

RASCALS USED BY GOD
A Devotional Study of Judges
by Max Frazier, Jr.

I want to share with you stories and truths from some of the most unusual men that God ever chose to use to accomplish His purposes. Some of these people will be somewhat familiar to you, while others you may meet for the very first time. They lived in the midst of some of the darkest days in the entire history of the nation of Israel. The people became mired in the swamps of sin and had to experience the discipline of God. Yet, through these people, God brought a measure of rest and relief.

The story of these individuals is found in the book of Judges. We are not sure who wrote this book, but many Bible scholars attribute authorship to Samuel, the man God raised up as His spokes person at the very close of this period of time. The theme of the book of Judges is that of backsliding and God's grace. It is a picture of man's sin and of God's grace in restoring a repentant people back into fellowship with Himself. One will observe a cycle within the book. That cycle begins with man's sin, which is then followed by the subsequent slavery to another nation as God initiates His process of discipline. After so many years of slavery, the people implore God for His relief, and the cycle is then completed when God raises up His deliverer, the very people whose stories we are going to examine in the coming days.

I have selected, as the key verse for the book of Judges, chapter 21 and verse 25, which states: In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. In other words, there existed a state of near anarchy within the nation. Although God's Laws existed, few people cared to follow them. Instead, everyone made up their own set of rules to follow without giving consideration to the impact which that might have upon another.

I think I could illustrate what was going on by trying to put it into a modern day setting. You and I know that there is a posted speed limit on all of the roads here in our great state. The law says that we are to drive at the speed limit because that is the speed which has been determined to be the safest for all drivers on the roadways. Suppose I say to myself, "Hey, I don't want anyone telling me how fast I can drive. I will drive the speed I want." And so, instead of 60, I drive 85 miles per hour. Alongside of me is Charlie, who wants to drive 75. Then there is Louise who wants to drive 50. Pretty soon, there is chaos on the freeways because everyone is doing their own thing. That is the way it was in Israel during the time of the Judges. Everyone was doing their own thing. The results were disastrous.

God has a purpose for law. Not only is it to help us in our relationship with Him, but it is to help us in our relationships with one another. This was a concept which the people of Israel would need years to learn.

HOW DO YOU SPELL TROUBLE?
Judges 1-2

The first two chapters of Judges establish the reason for the book. We immediately observe the disobedience of Israel in not driving out all the inhabitants of Canaan.

Chapter one begins well, but closes poorly. The chapter begins with a spirit of enthusiasm on the part of Judah as it joins hands with her brothers, the Simeonites, to drive out the Canaanites from the Promised Land. And God blessed this united effort with a series of great victories.

But, all was not well. The enemy had iron chariots and a strong-will determination. The Israelites soon forgot that God was on their side and His power was more than sufficient for them. So they retreated and did not completely destroy those people whom God had destined for destruction. This continued presence of those people would be the downfall of Israel later.

Incomplete obedience is nothing other than disobedience. God does not want partial obedience from His children. That never pleases Him. Nor does God delight in a compromised obedience. God's desire for us is total unconditional obedience. Although it is hard to obey, the consequences of our disobedience can be ruinous. This is one of the lessons taught in the book of Judges.

In chapter two, we observe where idolatry prompted more disobedience which led to Israel's troubles and defeat. Instead of completing the task of conquering all the land, the task which God had given them to do, Israel stopped short. But, not only were they disobedient in that way, they compounded their disobedience by adopting the standards of those they were to have driven out. The text proclaims that they forsook the Lord. That is, they willingly turned their backs upon God.

Israel knew what it was doing. When they left God, they adopted Baal. What a trade off! That which was living and powerful for that which was dead and useless. Israel's story shows the dangers of compromise with the enemy. Our enemy is never happy with just a little. He wants it all. So, obedience to God is vitally important if we wish to honor God with all we have.

STOP! I WANT TO GET OFF THE ROLLER COASTER **Judges 3:5-7**

Let me begin this study by asking you a question. For how many of you is life like a roller coaster? You know, you are up one day and down the next? Now to ride a roller coaster at one of many amusement parks can be a thrill. My wife, Marlys, finds great enjoyment riding them. But to be on a roller coaster every day of your life soon becomes a problem.

Now you might ask what I mean by a roller coaster? Well, you get all inspired on Sunday, but along comes Monday or Tuesday and it is a different story. If that characterizes you, I have good news for you, you are not alone. There are countless Christians who share the same frustrations. Jesus Christ never intended for our lives to be roller coaster experiences. He states in John 10:10, I am come that they (that is you and me) might have life, and that they (that is you and me, again) might have it abundantly. Now the abundant life is not a roller coaster ride.

The book of Judges depicts the life of Israel as being like a roller coaster ride. Some of you are ready to ask me, "Max, how did Israel get on this roller coaster anyway?" That is a great question. I believe the answer is found in verse five through seven of the third chapter of Judges. Listen to these words from verse seven: The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; (and here comes the important part of the verse) they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs.

How could Israel have forgotten what God had done for them? But how often do I forget what God has done for me? Instead of being difficult to do, it seems that forgetting God is very easy to do. Remember those words with which David reminded himself in Psalm 103: Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits. Remembering the goodnesses of God takes a conscious decision on my part. Remembering what God has done is not something which occurs automatically. I have to want to remember God. I have to want to count my blessings, naming them one by one. I have to want to say thank you to God for all that He has done. Israel chose to forget God. What they needed was a day of thanksgiving before God.

Friends, as we close our study today, may I encourage you to take a few moments to just remember how God has blessed you. If it helps, take a piece of paper and a pen and write down a list of God's blessings. Then take time to rejoice and to praise God for each one. This will help to get you off the roller coaster and back into the joys of abundant living.

OTHNIEL: A MAN WHO GOT INVOLVED **Judges 3:9-11**

As we observed in our last study, Israel had forgotten God, and when that happened, they turned to idolatry and began to serve sin. So we read in verse 8, The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years.

This king, Cushan, was used by God for eight years to punish Israel for their sin. And Israel suffered greatly

under his rule. The people Cushan ruled were known for their tortures and were very cruel and barbaric in their ways. These were eight long hard years for Israel.

But, there is an eternal truth in this verse. God always punishes sin and the wages of sin is always a difficult one. Paul reminded us that the wages of sin was death (see Romans 6:23). Yes, there may be momentary pleasures in sin, but the consequences often prove to be very costly, as Israel was experiencing.

But, after verse 8 comes verse 9. But when they (that is the people of Israel) cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. God's people cried out in repentance while in their slavery to sin and sought God's forgiveness and His relief. And God not only heard their cries, but He sent them a deliverer, a man by the name of Othniel.

Othniel appears earlier in the book of Judges. In chapter one, there is the account of Caleb's asking for help in ridding the giants from off the land which he had inherited. Caleb asked for volunteers and who shows up, but Othniel. As a result God used him to gain the victory over the giants of Debir. Now God needed another volunteer to rid Israel of Cushan and his horrendous army. It seemed that the only man willing to get involved was Othniel, so God used him once again.

But Othniel did not go in his own strength. We read this about him in verse 10, The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war.

Friends, there is no task which God gives to you but what He will help you to do it. But our confidence must be in Him. Our dependence must be upon Him and not upon ourselves.

In our next study I want us to explore deeper into the realities of our dependence upon God. Won't you plan to join me?

MORE THOUGHTS ABOUT OTHNIEL **Judges 3:9-11**

You might remember that yesterday we started our brief study into the life of this first great judge of Israel, a man named Othniel. So far we have observed that he volunteered for service with God in driving out those who had enslaved Israel because of sin. And, we also observed that he had gone in the strength of the Lord. Othniel's dependence was not upon himself, but upon God. I stated that there is no task which God gives to you but what He will help you to do it.

Let's just suppose for a few moments, that when God asked Elijah to go to Mount Carmel, Elijah would have said to God, "Oh, God, I can't go to Mount Carmel. After all the people are so set in their ways. What will I accomplish?" Would the fire of God had fallen from heaven? Absolutely not!

Let's just suppose also, that when God asked David to go out to fight Goliath, that David would have said to God, "Oh God, I can't face that giant. He is so much bigger than I am." Would Israel have then defeated the Philistines? Absolutely not!

Now before we become overly critical, let us ask ourselves if we don't do the same from time to time. We can come up with more excuses why we should not get involved with the Lord in doing His work. After spending nearly 28 years in ministry, I think I have heard most of them, and, I must admit, have used some of them myself.

The reason why we do this so easily is because we fear defeat. Yet, God has asked me this question on many occasions. "Max, has anyone ever defeated God?" You know lots of people have tried. Pharaoh and the Egyptians tried, but they lost. The Canaanites tried, but they lost. Nebuchadnezzar tried, but he also lost. Caesar, Herod, and Pilate all tried, but they each lost. Hitler tried, and lost. The Communists have tried, and they also have experienced failure. Friends, no one has ever defeated God, and since God is on our side, there is no way we can be losers.

What is the secret? It is having the Spirit of God come upon us, filling us with the power of God. This will

happen when we yield ourselves completely to God.

In closing, I am reminded of the appearance of Jesus before Peter there on the seaside after the resurrection. Peter, still shrouded in the guilt of his denial, is busy counting the fish the disciples had caught. Jesus walks over to him and asks him a very simple question: "Peter, do you love Me?" When Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know I love You", Jesus reply is "Then feed My sheep." It is like Jesus was asking Peter if he wanted to get involved with Jesus, or just to talk about getting involved. It is time for us to have the heart of an Othniel, a heart to get involved with God.

USED BY GOD IN SPITE OF HANDICAPS Judges 3:12-30

I want to welcome you to another study in the lives of some of the unusual people whom we meet in the Book of Judges. I believe that God has given us this marvelous book to instruct us in two areas. First, it is a reminder of the consequences which we face when we chose to willfully disobey God. Sin always comes with a price tag. And second, reading the stories of these men awakens within us the sense that God can use anyone who is committed to Him. If God can use a Samson, then surely He can use me if I am yielded to His will.

Last week we closed our time of study with a brief examination of the life and times of Othniel. For forty years he ruled over Israel and for those forty years the nation enjoyed peace and prosperity. But, it seems that once Othniel died and was absent from the national scene, the people again forgot God and His blessings and began sinning against Him.

This time, God sent oppression in the form of the Moabites. Just eighty brief years previous to this time Israel had had a victory over Balak and the Moabites. Now, Moab was their oppressor, having conquered the tribes of Reuben, Gad, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Judah. After eighteen years of intense slavery, the people of Israel cried out for deliverance and God sent them a man by the name of Ehud. You will find his story in Judges 3:12-30.

Ehud came from the weakest of all the tribes, Benjamin. It had become that way because of the immorality which is described for us in Judges 19 through 21. In fact, only six hundred Benjaminites had been spared. The tribe of Benjamin never fully recovered, as is evidenced when the nation was to divide years later, the southern tribes of Benjamin and Judah were simply known as Judah.

Not only was Ehud from the weakest of tribes, but he was left-handed. Left-handed people could not fight as well because they took longer to draw their swords. In essence we could say that Ehud was handicapped. In today's world, Ehud might have been excused from serving God because of these limitations.

Yet God delights in using our limitations to bring glory to Himself. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, And he (that is, God) said unto me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me (2 Corinthians 12:9).

God used a Fanny Crosby, in spite of her blindness, to bring encouragement to many even a century after her death. God used a George Whitefield, with such terrible asthma that he would become violently sick after speaking, to stir two continents with revival. God used a shoe salesman in Chicago, a man who butchered the King's English, to impact not only his generation but our generation today with his enthusiasm for God. That man's name was D. L. Moody. And God has used Joni Eareckson Tada to bring comfort and hope to those with great physical and emotional handicaps.

One of the great lessons from the life of Ehud is that no one is handicapped when it comes to serving God. God wants you just as you are.

EHUD: A STUDY IN AVAILABILITY Judges 3:12-30

Yesterday, you might remember, we began our brief study of the life of one of the unusual servants whom God used in the Book of Judges. You will remember that Ehud would have been considered as handicapped if alive today, yet he did not let those limitations detour him from serving the Lord.

But there is another truth which I observe in this brief account of this man, Ehud. Here was a man who was available for God to use. He was willing to carry the tribute to the Moabite King, Eglon. He was willing to risk his life to bring deliverance to Israel. He saw the opportunity God had given to him and he used it.

Why was Ehud this way? Although the Bible does not state directly, I believe Ehud had prepared himself for this role as a deliverer. I believe he had rehearsed what he would do if and when God called him to act.

How many of us use the opportunities which God has given to us to share our faith with others or to help others in their hour of need. I am reminded often of the challenge which flows from the heart and pen of Peter. Listen to his words: But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have....(1 Peter 3:15). Always be prepared to give a testimony for Christ. Always be prepared to explain to another why you believe the way you do. Always be prepared to be used by God.

I remember standing at the front door of my home, one evening, visiting with a man whom I had never met before. He had been drinking and his voice was about a hundred decibels higher than it should have been. He thought I was someone else, and wanted to talk before going out and committing suicide. His girlfriend had left him. His life was a wreck. He did not believe in a loving God who might care for him. I stood there and challenged him, before he took his own life, to read the Bible and to see if God was real. He roared away on his motorcycle, and I thought I would never hear from him again. A week later he called me. I knew by his voice something had happened. He told me that he had gone to a motel, found the Gideon Bible lying on the table next to the bed, and began reading at Genesis. He had found God, gave his life to Christ, and God began using him to minister to the motorcycle gangs around the country.

Friends, always be prepared to share Christ's love and the Word of God. You will never know who God will bring into your life. Ehud was ready and God used him.

SHAMGAR; A MAN WHO USED HIS GIFT WISELY **Judges 3:31, Judges 5:6**

Two verses tell us the story of this great man of God. We know so very little about him, except that his name, Shamgar, means "cupbearer." From Judges 5:6, we notice that during his time, people were afraid to travel on the main roadways. It appears that the Philistines guarded them closely and intimidated the travelers so that many used the backroads.

Shamgar had grown up in the closing years of the reign of Ehud, and had, I believe, patterned himself after his hero. That thought was arresting. Shamgar was observing the lifestyle and attitudes of Ehud. I am sure that Ehud probably never met Shamgar and never realized the impact that he was having upon this young man. Yet, as Christians, I need to be reminded that my life is to be an example for others to follow.

This is seen most importantly within my family. I remember a little poem which crossed my desk many years ago. Its words stirred within me the great responsibility which I had as a father. Listen to the words:

A careful man I ought to be, A little fellow follows me.

I do not dare to go astray For fear he'll go the selfsame way.

I cannot once escape his eyes, What e're he sees me do he tries.

Like me he says he's going to be - The little chap that follows me.

He thinks that I am good and fine, Believes in every word of mine.

The base in me he must not see - The little chap that follows me.

I must remember as I go, Thru summer's sun and winter's snow

I'm building for the years to be - That little chap who follows me.

The way we conduct our lives is important because someone is always looking at us. If we are careful to follow Christ, then we can lead by example and say with the Apostle Paul, Join with others in following my example, brother, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you (Philippians 3:17).

A second truth observed in the life of Shamgar is that he was able to achieve a great victory through an imperfect means. An oxgoad was a long-handled instrument used to guide the oxen. Some scholars suggest that it was eight feet long and six inches in diameter with a sharp point at one end. Now, the slaying of the six hundred Philistines was the possible prevention of a Philistine invasion.

An oxgoad, in the hands of one committed to God, can become a powerful tool to communicate God's power. God still delights in using the insignificant to overwhelm the mighty. Jesus awed the crowd that day along the seaside when He fed them all with merely five loaves and two fish. David overwhelmed the Philistine giant with a mere slingshot and a smooth stone.

So often we feel that our gift and talent is so small and insignificant for God to use. But listen to these words of encouragement from the Apostle Paul: But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27). All you may have to offer God is an insignificant oxgoad like the one Shamgar had, but God can use that to accomplish His purposes if you allow God to use it.

DEBORAH AND BARAK: HARMONY IN SERVICE **Judges 4 and 5**

Deborah is a name which is familiar to many of us. Perhaps at least one of you joining us today has that as your name. I have known several Deborah's in my lifetime, including a young niece who lives in California. But how many of you have known of a man with the name of Barak? Personally, I have never met anyone with this name. A recent Prime Minister of Israel is named Barak.

In Judges chapters 4 and 5, we read the story of this outstanding woman and this army general and the great victory which God accomplished through their lives. In our study today, I want to share some insights into who Deborah and Barak were, and then, tomorrow I will share some of the truths which come from their lives.

Through the years, the Canaanites had become rebellious of the claims Israel was making upon their land. They had become tired of paying the annual tribute to the Israelite leaders. They had been frightened during the days of Joshua, but after seeing what Mesopotamia and Moab had done, there was no longer any fear. United under the leadership of Jabin, king of Hazor, a large city in the far north of Galilee, and under his able military leader Sisera, who was stationed with the troops just at the foot of Mount Carmel in the west, the Canaanites decided to rebel. And rebel they did, oppressing Israel for twenty years.

God heard the cries from His people and raised up two very different people to act as His instruments of deliverance. Deborah was a prophetess. People knew that she spoke for God. People came to her for counsel and guidance. The situation in Israel had reached such a stage where the people no longer respected the court or governmental systems. But they did respect Deborah.

This thought cause me to give consideration to how I speak and what people hear when I speak. When I share through classes or even through these Village Line chats, am I merely speaking for myself, sharing my own philosophies and ideals? Or am I speaking for God? Friends, I can assure you that I am constantly addressing those two questions. It would be easy to share my own ideas. But God has called me to share His thoughts.

I want to thank you for remembering me daily in your prayers. Continue to pray that God would give me the heart of a servant and that I would be careful to only speak what God would lay upon my heart. Pray that I would have the spirit of this great woman called Deborah.

Barak was very capable military leader. Ten thousand men responded to his call and he organized and trained them. His men were to march into the very strength of the enemy. Deborah and Barak: two people working together in harmony in order that the work of God might be accomplished. And God used both to bring a stunning victory over Sisera and Jabin

MORE FROM DEBORAH AND BARAK **Judges 4 and 5**

In our last study, I introduced you to Deborah and Barak, two very gifted people whom God used to accomplish a great victory over the Canaanites. As I have evaluated their lives, I have discovered three truths which I want to share with you in this brief study.

First, Deborah was willing to get involved. She was not merely content to sit under the palm tree and give orders. She got into the action. This reminded me of the actions of the prophet Elijah many years later. He decided to get involved with the wicked King Ahab in a contest on Mount Carmel. I also thought of Daniel who was willing to get involved with his prayer life even though it meant getting tossed into the lions den. Or, how about the story of Moses, who was convinced by God to get involved in the release of the Israelites from Egypt.

I believe God would desire for each of us to get involved for Him. Now I am not saying that we need to fight a war like Deborah did, but you and I can get involved in the lives of our neighbors by encouraging them with visits and calls. We can get involved in the lives of our communities by writing notes of praise and letters of encouragement. I am reminded of a lady in one of my former churches who wrote cards of sympathy and encouragement to those whose obituaries she had read in the newspaper. Her acts of love and encouragement reached an entire city. God does not ask us to do everything, but He does ask us to do something. What can you do for God today?

Second, both Deborah and Barak were willing to use their talents. Deborah could not fight, but she could inspire others. Barak could not prophesy, but he could fight. Victory could not have been achieved without the involvement of either. Paul reminds the Corinthian church, in 1 Corinthians 12, that God has given a gift to every believer and that He wants that gift to be used to build others up.

Third, God gave the victory through His Spirit. We read these words in Judges 4:23, On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites. In order to accomplish victories, you and I need to have the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We need to be filled each day and to walk daily in the power of the Spirit. To wage spiritual warfare without the presence of the Holy Spirit is like fighting a war with no chain of command. It leads to total defeat.

A STIRRING REFORMATION **Judges 6:1-35**

In our last study, I introduced you to some people whom you might not have known. This week, the person we will focus upon most is that of Gideon. I am sure that most of you know his story. But, his is more than a story. It is the account of how God brought a reformation into this man's heart and then used that man to accomplish one of the greatest victories Israel has known.

In our brief time together today, I would like to have us begin thinking about what a reformation really is.

If I were to ask you what the word "reformation" meant to you, I am sure that I would get a variety of answers. For some of you, the name of Martin Luther would be mentioned, for on October 31, 1517, he posted his ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, beginning the movement we now call the Protestant Reformation.

Others of you might mention such names as John Calvin, who, in 1536, wrote one of the greatest doctrinal

books ever written: The Institutes of the Christian Religion. Others would cite John Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and perhaps even Billy Graham.

Now the dictionary defines a reformation as "the act of making something better." And certainly that is what God was about to do in the life of Gideon. But, before we consider the workings of God in his life, let us examine the situation in which the nation of Israel found herself.

We read in Judges 6:1, Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. Forty years after the deliverance through the leadership of Deborah and Barak, Israel forgot God. So, God began the process of discipline. The Midianites made life miserable for Israel. They had taken away Israel's hope. Each Spring Israel would plant their crops, tend them carefully during the growing season. Then, when hope for the harvest came, the Midianites would descend and take the harvest.

Where did God find this mighty soldier of valor named Gideon? In verse 11 we read that he was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. Gideon was not your battle-tested soldier. He was just a fearful farmer. And yet God can use each of us in spite of our background. He can take our fears and turn them into tools of dependence upon God. All that Gideon had to do was to be obedient to God's commands. And that is all that God requires of us today. If we are obedient, God will do the rest. And we can count on that.

REFORMATION PRECEDES DELIVERANCE **Judges 6:1-35**

We are examining the life and times of a man by the name of Gideon. We noticed in our last study that God called him even though Gideon was full of fears. You might remember that God found him threshing wheat in a winepress because he was fearful of the Midianites. Yet God chose Gideon to be the next great deliverer of God's people.

But before Gideon could become a deliverer, he had to become a reformer. Gideon had to attack the real root of the problem, and that was not the Midianites. God was only using the Midianites because Israel had turned their backs upon God and were worshiping idols. Listen to these words of instruction which God gave to Gideon: That same night the Lord said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old (let me just pause here and say that this bull had been born the same year that the Midianites had gained control over Israel) Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. Then build a proper kind of altar to the Lord your God on the top of this bluff. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering." (Judges 6:25-26).

Israel could not be delivered from the grip of the Midianite oppression until the sins which had caused the problem had been dealt with. Gideon's first act was not against the Midianites, but against the very pagan altar which his own father had built. Notice that Gideon could have gone around the nation proclaiming that God wanted all the pagan altars torn down. It is pretty easy to tell someone else what they should be doing. It is quite another thing to do it yourself. And yet, that is exactly what Gideon did. In essence, he practiced what he would later preach.

Now, verse 27 states that Gideon tore down this altar which was right in his own back yard late at night when no one was around. His heart was still very fearful. But, fearful or not, he did as God had commanded him.

But, I want us to notice another precious and important truth found in verse 28. There we read: In the morning when the men of the town got up, there was Baal's altar, demolished, with the Asherah pole beside it cut down and the second bull sacrificed on the newly built altar! Reformation is not only about tearing down that which is offensive to God, but also about building that which is pleasing to God. The great Reformer Martin Luther, not only published articles and spoke against the evils which he viewed in his day, he also spoke on how the people could get themselves right with God.

It is not enough for us today to shout against the evils of our time, although I must admit at times I think we need to shout louder. But we also must work together to build God's truths into the lives of those around us.

This is one of the express purposes of the Village Schools, to help people come to an understanding of how God has made known to us His will through His Word. Please pray that we will never lose sight of that purpose.

TO FLEECE OR NOT TO FLEECE? THAT IS THE QUESTION **Judges 6:36-40**

If there is any one aspect of the story of Gideon with which most Christians are familiar, it is the account of his testing God with the fleece. In my many years of ministry experience, I have found that one of the chief desires of most believers is to know the will of God for their lives. And this is an honorable desire. Remember Paul's words to the Romans, in that oft quoted verse in Romans 12: Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing, and perfect will (Romans 12:2).

So, was Gideon's testing of God's will with the fleece a proper one? I believe that in Gideon's case the answer is negative. Let me share with you my reasons. I will couch them in the form of some questions. First, had not Gideon encountered the angel of the Lord and had seen the powerful display when he offered his meal to him? (See verses 19-22) Second, had not God strengthened Gideon causing him to destroy the pagan altar which his own father had built? (See verses 25-28). Finally, had God's plans for Gideon changed any? No, God's plans had not changed any. Gideon had already received confirmation of what he was to do. The fleece was unnecessary and certainly did nothing to change God's plans. I believe that Gideon was hoping that God might change His mind and relieve Gideon of the great responsibility which had been thrust upon him. But God did not change His mind.

Now, you might ask me if I have ever used a fleece like Gideon did. The answer is a qualified yes, only when I was uncertain of the Lord's direction and when the two alternatives for ministry appeared equal. I remember using a fleece when it seemed that God was calling us away from our ministry in Chicago and back to Iowa. I had already said no to the church who was seeking us. Yet, months after expressing our desire to remain in Chicago, this same Iowa congregation called and asked if we had changed our mind. Because Marlys and I could not reach a definite understanding of God's will, we put out a fleece before God. His answer to our fleece helped us in our decision to move from Chicago to Iowa. And when we arrived, we knew we were where God desired us to be.

The question we should ask ourselves is not about the fleece, but about our desire to obey what we know God is already telling us to do. Gideon knew God wanted to use him to deliver Israel. Gideon just wasn't sure he wanted to obey or not. I have found that this is true of most when the issue of the fleece occurs. We already know God's will, we just don't know if we want to obey.

Friends, if God has shown you what He wants, then don't waste time with the fleece. Just move forward, knowing that God will direct your footsteps with His presence. But, if you have an uncertainty about what God is asking, then carefully lay a fleece before God. But do it with a heart that is fully prepared to obey whatever God asks of you.

A FAITH THAT PRODUCES A VICTORY **Judges 7:1-25**

Gideon has finally ascertained the definitive will of God. Through the fleece, he has understood that God is not about to change His plans. That God is serious about using Gideon as His instrument to deliver the people of God from the hands of the Midianites.

Gideon proceeds by issuing a call for men to join him in this fight. And, as a result of his efforts, thirty two thousand men rally to his side. Although that number sounds impressive, we must remember that the Word tells us that the Midianites, the Amalekites, and all the other eastern people had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore (Judges 7:12). Some Bible scholars estimate the combined strength of these enemy forces at 135,000 men. So, already Gideon is outnumbered by about four to one. Not great odds, but doable.

Suddenly, God tells Gideon that he is to allow those men who really did not want to fight to return to their

homes. Can you imagine the horrors upon the face of our fearful leader when 22,000 men picked up their spears and went home. Gideon's army was whittled down to a third of its size. The odds now had increased to thirteen to one. I am sure that Gideon may have been thinking to himself, "How do you spell defeat?"

But God is still not happy with the size of the army. He next commands Gideon to test the resolve of those who remained. The test is administered and only three hundred men pass. Gideon is now faced with the incredible task of defeating an army which outnumbers him by odd of four hundred and fifty to one. You see, God's concern was that Israel might take credit for the victory, and God wanted all the glory for Himself. So, He created the impossible odds, so that neither Gideon, nor his army, nor the people of the land could boast. They would have to give all praise to God.

Gideon now set the dangers which his small army might face on one hand and all of God's promises in his other hand. And Gideon knew that God's promises out weighed the dangers. Therefore, he led his men into the camp of Midian full of confidence that God would be victorious. And God honored this faith of Gideon in a miraculous way. The Midianites were routed and God's people were delivered.

Friends, God honors a faith that rests upon God. Take some time today to read through Hebrews 11. There you will visit the lives of men and women whose faith God honored in a special way. Then, take a few moments to remember those men and women whose faith in God inspired and encouraged you in your walk with the Lord. Then praise God for their memory and ask God to increase your faith so that He might use you to impact the lives of others.

CLOSING THE LIFE OF GIDEON **Judges 8:1-35**

Our focus has been upon God's servant, Gideon. As this eighth chapter of Judges open, the small army of Gideon is hot on the heels of the fleeing Midianites. There is chaos and death all along the path of retreat. The Midianites are in a rout, and Gideon is in hot pursuit. He is assured that God is giving him a complete victory.

I am impressed by a thought which comes out of verse 4 of this chapter. There we read, Gideon and his three hundred men, exhausted yet keeping up the pursuit, came to the Jordan and crossed it. The battle had waxed long and hard, yet it was not time to declare victory yet. Their bodies were tired and stretched to the limits. It was tempting to call it quits. Yet they kept going.

Friends, I don't know about you, but there have been many times when I found serving the Lord to be a fatiguing business. The days are often long and the pressures are often immense. Weariness can begin to set in, yet one must continue pursuing. God will provide the strength for our labors.

Let us focus for just a few moments on the causes for spiritual faintness. Whenever I encounter weariness, I take time to evaluate my devotional life. Am I spiritually hungry because I am not taking the time to feed my own soul? If I am lacking spiritual food, I will soon grow spiritually weak. Those moments of reflection in God's Word and communion with Him through prayer are vitally important if I am to not grow weary in well-doing.

I also ask myself if I am weary because I am physically tired. I am reminded that even Jesus had to set aside time to rest. We read in Mark 6:31, Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said them, "come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." There are those times when a person must simply get away for a few hours or even a few days. Attend a Bible conference where you can get spiritual refreshment for your own souls. Sit and read a good book or listen to your favorite piece of music. I remember reading the following quote: If you don't come apart, you will come apart. That is some powerful good advice.

Friends, God expects our attainments to be no more than proportional to our strength. Remember these words from David's pen, for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:14). God is not a hard task master making us make bricks without any straw. God realizes what you can do. He knows what your gifts and abilities are.

But, I also need to remember that the real source of victory is not our strength or ability, but God's. At times, our faintness will drive us into the arms of God. We will cry out, "I can't, but You can!" How God loves to hear those words.

Let me close our study in the life of Gideon by reading one of my favorite verses from the Bible. I think it describes Gideon's relationship with God, and I have found it so very true in my own life. But those who hope (I like the KJV word "wait") in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:31).

DESTRUCTION CAUSED BY PRIDE **Judges 9:1-57**

I want to welcome you to another exciting Bible study. We are continuing our study in the book of Judges. What a fascinating book, if you are interested in unusual people whom God has chosen to use. Makes a person optimistic that he or she can be used by God.

In this ninth chapter of Judges, we are introduced to the person of Abimelech. He was the son of Gideon. His name, in Hebrew, means "my father is king." Now, we know from the closing verses of Judges 8, that Gideon ruled over Israel for forty years. But nowhere do we read that he took upon himself the title of king. Perhaps, Abimelech just thought of his father as being king. And so, after the death of his father, Gideon, he proclaims himself as king.

Now, as one reads this ninth chapter of Judges, two deadly sins leap off the pages and into our minds. Those are the twin sins of jealousy and pride. Abimelech was jealous of his brothers, and the citizens of Shechem had pride in one of their own. Those two factors, when combined, became lethal. Both Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem needed to learn to guard their hearts against the wiles of Satan.

Friends, we must not give our enemy an advantage by harboring evil desires and attitudes within our hearts. It is good to be zealous for a cause, but not if it is a deterrent to our testimony for Christ. We are to be ambitious, but we are not to let our ambitions become the gods in our lives. I am reminded of the disciples who argued among themselves as to who would be the greatest in Christ's kingdom. Each wanted to be the most important. Christ told them that they were to focus upon His desires and not upon their own. What great advice for each of us.

And how we must guard against pride. The writer of Proverbs was correct when he stated that pride goes before a fall. And, in Proverbs 6:16-19, the very first of the sins which God finds as an abomination is that of a haughty spirit, or jealousy. Miriam and Aaron became jealous of Moses and their own personal pride during those long years in the wilderness. Finally, this jealousy and pride led them to complain to Moses and to God. They felt that they were just as good as Moses, so why didn't God speak to them more often. God brought judgment in the form of leprosy which plagued Miriam for seven days.

Because of jealousy and pride, a lot of sorrow and bloodshed occurred in Israel. A lot of families were destroyed. Even Abimelech suffered a cruel death. Oh the eternal wages of death which these two sins pay.

PROCRASTINATING ON GODS MERCY **Judges 10:1-18**

In the early verses of this tenth chapter of Judges, we are introduced to two men whose stories are told in just a few brief words. One man was named Tola and the Bible tells us that he judged over Israel for twenty-three years. The other man was named Jair, and he judged over Israel for twenty-two years. Although these men are overshadowed by the likes of a Gideon and later a Jephthah, they are important because they cause us to reflect upon the great truth: with God, every person is important. Oh, their stories may not be as exciting to read. In fact, their only story may be that of a daily faithful obedience to God. Not the stuff of which books are written, but most certainly the stuff in which God rejoices.

When we get to heaven, there will many Tolas and Jairs. I am reminded of some of the dear saints who have impacted my life. I think of Pastor Ray Baker for whom I worked while a teenager years ago. This godly man, unknown to the world, would pray and ask God to call me into the ministry. He was ushered into

eternity without seeing his prayer accomplished, but somehow, this "Tola" knew that God would answer him.

Friends, can I urge you today to sit down and to remember those unsung people who have impacted your life significantly for Christ? They may be known only to you. They are your "Tolas" and "Jairs". Thank God for their obedience. Give Him thanks for the wonderful privilege you had of knowing these dear saints. If they are still living, why not drop them a card of appreciation. I know it will be a blessing to them.

There is another truth expressed in this chapter. It is a truth shrouded in tragedy: Why does Israel spend so much time living in sin before they cried out to God? There seemed to be that feeling that, with time, they could improve themselves.

But sin never improves anyone. It always drags a person down. And just like Israel, we wait to cry out to God until we are helplessly mired in sins grip. Sin is nothing to play around with. It is nothing that we should compromise with. We need to flee from its presence. And when we fall, we need to immediately ask God for forgiveness. Lets not wait until the hour is desperate. Oh the joys we miss when we choose to wait.

And yet, in spite of the waiting, God still showed His mercy to Israel. How many times had they failed to serve Him! How many times had they served themselves and other gods! Yet, when they cried out and admitted their sin and turned from their evil ways, God brought deliverance. Praise God for His cleansing of our sins.

JEPHTHAH: AN OUTCAST WHO BECAME A HERO **Judges 11:1-40**

Once upon a time, according to the fairy tale, a duckling was hatched. He was very much unlike those other ducklings which were around him. He seemed not to fit in with them. He was awkward. His neck seemed to be a nuisance as he waddled along with the rest of the duck crowd. It did not take long for him to receive the nickname of "the ugly duckling." Soon, his friends began to shun him. He grew very lonely, and yet, at the same time, he did grow. One day his ugliness was replaced with the grace and beauty of a great swan.

That fairy tale reminds me of the story of this fascinating judge, named Jephthah. He was the son of a prostitute, not an auspicious way to begin life. He was soon driven from his home by his fathers legitimate children. They certainly did not want a prostitutes son receiving any of the inheritance which they hoped to receive from their father.

The Bible tells us that Jephthah went into the desert and became a gang leader. I like the way the King James Version records it: Then Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob: and there were gathered vain men to Jephthah, and went out with him (verse 3). One can only imagine what this group of young men was like that Jephthah became mixed up with. But soon, Jephthah developed a national reputation. People became aware of his outstanding leadership abilities.

I believe there is a lesson to be learned here in these opening verses of the story of Jephthah. People are indeed watching us. They are discovering our strengths and our weaknesses. We are leaving an impression upon them. How many times did the Apostle Paul remind his readers of their need to walk consistently and faithfully with God? Almost too many to count. As a father, I must remember that my children are observing me. As an employer, I must remember that those who work for me are also watching me closely. As a neighbor, those within my neighborhood are watching me to see if I live as I have believed. We may not like the fact that, as Christians, we live in a fish bowl, but that living has a great deal of impact upon our testimony for Christ.

MORE THOUGHTS ABOUT JEPHTHAH **Judges 11:1-40**

Yesterday we began our study in the life of this most unusual person, a man whom we might call "an ugly duckling" before God. We noticed that, although driven from his home because his birth was despised, he began to develop leadership skills which became noticed by those around him. Now those skills would be

called upon to help deliver his people from bondage.

When summoned by those same people who had "run him out of town" earlier in his life, Jephthah responded in a positive way. He did not seek revenge. He did not state, "Well, if I was not good enough for you then, I am not good enough for you now." No, Jephthah sensed the urging of God and went to meet this challenge.

Now, here is where the story gets very interesting. Instead of buckling on the sword and summoning the army, Jephthah tries his hand at negotiations. Being well versed in Scripture and in the story of his people, he first approached the Ammonite oppressors with the message of Gods dealings with both the Ammonites and Israel in the past. Jephthah knew how to fight with words, as well as with the sword.

I was impressed as I read his message to the Ammonites. I wonder how many of us are as intimately acquainted with Gods dealings in our nations past as was Jephthah with his nations. God has been at work in our nations history, a fact that many have tried to refute or ignore. What a responsibility we have to proclaim this heritage to others. Armed with the truths of the past, we can stand against those who seek to destroy those truths in the present. A knowledge of our past is important for a sure defense of the present and the future.

Jephthah tried to settle the differences between the Ammonites and Israel by talking first. He tried to reason with them. He wanted to listen to their complaints and wished them to do likewise with Israels complaints. Although his plan did not work, Jephthah is to be commended for his desire to be a peacemaker. Jesus told us that those who were peacemakers were indeed blessed.

Remember those words of God to Israel, as recorded by the prophet Isaiah? He wrote, Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. (Isaiah 1:18). It may not always bring the results we would like, but then again, an understanding might be reached which will allow Gods way to be realized.

Tomorrow, in our final study in the life of this unusual man of God, we want to give consideration to those closing verses of this chapter. Did Jephthah sacrifice his daughter or not? I invite you to join us for that study.

TO SACRIFICE OR NOT TO SACRIFICE: THAT IS THE QUESTION **Judges 11:34-40**

When one hears the name of Jephthah, it is this event in the closing verses of Judges 11 which most readily comes to mind. Probably one of the most asked questions I ever addressed while in the pastoral ministry, and it is asked here by many during the study of Old Testament Survey, is this: Did Jephthah sacrifice his daughter to God?

We read about this vow which Jephthah made with God just before he entered into battle against the Ammonites. It was one of those moments which most of us have experienced from time to time when we bargain with God. You know how it goes if God will do something, then you will do something in return. Usually, in such bargaining, we fail to keep our end of the bargain. At least we cannot say that about Jephthah.

God gave him a great victory, and upon his return home, whom should he meet first but his one and only daughter. His heart was crushed because of his vow before God. What would you do if you had been in Jephthahs shoes; I mean other than making such a foolish vow?

Bible scholars are about evenly divided in their interpretation of these verses. Allow me to share with you the evidence from those who hold to a literal sacrifice of his daughter. First, the express terms of the narrative in verse 30 (I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering) and in verse 39 (he did to her as he had vowed) relate the simple truth that what he had vowed he performed, and he had vowed a sacrifice. Second, Jephthah was half-heathen and the circumstances took place where the heathen dwelt in great numbers and where human sacrifices were known. Third, his excessive grief on seeing his daughter come forth to meet him can only be accounted for on the supposition that he considered her devoted to death. Finally, the

mourning for Jephthah's daughter for four days in the year can be reconciled only with the supposition that she was an actual sacrifice.

Now, let me share the evidence from those who say that Jephthah could not have sacrificed his daughter. First of all, and most importantly, it would have been a direct violation of the Mosaic Law. Second, Jephthah had a great respect for God, which would have kept him from going against that Law. Third, if he had sacrificed his daughter, his piety would have led him to do so at the proper place of sacrifice, which was the Tabernacle, but no priest would have been willing to officiate. Fourth, that Jephthah permitted his daughter to bewail her virginity for two months fits well with the idea of her soon being devoted to God in service at the Tabernacle, much like that of Samuel. This would necessarily mean that she would never marry and therefore, Jephthah would never have any grandchildren. Finally, the pivotal statement in Judges 11:31 can also be translated by the word "or" instead of "and", making the first part a reference to what Jephthah would have done if a human first met him, and the second if an animal.

Personally, I am convinced that the latter evidence is more substantial than that for an actual sacrifice. No where else in Scripture do we read where God honored the sacrifice of a person, except that of His own Son upon the cross.

I believe the significance comes, not in whether Jephthah did or did not sacrifice his daughter, but in his heart which was ready to fulfill that which he had vowed to God. That tells me his relationship with God was important and he desired to maintain that intimacy of fellowship with God. We could do worse than to follow his example.

A BOY WITH A GREAT FUTURE **Judges 13**

Welcome, friends, to another study from the Word of God. We will be concluding our study in the lives of those unique individuals whom we know as the Old Testament judges. We have certainly met a strange cast of characters, haven't we? And yet each one has taught us something about ourselves and our relationship with God. And for that, we say a thank you to God for including their stories in His marvelous Word.

Of all the judges, Samson is the one with whom we are most familiar. Hollywood has glamorized his life, especially focusing upon his story with Delilah. We see portraits of his tearing a lion apart or of pulling the Philistine temple down upon himself in those closing moments of his life. The story of Samson is so similar to that of many today. It is the account of a man who begins life with a great future, yet, because of disobedience and self-will, never fully realizes that potential.

We begin our study of the life of Samson in Judges 13. There was a special family in the valley of Zoreh who had been childless for quite some time. Seemingly they had given up on ever having children of their own. Now to not have children in those days was the mark of God's hands being against you. Yet, if I read the text carefully, this couple must have covenanted with God concerning their children if God would send them some.

To this childless couple the preincarnate Christ appeared to announce the birth of a special son, a promised deliverer from the Philistines. They would name that son, Samson.

Now Samson joined the ranks of several other important people who were singled out by God for a special blessing even before they were born. Jacob was one of them, for we read in Genesis 25:23, And the Lord said to her (that is to Rebekah, Jacob's mother), "Two nations are in your womb; and two peoples shall be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger."

Also called by God prior to his birth was Jeremiah. God told him, Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5). The Apostle Paul understood that God's hand had been upon him before he was born, for he writes to the Galatians, But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles (Galatians 1:15-16). And, of course,

aside from the birth narrative of Jesus Christ, the most famous of all children whose birth was announced before hand, was that of John the Baptist (read Luke 1:13-17).

Now God does not always call us before our birth as He did these men, but the Bible teaches us that God cared about us before the foundation of the world was laid. We know that God has a special plan for each of our lives and that God is interested in us as people with a purpose. It is God's desire to bless the world through you. I am reminded of those words of a song which Bill and Gloria Gaither wrote many years ago. Why not join in singing or praying these words to God in the form of a prayer of thanksgiving for making you what you are.

I am something special, I am the only one of my kind,

God gave me a body, and a bright healthy mind.

He has a special purpose, that He wanted me to find,

So He made me something special, I am the only one of my kind.

A POWERFUL PARENTAL PRAYER Judges 13:8

In our last study we noticed that Samson was to be someone very special, having been chosen by God for a specific task, that of delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines. Because Samson was to be someone special, his parents needed to be special as well.

Now we know that God asked that Samson be dedicated as a Nazirite from the moment of his birth. You will find the account of what it meant to be a Nazirite in Numbers 6, verses 2-8. This vow meant that a person was holy to the Lord. It was usually a voluntary vow taken for a certain period of time, but in the case of Samson, this vow was to be forever.

Because of this special vow which was to be upon Samson, notice the commands of God to his parents, found in verse 13. There we read, The angel of the Lord answered, "Your wife must do all that I have told her. She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her." This time of separation from the normal routines of life which they had enjoyed for years, was to be a time of preparation for them before the birth of their special child.

I was thinking the other day how good it would be if all parents were to separate themselves to God before their children came. It might help them to recognize the fact that that child is a gift from God. And it might help them to ask the question of God which Manoah, Samson's father, asked: O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born (Judges 13:8). Through that prayer, Samson's parents sought guidance from the Lord.

The Bible tells us that children are a precious gift from God. Listen to these words from the Psalmist: Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them (Psalm 127:3-5). What an awesome responsibility which God entrusts to us to nurture and to guide those precious lives. What a comfort to know that we, as parents, can ask God for guidance and for wisdom, knowing that He will supply those requests.

Because his parents were willing to separate themselves prior to his birth, God was able to bless Samson. We read in verse 24 that Samson grew and the Lord blessed him. God will bless each of us if we will separate ourselves unto Him. The Bible commands our separation from the world (read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Now that does not mean that we are to live in a cave or become a hermit. It does not mean that we are to be penniless or destitute. But it does mean that we must put God first in our lives and that everything you and I do centers around His will for our lives. And when we give God everything, in return, we will receive the blessings of the Lord. What a precious thought.

DO YOU HAVE EYE TROUBLE?

Judges 14

I have always loved being with children and listening to them talk about life. I also enjoy reading collections of stories about children. Their philosophy of life is so timeless. Listen to some of what children have said about sin:

A lively six-year old boy, when corrected by the teacher as his class marched into the church sanctuary, presented this original alibi: "Well, that old devil is so fast that he has me doing the wrong thing before I know it." (Perhaps we might use that same excuse).

Then there is this story from a third grader in Mississippi: The children were discussing how difficult it is sometimes not to tease, not to argue, not to be sassy. For a week they had kept track of things they had done which they really should not have done. Although the lists were private and not even to be brought to school, Robert had none. "I didn't really do anything," he explained, "things just kept happening to me." (Don't you feel that way at times?)

Finally, there is this story which relates to today's study in the life of Samson. One evening my neighbor's little boy was sent to bed because of being so naughty. The little boy knelt to pray and his mother said he should ask God to make him a better boy. He prayed accordingly, and near the end he said, "But don't worry if you can't, God, because I'm having a good time the way I am."

I think that applied to Samson. Samson seemed to be always getting into trouble with his eyes, and it never seemed to bother him. You will remember that God has chosen Samson to be the deliverer of Israel from the hands of the Philistines. So, what do we read about him in Judges 14: I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife (verse 3). Samson had been set apart for God's work and for God's glory. Now his desire was to marry one of those who was part of that group of people oppressing Israel. Although his father tried to dissuade him, Samson persisted until the arrangements were made for the wedding to occur. I believe this act marked the beginning of the downfall of Samson.

The Apostle John warns us about the lust of the eyes when he writes, Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world (1 John 2:15-16). How we need to carefully guard our eyes that what we view and take into our minds might be worthy of giving praise to God. Samson's focus was upon his desires rather than upon those of God.

THE FOLLY OF REVENGE Judges 15

In Judges 14 we have the story of Samson's marriage to the young Philistine woman of Timnah. As was the custom in those days, a celebration, lasting for as long as a week, was held for the bridal couple. Samson began to make sport of the young Philistine men attending this celebration by offering a reward to any who could tell him the answer to the riddle he was about to propose. Of course, everyone was up to the challenge.

As the days went by, the young Philistines were no closer to solving the riddle than they had been earlier. Desperate, they went to Samson's wife and begged her to obtain the answer from her new husband. She entreated Samson, but he showed no compassion for her distress. Finally, after four days of persistent pleading, Samson told her about the riddle and its meaning. She then went and told the young Philistines, who, with a spirit of cockiness, related the answer to Samson.

Samson became enraged, left the celebration, went out and killed thirty Philistines and supplied the garments which he had promised, and never went back to his bride. As chapter 14 closes, we observe that his bride was then given to the best man as his bride, all this unknown to Samson.

As chapter 15 opens, Samson decides to return to Timnah to his wife. When he gets there he is told that she is now married to someone else. Now begins the cycle of revenge. Samson sought revenge because his wife was no longer his wife, so he proceeds to burn the grain fields of the Philistines by tying torches

between the tails of 150 pair of foxes. That serves them right, he thinks to himself.

Now the Philistines sought revenge for the loss of their grain by murdering Samson's wife and her family. What as Samson's response? We read in verse 7, Samson said to them (that is the Philistine leaders), "Since you've acted like this, I won't stop until I get my revenge on you." So, he proceeds to slaughter hundreds of them. The Philistines then sought revenge for the loss of their peers by intimidating the men of Judah to hand Samson over to them. The men of Judah sought revenge against Samson for their plight, so they arranged to hand Samson over to the Philistines.

What an ugly chapter! Nothing is ever accomplished through revenge. In fact, revenge only makes a bad situation that much worse. How much better it is to let God work things out in His time. How much better it is to seek forgiveness and to leave the vengeance to God.

THE DOWNFALL OF SAMSON **Judges 16**

There is an old American proverb which states that "if you play with fire you will eventually get burned." Such a proverb aptly describes the life of Samson. We might say that here was a man who constantly lived near the edge of the cliff. There was a certain sense of arrogance in his attitude and in his approach toward the Philistines.

Unlike the other judges, whose stories we have read these past weeks, Samson never experienced a one-time lasting victory over the Philistines. In fact, he seemed to delight in toying with them, goading them on to make a move against him. Instead of shying away from the camps of the Philistines, Samson was determined to make his home among them. We might say that although Samson was very strong, he certainly was not very smart.

Samson soon found a new love interest in his life. This time it was a Philistine woman who lived in the Sorek valley. Her name was Delilah. It is obvious by her actions that she did not share the same affections as did Samson. She found herself in the employ of the Philistine leaders with the assignment to discover the secret of Samson's incredible strength. If successful, she would become an independently wealthy woman. Who could resist that kind of an offer?

Delilah persuades Samson to divulge the secrets of his strength. And thus begins the cat and mouse game which Samson loved to play. Each time he shared an idea, the plan was carried out by Delilah and the Philistines came. Each time Samson was successful in his escape. We are indeed mystified as to why Samson remained in Delilah's home. Surely he had become aware of her intentions. We want to shout out to him to flee even as Joseph fled from the home of Potipher. But all of our shouting is to no avail.

Have you noticed how with the first two attempts to bind him, Samson really made sport of the Philistines? But then he began to succumb to the enticing wiles of Delilah. First the hair was braided. Finally it was cut. And Delilah went to the bank to deposit her newly earned wealth. Samson the strong became Samson the weak. The man whose eyes had gotten him into continual trouble, now became the man who had no eyes. The man who had taunted others, now became the one at whom others hurled insults. All this because God's power cannot abide in disobedient vessels.

You might be asking why we would spend a week on the life of a man whose story is most discouraging. I believe that many of us have played the role of Samson a time or two in our lives. I know I have. You know how easy it is to live for your own selfish pleasures and ideas rather than to seek God's best. It is easy to walk in the energy of the flesh rather than that of the Spirit. And we have found that God still disciplines those who walk in disobedience to His will. Yes, we might feel sorry for this man who had so much potential that was unrealized. But how we need to be alert that we do not make the same tragic mistake which Samson did.

Father, You have taught us much during these studies from the book of Judges. We must confess that too often we have seen ourselves in the lives of these unique individuals. We have learned and we have grown, and for that we say "thank You." Continue to bless the ministry of Your Word in the lives of Your children until we reach maturity in Christ. For it is in His name we pray, Amen.

