answer:
6. All the above.

FURTHER STUDY: Study the structure of the book of Judges (see outline in Thursday's lesson) in relation to its content. Consider the possible significance of structural features—such as the increase of minor judges toward the end of the book—for the book's meaning.

Note the double beginning of the book and its double ending. The historical preface at the beginning of the book (Judg. 1:1–2:5) is tied to the end of the book, which deals with the war with Benjamin (19:1–21:25). In both sections, military coordination between the tribes is governed by the Lord's instruction that the tribe of Judah should lead the way (1:1, 2; 20:18). Furthermore, the second and second-last sections of the book (2:6–3:6; 17:1–18:31) both emphasize idolatry. Thus, the outer framework of the book is unified by a pattern of inversion that can be called "chiastic," after the Greek letter *chi*, which looks like an X:

Judah first (1:1–2:5)	X	Idolatry (2:6–3:6).
Idolatry (17:1–18:31)		Judah first (19:1–21:25).

In addition to unity, this pattern emphasizes tragic, ironic shifts that occurred during the period of the "judges." At the beginning of the book, Judah leads the battle against Canaanites, and the Israelites become ensnared by Canaanite gods. At the end of the book, Israelites make gods of their own, and Judah leads the battle against fellow Israelites. So the Israelites become their own enemies.

On the background, theme, and structure of the book of Judges, read the *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, pp. 301–306.

"When Othniel was designated as the man whom God had chosen to lead and deliver Israel, he did not refuse to take the responsibility. In the strength of God he at once commenced to repress idolatry as the Lord had commanded, to administer justice, and to elevate the standard of morality and religion. As Israel repented of their sins, the Lord manifested His great mercy toward them, and wrought for their deliverance."—Ellen G. White Comments, *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 1002.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What parallels do you see between the way God delivered Israel and the way Jesus delivers us? What similarities and differences are there between the "judges" and the spiritual leaders of our church?

SUMMARY: Through the leadership of "judges" such as Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar, the Lord won justice and deliverance for His people. These leaders were designated, motivated, and empowered by the Spirit of the Lord.



My Miracle

Maria Sae Yang

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My minister husband and I live in Thailand. We were called to a district far from our friends and colleagues. After much prayer, we accepted this new assignment. It was difficult for me to move to this small village where I didn't know anyone, and had no work.

I prayed for a ministry in my new village, and felt impressed to begin a child-care center as an outreach in this small town. I could meet adults by caring for their children. I hoped this would lead to Bible studies with some of them. I found a place to operate the child care center, and the first day I registered 10 children.

Then trouble started. Caterpillars invaded the center. They came from everywhere. They secreted a poison that made the children's skin break out in a rash. I couldn't keep the caterpillars off the children. Because of them, some of the children dropped out.

Then mosquitoes swarmed us without mercy. The children were being eaten alive. The parents threatened to keep the children home if the problem did not stop. I prayed. "Lord, this is Your work. If it is Your will that I continue this child-care program, please get rid of these mosquitoes."

The next day I returned to the child-care center and stuck out my arm to test for mosquitoes. I waited a minute—no mosquitoes. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes. Still no mosquitoes. It was an answer to prayer! A few children came. At nap time, they asked me why I didn't cover them with mosquito netting. "The mosquitoes are gone," I replied. Then I told them how I prayed to my Jesus and He had taken the mosquitoes away. "They will not be back ever to bother us again."

That evening, the children told their parents. One mother could not believe the mosquitoes were gone. I told her about my prayer. She stayed all day to see if it was really true. Then she told the entire village—no more mosquitoes! The next week 20 children came to the child-care center. In a couple of weeks our numbers grew to 40, then to 60. Many cried when I had no more room in the program.

I can minister to these people because Jesus honored my prayer and my desire to serve Him. The Lord is waiting to pour out blessings to those who claim His promises to do His work.

Maria is a pastor's wife living in Chiang Kong, in Northern Thailand. Story is with permission from *Shepherdess International*.

Coming to the Help of the Lord



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judges 4, 5.

MEMORY TEXT: "My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people. Bless the Lord" (Judges 5:9, NRSV).

KEY THOUGHT: God gives victory to His people when they and their leaders willingly unite in worship, obedience, trust, and service, whatever the personal risks involved. Those who choose not to take part in this effort lose their share in the blessing of victory.

EVERY SPIRITUAL ATHLETE IN THE CHURCH IS IMPORTANT. The smallest high school in the district wants to win the track-and-field trophies. This is possible only with a high level of participation, commitment, and effort on the part of the students. Every student who has ability in running, jumping, or throwing prepares for months in advance for the yearly event. The big day arrives. Muscles strain. Sweat flows. Voices grow hoarse from cheering. The small school wins!

There are many situations in which full participation is needed. A sports team needs all its members in order to be competitive. An orchestra needs every player. A church needs every member.

In the church's mission to the world, full participation and cooperation can mean the difference between victory and defeat. The same principle was true in the time of Deborah and Barak, when their makeshift Israelite army took on the powerful Canaanite forces of Jabin and Sisera.

DEBORAH AND BARAK (Judg. 4:1-10).

The apostasies of the Israelites became continually worse (Judg. 2:19), and their punishments became worse. Whereas they served Cushan-rishathaim for eight years (Judg. 3:8) and were subjugated by Eglon for 18 years (verse 14), they were cruelly oppressed by King Jabin of northern Canaan for 20 years (Judg. 4:3). Enemies were coming from places ever closer to home: Mesopotamia (northeast of Canaan), Moab (close by Canaan to the southeast), and then from the north of Canaan itself.

Whereas Othniel and Ehud were apparently called directly by God (Judg. 3:10, 15), Barak was called through Deborah, a prophetess (Judg. 4:4-7). Because of her prophetic gift, the Israelites submitted their legal cases to her for judgment (verses 4, 5; compare Lev. 24:13, 14; Num. 36:5).

Can you think of other women in the Bible who were specially inspired by God?

Exod. 15:20, 21 _____

2 Kings 22:12-20 _____

Luke 2:36 _____

Acts 21:9 _____

Barak accepted Deborah's prophetic gift and believed that God would use him to deliver Israel (Heb. 11:32, 33). But he insisted that she go with him (Judg. 4:8). Asking a woman to put herself in mortal danger by going into a battle situation was highly unusual. Even more surprising is the fact that she agreed to go (verse 9). Her courage, based upon absolute trust in the word of God, is astounding.

Why did Barak want Deborah to go with him? Judg. 4:4-7; 5:7.

Deborah, an established leader (Judg. 4:4), had initiated the action. Her presence would inspire soldiers with confidence in the reliability of God's message of victory. She would go where she had told others to go. Also, if a woman could go to the battle, any able-bodied man who did not go would risk the humiliation of cowardice!

Are we willing to accept messages from God that are delivered to us by a woman?

GENERAL IN TENT TO KILL (Judg. 4:11-22).

When Barak asked Deborah to go with him, she said: "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (Judg. 4:9, NRSV). It is natural to assume that Deborah was referring to herself as overcoming Sisera.

Surprise! Another woman enters the story. She is Jael (pronounced Ya-ale), a tent dweller of the Kenites, who were related to the Israelites through Moses (verses 11, 17).

While most Kenites remained in the south (Judg. 1:16), the family of Jael had moved to the north, where they were on peaceful terms with Jabin (Judg. 4:17).

In what predicament did General Sisera find himself? Judg. 4:12-17.

Sisera's fearsome iron chariots and army were gone, destroyed by the Lord through Barak's army. Footsore and weary, he finally found a place of refuge and rest in a Kenite camp. Jael went out of her way to be helpful, inviting him into her tent and hiding him there (verse 18). She went out of her way to be hospitable, giving him milk to drink instead of water (verse 19). And when he fell asleep, she went out of her way to be helpful to the Israelites! Her real loyalties were with them and with the Lord. She could have waited until Barak arrived to deal with Sisera (verse 22), but instead, she was courageous enough to dispose of the general herself (verse 21).

Compare the role of Jael (Judg. 4:17-22) to that of Ehud (Judg. 3:15-25) in terms of the way they acted and the results that they achieved for the Israelites.

Ehud had acted alone in assassinating Eglon and leading the Israelites against the Moabites (Judg. 3:15-30), but God used a team against Jabin: Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Jael was to Sisera what Ehud was to Eglon. Both Ehud and Jael acted in response to God's command to destroy His enemies. Their acts were not murder; they were punitive acts, capital punishment, commanded by God, of those whose probation had closed. (See Judg. 5:24-27; Acts 5:1-11; Heb. 10:26-31.)

In our setting, what are the results when we, as a team, cooperate with Christ in the spiritual battle of delivering sinners from the power of Satan? Acts 2:43-47.

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VICTORY SONG (Judg. 4:23–5:31).

The name *Deborah* means “bee,” and *Barak* means “lightning.” Their forces struck like lightning and stung like a bee. After the main battle, King Jabin was still alive in Hazor (Judg. 4:2), one of the largest cities of ancient Palestine. But the Israelites went on to destroy him too (verse 24).

At the end of the climactic day of battle (“on that day,” Judg. 5:1; compare 4:14, 23), Deborah and Barak sang a victory song, a national anthem of praise to God (Judges 5).

What are the main themes of Deborah and Barak’s song? Judges 5.

Since the Hebrew song preserves many ancient poetic features and words, it is among the most difficult passages in the Bible to translate. Nevertheless, the poem clearly emphasizes the same overall idea as the preceding narrative: deliverance by God through human beings who fully cooperated with Him and trusted in His strength. Compare Judges 4:14: “Then Deborah said to Barak, ‘Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. The Lord is indeed going out before you’” (NRSV).

The song begins with a reminder that God was with the Israelites at the time of their journey toward Canaan in the time of Moses (Judg. 5:2-5; compare Deut. 33:1, 2). Then the song describes the situation in Israel before the battle (Judg. 5:6-8), tells of the call to battle and its success (verses 9-13), and lists tribes who answered the call and those who failed to do so (verses 14-18). The remainder of the song vividly recounts the battle itself (verses 19-22), curses the inhabitants of Meroz for not helping when their assistance was of vital importance (verse 23), and portrays the death of Sisera (verses 24-31).

Why do you think a conversation between Sisera’s mother and the wisest of her ladies is included? Judg. 5:28-30.

How ironic that the wisest of the Canaanite ladies imagined that Sisera was delayed by victory! Their “wisdom” was completely wrong because they did not take the God of Israel into account.

What different results do we experience when we rely on God’s wisdom rather than our own? (Compare Gen. 3:6 with 1 Cor. 1:18-31.)

WILLINGLY COMING TO THE HELP OF THE LORD (Judg. 5:2, 9, 13-18, 23).

The song of Deborah and Barak praises the Lord for the Israelites who volunteered to go into battle (Judg. 5:2, 9). What is the effect of willingly contributing to the service of God?

Exod. 32:26-29 _____

Exod. 35:4-9, 21-29; 36:2-7 _____

1 Chron. 29:5-9, 14-18 _____

Neh. 11:1, 2 _____

2 Cor. 9:6-15 _____

When Jesus sent out His disciples to preach and heal, He said to them: "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8, NIV). When we acknowledge that we have received freely from God, we are ready to give freely to His service. Through Christ and His sacrifice, God gives us salvation as a gift (Rom. 3:24; Titus 3:4-7) because He loves us (John 3:16). If we respond with gratitude and love for Him, we will happily give of ourselves to His cause, which is the salvation of others like ourselves. God can use wholehearted, enthusiastic service to achieve great results, as the stories of Caleb, Othniel, and the other heroes of the book of Judges demonstrate.

Many Israelites rushed forth to battle at the heels of Barak (Judg. 5:15), risking their lives (verse 18). But others hesitated, not contributing what they could have (verses 15-17). Singled out for a terrible curse were the people of the town of Meroz (verse 23).

What was so wrong about what the people of Meroz did, or rather, failed to do? Judg. 5:23.

"The Israelite inhabitants of Meroz, on the path of the retreating hosts of Sisera, refused to render assistance in any form. With the aid of these men the pursuing Israelites could probably have prevented any of the Canaanites, perhaps even Sisera, from escaping the field of battle."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 336.

Do you do nothing in times of spiritual crisis? If so, why? What is the connection between the state of your relationship with Christ and your courage?

RETELL THE TRIUMPHS OF THE LORD (Judg. 5:11).

In their song, Deborah and Barak spoke of retelling the victories of the Lord (Judg. 5:11), which He had won on behalf of His people.

Compare Judges 5 with other songs of deliverance by God that are recorded in the Bible. Exod. 15:1-21; Psalm 107; Isaiah 12; Rev. 15:3, 4. What is the effect of such triumphant celebration?

The song of Deborah and Barak begins with a reminder of God's presence when the Israelites journeyed toward Canaan (Judg. 5:2-5). The rest of the song, telling of deliverance from King Jabin and Sisera, shows that God was again with His people in the time of Deborah and Barak. They could trust God completely in the present and in the future because He had demonstrated His trustworthiness time and again.

"We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history."
—Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches*, p. 196.

What did God's greatest triumph accomplish? Col. 1:13, 14; Rev. 15:2-4.

Oppression by Pharaoh, Jabin, and Sisera is nothing compared with subjection to Satan, who through deceit usurped the dominion that God gave to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:1-24). But at the price of incredible self-sacrifice, the Lord has delivered from the power of Satan all who have believed in Him and has made them citizens of His kingdom, under His protection.

Just before His crucifixion, Jesus said, "Now is the judgment of this world, now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:31, 32, NRSV). Jesus is the ultimate Judge-Deliverer. By dying the death of the wicked in place of human beings, He delivered His willing ones by casting out Satan as having any claim to authority over human beings. At His second coming, Christ will take over the world, exercising the right that He bought with His blood (Rev. 19:11-20:3).

Why are personal testimonies to the triumphs of the Lord in individual lives so powerful? Mark 5:18-20.

FURTHER STUDY: Reconsider the relationship between faith and the punitive work performed by Deborah and Barak (Heb. 11:32-34). Read the *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, pp. 333-337, on Judges 5, the song of Deborah and Barak.

“True Christian character is marked by a singleness of purpose, an indomitable determination, which refuses to yield to worldly influences, which will aim at nothing short of the Bible standard. If men will permit themselves to become discouraged in the service of God, the great adversary will present abundant reasons to turn them from the plain path of duty to one of ease and irresponsibility. Those who can be bribed or seduced, discouraged or terrified, will be of no service in the Christian warfare. Those who set their affections on worldly treasures or worldly honors, will not push the battle against principalities and powers, and spiritual wickedness in high places.”—Ellen G. White, “A Test of Faith,” *Signs of the Times*, June 30, 1881.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How single-minded and determined are you to overcome the power of Satan, by Christ's strength, in your own life and in your ministry for others? If you lack such determination, how do you get it? (See Acts 4:12, 23-31.)
2. How can we have an “indomitable determination, which refuses to yield to worldly influences,” and “push the battle against principalities and powers” and at the same time be sensitive to the needs of those with whom we come in contact? Study this question in the context of Jesus' life. For example, compare John 2:13-17 and Matt. 23:13-36 with Matt. 23:37; 12:20. See also Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 12: “Tears were in His voice as He uttered His scathing rebukes.”
3. Even though we are never called today to perform the kind of work to which God directed Ehud and Jael, are Christians today sometimes called to unpleasant duties? (See Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5.)

SUMMARY: Under Deborah and Barak, the Israelites were victorious because they trusted in God's power to deliver them from superior forces. Their faith was shown by their actions. Without works resulting from our faith, our faith is dead (James 2:26).



A Church for His People

Sven H. Jensen

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South Sudan has been caught in a civil war for years. In spite of the hardships of war, Adventist congregations are springing up in many places.

It was Sabbath morning. We had flown into Akobo, a village near the Ethiopian border of Sudan, with a United Nations relief mission. It had rained heavily all night, and the dirt roads were sloppy mud. We slogged through the mud toward the church. At one place it was so deep that I lost my balance and landed in the mud. After a quick clean-up we entered the church, built of sticks, mud, and grass. As our eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, we counted 20 people gathered for worship. The rains had kept away many members who walk great distances to church.

The little church, we learned, had been established by Chot Thich Dok, an evangelist from another denomination who had heard the Adventist message while in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. The message convicted his heart, and he joined the church in 1987. When he returned to Sudan he was tempted to settle with other Adventist refugees in the border town of Maiwut. But he felt the burden to share his new faith with his own people in Akobo.

When he arrived in Akobo in 1992 and began witnessing to colleagues from his former church, he met great opposition. They tried to convince government authorities to forbid the Adventist presence in Akobo, but they were told not to interfere with Adventists. Chot, his wife, and another young man built the church. In the past two years Chot has brought many into the church. Some still wait for a pastor to come and baptize them.

The church building is already too small. Chot wants to build a bigger church, closer to the river so more people can come by boat. He has only three years of education and wants to establish an Adventist school to teach the adults and children of the growing Adventist church.

Chot works full time in construction. He hopes that soon a lay preacher will come to teach the many who are ready to accept the Adventist message. He sees a great potential for raising up new companies in the nearby villages along the river.

Our members can build churches with their own hands, but they need education and trained pastors and lay preachers. Pray that the work in this region will expand to every town and village.

Sven H. Jensen is director of church ministries in the Middle East Union.

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Signs of Security



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judges 6.

MEMORY TEXT: "When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the Lord, he exclaimed, 'Ah, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!' But the Lord said to him, 'Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die' " (Judges 6:22, 23, NIV).

KEY THOUGHT: When God calls people to work for Him, He gives them the assurance that He will be with them. At times, He may reinforce this assurance with miraculous or providential signs.

THE FATHER'S HAND. A tiger pads softly along a pathway toward a two-year-old girl. She watches intently through the bushes as the large animal approaches. Stepping into the pathway a few feet in front of the tiger, she says, "Rrrrrrrr!" Little Sarah roars at the tiger without fear, not because she notices the thick chain around the tiger's neck, held by a trainer of Marine World, Africa U.S.A., but because she firmly clutches her father's hand. As far as she is concerned, Daddy is big and strong enough to take care of any situation.

Adults need security too. We saw in the last lesson that Barak needed Deborah, the prophetess, to provide him with security by accompanying him into danger. When God called Gideon to deliver Israel, he was insecure about the whole idea, but he had nobody like Deborah to help him. He had to rely upon God directly, making sure that his heavenly Father was with him.

OPPRESSED AND DEPRESSED AGAIN (Judg. 6:1-10).

After the deliverance from Jabin and Sisera, “the land had rest forty years” (Judg. 5:31, NRSV). But after a while, the people no longer guided their lives by the Lord and His triumphs, and they fell back into idolatry. The result was depression, not merely emotional but economic, as well. Whereas the Israelites had survived 20 years of oppression under Jabin and Sisera, they were driven to desperation after only seven years of plundering by the Midianites (Judg. 6:1).

What was so devastating about what the Midianites did? Judg. 6:2-6.

“Inasmuch as the Midianites were nomadic tribes, they did not conquer the land and settle down permanently. . . . They preferred that the settled peoples should do the work of sowing. Then in a series of raids they would sweep over the land, confiscating the crops and driving off all the farm animals they could find. According to custom, they left the houses undestroyed in order that the farmers would be tempted to return and sow the fields once more.”—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, pp. 339, 341.

The Midianites, along with the Amalekites and other “people of the East,” were like locusts in terms of their numbers, and also in terms of their effect on the land (Judg. 6:3-5; compare Joel 2:4-10). After losing their crops for seven years in a row, the Israelites were starving. When they were “greatly impoverished” (Judg. 6:6), they were ready for the Lord again. But the Lord did not respond to their cry for help by immediately promising to deliver them. While He had their attention, He sent them an unnamed prophet to explain the cause of their distress (Judg. 6:7-10) so that they would be wiser in the future.

Compare the words of the prophet (Judg. 6:8-10) to the earlier message of the Angel of the Lord at Bochim (Judg. 2:1-3).

The prophet reiterated the overall theme of the book of Judges: In spite of God’s faithfulness, the Israelites persisted in faithless disobedience. By breaking God’s covenant, they forfeited complete fulfillment of the covenant promises.

Do you tend to rely on God most when you are “brought very low”? Why, or why not? Why do we tend to blame God for trials that we have brought upon ourselves?

THE CALL OF GIDEON (Judg. 6:11-16).

The “judges” were called by God in various ways. Ehud was simply raised up by the Lord (Judg. 3:15), Othniel was designated as Israel’s deliverer by the Spirit of the Lord coming upon him (verse 10), and Barak was called through the prophetess Deborah (Judg. 4:6, 7). Gideon’s call was special. The Angel of the Lord appeared to him in person.

Read Judges 6:11-16 carefully, looking for the significance of (1) the circumstances in which the conversation between Gideon and the Angel took place and (2) the ideas that were expressed in the course of the conversation.

Wheat was normally threshed on a threshing floor, but Gideon was threshing wheat in a wine press, where the Midianites would not look for it. At this low point in his life, as he was hiding his food for fear of the Midianites, the Angel of the Lord appeared to him.

The first words of the Angel were: “The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour” (Judg. 6:12). Gideon questioned this statement. He had heard of the past triumphs of the Lord for the Israelites, but he did not see how He could be with them at the present time. “Then the Lord turned to him and said, ‘Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you’” (verse 14, NRSV). So the Angel was the Lord Himself, and Gideon was to be the deliverer!

The Angel had twice referred to Gideon’s might. It was true that Gideon’s brothers, and probably Gideon himself, had been involved in military action against Midian (Judg. 8:18, 19), but he did not regard himself as qualified to lead Israel. He claimed to have less power than anyone else in the tribe of Manasseh. “The Lord said to him, ‘But I will be with you’” (Judg. 6:16, NRSV). The Lord Himself would be with Gideon! That was all the power he needed!

Compare the call of Gideon with that of Moses (Exod. 3:1-4:17) and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4-10).

God could use people like Moses, Gideon, and Jeremiah because they recognized their own inadequacy and relied upon His strength rather than their own.

Is it a lack of faith to request evidence from God? How would you support your point of view?

THE ANGEL OF THE LORD (Judg. 6:11-16).

How is the identity of the “angel of the Lord” revealed in Judges 6:11-16?

Whereas the Being who spoke with Gideon is first called the “angel of the Lord” (Judg. 6:11, 12), He is subsequently identified as “the Lord” (verses 14, 16). Thus, the initial words, “The Lord is with thee” (verse 12), mean the same thing as the later statement, “I will be with thee” (verse 16). Note that “the Lord” in these verses translates the Hebrew word *Yahweh*, which means “Jehovah.”

Compare the Gideon story with the story of the “angel of the Lord” appearing to Samson’s parents (Judges 13). The Angel appeared in human form (verse 6), but He was the Lord (verses 21-23).

In the Gideon and Samson stories (Judges 6, 13), why is the Lord called “the angel of the Lord”?

In the Old and New Testaments, the Hebrew and Greek words translated “angel” mean “messenger.” We associate this term with created beings sent forth by God. (See Heb. 1:6, 7, 13, 14; Dan. 9:21; Luke 1:26.) But sometimes the Lord has appeared to deliver messages in person (Genesis 18).

In Exodus 23:20, 21, God spoke of “an angel” whom He sent to bring the Israelites to the Promised Land. “Be attentive to him . . . for my name is in him” (verse 21, NRSV). Ellen G. White comments: “Christ was not only the leader of the Hebrews in the wilderness—the Angel in whom was the name of Jehovah, and who, veiled in the cloudy pillar, went before the host—but it was He who gave the law to Israel. Amid the awful glory of Sinai, Christ declared in the hearing of all the people the ten precepts of His Father’s law.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 366.

It appears that occasions such as those mentioned above must be included among the “goings forth from of old” of the divine Messiah born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). This birth has brought to humankind the ultimate manifestation of the Lord in human form: Jesus Christ, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). In John 1:1-5, 9-14, Jesus is not only identified as the divine Creator, who has become human in order to communicate with us; He is called “the Word,” the content of the message itself.

In view of the personal care that the Lord has invested in His messages to us, how should we demonstrate our respect for them?

SIGNS FROM GOD (Judg. 6:17-24, 36-40).

Gideon asked for a sign confirming the divine identity of the One who was speaking with him (Judg. 6:17). Since the encounter was so unusual and so much depended upon it, this request was reasonable enough. Keep in mind that Gideon did not have in front of him the words of the Bible, which identify his Visitor as "the Lord" (verses 11, 12, 14, 16). What he saw and heard was a Being, presumably in human form, sitting under an oak tree (verse 11).

Why did Gideon's sign take the form of a food offering? Judg. 6:18, 19.

Gideon might have thought that if his Visitor were the divine Angel of the Lord, He would not consume food as a human being would. Israelite sanctuary sacrifices were called "food" for the Lord (Num. 28:2), but He did not consume them in a human manner because He does not need human food at all (Ps. 50:12, 13).

The "angel of the Lord" identified Himself by not eating the food but miraculously burning it. Then He vanished (Judg. 6:20, 21; compare Judg. 13:15-20). Whether or not Gideon had thought that something like this could happen, when it did, he was amazed and afraid because he had "seen the angel of the Lord face to face" (verse 22, NRSV; compare Judg. 13:21, 22). Reassured by the Lord, he built an altar to commemorate His appearance there (Judg. 6:23, 24; compare Gen. 28:17, 18, 22).

Feeling insecure, Gideon later sought miraculous confirmation from the Lord that He would deliver Israel as He had promised (Judg. 6:36, 37).

Why did Gideon request a second test with the fleece? Judg. 6:38-40.

"The first sign that Gideon asked was granted. The fleece gathered water, and the ground around it was dry. After thinking it over, Gideon felt that this was, after all, what one would expect, since wool naturally draws water. Hence it might not be a sign at all. He may thus have felt as uncertain as before. . . . Recognizing Gideon's limited faith, the Lord descended to work a miracle to give him the sign for which he asked."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 345.

What dangers do you see in placing undue reliance on signs that we have stipulated? (See Heb. 11:1.)

FIRST THINGS FIRST (Judg. 6:25-35).

Before the Lord could use Gideon, He required him to purge idolatry from his family (Judg. 6:25, 26). "Gideon must declare war upon idolatry before going out to battle with the enemies of his people." —Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 547.

Destroying the Baal altar and the Asherah, which may have been a sacred pole or tree trunk, plus building an altar to the Lord and offering a sacrifice, was a big job, but Gideon did it in one night (Judg. 6:27). The next morning, idolatrous Israelites wanted to put Gideon to death for insulting Baal (verses 28-30), but his father defended him on the ground that if Baal were really a god, he could punish Gideon himself (verse 31; compare 1 Kings 18:20-29). Gideon's father prevailed. It appears that he was turning to faith in the God of Israel, who had appeared to his son.

Can you think of other cases in which reform preceded deliverance by God?

Gen. 35:1-5 _____

Exod. 4:21-26 _____

Judg. 10:16 _____

2 Chron. 17:3-6 _____

2 Kings 18:1-7 _____

God cannot accept the prayers of those who cherish iniquity in their hearts (Ps. 66:18). When sin is cherished, confidence is false and turns to defeat (Joshua 7:1). The quickest way to destroy God's people is to entice them into disobedience, thereby driving a wedge between them and their God (Num. 25:1-3). The greatest evidence that sin separates one from God is found in the death of Christ, who was separated from His Father (Matt. 27:46) because He became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21).

On the other hand, the Lord is eager "to give repentance" (Acts 5:31). As soon as His people put away those things that come between Him and them, He is ready to help them (Judg. 10:16). After Gideon's reform, the next time the Midianites and their allies crossed the Jordan, the Spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon, and he summoned the Israelites to a war of liberation (Judg. 6:33-35).

How can we rid ourselves of the idols that separate us from God?

FURTHER STUDY: Review what Jesus said about trusting Him even when there are no outward signs: John 20:29. Read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, "The Earlier Judges," pp. 546-548.

"The Lord does not always choose for his work men of the greatest talents, but he selects those whom he can best use. Individuals who might do good service for God, may for a time be left in obscurity, apparently unnoticed and unemployed by their Master. But if they faithfully perform the duties of their humble position, cherishing a willingness to labor and to sacrifice for him, he will in his own time intrust them with greater responsibilities."—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, June 23, 1881.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. God gave signs to Gideon, and Jesus performed many miracles, which were signs of His divinity. Why did Jesus refuse to grant the request of scribes and Pharisees for a sign, except for "the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matt. 12:38-41; 16:1-4, NRSV)? Compare Jesus' refusal to give Satan a sign of His divinity (Matt. 4:3, 4). Do you sometimes look for miraculous signs for wrong reasons?
2. God required Gideon to do something that offended some Israelites by attacking their form of worship. Did these people have a just basis for being offended? Does God ever ask us to do or say things that result in offending people? If so, how do we know that it is God who is behind this, and not our own emotions or prejudices? Does our own tactlessness cause problems in these situations? Does fear that we may offend someone keep us from saying things that should be said?

SUMMARY: Gideon's confidence in God needed to grow, but God could use him because he was not self-confident. He needed repeated assurances that God was with him, but then he went ahead and faithfully did what God asked him to do, beginning with reform in his own family. As by faith we accept God's assurances, He imparts to us the strength and wisdom to carry out His will.



Honesty Wins Converts

Maria Teresa Joya de Rodriguez

While living in Guanare, in central Venezuela, I served as treasurer of a school. One day I entered a shop and began talking with the manager. He invited me to buy some of his fresh cheese.

"I would like to, but I have no money with me," I said.

"You have money; you are the school treasurer," he accused.

"But the school's money is not mine," I countered.

"All that one has in his pocket belongs to him," he answered.

"I'm sorry, I don't agree with you," I said. "The school's money is not mine. If you want to audit my books, I am ready."

A young man in the shop heard our conversation. He asked, "Do you belong to a religion?" I smelled alcohol on his breath.

"Yes, I am a Seventh-day Adventist."

He said he was impressed with my honesty. Then he told me, "I want my family to go to a church like the one you go to. Would you visit my family?" He gave me directions to a poor section of town.

I promised to visit the family the following Tuesday. At the appointed time my pastor husband and I went to visit the man's home. This time the man was not drunk.

We enjoyed visiting and getting acquainted with the family. Before we left we made arrangements to begin studying the Bible together. The family had no religious training, but the children, ages 8 to 14, enjoyed the Bible stories, and the adults studied the Bible eagerly and accepted the truths we presented.

About two months later we invited the family to attend church with us. The man's wife and children went, but the man was not ready. He was still struggling with alcohol. We loved and prayed for him. The Bible study group grew as the family invited their friends. Eventually we had about 15 people in this group study.

The girls, ages 13 and 14, were baptized first. A few months later the boys, 8 and 10, and their mother were baptized. The husband struggled for several more months before he gained victory over alcohol and was baptized.



The little group now meets in a hall and continues to grow. All this happened because of a conversation over a piece of cheese.

Maria Teresa Joya de Rodriguez is director of a primary school in Barquisimeto, Venezuela.

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A Few Good People



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judg. 7:1-8:21.

MEMORY TEXT: "And the Lord said to Gideon, 'The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, "My own hand has saved me" ' " (Judges 7:2, NKJV).

KEY THOUGHT: For the benefit of His people, God wants them to cooperate with Him in achieving His purposes. But they should keep in mind that it is God who gives success; they are only instruments in His hands.

BEATING THE ODDS. God loves to show who He is by overcoming obstacles that are, humanly speaking, insurmountable. Three hundred Israelites battling 135,000 Midianites and their allies? Unthinkable! (See Judg. 7:12; 8:10.) Five loaves and two fish to feed 5,000 men, besides women and children? Absurd! (See Matt. 14:15-21.) A handful of people to shake up an empire with "good news" about an executed Carpenter? Preposterous! (See the book of Acts.) A Jewish girl to give birth to God's Son without losing her virginity? Impossible! (See Luke 1:37, 38—Gabriel said, " 'For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word' "[NRSV].)

When you feel alone and powerless, overwhelmed by unfavorable odds (1 Kings 19:9, 10), remember the words of Gabriel to Mary and her response. God often demonstrates His love for His children by doing that which, to them, seems impossible. If our eyes could be opened, we would see invincible heavenly forces guarding and guiding our lives.

LESS IS BETTER (Judg. 7:1-8).

For an initial strike force against the Midianites and their allies, all God needed was a few good men. Thirty-two thousand Israelites answered Gideon's trumpet call (Judg. 6:34, 35; 7:3). By a two-stage process of elimination, God sent 31,700 of them home!

Why did God choose only 300 men? Judg. 7:7, 8.

Which of the following best answers the question?

1. God did not want to use too many Israelites, lest they attribute their success to their own power (Judg. 7:2).
2. God could not use the 22,000 who admitted their fear by returning home at the first opportunity (verse 3; compare Deut. 20:5-8). Except for 300 men, even the 10,000 who remained after the proclamation lacked sufficient courage, so God could not use an army of 10,000, as He had in Barak's day (Judg. 4:10).
3. God wanted only the 300 who were eager to fight. When they went to a stream, expecting to cross it and keep marching to the enemy camp, they drank by scooping up water in their hands as they went (Judg. 7:4-6).
4. Another answer:
5. All the above.

What did the actions of the 300 chosen warriors, even before they went into battle, indicate regarding their relationship with God? Judg. 7:3-7.

The enemy hordes appeared innumerable (Judg. 7:12; 8:10). Israelites who were eager to attack such a force must have wholeheartedly believed in the Lord and the message of victory that He had given to Gideon (Judg. 6:16). From a human point of view, their venture was foolhardy, but "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25, NRSV). As Jonathan put it, "Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few" (1 Sam. 14:6, NRSV). For those who are willing to follow the Lord into spiritual battle, courage is not optional. He commands it because He provides it (Deut. 20:1-4; Joshua 1:6, 7, 9).

How does the presence of Christ with us affect our courage as we carry God's love into territory claimed by Satan? (See Matt. 28:18-20.)

DREAM TEAM (Judg. 7:9-15).

Gideon was still afraid. The Angel of the Lord had appeared to him and performed a miraculous sign (Judg. 6:21), and God had granted him a double sign with fleece (verses 36-40). Now the time for battle had almost arrived, and he had only 300 men. He had scarcely dared to ask God for the second sign with the fleece (verse 39), so requesting another sign was out of the question. Recognizing his insecurity, God took the initiative and offered him the sign he needed (Judg. 7:9-11).

What is the relationship between the Midianite's dream and its interpretation? Judg. 7:13, 14.

The dream was symbolic. The enemy soldier dreamed that a piece of barley bread, food of people such as the impoverished Israelites, tumbled into the Midianite camp and did something ordinarily impossible: it knocked a tent over. Just so, Gideon and his team would carry out a miracle of God by destroying the Midianite forces.

The dream was also ironic. The Midianites had stolen Israelite food. In the dream, a piece of food out of control by the Midianites knocked their tent over, bringing their wickedness down upon their own heads. (Compare Judg. 9:57.) They had also taken the lives of Israelites, including Gideon's brothers (Judg. 8:18, 19). Now Gideon, who had escaped the control of the Midianites, would punish them, not only for taking Israelite food but also for killing his brothers.

When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he did not delay thanking God, but worshiped Him on the spot. Filled with courage, he returned to the Israelite camp with a triumphant battle cry (Judg. 7:15).

What knowledge did Gideon have of the validity of dreams given by God? Gen. 37:5-10; 40:1-8; 41:1, 16.

Spoken by enemies, who would not make up stories about Israelite victory, the dream and its interpretation must be genuine. Dreams from God were known by the Israelites to predict the future accurately. So when Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, which agreed with the words of the Angel of the Lord (Judg. 6:16), his doubts fled.

In what ways does God give us evidence to strengthen our faith, even when we do not ask for it? How can we be sure that "signs" indicating a certain course of action are from God?

SOUND-AND-LIGHT SHOW (Judg. 7:16-25).

In the night, Gideon divided his 300 men into three groups, stationed at the outskirts of the Midianite camp.

How did 300 Israelites defeat a force of 135,000 Midianites and their allies (Judg. 8:10)? Judg. 7:19-25.

The sleeping Midianites were awakened by the din of crashing pottery, the blasting of trumpets, and the sudden appearance of torch light all around them. It appeared as though they were surrounded by a large, attacking army. They panicked, each thinking only of his own safety. Assuming that the attackers had entered the camp, and not being able to identify one another in the darkness, the Midianites defended themselves by killing one another: "The Lord set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army" (Judg. 7:22, NRSV). As the Midianites fled, Gideon called the rest of the Israelites to help pursue the enemy. It appears that when Gideon sent home the 31,700 men, he told them to be ready for action.

Compare the sound-and-light show that God will provide when He delivers His end-time people from overwhelming forces of opposition. (See 1 Thess. 4:16, 17; Matt. 24:27.)

Since it was God who defeated the Midianites, why did Gideon need to use strategy (Judg. 7:16-24)?

This story is a classic case of divine-human cooperation. God won the battle by optimizing the efficiency of human effort and blessing the results of that effort. Without the Lord's direction, Gideon would have attacked the 135,000 enemy soldiers with all 32,000 Israelites who initially volunteered. God could have brought victory out of such unfavorable odds, but He had a better way: make the army of 135,000 attack itself! To do this, He needed a small group of daring men who could serve as a catalyst for panic by sneaking up on the enemy without being detected and surprising them with a sound-and-light show. He multiplied the results of the human effort, making sure that confusion reigned in the camp of the enemy.

This was not the first time that God had used a small number of dedicated people to win a great victory. (See Gen. 14:14-16.)

In our spiritual warfare, in what ways does God ask us to cooperate with Him?

NONSUPPORTIVE FRIENDS (Judg. 8:1-9).

To destroy the fleeing Midianites, Gideon needed the cooperation of as many Israelites as possible, but some of his countrymen caused him trouble.

Why did the Ephraimites react as they did? Judg. 8:1.

The Ephraimites helped by cutting off the Midianites at river crossings (Judg. 7:24) but then berated Gideon for not having called them before the battle when he called other northern tribes (Judg. 6:35).

Ephraim was the most powerful northern Israelite tribe. It appears that they were envious of Gideon and insulted by his not consulting them before attacking the Midianites.

"In common with the others, they were brave enough to join in the fray only after the enemy was in flight. Similarly, there are many today who criticize the one who courageously launches a laudable project. They hold back any support until it is apparent that the venture will succeed. Then they attempt to take credit to themselves or to edge in on the leadership of the enterprise."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 351.

How did Gideon successfully deal with the Ephraimites? Judg. 8:2, 3.

Gideon had borne the responsibility and risk of the initial attack upon the enemy. As the divinely appointed leader of the Israelites, he could have rebuked the Ephraimites. But then, he probably would have had to fight them as well as the foreigners (compare Judg. 12:1-6), and there was no time for that. The wise, courteous, and humble diplomacy of Gideon, praising the success of Ephraim, was just right for the situation. The book of Proverbs was not yet written, but Gideon knew that "a soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov. 15:1, NRSV).

Gideon and his 300 men, faint with hunger, were still pursuing the Midianites, but the men of Succoth (pronounced Soo-cote) and Penuel were like the people of Meroz earlier: they selfishly refused to help at all (Judg. 8:4-6, 8; compare 5:23). Gideon regarded them, unlike the Ephraimites, as traitors and threatened to punish them (Judg. 8:7, 9).

What are your motives for supporting good causes? Because they are good? Or do you support them only when they will clearly succeed, so that you can take some credit?

RETRIBUTION FOR DISLOYALTY (Judg. 8:10-21).

About 15,000 Midianites were left. Gideon and his men surprised them, threw them into panic, and defeated them, capturing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian (Judg. 8:10-12). The short war was over. The terribly swift sword of the Lord and of Gideon had prevailed against overwhelming odds. But Gideon did not immediately go back to his farming. The "judge" had some judging to do first.

Why did Gideon take Zebah and Zalmunna to Succoth? Judg. 8:15.

The men of Succoth and Penuel had ridiculed Gideon for thinking that he could defeat the thousands of Midianites who were left. They had refused to help him, because he had not already won the battle and captured the Midianite kings (Judg. 8:6), and probably because they expected him to lose and did not want to suffer retaliation from the Midianites for helping him. Gideon had replied that when (not if!) the Lord gave the kings to him, he would return and punish them (verses 7, 9).

When he did capture the kings, Gideon showed them to the people of Succoth and Penuel to prove that God had, indeed, made him the judge-deliverer of Israel. But the judgment he gave Succoth and Penuel was not deliverance; it was divine retribution for disloyalty and unfaithfulness (verses 13-17).

What is the significance of the fact that the Midianite kings had killed Gideon's full brothers? Judg. 8:18-21.

We expect Gideon, the leader of the Israelite army, to put the Midianite kings to death. They had opposed Israel's God. Moreover, Gideon had reason to seek personal justice. In a previous battle at Tabor, not further described, the kings had shown Gideon's brothers no mercy. Consequently, they received none.

This story may partly explain why the Lord chose Gideon. Not only was he a man of faith; he had a strong personal interest in bringing the Midianites to justice. He was reticent at first to fight the Midianites, because he knew firsthand their strength and the risk of battle, but when God encouraged and motivated him, he was highly motivated!

Why was it right for Gideon to bring justice upon his enemies, but it is not right for us? Rom. 12:17-21.

FURTHER STUDY: Read the following passages, which establish that God forbids us to retaliate against our enemies: Lev. 19:18; Prov. 20:22; 24:29; Matt. 5:39; 1 Peter 3:9. Read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, "The Earlier Judges," pp. 549-555.

"Act promptly. God would have you minute men, as were the men who composed Gideon's army. Many times ministers are too precise, too calculating. While they are getting ready to do a great work, the opportunity for doing a good work passes unimproved. The minister moves as though the whole burden rested on himself, a poor finite man, when Jesus is carrying him and his burden too. Brethren, trust self less, and Jesus more. He is willing to save the souls for whom we labor. Because he lives to intercede for us, we shall see of his great power. He 'is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.' Jesus wants us to ask for help; he wants us to cast our helpless souls on him; and he will give us according to our faith."—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 1, 1884.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you miss opportunities to serve the Lord? If so, why? Is it because you fail to see them until it is too late, or are you too inflexible or timid? What can you do to improve your ability or desire to take advantage of opportunities for service?
2. Gideon's venture was successful because he cooperated with God. Look for other Bible passages that speak of, or illustrate, divine-human cooperation. (See, for example, John 6:5-14; 11:39, 41-44; Phil. 2:12, 13. On John 11:39, Ellen White wrote: "Christ could have commanded the stone [covering Lazarus's tomb] to remove. . . . What human power can do divine power is not summoned to do. God does not dispense with man's aid. He strengthens him, cooperating with him as he uses the powers and capabilities given him." —*The Desire of Ages*, p. 535.)
3. How can this lesson be used to illustrate the ultimate triumph of God's faithful remnant who will be opposed by apparently superior forces? (See Rev. 6:10, 15-17.)

SUMMARY: Gideon and his men were God's instruments to deliver Israel. Success depended upon God. Without Him, human efforts would have failed. But human efforts were important because God chose to use them. God can use people today who are willing to risk all in carrying out His will.



The Miracle of the Dagushan Church

David Lin

About 3,000 Adventist believers in Jilin Province, China, gathered to dedicate the 600-seat Dagushan Adventist Church recently. A series of miracles marked the completion of this church.

The young lay pastor told how God blessed at every stage of construction. After the foundation was laid, the pastor had only 170 yuan (\$20) cash left. He managed to purchase bricks on credit, and then borrowed some money to buy lumber. He estimated that he needed about \$825 worth of wood to make the triangular cross beams for the roof. But he had less than \$50. With this meager sum, he set out on his bike, praying that the Lord would lead him to lumber he could afford.

The pastor was so weary from working day and night that he stopped beside the road and slept. When he awoke he got on his bicycle and began riding. Soon he met a man walking on the road. The pastor stopped and asked the man if he knew where he could find some lumber. The man answered, "I have some." The pastor followed the man to his farm, where a large grove of trees stood. It was enough to build the cross beams, so the pastor offered the man 800 yuan, about \$95 for it. He paid the man the 400 yuan he had with him, and pedaled back to town to borrow the remaining 400 yuan and a tractor and trailer to haul the logs. Thus the lumber, which would have cost \$825 at a lumber yard, cost less than \$100.

A carpenter and a mason were the only two skilled laborers hired to work on the church. Every evening they kidded the pastor with the question, "Out of cash again?" And every time the pastor replied, "Yes, out of cash." But the next day there was always work to keep the construction going, and somehow, cash to pay these men. Surely God was in charge.

Using the skills of church members, the church was finished in 4 months at a total cost of about \$10,000. On the day of the dedication, the church still owed about \$4,700. Offerings that day raised more than \$1,500, and a generous gift by a brother in Beijing cleared the remaining deficit.

A baptism held the day after the dedication brought church membership to 1,000. The work in China is growing rapidly under the leadership of dedicated laymen and women. Pray that God will strengthen and unite the work and the workers there.

David Lin pastors the Adventist congregation in Shanghai, China.

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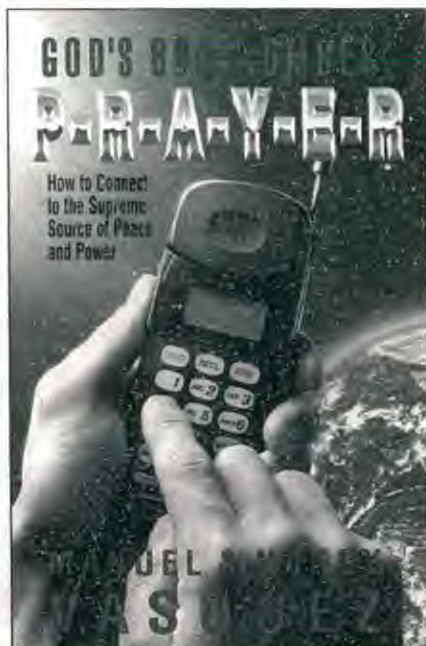


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Royalty and Disloyalty



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judg. 8:22–9:57.

MEMORY TEXT: “And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you” (Judges 8:23).

KEY THOUGHT: A person's relationship with God is reflected in the way he or she treats other human beings. Thus, loyalty to God as Lord leads to human kindness, but rejection of God as Lord leads to ingratitude, selfish pride, and cruel ruthlessness.

THE COST OF KINGSHIP. Ever since Lucifer came up with the idea of being like the Most High (Isa. 14:14) and deceived the human race into accepting his philosophy (see Gen. 3:5—“you shall be as gods”), people have played God and lorded it over others. From earliest times, kingship has been likened to and associated with divine power. The Egyptian pharaohs, Mesopotamian kings, and Hittite emperors, to name a few, even demanded and received worship as gods. With their awesome authority, ancient kings claimed to be the “shepherds” of their people, providing for their protection and well-being. But the price was high (1 Sam. 8:10-18).

When Gideon was offered the kingship of Israel, he was not offered the kind of constitutional monarchy that many nations have today. He recognized that to take that position would be to substitute despotic human rule for God's authority, to play God (Judg. 8:23). But his son, who did not respect God or people, wanted to be king at all costs. The price to others was high, and in the end, so was the price to him.

“THE LORD WILL RULE OVER YOU” (Judg. 8:22, 23, NIV).

Gideon had led Israel to victory over kings, and he looked like a king (Judg. 8:18). The Israelites were so grateful that they asked him to be their king (verse 22).

What do the words of the Israelites to Gideon reveal about their attitude toward God? Judg. 8:22.

Where was the Israelites' gratitude to God? They clearly wanted a permanent leadership institution to unite and organize their tribes for protection against their enemies. Their oppressors were ruled by kings, so they wanted a king too. How quickly they had forgotten that the kings who oppressed them had been defeated by divine-human cooperation!

The offer of a dynastic kingship (“and your son and your grandson also,” Judg. 8:22, NRSV) must have been attractive. Once again, as at the time of the crisis with Ephraim (verses 1-3), Gideon showed restraint, wisdom, and humility. Refusing the offer, he exalted the kingship of the Lord as the ideal for Israelite leadership (verse 23).

Since Israel later had kings, what was wrong with Gideon's becoming king? 1 Sam. 8:7.

The tribes of Israel were supposed to be united by the Lord, who dwelt in the tabernacle and raised up leaders like Joshua and Gideon. But that plan required too much faith. The people wanted a person who was more permanent, more powerful—someone to whom they could pay taxes. They misread God's power. Instead of seeing God as deliverer, they saw those whom He raised up as the key to freedom and independence. God later let them have a king, but it was a concession because of their lack of faith in Him (1 Samuel 8). After the disastrous reign of Saul, the Lord made the best of kingship by choosing David, “a man after his own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14), with whom He made a special covenant (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89). But the kings who descended from David destroyed the spiritual life of the nation. The only hope was a return to the Lord's leadership. He is the divine “root and the offspring of David” (Rev. 22:16) to whom the kingdom rightfully belongs (Gen. 49:10). His power does not originate in this world (John 18:36).

Do you enjoy having power or influence over people? If so, why? Are the results positive or negative?

GIDEON'S MISTAKE (Judg. 8:24-28).

Just after nobly refusing to become king (Judg. 8:23), Gideon made the biggest mistake of his career. He asked for earrings taken from the Midianites (called Ishmaelites in verse 24; compare Gen. 37:25, 27, 28), and from this gold he made an "ephod," a priestly shoulder cape or mantle (verses 24-27).

Why did Gideon do this?

Which of the following best answers the above question?

1. Gideon coveted the gold and realized that the Israelites could make him rich.
2. So that Gideon could have the gold and at the same time acknowledge the Lord's role in the deliverance, he made the gold into a sacred object dedicated to the Lord.
3. Since the Angel of the Lord had appeared to him at Ophrah (Judg. 6:11-24), Gideon thought that he should establish a center of worship there (Judg 8:27).
4. Gideon wanted to establish a worship center in his tribe of Manasseh to make sure that Manasseh would retain a leading political role.
5. Another answer:
6. All the above.

What was wrong with what Gideon did, as recorded in Judges 8:24-27?

By making an ephod containing a lot of gold, like the ephod worn by the Israelite high priest (Exod. 28:6-14), Gideon intended to worship the Lord. But it was wrong for him to set up priestly worship functions that the Lord had not authorized, in competition with the sanctuary. Because the Lord was not present with Gideon's ephod, the ephod itself came to represent God and be worshiped (Judg. 8:27). Compare 1 Kings 12:25-33, which describes how Jeroboam set up unauthorized golden calves at Bethel and Dan, in competition with the temple in Jerusalem. It appears that these were supposed to represent the Lord, who had brought the Israelites out of Egypt (1 Kings 12:28; see Exod. 32:4, 5). But these material representations were, in fact, idols. (See Exod. 20:4-6; Deut. 4:15-18.)

Does our form of worship follow principles established by God? If not, how should we go about making changes?

INGRATITUDE (Judg. 8:29-35).

When Gideon made a golden ephod, his intentions were probably not too bad. But, whereas he had formerly followed God's direction, on this occasion he trusted only in his own reasoning. The results were disastrous, both for his family and for the nation.

Why did the people turn so quickly to Baal worship as soon as Gideon died? Judg. 8:33.

Gideon's ephod was originally supposed to be used to worship the Lord. But more and more importance was attached to the object itself, so that it came to be worshiped. (Compare 2 Kings 18:4.) Once the object was worshiped in place of the Lord Himself, the Lord was forgotten. Then it was a fairly short step for the Israelites to reconnect their worship with Baal, against whom Gideon (Jerubbaal) had contended (Judg. 8:33-35; compare 6:25-32).

Was there a connection between the fact that the Israelites did not remember the Lord after Gideon's death and the ingratitude that they showed to Gideon's family? Judg. 8:33-35.

Deliverance from the Midianites was accomplished by the Lord, working through Gideon. They were a team. When the people of Israel ungratefully "did not remember the Lord their God" (Judg. 8:34, NRSV) and the deliverances He had wrought for Israel, they simultaneously lost sight of the good that deliverers such as Gideon had done to them. Thus, ironically, the apostasy into which Gideon led the people contributed greatly to their subsequent lack of kindness to his family.

When Judges 8:34, NIV, says that the people "did not remember," it does not mean that they had amnesia for which they were not responsible. They were, indeed, responsible for not remembering, that is, not cherishing or guarding as precious the significance of what the Lord had done for them. This meaning of the word *remember* also appears in Exodus 20:8: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy." Compare the parallel statement of the same commandment in Deuteronomy 5:12: "Observe [literally "guard" or "keep"] the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (NIV).

Do we cherish the memory of what God and His people have done for us?

EXPERIMENT WITH KINGSHIP (Judg. 9:1-22).

Gideon said, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you" (Judg. 8:23, NRSV). But after Gideon died, Abimelech persuaded the citizens of Shechem to make him king.

The name *Abimelech*, apparently given by Gideon (Judg. 8:31), means "my father is king." This name probably referred to the divine heavenly Father as king, in harmony with Gideon's words "the Lord will rule over you" (verse 23, NRSV). But Abimelech ignored the significance of his own name!

Why did the citizens of Shechem support Abimelech? Judg. 9:1-6.

Which of the following best answers the question?

1. Abimelech gave the impression, which may have had some basis in reality, that the 70 legitimate sons of Gideon were ruling over the people of Shechem. Abimelech would help to remove this undesirable external authority (Judg. 9:2).
2. Gideon's other sons were born to wives who lived at Ophrah. Abimelech was born to a concubine from Shechem. Thus, he claimed to be a Shechemite.
3. Whereas Gideon and the people of Ophrah belonged to the tribe of Manasseh, the Israelites of Shechem were of the tribe of Ephraim. The proud Ephraimites had earlier chafed under Gideon's leadership (Judg. 8:1-3). Now they had an opportunity to become the dominant northern tribe by appointing as their leader a son of Gideon who was also from their territory.
4. Another answer:
5. All the above.

What is the point of Jotham's parable, recorded in Judges 9:7-20?

Jotham's parable is both a searing commentary on the disloyalty and treachery of Abimelech and the Shechemites (Judg. 9:1-6) and a prophecy that they would destroy each other. (See verses 23-57.)

What dangers are involved in manipulating others to achieve our personal goals? How can we avoid hurting people in our quest for success?

DEPRAVITY AND GRAVITY (Judg. 9:23-57).

Abimelech ruled for three years (Judg. 9:22). But the Lord allowed him and the Shechemites to destroy each other (verses 23-57), as foreseen by Jotham (verse 20). The story demonstrates God's justice in making punishment fit a crime. "What goes around comes around" or "what goes up must come down." (See Judg. 9:57—"fall back on their heads," NRSV.)

Study the coincidences in this story. Where does coincidence cease and divine intervention begin? What evidence is there that God was in control of these "coincidences"?

Judg. 9:23, 24 _____

Compare Judg. 9:23 with Judg. 7:22 _____

Compare Judg. 9:26-29 with verses 1-3 _____

Compare Judg. 9:32, 34 with verse 25 _____

Compare Judg. 9:34, 43 with Judg. 7:16 _____

Compare Judg. 9:48, 49 with verse 20 _____

Compare Judg. 9:53 with verse 57 _____

Like his father, Abimelech was a courageous and effective military leader (Judg. 9:34-49). But his story shows what tragedy can result when (1) people are disloyal and ungrateful to God and to one another, (2) actions are guided by ruthless human ambition rather than by God and His principles, and (3) a leader is chosen for the wrong reasons.

Abimelech was the "bramble" Jotham depicted him to be (Judg. 9:14, 15). An illegitimate son, he was an illegitimate king as far as God was concerned. The first legitimate king of Israel was Saul, whom God rejected because of his disobedience. Like Saul, Abimelech was afflicted by an "evil spirit" from God (Judg. 9:23; compare 1 Sam. 16:14). Also like Saul, Abimelech asked his armor-bearer to kill him when he was mortally wounded. Abimelech's armor-bearer complied, but Saul's did not (Judg. 9:54; compare 1 Sam. 31:4).

Can you find other biblical examples of punishments fitting crimes? (See Gen. 4:10-12; Num. 14:26-35.) How have you seen God's justice at work during your lifetime? Why are some wrongs not paid for in this life?

FURTHER STUDY: On God's ultimate punishment of the wicked at the end of time, read: 2 Thess. 1:7-10; Rev. 20:7-10, 14, 15. Read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, "The Earlier Judges," pp. 555-557.

"God had manifested special favor to Gideon, in selecting him as the instrument through whom to deliver Israel. While great responsibilities rested upon him in this important crisis, Gideon's course was marked with humility and faithful obedience. God accepted his work, and crowned his efforts with success. But now Gideon was assailed by temptation in a new form. When the reprovener of wrong has done his work, in obedience to God's commands, the period of inactivity which succeeds the struggle, is often the most dangerous. This danger Gideon now experienced. A spirit of unrest was upon him. Hitherto he had been content to execute the commands given him of God; but now, instead of calmly waiting for divine instruction, he began to devise and execute plans for himself."—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, July 28, 1881.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The above quotation refers to the danger of periods of inactivity following struggles. Have you found this to be true? (Compare 2 Sam. 7:1; 11:1-3.) Explain your answer.
2. Consider how this lesson can be used to illustrate the contrast between the kingship of sin in our lives and the rulership of Christ and His righteousness. (See Rom. 6:14-22; Col. 1:13, 14.)
3. What does gratitude do to relationships? How do you feel when someone expresses gratitude to you, or fails to do so? Do you express gratitude to other people and to God as much as you could?
4. Do you see a connection between a person's loyalty to God and his or her loyalty to other human beings? (See Ruth 1:16, 17.) What are the implications of this idea for your relationships with others, especially if you are married?

SUMMARY: Gideon was loyal to God when he refused royal honors, but he was disloyal when he set up unauthorized worship. This disloyalty led many Israelites astray, preparing the way for worship of other gods and for disloyalty to his own family. The story of Gideon's son Abimelech illustrates the self-destructiveness of disregard for proper relationships with God and other people.

Courageous Missionary

James H. Zachary

As Rupelin Gorospe and her three children boarded the aircraft, she turned to those who stood watching. "I will return and carry on the work that my husband and I started," she promised.

Rupelin and Art Gorospe had served as nurses in a remote clinic in Ethiopia before they transferred to Ethiopian Adventist College to serve the medical needs of students and staff. The hours at the clinic were long; they needed time to relax.

The couple loaded their camping gear and their family into the little car and drove out of town. As the car turned off the main road, a man with a gun blocked their way. He raised the gun and began firing into the car. Art and the family's maid died instantly. The gunman fired again, but did not hit Rupelin and the children.

Anger and rage filled the hearts of friends and co-workers when they learned what had happened. The killer took the lives of two innocent people, and got only the family's picnic lunch.

Rupelin went to the police, not to demand justice, but to plead for the life of the killer. "Please, when you find this man, spare his life. Tell him I forgive him." The killer, a man named Kabato, was eventually arrested, and sent to prison. A friend of Art Gorospe, fellow missionary Chris Howell, visited Kabato and told him of Rupelin's plea for his life. Howell studied with Kabato, who eventually accepted Jesus as his Saviour and was baptized.

After several weeks of mourning in the Philippines, Rupelin Gorospe returned to her duties as the college nurse, meeting the medical needs of the sick in the community as well as the college.

Life is hard in the college community. Two years ago another teacher was murdered. Recently angry people from the community attempted to burn the house of the college treasurer.

But Rupelin is a courageous young woman; she is staying on. The people need her help. Hers is the spirit that will carry the gospel to the world in spite of challenges and difficulties.

Pray earnestly for the missionaries like Rupelin who minister for Jesus on the front lines.



Rupelin Gorospe and her children have returned to Ethiopia to serve God and the people there.

Repentance and Rashness



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judg. 10:6–12:7.

MEMORY TEXT: “So they put away the foreign gods from among them and worshiped the Lord; and he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer” (Judges 10:16, NRSV).

KEY THOUGHT: When God's people repent and return to His covenant, He can provide for them as He has wanted to do all along. Zeal for God's cause is an inspiring and motivating force, but rashness is destructive.

PROMISES, PROMISES. A father promises his son an outing but does not mark the promise in his appointment book. Responsibilities come up. The father forgets his promise. But the son does not.

A bride vows to “love, honor, and cherish” until death. But down deep, she knows that if things don't go as well as she hopes, she can be divorced and marry someone else.

While he is partying, a king promises with an oath to give his daughter whatever she wishes. Prompted by her mother, she asks for the head of a preacher on a platter. “The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison” (Matt. 14:9, 10, NIV).

Promises are a problem! We are in trouble if we don't keep them, but sometimes we are also in trouble if we do keep them. Making a rash promise, which should not have been made in the first place, can result in a no-win situation. This was the predicament in which Jephthah found himself. He vowed, but it never occurred to him that his daughter's future was at stake!

REPENTANCE (Judg. 10:6-16).

They did it again! The Israelites forsook the Lord. Their worship turned into a veritable United Nations of pagan gods from Syria, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, and Philistia (Judg. 10:6). So the Lord "sold them" into the power of the Philistines and the Ammonites (verse 7, NRSV).

Why do you think the Lord permitted the Philistines and Ammonites to oppress Israel?

Which of the following best answers the question?

1. The Philistines were from the west, and the Ammonites were from the east, so the Israelites would get a double dose of oppression, from both sides.
2. Allowing the Israelites to suffer at the hands of the Philistines and Ammonites, whose gods they worshiped, is another example of the Lord's tailoring punishment to fit a crime.
3. By this means, the Lord could make the gods of the Philistines and Ammonites odious to the Israelites.
4. Another answer:
5. All the above.

In Judges 10:10-16, the Lord directly confronts the Israelites with their apostasy. Compare this with earlier passages that are similar: Judg. 2:1-5; 6:7-10. What similarities and differences do you notice regarding (1) the identity of the one speaking to the people, (2) the indictment, referring to past history and present disloyalty, (3) opportunity for hope (or lack of it), and (4) the reaction of the people?

In Judges 10:14, the Lord made it clear that because the people had abandoned Him, He had justly abandoned them: "Go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress" (NRSV). But the people did not give up. They fully admitted their guilt and the right of God to punish them (verse 15). And they did something to demonstrate their sincerity: They rid themselves of their foreign gods and began to serve the Lord. Because they had responded positively, the Lord was able to help them (verse 16).

How can you rid yourself of those things that stand between you and the Lord?

JEPHTHAH (Judg. 10:17–11:11).

After the Israelites had turned again to the Lord, the Ammonite oppressors showed up again. The Israelites were now looking for a deliverer to lead the battle. Who could do it? The book of Judges leaves that question hanging and moves on to some apparently unrelated background information regarding Jephthah (Judg. 11:1-3). But when the Ammonite threat is mentioned again, it becomes clear that Jephthah is to be the deliverer (verses 4-11).

Jephthah was an illegitimate son of a prostitute (Judg. 11:1). How did circumstances arising from this social handicap result in his being chosen as leader? Judg. 11:2, 3.

Like Ehud, who was left-handed (Judg. 3:15), and Gideon, who was the least important member of the weakest clan in Manasseh (Judg. 6:15), Jephthah had what would have been regarded as a disadvantage. But this resulted in his having an advantage, as was also true in the case of Ehud (Judg. 3:16, 21).

The legitimate sons of Jephthah's father forced him into exile so that they could keep any share he may have had in his father's inheritance (Judg. 11:2). Fending for himself in the land of Tob, he became a leader of a raiding party (verse 3). Thus, when an experienced military leader was needed for the impending battle against the Ammonites, Jephthah was the logical candidate (verses 4-6).

How did the elders of Gilead persuade Jephthah to lead the Israelites into battle? Judg. 11:6-11.

Jephthah had been exiled from Gilead, so he was not prepared to risk his life on behalf of the Gileadites without a substantial reward (Judg. 11:7). So they offered not only to make him leader of an army to fight the Ammonites (verse 6); they also promised to make him the administrative chief of their territory (verse 8). He agreed to those terms and made a covenant with them, which was solemnized before the Lord at Mizpah (verses 9-11), where the Israelites had gathered (Judg. 10:17).

Consider other Bible characters for whom God turned disadvantages into advantages. In what ways has God done this for you? Reviewing your experience, why do you think the Lord blessed you in this manner?

WORDS BEFORE WAR (Judg. 11:12-27).

Rather than immediately rushing into battle, Jephthah tried to avoid war through diplomacy. The Ammonite king argued that when the Israelites came out of Egypt, they took the land between the Arnon and Jabbok rivers from the Ammonites. He demanded it back.

What elements of truth and inaccuracy were contained in the demand of the king of Ammon? Judg. 11:13-22; Num. 21:21-30.

The Israelites had taken this territory from Sihon, king of the Amorites, who had earlier taken it from Moab (Num. 21:21-30). It appears that in the time of Jephthah, the Ammonite king claimed to represent Moab. The Moabites had been weakened by their defeat at the hands of Ehud and his fellow Israelites (Judg. 3:28-30), so perhaps for a time they were allied to the Ammonites, who were related to them through Lot, the nephew of Abraham (Gen. 19:36-38).

Even if the Ammonite king could legitimately represent the Moabites, who at one time had owned the land, Jephthah argued that the Israelites had taken it from Sihon, king of the Amorites, not from the Ammonites (Judg. 11:14-23).

What did Jephthah mean by saying, "Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess? And should we not be the ones to possess everything that the Lord our God has conquered for our benefit" (Judg. 11:24, NRSV)?

There was no United Nations to arbitrate such disputes, so Jephthah appealed to divine justice (verse 27) in accordance with the principle that God had established the boundaries of the Israelites in relation to other nations (Deut. 32:8). When they came out of Egypt, God had guided them by that principle when He forbade them to fight against their relatives, the Moabites and Ammonites (Deut. 2:9, 19).

Jephthah may or may not have understood the sovereignty of God over all nations, but in any case, he stated his case in a way that the foreign ruler could understand. Chemosh was the god of the Moabites (Num. 21:29), so Jephthah was addressing the Ammonite king as the ruler of Moab.

What efforts does Satan continually make to reclaim "territory" in our lives that has been taken over by the Holy Spirit? What is the answer to Satan's claims?

VOW FOR VICTORY (Judg. 11:28-40).

Since the Ammonite king did not accept Jephthah's reasoning, Jephthah went into action, motivated by the Spirit of the Lord. Like Gideon, he attacked the enemy before they attacked him.

Why did Jephthah make the vow that he did? Judg. 11:30, 31.

Jephthah valued the security of promises made before God. Perhaps his unstable background had made him particularly sensitive to human unreliability and the need for security that only God could provide. In any case, his willingness to lead the Israelites had been based upon promises witnessed by the Lord (Judg. 11:10, 11).

Jephthah felt a need for security. Rather than seeking signs, he vowed that if the Lord would give him victory, he would offer as a burnt offering whoever or whatever should meet him when he returned home.

What was the result of his vow? Judg. 11:34-40.

To his dismay, Jephthah was met by his only child, a daughter. God had fulfilled his condition by giving him victory. Now he felt obligated to fulfill his vow. Heroically, his daughter did not protest (compare Gen. 22:9), but she asked to live for two more months. Then, he "did with her according to the vow he had made" (Judg. 11:39, NRSV). At this point, perhaps out of a sense of horror, the biblical text avoids stating directly what happened: he offered her as a burnt offering (verse 31). This does not mean, of course, that he burned her alive; he would have slain her with a knife first. (Compare Gen. 22:10.)

What went wrong? The Lord was already with Jephthah. He did not need to make his rash vow; God would have given him victory anyway. The vow showed insufficient faith. Furthermore, once the vow was made and the daughter designated, Jephthah should have offered an animal as a substitute, just as Abraham offered in place of Isaac a ram provided by the Lord (Gen. 22:13, 14). God did not demand or approve of human sacrifice (Deut. 12:31), which was practiced by Jephthah's enemies, the Ammonites (Lev. 18:21; compare 1 Kings 11:7) and Moabites (2 Kings 3:26, 27).

When is an oath rash, and when is it a commitment to display the victories faith has wrought in our lives? Matt. 5:33-37.

FRIENDS WHO BECAME ENEMIES (Judg. 12:1-7).

Just as the Ephraimites had given Gideon trouble after he defeated the Midianites (Judg. 8:1), so a later generation of these fellow Israelites harassed Jephthah after he defeated the Ammonites.

Compare the trouble the Ephraimites gave Gideon and the trouble they gave Jephthah. What similarities and what differences do you see between the two situations?

In both situations, "the tribe of Ephraim is presented in an unfavorable light. They were passive in time of oppression, and arrogant when others had taken the initiative and won the victory."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 379. Whereas the Ephraimites answered Gideon's call once the Midianites were on the run (Judg. 7:24, 25), they did not help Jephthah at all (12:2). The Ephraimites disputed with Gideon (8:1), but they assembled their troops against Jephthah (12:1). The Ephraimites backed off when Gideon spoke to them (8:3), but they taunted Jephthah (12:4).

Why did Jephthah fight? Judg. 12:4-6.

Which of the following best answers the above question?

1. The provocation was too severe to go unpunished.
2. Jephthah had just suffered an intense personal tragedy owing to his vow regarding his daughter. Aside from losing her, which was terrible enough, he would be deprived of descendants. His tolerance for nonsense from the Ephraimites would be at an all-time low.
3. Since the Ephraimites were about to attack him and his fellow Gileadites, Jephthah led an effective defense.
4. Another answer:
5. All the above.

Civil war! The book of Judges begins with Israelite tribes cooperating together (Judg. 1:1-3, 22, NRSV—"house of Joseph" = Ephraim and Manasseh). They also cooperated under Barak (Judg. 5:14, 15, 18) and Gideon (Judg. 7:23-25). But intertribal problems grew from apathy (Judg. 5:15-17) to contention (Judg. 8:1-3) and finally, to war (Judg. 12:1-6). The Israelites had become their own enemies!

How can we avoid strife among ourselves?

FURTHER STUDY: On the topic of respect for oaths, read Joshua 9, describing the circumstances surrounding a treaty that the Israelites made with the Gibeonites. Read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, "The Earlier Judges," pp. 557-559.

"The Gibeonites had pledged themselves to renounce idolatry, and accept the worship of Jehovah; and the preservation of their lives was not a violation of God's command to destroy the idolatrous Canaanites. Hence the Hebrews had not by their oath pledged themselves to commit sin. And though the oath had been secured by deception, it was not to be disregarded. The obligation to which one's word is pledged—if it does not bind him to perform a wrong act—should be held sacred. No consideration of gain, of revenge, or of self-interest, can in any way affect the inviolability of an oath or pledge. 'Lying lips are abomination to the Lord.' Proverbs 12:22. He that 'shall ascend into the hill of the Lord,' and 'stand in His holy place,' is 'he that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not.' Psalms 24:3; 15:4."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 506.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the implications of the above statement (especially "if it does not bind him to perform a wrong act") for Jephthah's decision to sacrifice his daughter (Judg. 11:35)?
2. Do "moral dilemmas" really exist? In other words, is it ever true that keeping one of God's requirements necessarily results in breaking another of His requirements?
3. Do you keep your promises faithfully? What is the difference between ordinary promises on the one hand and vows, oaths, or pledges on the other hand?
4. What issues regarding vows are addressed in Numbers 30?

SUMMARY: When the Israelites turned again to God, putting away those things that came between themselves and Him, He forgave them and mercifully turned again to help them. To deliver them from the Ammonites, God raised up Jephthah as their leader. Jephthah was zealous for the Lord, but at a highly stressful time, he sought assurance from God in an unwise way, which was not consistent with faith. Rash vows that dishonor God should not be kept.



Would You Be Willing to Try?

Adly Campos

Night after night Louis attended the evangelistic meetings in Mexico City alone. He seemed intensely interested in the topics on the home that were presented each evening. One night after the meeting, he stopped me. "I wish I had known what you are presenting before I got married, and now I don't know if it is possible to save our marriage. But I would like you to talk with my wife," he pleaded. I usually do not counsel someone who has not come to me for help, and she had not attended the meetings, so I felt I had little influence over her. But the pastor and I went to visit Louis' wife, and she agreed to talk with me. She was a fragile soul, wounded by misunderstanding, jealousy, and mistrust. This was her second marriage; the first one failed because of her husband's infidelity. Louis did not realize the trauma she had suffered in her first marriage and did not know how to treat her tenderly.

As we talked, tears flowed down her face, but after the storm of emotions, she began to realize that with Jesus, there was hope for their marriage. Mariela was willing to talk with her husband and receive marriage counseling. The next day Louis and Mariela came together to talk. The atmosphere was full of sincerity, recognition and acceptance. The couple asked pardon of each other, held hands, embraced, and finally decided to stop the divorce process.

Louis had attended a church but had never surrendered his life to the Lord. Mariela had been a Christian, but had abandoned her faith long ago. I explained the importance of inviting Jesus into the home. But Mariela was reluctant to be rebaptized.

Louis and Mariela began coming to the meetings together. They looked like a newly married couple. On Sabbath Louis stood to request baptism, and to his surprise and ours, Mariela suddenly appeared beside him; they were baptized together. Following their baptism Louis and Mariela reconsecrated their marriage to God at the close of the series of meetings. Louis and Mariela are good examples of what Jesus can do to create a happy home!



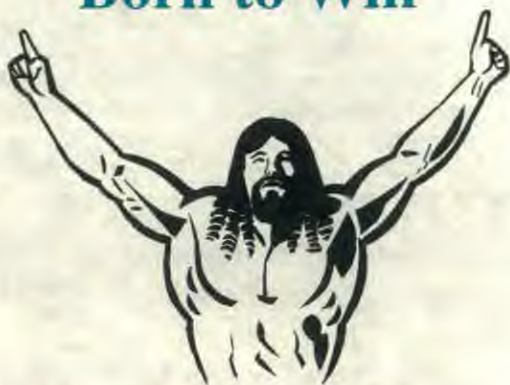
Adly Campos is an administrative secretary in the Ministerial Association of the General Conference. She conducts family-life evangelistic meetings in Hispanic communities.

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Born to Win



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judges 13.

MEMORY TEXT: "And the Angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, 'Indeed now, you are barren and have borne no children, but you shall conceive and bear a son' " (Judges 13:3, NKJV).

KEY THOUGHT: Samson was a special deliverer, whom God chose before his birth. All who are privileged to be chosen by God have a responsibility to live holy lives.

CHILD OF PROMISE. Infertility is a major problem today. Many couples spend thousands of dollars on medical procedures that increase their chances of having children. In many cases, of course, success by such means is not guaranteed.

In ancient times, couples were just as anxious to have children, but modern technology was not available to them. The kind of stress that could result from infertility is apparent in this exchange between Rachel and Jacob: Rachel "said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I'll die!' Jacob became angry with her and said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?' " (Gen. 30:1, 2, NIV).

Why did God allow Rachel to be childless? So that when she did have a child, she would recognize him to be a special gift from the Lord (Gen. 30:22, 23). Earlier, God had taught the same lesson to Sarah (Gen. 18:9-14; 21:1-7) and Rebekah (Gen. 25:21).

In the time of the "judges," Mrs. Manoah was infertile. But the Lord gave her a child who would grow up to become big and strong. Yes, strong indeed!

MIRACLE CHILD (Judg. 13:1-5).

After the short career of Jephthah (Judg. 12:7), followed by three minor judges (verses 8-15), the Israelites turned from God again. So He gave them to the Philistines for a long time: 40 years (Judg. 13:1).

There is no indication that the Israelites were repentant at this time. Neither was there a living deliverer. But in His great mercy, God had not given up on the Israelites. So He raised up a deliverer, giving him as a baby to faithful parents. Like the wives of the patriarchs (Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel), the wife of Manoah had been infertile. Thus, the baby announced was a miracle child, a special gift from God.

What similarities were there between the circumstances of Samson's conception and birth and those surrounding special cases mentioned in the New Testament?

Luke 1:5-22 _____

Luke 1:26-38 _____

With regard to the circumstances of his birth, Samson had some illustrious company: Isaac, John the Baptist, and Jesus Christ. The mothers of Isaac and John the Baptist were beyond childbearing age (Gen. 18:11; Luke 1:7, 36, 37), and the mother of Jesus was a virgin (Luke 1:27, 34, 35).

The earlier judges decisively subdued Israel's enemies (Judg. 3:30; 4:23, 24). But the Angel of the Lord predicted that Samson would only begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines (Judg. 13:5).

Why would Samson only begin to deliver Israel?

Choose the best answer to the above question:

1. Because of the poor spiritual condition of the Israelites, God could do only a limited work for them.
2. Samson would carry on a personal struggle with the Philistines rather than leading an army against them.
3. The Philistines were an especially tough enemy.
4. Samson's life would fall short of God's ideal for him.
5. Another answer:
6. All the above.

Why should every child be valued as a gift from God? (See Ps. 127:3-5.)

NAZIRITE (Judg. 13:4, 5, 7, 13, 14).

Before his birth, Samson was designated by the Lord as a Nazirite, that is, a person dedicated or “separated” to God. As a physical sign of this dedication, he was never to have a haircut (Judg. 13:5). His mother was not to drink “wine or strong drink” or eat unclean meat (verses 4, 7, 14).

What was the relationship between Nazirites and priests, who were also dedicated to God? Numbers 6; compare Lev. 10:6-9; 21:1-15.

While only priests were permitted to officiate in the sanctuary, any Israelite could consecrate himself to the Lord by becoming a Nazirite. Numbers 6 regulates Nazirites, whether men or women, who voluntarily dedicated themselves to God for limited periods of time. During a time of dedication, a Nazirite was to indicate outwardly his or her special, holy relationship with the Lord (verse 8) by abstaining from (1) wine, “strong drink,” and all grape products (Num. 6:3, 4), (2) haircuts (verse 5), and (3) corpse contamination (verses 6, 7).

The restrictions for Nazirites were similar to those for priests, who were also holy to the Lord. Priests were forbidden to drink wine or strong drink when they went into the sanctuary (Lev. 10:9), and they were restricted with regard to corpse contamination. Nazirites were like the high priest, who was forbidden to defile himself even for his closest relatives (Lev. 21:11). Priests were allowed haircuts, but they were forbidden to let their hair hang loose in mourning for the dead (Lev. 10:6; 21:10).

Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist were lifelong Nazirites. Samson and John the Baptist were designated as such by the Lord (Judg. 13:5; Luke 1:15). Samuel, who was born to a barren mother in response to her prayer of faith, was dedicated to God by her (1 Sam. 1:11, 28). It appears that lifelong Nazirites were not prohibited from contact with corpses. In fact, on several occasions Samson came in contact with dead Philistines whom he had killed. (See, for example, Judg. 15:15.) However, Samson and Samuel were prohibited from having their hair cut (Judg. 13:5; 1 Sam. 1:11). John the Baptist was not to drink wine or strong drink (Luke 1:15).

Have you dedicated your life to God in a special way? What connection does your lifestyle have to your inner commitment? Do you think that the Christian lifestyle should be in all respects identical for all believers?

RESPONSIBLE PARENTS (Judg. 13:2-14).

The name of Manoah's wife is not given, but it was to her that the Angel of the Lord appeared (Judg. 13:3). When Manoah prayed that the Lord would send the Angel to them again, He appeared a second time to the woman, who then brought her husband to talk to Him (verses 9-11).

Why did the Angel appear primarily to Manoah's wife, rather than to Manoah? Judg. 13:3, 9.

Which of the following best answers the above question?

1. Manoah's wife had been infertile (verse 2). She needed special evidence to believe that she would have a child. (Compare Gen. 18:12—Sarah laughed.)
2. Manoah's wife would nourish the baby during pregnancy. Also, after his birth and before he would be weaned, she was responsible for observing dietary restrictions in keeping with his Nazirite status (Judg. 13:4, 7, 14).
3. It appears that Manoah's wife was more perceptive than her husband regarding the Lord and the way He deals with human beings (Judg. 13:22, 23).
4. Another answer:
5. All the above.

How seriously did Manoah and his wife take the words of the Angel? Judg. 13:6-12.

Manoah's words make it clear that he believed the message of the Angel of the Lord as related by his wife. Unlike Zecharias, the father of John the Baptist, he did not ask for confirmation of the prediction that he would have a son (compare Luke 1:18), but rather for further instruction regarding the child's life and mission (Judg. 13:8, 12).

Manoah and his wife took their responsibility seriously, and God answered Manoah's prayer for guidance (verses 8, 9). But when the Angel of the Lord returned and spoke to Manoah directly, He reiterated the dietary guidelines that He had stated earlier (verses 13, 14).

Do we take seriously enough our responsibility to safeguard the physical, moral, and spiritual well-being of our children? Do we ask God for counsel in these matters? What is so important about diet? How do prenatal factors affect children?

HIS NAME IS WONDERFUL (Judg. 13:15-23).

How did Manoah's wife describe the Angel of the Lord to her husband? Judg. 13:6.

Manoah and his wife did not know that the man they saw (verses 6, 10, 11) was "the angel of the Lord" (verse 16). Like Gideon, they offered Him food. (Compare Judg. 6:19.) The Angel said that He would not eat the food, but they could offer a burnt offering to the Lord (Judg. 13:16).

With aroused curiosity, Manoah asked the Angel who He was (verse 17). Without stating His name, the Angel described His name as "wonderful" (verse 18, NRSV). The word translated "wonderful" here means something like "beyond human understanding." (Compare Ps. 139:6; see also NIV of Judg. 13:18.)

When Manoah offered a burnt offering and cereal offering to the Lord, the Angel ascended in the flame (Judg. 13:20). Manoah and his wife now understood the man to be "the angel of the Lord," that is, "God," "the Lord" (verses 21-23). Like Gideon, Manoah was afraid. (Compare Judg. 6:22.) Whereas the Lord had reassured Gideon (verse 23), it was Manoah's wife who reassured Manoah on the basis of the Angel's favorable treatment of them (Judg. 13:23).

In an earlier lesson (lesson 5, Tuesday, on Judg. 6:11-16), we identified "the angel of the Lord" with Christ. Further support for this identification can be found by comparing the description of the Angel's name as "wonderful" (Judg. 13:18) with the description of the Messiah in Isaiah 9:6: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (NRSV). The word translated "wonderful" here means literally "wonder" (wonder or marvel of a counselor). This noun is from the same Hebrew root as the adjective "wonderful" in Judges 13:18.

An important aspect of the Lord's "wonderfulness" is the fact that He performs wonders of deliverance on behalf of His people (Exod. 15:11; Ps. 77:14). The wonder that He performed before Manoah and his wife (Judg. 13:19, 20) by ascending in the flame of the burnt-offering sacrifice (verse 20) pointed forward with amazing clarity to His greatest act of deliverance: the wondrous sacrifice of Himself on behalf of human beings (see John 1:29; compare John 20:17—"I have not yet ascended to the Father").

Describe your feelings of awe when you contemplate what the Lord has done and is continuing to do for His people.

SAMSON (Judg. 13:24, 25).

God had high hopes for Samson, as shown by the marvelous way in which He had announced his birth. As the boy grew, the Lord blessed him, and when he was still young, "the Spirit of the Lord began to stir [impel] him" (Judg. 13:25, NIV; compare Luke 1:15, 80; Luke 2:52).

What did God want to do with Samson? Did he live up to the Lord's ideal for his life? Judg. 13:5.

Which of the following best answers the above question?

1. In spite of his failures, Samson did fulfill the prediction that he would begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines (Judg. 13:5; compare Judg. 16:30, 31). It is not clear, however, whether the prediction expressed the full extent of God's ideal or reflected the reality of what God could do with him, given constraints imposed by Samson's own failures.
2. If he had lived a life of wholehearted devotion to God, Samson could have eliminated the Philistine threat.
3. Had Samson been a spiritual man, in keeping with his special dedication to God, he could have been a great religious leader like Joshua, Samuel, and David. He could have led the Israelites to repentance and reformation, to love and respect the One whose name and works are wonderful (Judg. 13:18, 19).
4. Another answer:
5. All the above.

Who were the Philistines, and who finally delivered Israel from them? 2 Sam. 5:17-25; 8:1.

The Philistines were a problem to the Israelites before the time of Samson (Judg. 3:31; 10:7) and continued to cause serious trouble until David overcame them. "They were, like the Hebrews, invaders and settlers in Palestine. Philistines, in limited numbers, were in the land as early as the time of Abraham (Gen. 21:32). But their major wave of migration into Palestine probably occurred at the beginning of the 12th century B.C. along with that of other non-Semitic tribes from Asia Minor and the Aegean Islands."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 382.

What is your part in avoiding Samson's failure and allowing God to achieve His ideal for your life?

FURTHER STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, "Samson," pp. 560-562.

"He who will observe simplicity in all his habits, restricting the appetite and controlling the passions, may preserve his mental powers strong, active, and vigorous, quick to perceive everything which demands thought or action, keen to discriminate between the holy and the unholy, and ready to engage in every enterprise for the glory of God and the benefit of humanity."—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, September 29, 1881.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The Angel of the Lord called Samson through his parents. Study the relationships between the various times and ways in which God communicated with His people during the period of the "judges":
 - a. Angel of the Lord rebukes (Judg. 2:1-5).
 - b. prophetess called (Judg. 4:4-7).
 - c. prophet rebukes (Judg. 6:7-10).
 - d. Angel of the Lord calls (Judg. 6:11-16).
 - e. Lord rebukes (Judg. 10:10-16).
 - f. Angel of the Lord calls (Judges 13).
2. What is the relationship between holiness and effectiveness in service for Christ? If Samson had been genuinely holy by virtue of fellowship with God, what difference would there have been in his effectiveness?
3. Why was David ultimately more successful in subduing the Philistines than was Samson? Are solitary champions or group leaders more effective in God's work today?

SUMMARY: Samson was a miracle child, announced by the "wonderful" Angel of the Lord Himself and born to a barren mother. His entire life, even before birth, was to be holy, dedicated to God. His mission was to begin delivering Israel from the Philistines. God chooses leaders whom He has carefully trained for the particular challenges with which they will be confronted.



The Saloon Church, Part 1

James H. Zachary

I n s i d e S t o r y

Young Lica had problems. His father was a drunkard. His mother lived a life of sin. Lica soon became a problem boy in his village. Then one day a young Christian couple invited him to attend a Revelation Seminar, and his life began to change.

Lica made the long trip from his village to Pitesti, a city in Romania, to attend the seminar. His heart thrilled as he studied the Bible and began to realize that Jesus loved him. Week after week he traveled to Pitesti to hear more of Jesus. He longed to share this message with the people in his own village.

He visited the village mayor. "I would like to use the town hall to hold a Revelation Seminar," he said. But the mayor refused to rent the building to someone who wanted to give Bible studies. The high school principal also refused to rent a classroom.

The only other building large enough for a Revelation Seminar was the town's saloon. He went to talk to the man who owned the saloon, a man affectionately known as Uncle Elijah. "Uncle, I would like to rent your saloon for a Revelation Seminar."

"What is that?" Elijah asked.

"It is a meeting where many people can come to study the book of Revelation." Elijah caught the phrase "many people." Perhaps this was a way to increase business, he thought. He gladly agreed.

Eagerly Lica found the pastor. "I have rented a hall. I will invite the people. Please come and teach a Revelation Seminar in my village." Pastor Titi Gadea was delighted.

On the evening of the first meeting, Uncle Elijah set up extra chairs in his saloon. As the people arrived, he stood behind the counter, ready to dispense drinks. And many people came to the meeting in the saloon. While he waited to take orders, Uncle Elijah listened to the interesting seminar. But no one bought drinks.

(continued)



Lica's life changed when he found Jesus Christ.

James H. Zachary recently retired from the Ministerial Association at the General Conference.

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The Ungolden Rule



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judges 14 and 15.

MEMORY TEXT: "And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions" (Heb. 11:32, 33, NKJV).

KEY THOUGHT: Even though Samson's life was far from exemplary, God overruled human attitudes and circumstances in order to carry out His will, the deliverance of His people.

SECOND STRIKE. "He hit me first!" "No! He hit me first—purposely!" Sound familiar? The underlying assumption is that hitting is justifiable if it is done in retaliation. This logic is appealing not only to children but to adults and entire nations, as well. A military strike or war is "just" if it responds to provocation by the other side. Of course, the other side is sure that *it* was also provoked. Resulting cycles of aggression can go on for years, or even centuries, causing untold suffering.

Jesus said: "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matt. 5:39, NRSV; compare verse 44). Love and forgiveness break cycles of aggression caused by hatred.

Why did Samson not turn the other cheek to the Philistines? The situation was special in that the Lord had commissioned Samson to carry out His judgments upon the enemies of His people. Because these enemies had filled up the cup of their iniquity, the Lord brought retribution upon them.

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PROVIDENTIAL PROVOCATION (Judg. 14:1-4).

“Once Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw a Philistine woman” (Judg. 14:1, NRSV). Thus his troubles began. Eve had a similar experience: “The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6, NRSV). Liking what she saw, and trusting her own perceptions, Eve made a foolish decision. Samson’s parents tried to keep him from an unwise decision, but to no avail.

On what basis did Samson’s parents try to persuade him to reconsider? Judg. 14:3; compare Exod. 34:16; Deut. 7:3.

Because of the danger of falling into idolatry, the Israelites were expressly forbidden to intermarry with the idolatrous inhabitants of the land (Deut. 7:3, 4). Before this command was given to Israel, Abraham and Isaac recognized the importance of not taking wives from among the inhabitants of Canaan (Gen. 24:3; compare 27:46–28:5).

In spite of God’s command, examples from the lives of the patriarchs, and the wishes of his parents, Samson wanted a Philistine girl. He was supposed to be dedicated to God for life as a holy person, which gave him all the more responsibility to choose a wife of whom God could approve. (Compare Lev. 21:7, regulating marriages of priests.)

What is meant in Judges 14:4 by the words: “His father and mother did not know that this was from the Lord; for he was seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines” (NRSV)?

Did the Lord really want Samson to break His own command regarding marrying non-Israelite women? Before we try to answer that question, let’s ask another one: Did the Lord want Joseph’s brothers to sell him into slavery (Gen. 37:25-28)? But see how Joseph later interpreted the event to his brothers: “And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Gen. 45:5, NRSV; compare 50:20). So the Lord even uses human mistakes to accomplish His purposes. (Compare Rom. 8:28.)

Have you seen human mistakes overruled by God? Are there aspects of God’s overruling providence that you will never understand in this life? How can we reconcile ourselves to hurtful experiences that the Lord has permitted?

A MARRIAGE RIDDLED WITH PROBLEMS (Judg. 14:5-20).

Against the wishes of his parents, Samson insisted on marrying a Philistine woman (Judg. 14:3). So his parents went with him to Timnah (verse 5), undoubtedly to make arrangements for the marriage. At some point along the way, Samson was traveling alone when a lion roared at him.

Why did the Spirit of the Lord rush upon Samson so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands (Judg. 14:6)? He was to deliver Israel from Philistines, not from lions.

Which of the following best answers the above question?

1. If the Spirit of the Lord had not empowered him to kill the lion, the lion would have killed him, and then he could not have delivered anyone.
2. The Lord let him see what he could do to a lion, so that he would have no fear of human beings.
3. In this way the Lord set up the circumstances for Samson's riddle (verse 14), which was to carry out His purpose by causing conflict between Samson and the Philistines (verses 15-20; compare verse 4—"for he was seeking a pretext," NRSV).
4. When Samson told his wife the meaning of the riddle (verse 17), he may well have included some description of the circumstances behind it, which she may have passed on to the Philistines. If so, this would explain why the Philistines apparently did not attempt to apprehend Samson after he killed 30 men in their city of Ashkelon (verse 19). Thus, the awesome feat that Samson had performed against the lion would have furthered God's purpose by intimidating the Philistines. Verse 11 suggests that they may have been impressed with his strong appearance even before they knew the riddle: When they saw him, "they brought thirty companions to be with him," perhaps partly to keep him under control.
5. Another answer:
6. All the above.

What does this story (Judg. 14:5-20) reveal about the character of Samson, his wife (verses 16, 17), and the Philistines (verse 15)?

Illustrate how God sometimes uses situations existing in our lives to fulfill His purposes.

“JUDGE” WITH A GRUDGE (Judg. 15:1-8).

Mr. and Mrs. Samson had gotten off to a rocky start. Rather than telling her new husband about the threat of her ruthless, cruel countrymen to burn her and her father's house, she showed disloyalty to Samson by betraying his secret (Judg. 16:15-17). Ironically, she ended up suffering the very fate that she had tried to avoid.

What chain of circumstances led to the death of Samson's wife? Judg. 15:5, 6.

One thing led to another, in a series of “cascading consequences” shaped by human choices in accordance with the characters of the individuals involved. Killing the lion and eating the honey led Samson, who was clever, as well as strong, to invent a riddle and challenge the Philistines with a wager. To solve the riddle and win the wager, they intimidated his wife into betraying him, which infuriated him so that he abandoned her. Thinking that the abandonment was permanent, her father betrothed her to the best man at Samson's wedding. When his anger abated and he again felt desire for his wife, Samson returned to take up marital relations. But because she was now betrothed to someone else, her father could not give her to Samson. So Samson took revenge by arson on a grand scale. Their crops gone, the Philistines blamed Samson's father-in-law for provoking him and burned the father-in-law along with his daughter, Samson's now ex-wife.

If Samson were angry with his wife and father-in-law, why did he want revenge on the Philistines when they burned them? Judg. 15:7, 8.

Which of the following best answers the above question?

1. Samson was appalled by this excessively brutal act.
2. Samson was angry with the Philistines anyway and was ready for any excuse to do them more damage.
3. It appears that Samson still had some loyalty to the woman he had loved.
4. Another answer:
5. All the above.

Have you experienced “cascading consequences” (one thing leading to another) in your life, including your spiritual life? How have you related to these consequences?

COUNTERREVENGE COUNTERED (Judg. 15:7-15).

To avenge the death of his wife, Samson wiped out a group of Philistines, perhaps the same ones who had burned his wife. "He struck them down hip and thigh" (Judg. 15:8, NRSV), that is, he destroyed them completely.

The Philistines had not retaliated directly against Samson, most likely because they were afraid of him. Now they could no longer tolerate his being on the loose. So he chose to live in an isolated place, where he could defend himself against capture.

What was the principle on which the Philistines and Samson were operating? Judg. 15:10, 11.

Both sides were trying to do to the other what the other side had done to them. This principle of retaliation is the "ungolden rule," in contrast to Jesus' "golden rule": "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matt. 7:12, NIV).

How did the men of Judah help Samson, and how did he demonstrate his faith in God? Judg. 15:12-15.

Samson's 3,000 fellow Israelites did not intend to help him. Had they fought with him, who knows what deliverance could have been wrought. But their fear overshadowed any faith in God. Nevertheless, the cowardly Judahites unwittingly helped Samson by setting up a situation in which the Philistines were surprised. Thinking that he was theirs, the Philistines rushed upon him, but the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon Samson, and he wiped them out.

The fact that Samson had allowed himself to be bound shows his great confidence in the strength given him by the Spirit of the Lord. He was a hero of faith (Heb. 11:32).

Samson must have been remarkably muscular, but he was not muscle-bound. He was fast enough to kill a lion (Judg. 14:6), to catch 300 jackals (Judg. 15:4), and to do hand-to-hand combat against an entire army (Judg. 15:15). His physical prowess was superhuman. With God's Spirit working through him, he was invincible.

Barak had led 10,000 brave volunteers (Judg. 4:10); Samson now fought alone. The spiritual deterioration of the Israelites was reflected in their shortage of courageous individuals.

What can we accomplish when we have confidence in what the Holy Spirit can do through us? (See Acts 1:8.)

MIRACLE WATER (Judg. 15:16-19).

After Samson killed 1,000 Philistines, he celebrated in the same way that Deborah and Barak had: with a poem (Judg. 15:16; compare Judges 5). His poem is short, but like his riddle, it is clever. (See Judg. 14:14.) It includes a wordplay on *donkey* and *heap*, which sound identical in Hebrew: *Bilchi hachchamor, chamor chamoratayim* ("With the jawbone of a donkey, a heap, two heaps").

In what predicament did Samson find himself? Judg. 15:18.

Killing 1,000 men with the jawbone of a donkey (Judg. 15:15) was hard work, even for Samson. So after his deliverance and his poem, Samson was dehydrated, in a hot country without water. He was in real trouble.

Compare the situation of the Israelites after their deliverance from Pharaoh at the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21-31): they celebrated with a song (Exod. 15:1-21), after which they found themselves in the wilderness without water (verse 22).

What did Samson's prayer (Judg. 15:18) reveal about his dependence upon God?

The Lord had given Samson superhuman strength, but He did not keep him from becoming weary and dehydrated. Samson had won, but without divine help, he would have died right there. He was completely dependent upon his heavenly Father, an important thing for him to understand.

Jesus demonstrated the importance of recognizing dependence upon the heavenly Father. The Spirit led Him into the wilderness, and after 40 days of fasting, He was hungry (Matt. 4:1, 2). Then Satan tempted Him to neglect dependence upon His Father for physical needs (verses 3, 4). When the defeated foe departed, angels came and ministered to Jesus, who was weak and exhausted (Matt. 4:11).

Just as angels ministered to Jesus after His victory, and just as God provided water for the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod. 15:25), even bringing water for them out of rocks (Exod. 17:6; Num. 20:10, 11), so God miraculously provided for Samson in answer to his prayer (Judg. 15:19).

Do you live and pray in harmony with the fact that you are dependent upon God? (See Dan. 5:23.) How can we learn to have greater dependence upon Him?

FURTHER STUDY: On the need of total dependence upon God, read: Ps. 127:1; Jer. 10:23; John 3:27; 15:5; 2 Cor. 3:5. Read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, "Samson," pp. 563, 564.

"Thousands of Israelites witnessed Samson's defeat of the Philistines, yet no voice was raised in triumph, till the hero, elated at his marvelous success, celebrated his own victory. But he praised himself, instead of ascribing the glory to God. No sooner had he ceased than he was reminded of his weakness by a most intense and painful thirst. He had become exhausted by his prodigious labors, and no means of supplying his need was at hand. He began to feel his utter dependence upon God, and to be convinced that he had not triumphed by his own power, but in the strength of the Omnipotent One.

"He then gave God the praise for his deliverance, and offered an earnest prayer for relief from his present suffering. The Lord hearkened to his petition and opened for him a spring of water. In token of his gratitude Samson called the name of the place En-hakkore, or 'the well of him that cried.'"—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, October 6, 1881.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In Wednesday's lesson, we mentioned Samson's faith in the strength given him by the Spirit of the Lord, as shown by the fact that he allowed himself to be bound. How does this idea relate to the quotation given above? Have you, like Samson, had experiences that taught you not to rely on your own abilities, but on those given to you by God?
2. What kinds of problems are caused today by marriages of believers with nonbelievers? How far should parents go in trying to prevent such marriages? Can two Seventh-day Adventists marry and then experience problems of a mixed marriage due to differing levels of spiritual commitment?

SUMMARY: Samson was a one-man army for the Lord. To use him effectively, in spite of his failures, God allowed a chain of circumstances in which he and the Philistines provoked each other. At crucial times, the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him and enabled him to wreak havoc upon them. As Samson was dependent upon God's power, so are we. Only by complete trust in Him can we fulfill our mission in life.



The Saloon Church, Part 2

James H. Zachary

Uncle Elijah stood behind the bar ready to serve drinks. As he waited, he listened to the interesting seminar being taught in his saloon. But no one bought a drink all evening.

Young Lica's life had been changed when he attended a Revelation Seminar. He wanted to share his new faith with people in his hometown in Romania. When he could not rent the town hall or a school classroom, he offered to rent the saloon. Uncle Elijah, the bartender, accepted the offer, hoping for more business.

Lica invited everyone he could find to the meetings. He saw a young woman weeding her garden and asked what she was doing. "Can't you see? I am pulling weeds," she said.

"You need to be pulling some other weeds," he responded. Surprised, she asked him what he meant. "The weeds of sin in your heart," he replied. "Come to the Revelation Seminar and learn for yourself." The young woman and her sister came every night. When they took their stand to be baptized, a great storm of anger swept over their family. Pastor Titi Gadea, seminar leader, visited the parents, who were impressed by his Christlike demeanor. Reluctantly they accepted their daughters' decisions.

Two other women decided to be baptized, but when their husbands learned of their plans they drove the women from their homes. The new believers prayed for them and for their husbands. Alone now, the men talked about how their wives had changed. They seemed more loving since they attended the meetings. The husbands found their wives and begged them to come home.

Uncle Elijah's saloon was filled with people, but no one drank his liquor. He went bankrupt and closed the saloon. He tried to sell the business, but no one wanted an old saloon. However, the little group of believers needed a church home. So they pooled their meager resources and purchased the building. Now if you were to walk by the old saloon on Sabbath morning, instead of rowdy conversation, you would hear songs of praise.



James H. Zachary recently retired from the Ministerial Association of the General Conference.

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Strong and Weak



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judg. 15:20–16:31.

MEMORY TEXT: "He did not know that the Lord had departed from him" (Judges 16:20, NKJV).

KEY THOUGHT: Samson was physically strong but morally weak. By surrendering his special relationship to God, he lost God's power, the secret of his success.

THE WEAKEST POINT. The Great Wall of China, stretching for thousands of miles across northern China, is the longest structure built by human beings. It stands about 25 feet high and has thousands of watchtowers. Construction of the wall, done entirely by hand, took centuries and required hundreds of thousands of laborers, working under tremendous hardship, with the loss of many lives.

According to Chinese historical sources, the wall was begun by Shih-huang-ti, a ruler of the Ch'in dynasty, who ruled from 221-210 B.C. His intention was to defend China's border against warlike tribesmen who lived in the Mongolian plains to the north. But there have been many occasions when the wall has failed to protect China. The northern enemies have simply found the weakest, most lightly guarded points, and poured through. Because some of China's governments were weak and corrupt, the massive walls were not always well defended. China's northern enemies were often able to surmount them.

A wall, a chain, or a person is only as strong as the weakest point. Physically, Samson was the strongest man who ever lived, as far as we know. But he had a weak point. Once his enemies found it, he soon became history.

IRRESISTIBLE FORCE (Judg. 15:20–16:3).

Coming immediately after the story of Samson's great victory with the jawbone of a donkey, the notice that he judged Israel for 20 years (Judg. 15:20) implies that the Philistines did not again successfully trouble the Israelites for several years.

Before Samson's victory, the Philistines had felt free to raid the Israelites. That is how they had tried to capture him: They made a raid, intimidating the Judahites into helping them (Judg. 15:9-13). But after Samson's victory, the book of Judges does not record another battle between him and the Philistines. Fear must have kept them from attempting to capture him. As long as he remained free, the Philistines would not dare risk arousing him to retaliatory action by attacking his people.

How did Samson foolishly jeopardize his safety and that of his people? Judg. 16:1, 2.

As Israel's deliverer, Samson had a great responsibility. But he made a foolhardy excursion to indulge his sexual appetite. Fascinated by foreign women, he had married a Philistine. (Compare 1 Kings 11:1-8.) Now he sought a liaison that was not only out of bounds owing to the fact that the woman was a Philistine; it was outside the bounds of marriage altogether.

The prostitute was also outside the bounds of safe territory; she was in Gaza, a strongly fortified, walled Philistine city. Thirsting for revenge, the Philistines surrounded Samson and laid an ambush at the city gate where he would go out in the morning.

"At midnight, Samson was aroused. The accusing voice of conscience filled him with remorse, as he remembered that he had broken his vow as a Nazarite. But notwithstanding his sin, God's mercy had not forsaken him. His prodigious strength again served to deliver him."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 565.

The Philistine soldiers did not stop Samson. Nor did the heavy city gate, which was attached to the ground: "Samson seized the bar that was locked through gateposts and, exerting his magnificent strength, uprooted the posts. . . . Samson carried away the whole mass in one piece, the doors and the entire framework."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 396.

Why does God sometimes deliver people who are presumptuous and overconfident, but He does not deliver others? Illustrate your answer.

SAMSON'S WEAKNESS (Judg. 16:4, 5).

Samson “fell in love with a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah” (Judg. 16:4, NRSV). She is not called a Philistine or a harlot. Perhaps Samson had learned his lesson regarding Philistines and prostitutes. Delilah lived near Zorah, which was Samson’s home (Judg. 13:2), so she may have been an Israelite. The fact that she was free to be alone with Samson suggests that she was an unattached woman not under the control of male relatives.

Why did the Philistines think they could use Delilah to trap Samson? Judg. 16:5.

Whatever Delilah’s nationality, Samson was not married to her. So she did not have the commitment to him that a wife would have had. Recognizing an opportunity to accomplish what force had failed to do, the rulers of the Philistine city-states offered her an enormous bribe to betray Samson—1,100 pieces of silver from each of them. If the rulers of all five Philistine cities were involved, the total amount was 5,500 shekels, equivalent to the value of 183 slaves at 30 shekels each. (See Exod. 21:32.)

This was not the first time the Philistines had used a woman to pry a secret out of Samson. (Compare Judg. 14:15-17.) His wife gave in to the threat of burning. A threat would not work with Delilah; she knew that Samson could protect her.

What made Samson so vulnerable where women were concerned? Judg. 14:1-3, 15-17; 16:1, 2, 4.

Which of the following best answers the above question?

1. Samson had a strong need for affection, but since his marriage had failed, he had serious emotional hang-ups.
2. Seeking intimacy outside the safety of marriage to an Israelite woman, he came under the influence of women who had little vested interest in him.
3. He couldn’t bear to see a woman he loved unhappy day after day. So an unhappy woman could put a lot of pressure on him.
4. Another answer:
5. All the above.

What can you do if your relationships make you spiritually vulnerable?

ATTEMPTS AT BETRAYAL (Judg. 16:5-14).

The Philistines assessed Delilah's character accurately enough. Perhaps her love of money was known to them. In any case, their bribe outweighed her loyalty to Samson. Of course, she only agreed to betray Samson into the control of the Philistines; they said nothing about killing him (Judg. 16:5).

How did the Philistines get the idea that there was some secret behind Samson's strength? Judg. 16:5.

The magnitude of Samson's achievements made it clear that his strength had a supernatural aspect. For example, David and Benaiah also killed lions (1 Sam. 17:34-37; 2 Sam. 23:20), almost certainly using weapons, but Samson ripped a lion apart with his bare hands (Judg. 14:6). When Samson uprooted the city gate of Gaza and carried the entire structure to the top of a hill (Judg. 16:3), the Philistines must have been speechless with amazement. The Philistines "imagined that he probably possessed some magic charm that was the secret of his power. Perhaps Samson at some time had boasted that there was a secret source of his strength."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 397.

What do Samson's responses to Delilah reveal about his level of trust in her? Judg. 16:7, 11, 13.

Delilah could not betray Samson without his betraying himself first. She was not subtle in the way she asked him about his strength; she basically used the same words with which the Philistines had approached her. (Compare verses 5 and 6.) Although she was his mistress, he avoided telling her his secret, which was not only a personal matter; it was a matter of survival. He did not trust her completely, just as he had not completely trusted his Philistine wife (Judg. 14:16). In order to satisfy Delilah, he made up strategies for binding him that sounded as if they revealed his secret.

If Samson's suspicions were not aroused by Delilah's question, it is hard to imagine that they were not aroused by the sudden appearance of the Philistines each time Delilah bound him (Judg. 16:9, 12, 14).

How does Delilah's approach compare to Satan's? How does Satan try to get us to betray ourselves into his power? How could Samson have found deliverance, and how can we?

THE SECRET OF SUCCESS (Judg. 16:13-20).

The Philistines asked Delilah to find a way to bind Samson successfully (Judg. 16:5), so she asked him how he could be bound (verse 6). Thus, he told her how to bind him, first with seven fresh bowstrings (verse 7) and then with new ropes (verse 11). Since the secret of his strength had nothing to do with how he could be bound, these things were no more effective than the new ropes with which the Judahites had bound him earlier (Judg. 15:13, 14).

How did the third strategy for binding Samson (Judg. 16:13, 14) come dangerously close to the true secret of his strength?

Like the first two, the third strategy had to do with binding, but it also involved Samson's hair, which was the real secret. It appears that he was beginning to weaken in his resolve not to betray himself to Delilah.

What was the connection between Samson's hair and his strength? Judg. 16:17-20.

There was nothing magical about Samson's hair. But the Lord had made it a sign of Naziriteship, a special, holy relationship with Himself (Judg. 13:5). The gift of superhuman strength from the Spirit of the Lord was not simply for Samson; it was for Samson the Nazirite. When his hair was cut off (Judg. 16:19), his Nazirite status was cut off. Since he was no longer Samson the Nazirite, he was also cut off from the Source of his strength.

Samson's life reflects dynamics that characterized the experience of the Israelites during the period of the Judges. God chose him for a privileged covenant relationship, as He had chosen them. His special relationship with God, and theirs also, was conditional upon obedience, which included the maintenance of a distinct lifestyle. As long as Samson and the Israelites kept God's covenant, they were invincible. When they formed liaisons with unbelievers, they gave in to evil influences and gave up their special relationship with God. Then they were powerless. They were like worthless salt, which has lost its distinctiveness (Matt. 5:13), and like dead branches disconnected from their trunk (John 15:6).

What is the secret of your spiritual success? Do you need to keep it a secret?

CARNIVAL AND CARNAGE (Judg. 16:21-31).

Samson awoke, thinking he could win as usual. But he didn't know that the Lord had left him (Judg. 16:20). As far as the Philistines were concerned, death was too good for Samson; their revenge demanded lingering suffering. Blind and grinding at a Philistine mill, his physical condition reflected what he had been spiritually all along: a blind slave to sin (verse 21).

What happened to other people in the Bible who were forsaken by God because they rejected Him?

1 Sam. 28:5-7; 31:2-10 _____

2 Chron. 36:15-21 _____

Matt. 27:3-5 _____

The overjoyed Philistines proclaimed a joyous religious festival and brought out Samson for all to gaze upon. Samson decided to get the final revenge. His hair had begun to grow again, but more important, he realized his dependence upon God and remembered how to pray, as he had when he nearly died of thirst (Judg. 15:18). This time, his prayer was not for self-preservation but for revenge (16:28). Nevertheless, as before, God used Samson's revenge to further His plan: partial deliverance of the Israelites from the Philistines (13:5). By bringing a crowded building down upon his own head, he destroyed more Philistines than he had during the rest of his life (16:30). Samson, the lone avenger, was a great deliverer.

Did Samson commit suicide or perform self-sacrifice? Judg. 16:28-30.

God helped Samson to do what he did. Since God does not approve of murder (Exod. 20:13), would He have helped Samson to commit suicide, which is self-murder? Hardly. Samson's goal was not the destruction of himself but the destruction of his enemies, who were Israel's enemies. He helped Israel by sacrificing his own life.

Divine retribution, which God used His people to dispense, at various stages of their history, to the incurably lost, was not murder; it was execution, capital punishment. In our much different social setting, the execution of unrepentant unbelievers is not our work. God administers punishment. (See Heb. 10:26-31.)

FURTHER STUDY: Study the Bible instruction regarding kindness and love to our enemies: Exod. 23:4; Prov. 24:17; 25:21, 22; Matt. 5:44; Rom. 12:20. How do you relate this Old and New Testament teaching to God's plan to use Samson to deliver Israel from the Philistines? Read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, "Samson," pp. 565-568.

"Samson in his peril had the same source of strength as had Joseph. He could choose the right or the wrong as he pleased. But instead of taking hold of the strength of God, he permitted the wild passions of his nature to have full sway. The reasoning powers were perverted, the morals corrupted. God had called Samson to a position of great responsibility, honor, and usefulness; but he must first learn to govern by first learning to obey the laws of God. Joseph was a free moral agent. Good and evil were before him. He could choose the path of purity, holiness, and honor, or the path of immorality and degradation. He chose the right way, and God approved. Samson, under similar temptations, which he had brought upon himself, gave loose rein to passion. The path which he entered upon he found to end in shame, disaster, and death. What a contrast to the history of Joseph!"—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, October 13, 1881.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Like Solomon (1 Kings 11:1-8), Samson was fascinated by foreign women. Can you think of some reasons why "grass is greener on the other side of the fence"?
2. What similarities and differences can you see between the life of Samson and that of Jesus?
3. Samson's hair was a sign of his special relationship with God. What is the sign of our relationship with God? (See Exod. 31:12-17; Ezek. 20:12, 20.) How does studying the importance of Samson's sign in his life affect your view of the place of God's sign in your life?

SUMMARY: Seeking sinful pleasure and trusting in his own strength, Samson made himself vulnerable. But his strength was not ultimately his own. It was a gift from God. When he gave up his relationship with God, he was easily overcome by his enemies. Nevertheless, God answered Samson's final prayer in order to help His people. Even so today, God works through weak instruments who seek His help.



The Unsung Hero

Wendell M. Serrano

Felipe de Ramos lived in a mountainous village in the Philippines. He married a faithful Adventist woman, but showed no interest in religion. One morning, Felipe heard his wife pray: "How long, Lord, shall I serve You alone? What more can I do to help my husband accept You? Have I not been a good Christian wife? Have I kept him from following You?"

Felipe was touched and hugged his wife, expressing sadness for resisting God. He studied the Bible with her and soon was baptized. He was impressed by the urgency of God's message, and he promised God he would share his new-found faith with others.

Felipe wanted to share the gospel with every non-Adventist in his village. He set out with his Bible and a picture roll, and gave Bible studies to anyone who would listen.

Some members of the Villabito family began studying the Bible. This family followed a strange religious cult. One son, Marcelino, feared that the family charms would become powerless if the family continued studying the Bible. He warned Felipe to stop coming.

But Felipe was not afraid. He arrived for the Bible study, unfolded his picture roll, and opened his Bible. Marcelino slipped into the room holding a 24-inch knife. He challenged Felipe's God to protect him and plunged the knife into Felipe's body, killing him.

I conducted Felipe's funeral service. I wanted to help the family seek justice for their father's death, but Felipe's children told me that they had visited Marcelino's cell and told him, "Our father is dead, but he will receive his reward of everlasting life. He would want you to be set free from the chain of sin, so we will set you free from this prison cell. But remember, only God can set you free from eternal punishment. Go from here, and search for the way to eternal life."

I moved to another area and lost contact with Felipe's family. Six years later, I returned to speak at a camp meeting in their area. While sitting on the platform, the pastor pointed to a man seated at a corner. It was Marcelino, Felipe's killer!

"Marcelino is a Seventh-day Adventist, and a delegate to this seminar," the pastor said. "Felipe's killer is now his brother, saved from eternal punishment and living in the hope of eternal life."

W. M. Serrano is the church ministries director of the South Philippine Union Mission.

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Misguided Devotion



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judges 17, 18.

MEMORY TEXT: "You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:4, 5, NKJV).

KEY THOUGHT: God accepts worship that is offered according to His instructions, which leads to a proper understanding of Him. A blend of true and false worship may be appealing to human beings, but God does not accept it.

ROYAL RULES. If you wish to speak with the queen of England, you cannot simply knock on the door of Buckingham Palace and expect her to come to the door. She is a queen. You are a common stranger. Even if you are granted a meeting with her, you must approach her through a protocol established by the queen and her assistants. She makes the rules. You follow them.

Like the queen of England, the Lord is a monarch. Not only that, He is Deity, greater than any earthly monarch. He is the King of kings, who "is sovereign over the kingdom of mortals; he gives it to whom he will" (Dan. 4:17, NRSV). Therefore, human beings must approach Him on His terms. He makes the rules. Those who approach Him in worship on their own terms rather than His do not honor Him; they insult Him. That is what the ancient Israelites did when they used idols to worship the Lord; they insulted Him.

IMAGE WORSHIP (Judg. 17:1-4).

Samson is the last in a series of "judges," deliverers whose stories are recounted in the core portion of the book of Judges (Judg. 3:7-16:31). This part of the book shows how the history of the Israelites in this period was characterized by apostasy, oppression, and deliverance.

The end of the book describes two events that show how lawless the Israelites were during the period of the "judges." That lawlessness is the theme of this section is clear from the words found near its beginning and at its end: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg. 17:6; 21:25, NRSV; compare 18:1; 19:1).

The two events were (1) the idolatry of Micah and the transfer of this form of worship to the city of Dan (Judges 17, 18) and (2) a crime committed by Benjaminites and the civil war that resulted (Judges 19, 21). Judges 18:30 and 20:28 indicate that these events occurred in the time of Moses' and Aaron's grandchildren, before events related earlier in the book.

What is the significance of the story about Micah and his mother that is told in Judges 17:1-5?

The story provides background to Micah's idolatrous worship, explaining how he came to own images. He had taken silver that belonged to his mother. When she discovered it missing, she uttered a curse, apparently upon whoever had taken it. Hearing the curse, Micah was apparently afraid and confessed to her, whereupon she promptly forgave him.

A problem remained: the curse could not be taken back. It appears that Micah's mother had inadvertently cursed her son, just as Jephthah had inadvertently vowed to offer his daughter as a sacrifice (Judg. 11:30, 34, 35). Her subsequent words and actions seem to indicate that she attempted to neutralize the curse by providing her son with a blessing. She dedicated the silver to the Lord by having it made into images for the worship of the Lord, against the Lord's command (Exod. 20:4), and gave the images to her son.

Unlike Samson's mother, Micah's mother did not rely on instructions from God. She had 1,100 pieces of silver, the same amount promised to Delilah by each of the Philistine rulers for her contribution to Samson's physical downfall (Judg. 16:5). In the way Micah's mother used her silver, she contributed to her son's spiritual downfall.

How would you evaluate your spiritual influence upon others?

PRIEST FOR HIRE (Judg. 17:5-13).

Because of his mother's strategy, Micah had a shrine, to which he added an ephod (a priestly mantle; Exod. 28:6-8) and teraphim (household idols; Gen. 31:19, 34). He installed (literally "filled the hand of") one of his sons as his priest. This was blatant idolatry. Gideon had made an unauthorized ephod to worship the Lord, and it subsequently came to be worshiped (Judg. 8:27), but Micah and his mother blatantly set up idolatry from the start. Recognizing the illegitimacy of Micah's cult in the sight of God, the book of Judges makes the observation at this point that "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 17:6, NKJV).

Why did Micah seize upon the opportunity to have a Levite as his priest? Judges 17:13.

God had chosen the tribe of Levi to serve Him in a special way at His sanctuary (Exod. 32:26-29). From this tribe, Aaron and his descendants were consecrated to function as priests (Exod. 28:1; Num. 3:2, 3), who were authorized to perform rituals in the sanctuary. Other members of the tribe of Levi were designated to perform nonritual labor connected with the sanctuary (Num. 3:5-39; 4:1-33).

Jonathan, Micah's Levite, was descended from Levi through Moses and his son Gershom rather than Aaron (Judg. 18:30; compare Exod. 2:21, 22). Note that if your translation of Judges 18:30 reads "Manasseh" rather than "Moses," it is because the Hebrew text shows the addition of a Hebrew letter to the name "Moses," thereby changing it. Jonathan was not qualified to serve as a legitimate priest. But Micah's shrine was not legitimate, and the Levite would make it seem more legitimate.

Micah's statement after the installation of the Levite reveals his motive: "Now I know that the Lord will prosper me" (Judg. 17:13, NRSV). His underlying goal was not to honor the Lord through a relationship of love with Him but through material prosperity. He thought that the presence of ritual objects would ensure God's blessing and his well-being. (See 1 Sam. 4:3-11.)

Worship is an offering to God. Is it more important that we own our worship and can relate to it or that God wants to own and accept it? Gen. 4:2-5; Exod. 32:1-10.

SPIES (Judg. 18:1-10).

Following the story of Micah and his idolatry in Judges 17, chapter 18 seems at first to begin a new story about the Israelites of the tribe of Dan. But the reader soon becomes aware of contact between the Danites and Micah; the two stories are interlinked.

Why were the Danites looking for a place to live? Had not territory been allocated to them, along with the other tribes, in the time of Joshua? Joshua 19:40-48.

The original inheritance of the tribe of Dan was in the southwestern part of Palestine, just north of Judah. This territory included Zorah and Eshtaol, where Samson lived (Joshua 19:41; compare Judg. 13:2, 25). The problem with this area was the fact that it was next to the land of the Philistines, who were not inclined to mind their own business and respect Israelite borders. Although Joshua 19:47 does not say who took the territory of the Danites away from them, it was probably the Philistines.

Judges 18:30 indicates that the events of Judges 18 occurred at the beginning of the period of the "judges," but some Danites still lived in part of their original homeland as late as the time of Samson (Judg. 13:2, 25).

Before attempting to conquer territory, the Danites sent spies to find a good place. (Compare Numbers 13 and Joshua 2.) As the spies passed through the territory of Ephraim, they stayed at Micah's house. This is important for what happens later.

How valid was the prediction of the young Levite (Judg. 18:6) regarding the success of the Danites?

The Danite spies wanted the security of knowing that their endeavor would succeed. Since the young priest had ritual objects, they thought that he could use them to inquire of the Lord. He gave them an answer, but since he was disobeying God by his form of worship (Exod. 20:4, 5), God would not have spoken through him. (Compare 1 Sam. 28:6; Ps. 66:18.) The Danites went on their way with false security, thinking that God was with them. The only kind of people they could conquer were the weak and unsuspecting, who, like themselves, had false security (Judg. 18:7).

Is your spiritual security genuine? On what is it based? What could threaten it?

STOLEN GODS (Judg. 18:11-26).

The Danites sent soldiers from Zorah and Eshtaol to take the territory that the spies had found. The place of one of their first encampments came to be called "Mahaneh-dan" (meaning "camp of Dan") because they were there. Compare Judges 13:25, speaking of Samson's being "in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol" (NRSV). If this were the same Mahaneh-dan, and if it had received its name by the time of Samson, then the story of Micah and the Danites took place earlier than the story of Samson. (Compare Judg. 18:30; see Sunday's lesson.)

We have found several links between the story of Samson and that of Micah and the Danites: (1) mothers are prominent; (2) 1,100 pieces of silver are mentioned (Judg. 16:5; 17:2; see Sunday's lesson); (3) Samson was a Danite (Judg. 13:2); and (4) the Danites in Judges 18 originated from the same places as Samson.

Why did the Danites take Micah's ritual objects? Judg. 18:14-20?

The spies showed the soldiers the way. As before, they came to Micah's house. This time, however, they stole the valuable ritual objects, which, they thought, would give them access to the Lord. They not only wanted to be able to inquire of the Lord; they wanted a worship center of their own (Judg. 18:19, 30, 31). Their thinking must have been similar to Micah's: having a shrine would bring prosperity (Judg. 17:13). What hypocrisy! They wanted to worship the Lord with stolen idols!

How did the Danites persuade the young Levite to cooperate with them? Judg. 18:18-20.

The Danites promised the Levite a promotion: he could become priest of their tribe. Micah pursued the Danites, just as Laban had tried to recover his household gods when Rachel took them (Gen. 31:19, 22-25, 30-35), but the threats and obvious strength of the Danites intimidated him (Judg. 18:22-26).

The silver that Micah had taken (Judg. 17:2) was taken from him, illustrating the principle that we reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7, 8). Have you seen this principle operate? Is it God's way of giving people what they deserve, or is there another reason for it? (See Judg. 1:7; 9:56, 57.)

THE CITY OF DAN AND ITS IDOLATRY (Judg. 18:27-31).

The Danites succeeded in conquering the northern city of Laish, which they rebuilt and named "Dan." Because the Danites were successful, it might appear that they were people of faith, like the Israelites whose continuation of the conquest of the land is described in Judges 1. In fact, they succeeded only against "a people quiet and unsuspecting" (Judg. 18:27, NRSV), a people with faith in a false god (verse 30, 31).

Can you find indications that the Danites lacked the faith possessed by the successful Israelites at the beginning of the period of the "judges"?

Compare Judg. 1:1 with 18:5 _____

Compare Judg. 1:4-7, 20 with 18:7, 10, 27, 28 _____

At the beginning of the book, the Israelites did not question whether they should fight the Canaanites or whether they would succeed. God had already told them those things (Joshua 1:1-9). Their question was how the Lord wanted them to go about taking the rest of the land (Judg. 1:1). The Danites, on the other hand, inquired of what they thought was the Lord as to whether they would succeed, because they were unsure of the Lord's presence with them (Judg. 18:5, 6). The assurance that they received (verse 6; compare verse 10) was a false assurance; the Lord was not with them.

At the beginning of the book, the Israelites fought formidable enemies with large armies, such as Adoni-bezek, who was a conqueror himself (Judg. 1:5-7), and giants (verse 20). They succeeded because God was with them. The Danites, on the other hand, succeeded because their enemy was weak; they simply overpowered them.

What influence did Micah's idolatry have on the Israelites? Judg. 18:30, 31.

The false worship of an individual was accepted by an entire tribe and region. Not only was this idolatry wrong; it kept Israelites from participating in the true worship of the Lord's sanctuary at Shiloh, just as Jeroboam's calf images at Bethel and Dan later kept the Israelites from going to the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:26-33).

Are you successful because the Lord is blessing you, or in spite of His not blessing you?

FURTHER STUDY: Read Isa. 40:18-20; 44:6-20; 46:1-9.

"The second commandment forbids the worship of the true God by images or similitudes. Many heathen nations claimed that their images were mere figures or symbols by which the Deity was worshiped; but God has declared such worship to be sin. The attempt to represent the Eternal One by material objects would lower man's conception of God. The mind, turned away from the infinite perfection of Jehovah, would be attracted to the creature rather than to the Creator. And as his conceptions of God were lowered, so would man become degraded."
—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 306.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What points made by Isaiah regarding idolatry are relevant to the story of Micah and the Danites? (See Isa. 44:9, 10; 46:1, 2, 7.) Of what relevance is this counsel for us?
2. What is the significance of the reference to "the captivity of the land" in Judges 18:30? (See Lev. 26:33-39; Ps. 73:1-20.) Note that Judges 18:30 probably refers to a captivity not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. (See verse 31; the sanctuary was removed from Shiloh long before the Assyrian captivity described in 2 Kings 17.)
3. Compare the inquiries of the Israelites (Judg. 1:1) and the Danites (Judg. 18:5) with the questions of Zechariah (Luke 1:18) and Mary (Luke 1:34) to Gabriel. Why was Zechariah rebuked (Luke 1:20), but Mary was not? What kinds of questions do you ask the Lord?
4. How can we avoid false assurance (Judg. 18:5, 6, 10; Jer. 6:14; 8:11) and at the same time have true assurance that a saving relationship with our Lord is ours now? (See Rom. 10:9-13; 1 John 5:11-13.)

SUMMARY: Disregarding God's law, Micah's mother made idols, which Micah used for worship of the Lord. Micah involved his family and then a young Levite in this idolatry. When the idols were stolen by greedy Danites and used for a religious center in the newly conquered northern city of Dan, many Israelites were subjected to this evil influence.

One person's disobedience of God often sets in motion a chain of circumstances that results in many being led into spiritual defeat.



He Dared

Carolyn Pawlak

Olek smelled bad. He talked loudly, and was slow to catch on. Poor, simple, and dirty, he smoked, and often was seen staggering drunk down the streets. No one thought he would ever amount to anything. When he first came to our church, our members tried to accept him, but he was so different.

Fatherless and poor, he was raised by a simple-minded mother in a two-room house with no bathroom. An Adventist neighbor visited them and encouraged Olek to read the Bible. When Olek asked the local priest questions about the Sabbath, the priest became angry. That is when Olek began to attend our church.

Olek had tried repeatedly to stop smoking, but with encouragement and many prayers, Olek successfully beat the habit. He began using a bathtub, and soon smelled better. As he read the Bible, he made other changes in his life. He began to wear the clean clothes we gave him, and washed his hair more often. He became quieter, and more reasonable. He quit drinking coffee, eating unclean meats, and finally, after a difficult struggle, he gave up his beloved beer.

He began preaching the gospel to anyone who would listen. One day he saw a priest sitting on a bench reading a book. Olek thought the priest was reading the Bible. He greeted him and said, "I see you are interested in the Bible." The priest said "Yes I am, but let's not talk about it here; come to my house."

Although Poland is a "Christian" country, people who dare to change religions meet with opposition. In some areas people are pressured to refuse to rent rooms for religious meetings.

But Olek dared; he shared his simple knowledge of the Bible with the priest. Now he takes more knowledgeable members with him. The priest, hungering for truth, asks many questions. He has requested to meet the pastor. And Olek, in his simple, childlike way, shares the gospel, afraid of no one, because Jesus is with him.



Carolyn Pawlak is a pastor's wife living in Poland. She has written a vegetarian cookbook that uses only foods available in Poland. The book has sold more than 40,000 copies.

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Civil War



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Judges 19–21.

MEMORY TEXT: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25, NKJV).

KEY THOUGHT: Abandoning God and His covenant led to moral depravity comparable to that of Sodom. Purging this evil from Israel took tremendous effort, pain, and sacrifice, but God ultimately made the operation successful.

RETURN TO THE LAW OF THE JUNGLE. The jungle is ruled by claws and fangs. All creatures are not created equal in the food chain. The strong prey upon the weak. Vigilance and speed of escape are crucial for survival; there are two kinds of animals: the quick and the dead.

Human society has laws that differ from “the law of the jungle,” laws that protect people from one another. But these laws are only as effective as the authorities behind them, authorities that enforce the law by punishing lawbreakers.

In ancient Near Eastern societies, human kings were usually the authorities behind the laws. Israel was different: laws were established by God, the divine King. But during the period of the “judges,” the Israelites rejected God. Without God and without a human king, their laws lacked a recognized authority to back them up. “All the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 21:25, NRSV). The strong preyed upon the weak according to the only law that was really in effect, the law of the jungle.

LIKE SODOM (Judg. 19:1-26).

Judges 19:1 begins a new story that, like the story of Micah and the Danites, took place “when there was no king in Israel” to keep order. (Compare Judg. 17:6; 18:1.) Also like the previous story, chapters 19–21 involve (1) a Levite resident alien in the hill country of Ephraim (19:1; compare 17:1, 7-12); (2) Bethlehem in Judah (19:1-3; compare 17:7-9); (3) a trip to get something or someone back (19:3; compare 18:22); (4) crime (19:22-26; compare 18:17-20); (5) unfaithfulness by an Israelite tribe (20:12-16; compare 18:30, 31); and (6) an attempt to help a tribe survive (21:6-23; compare 18:1, 2, 27-29).

How did a Levite come to encounter danger in Gibeah? Judg. 19:1-24.

A Levite traveled to Bethlehem to retrieve his concubine, who had been unfaithful to him (following the Hebrew rather than some ancient versions, which read “became angry with him”). Her father detained him for several days, until he became frustrated and left with his concubine later in the day than he should have. He found himself spending the night in Gibeah, which belonged to Benjaminites. Only an elderly Ephraimite would take him in, along with his servant and concubine.

The men of Gibeah were not only inhospitable; they were sexual perverts like the men of Sodom and, like them, wanted to commit homosexual rape. (Compare Gen. 19:4, 5.) Israelites had sunk so low that they were like Sodomites! Like Lot, the old Ephraimite recognized the extreme severity of the situation and his responsibility to protect a guest. (See Lev. 18:22; 20:13.) Also like Lot, he offered women to the attackers to satisfy their lust. (Compare Gen. 19:6-8.) It is horrifying to see what a low value was placed upon women, even by the more righteous individuals in these stories!

What finally satisfied the men of Gibeah? Judg. 19:25, 26.

Whereas the two angels staying with Lot prevented the men of Sodom from carrying out their intention (Gen. 19:10, 11), the Levite took his emergency into his own hands by shoving his concubine out to the men, whereupon they raped her all night literally to death (Judg. 19:28; 20:5).

What is the true value of a woman? (See, for example, Gen. 2:23, 24; Gal. 3:28, 29; Phil. 4:3.)

FROM A CRIME TO A CIVIL WAR (Judg. 19:27-20:17).

In the morning, the Levite found his concubine lying with her hands on the threshold, clutching to the hope of protection. But he had not protected her. Now he callously ordered her to get up. No wonder she had left him in the first place (Judg. 19:2)! There was no answer. She was dead.

Why did the Levite send pieces of his concubine throughout Israelite territory? Judg. 19:29, 30.

Even if he had not been sympathetic to the feelings of this woman, the Levite was outraged by what the men of Gibeah did. He was powerless against them, but his horrifying, gory "correspondence" was an effective strategy to marshal wide support for justice. (Compare 1 Sam. 11:5-7.)

Even "the law of the jungle" had its limits! Perhaps the Israelites were afraid of God's retribution against them collectively if they did not destroy the evil from among them. (Compare the story of Achan, Joshua 7.) Something had to be done, but what? The problem was so serious that the Israelites spontaneously gathered together at Mizpah. Upon hearing the testimony of the Levite, the people resolved to attack Gibeah to punish its inhabitants for their deed.

Resolution of the matter was more difficult than the Israelites had imagined at first. Rather than cooperating by giving up the criminals of Gibeah, the Benjaminites mustered their forces to protect Gibeah.

Why is the story of the Levite and his concubine (Judges 19) in the Bible?

Since the Bible contains a record of God's dealings with sinners, and since sin is ugly, there are parts of the Bible that are not pretty. If the story of Judges 19 shocks us by showing the depths of depravity to which God's professed people can sink when they turn from Him, then it has gone a long way toward accomplishing its purpose. The positive point is: by cherishing our relationship with the Lord and His law, which is the divine plan for our well-being based upon loving relationships with Him and with other human beings, we can avoid an otherwise inevitable slide to moral degradation.

Does collective moral responsibility operate within the church today? If so, how?

ANGUISH AND AMBUSH (Judg. 20:18-48).

As at the beginning of the book of Judges, where events close to the same time are described (Judg. 20:28), the Israelites inquired of the Lord who should lead the battle against the Benjaminites. The answer was the same: Judah (Judg. 20:18; compare 1:1, 2). But this time they were going to war against fellow Israelites rather than Canaanites.

Why did the Lord let the Israelites lose two battles against the Benjaminites? Judg. 20:19-25.

The defending Benjaminites had some advantages over the other Israelites: (1) superior military skill (Judg. 20:16; compare 3:15—Ehud was also an effective left-handed Benjaminite warrior); (2) a smaller, more cohesive force to coordinate; (3) a better strategic position, since Gibeah was situated on a small hill; and (4) knowledge that they were fighting for the survival of their fellow tribesmen. But had not the Lord directed Judah to lead the way? (verse 18). When the people inquired of the Lord after the first battle, He told them to go up a second time (verse 23).

“The Israelites were not allowed to win a victory until after a preparatory period. The setbacks effectively drove them to fasting and prayer and to an earnest inquiry as to the cause of their failure. The delay was God’s opportunity to point them to their own defects of character that needed correction as much as to the faults of others, of which they were so forcefully aware. The Israelites were far too ready to set out upon the work of correcting their brethren without being conscious of their own shortcomings.”—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 416.

When, in the theocracy, God commanded the application of capital punishment, He wanted those implementing it to be right with Him.

How did the Israelites finally defeat the Benjaminites? Judg. 20:26-48.

After their second defeat, the Israelites wept, fasted, prayed, and offered sacrifices (Judg. 20:26). Then the next day the Lord “defeated Benjamin before Israel” (verse 35, NRSV). This victory, like Gideon’s (Judges 7), was not won without human effort, but it was the Lord who gave success.

What should be our personal reaction to our spiritual defeats? (See Matt. 17:14-21.)

WIVES FOR SURVIVORS (Judg. 21:1-24).

In what dilemma did the victorious Israelites find themselves? Judg. 21:1-4, 6, 7.

The original intention of the Israelites was to punish the men of Gibeah (Judg. 20:10). Once they put the Benjaminites to flight, they could quite easily have accomplished this objective. But in the heat of battle, they did not think about when to stop (Judg. 20:48). Consequently, they almost entirely wiped out the tribe of Benjamin. All the women were destroyed, and only some men who had fled during the battle remained.

Without wives, the remaining Benjaminite men could not repopulate their tribe. The Israelites had earlier sworn that they would not give their daughters in marriage to Benjaminites. As in the case of Jephthah's rash vow (Judg. 11:30, 34, 35) and the curse of Micah's mother (Judg. 17:2), the consequences of what was thought to be an irrevocable utterance were unforeseen.

What solutions did the Israelites find for their dilemma? Judg. 21:5, 8-24.

A second oath solved part of the problem caused by the first oath! The Israelites had sworn to put to death anyone who did not participate with them against the Benjaminites. Because the men of Jabesh-gilead had not come, the Israelites destroyed all the inhabitants of that town except for the virgin women, whom they gave as wives to the remaining Benjaminites. To maintain the inviolability of a rash oath and to show compassion to the tribe of Benjamin, they massacred innocent married women and their children!

More women were needed. So a second solution was devised. When maidens danced at the yearly feast of the Lord at Shiloh, they would be somewhat separated from their family members. The Benjaminites would have a chance to abduct some of them as wives. In this way, the Israelites could provide the Benjaminites with wives without the direct consent that would violate the wording of their oath.

Drastic remedies were employed to solve a drastic problem, which the Israelites themselves had caused. What a tragedy that they had not shown compassion to the Benjaminites a little earlier, before they killed their families!

How can we avoid solving problems without causing larger problems?

“WHAT WAS RIGHT IN THEIR OWN EYES” (Judg. 21:25, NRSV).

Is the statement that “in those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 21:25; NRSV) positive or negative?

Taken by itself, this observation repeated at the very end of the book (see also Judg. 17:6) could be neutral or even positive: In the absence of a central human governing authority, everyone followed the dictates of his or her own moral judgment. But it is clear that the moral judgment of the Israelites was faulty because they failed to stay close to the Lord. He was their King, the authority behind the law that they should have been keeping. Such observance would have unified and protected them from themselves and from one another.

During the period of the “judges,” the Israelites enjoyed some successes when they sought the Lord. But had they followed the Lord’s direction more often, rather than relying upon their instincts and logic, they could have avoided terrible problems and atrocities.

The end of the book of Judges points forward to the books of 1 Samuel and Ruth. Samuel was the last of the “judges.” Near the close of his leadership, the Israelites demanded a king (1 Samuel 8). They recognized their need for continuing leadership, but rather than seeking renewed commitment to the Lord, they sought a human ruler. In the end, human kingship would fail as miserably as the earlier tribal leadership. But ultimate success comes through Jesus, our divine Deliverer, Judge, and King. (See Rev. 5:9-14.) Jesus was a descendant of Ruth (Matt. 1:5), the Moabite woman who kept covenant loyalty to God and human beings during the period of the “judges,” in striking contrast to the covenant disloyalty of the period.

Like the Israelites, we not only need a legal authority; we need forgiveness and the power to keep God’s law in spite of our tendencies (Rom. 7:14-20). God gives us both through faith in Him! He cleanses us from our sins through the blood of Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26) and pours true, unselfish love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). With the motivation of love, we come into harmony with God’s law of love (Matt. 22:36-40), which reflects His character (1 John 4:8). Obedience to God requires human cooperation with Him, as did Gideon’s victory, but success in obedience is a gift of God through the Holy Spirit.

How would you explain to someone else the means by which we can receive God’s gifts of forgiveness and obedience?

FURTHER STUDY: Why did the Lord tell Samuel to appoint a king over Israel, even though the people's request indicated that they had rejected the Lord? 1 Sam. 8:7, 22. Read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, "The First King of Israel," pp. 603-608, on the institution of kingship in Israel.

"The days of Israel's greatest prosperity had been those in which they acknowledged Jehovah as their king—when the laws and the government which He had established were regarded as superior to those of all other nations. Moses had declared to Israel concerning the commandments of the Lord: 'This is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' Deuteronomy 4:6."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 605.

"God desired His people to look to Him alone as their Lawgiver and their Source of strength. Feeling their dependence upon God, they would be constantly drawn nearer to Him. They would become elevated and ennobled, fitted for the high destiny to which He had called them as His chosen people."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 606.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you value God's law sufficiently? Do you regard it as something positive, for your benefit, or as something negative? Why do you answer as you do?
2. How does acceptance of the Lord as your King affect your life and worship?
3. Jeremiah looked forward to the time when God would make a "new covenant" (a "new testament") with His people, which they would keep because they would allow God to put His law within them and write it upon their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). When is this prophecy fulfilled, and how do God's people internalize His law? What is the relationship between the "new-covenant" and the "new-birth" experience (John 3:5-8; Heb. 8:10-13)?

SUMMARY: As illustrated in the story of Micah and the Danite and the story of a Levite, his concubine, and the civil war that followed, lawlessness during the period of the "judges" showed itself in the form of wrongs done to God and to human beings, including idolatry, theft, rape, and murder. When individuals and societies depart from the Lord, they fall prey to evil inclinations. The result is often tragedy for multitudes.



A Word in Season

Hannah Moses

I n S i d e S t o r y

No one can estimate how far reaching an act of kindness or a word spoken in season will be.

On Sabbath afternoons students at Spicer Memorial College go into surrounding villages and communities to conduct Branch Sabbath Schools. They teach villagers to sing Sabbath songs, and share with them the Sabbath School lesson. The students prepare special lessons and songs for the children. Sometimes it is years before the full fruits of these Branch Sabbath Schools become known.

In the village of Kirkee, a large group of children met the Spicer Memorial students as we entered the village each Sabbath. One of the boys who attended the story hour every week was Rajan. We looked forward to seeing this bright young man who was learning to love Jesus. As our friendship grew, Rajan told us how much he wanted to attend a Christian school. With his parents' permission, we arranged for him to attend our Adventist boarding school in Lasalgaon, India.

Rajan was thrilled to study in a Christian school, even though he missed his family and friends. As he studied his Bible, he accepted whole-heartedly the truths of the church and was baptized.

When he finished high school, Rajan went to Spicer Memorial College. On Sabbath afternoons he joined Spicer students at Branch Sabbath Schools nearby. After graduation he became an evangelist. He never forgot the happy times and the positive influence of a Christian education. Eventually he opened up a small school in Kohlapur, India. The school has grown until now it has an enrollment of 1,000 students.

We never know what will come from our actions when we witness for Jesus, but we praise God for the zeal of teachers and students at our Christian schools who go out each week to witness to their faith in villages Sabbath after Sabbath. We praise God for young people like Rajan, who accept the message and become witnesses themselves for the Lord.

Until her recent death, Hannah Moses was an office secretary in the Southern Asia Division.

Lessons for Third Quarter, 1996

The third quarter Sabbath School lessons, entitled "*End-Time Landmarks*," focus on some of the most important landmarks of the faith taught in Scripture and believed by Seventh-day Adventists.

Lesson 1: Christ the Focus of Scripture.

Read for This Week's Study: Luke 24:27, 44; Isa. 7:14; 9:6, 7; Ps. 2:1-12.

Memory Text: Luke 24:27.

Key Thought: Because all Scripture focuses on Christ, all Bible teaching is best understood in the light of the cross.

Outline:

Christ in the Five Books of Moses (Luke 24:27, 44).

Christ in the Old Testament Prophets (Isa. 7:14; 9:6, 7).

Christ in the Psalms, the Writings (Ps. 2:1-12).

Christ is Central to the New Testament (Eph. 4:21).

Calvary, the Center of the New Testament (Gal. 6:14).

Lesson 2: Christ Our Righteousness and Salvation.

Read for This Week's Study: John 3:1-21.

Memory Text: John 3:16.

Key Thought: The most important landmark of Bible teaching is the truth of righteousness and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Outline:

The Cross (John 3:14-16).

Forgiveness (John 3:18).

Righteousness and Life Imputed to the Believer (John 3:14, 15).

Righteousness Bestowed (John 3:3-8).

Works of Faith (John 3:20, 21).

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- West Zaire Union: A medical clinic in Mbandaka, Zaire, and a medical launch to treat people living along the Zaire River.
- Nigeria: Build a multipurpose/classroom building on the campus of Adventist Seminary of West Africa.
- Madagascar: Build two medical clinics, one in the north and one in the south of Madagascar.



AFRICA-INDIAN OCEAN DIVISION

Unions	Churches	Membership	Population
Burundi Mission (Attached Field)	117	40,863	6,000,000
Central Africa Union Mission	651	72,235	26,700,000
East Zaire Union Mission	812	169,729	22,383,250
Indian Ocean Union Mission	225	44,374	15,538,883
Nigeria Union Mission	539	123,083	98,100,000
Rwanda Union Mission	806	285,440	7,500,000
Sahel Union Mission	86	11,439	69,900,000
West Africa Union Mission	592	192,154	25,845,669
West Zaire Union Mission	293	109,440	20,106,750
Totals December 31, 1994	4,121	1,048,757	292,074,552