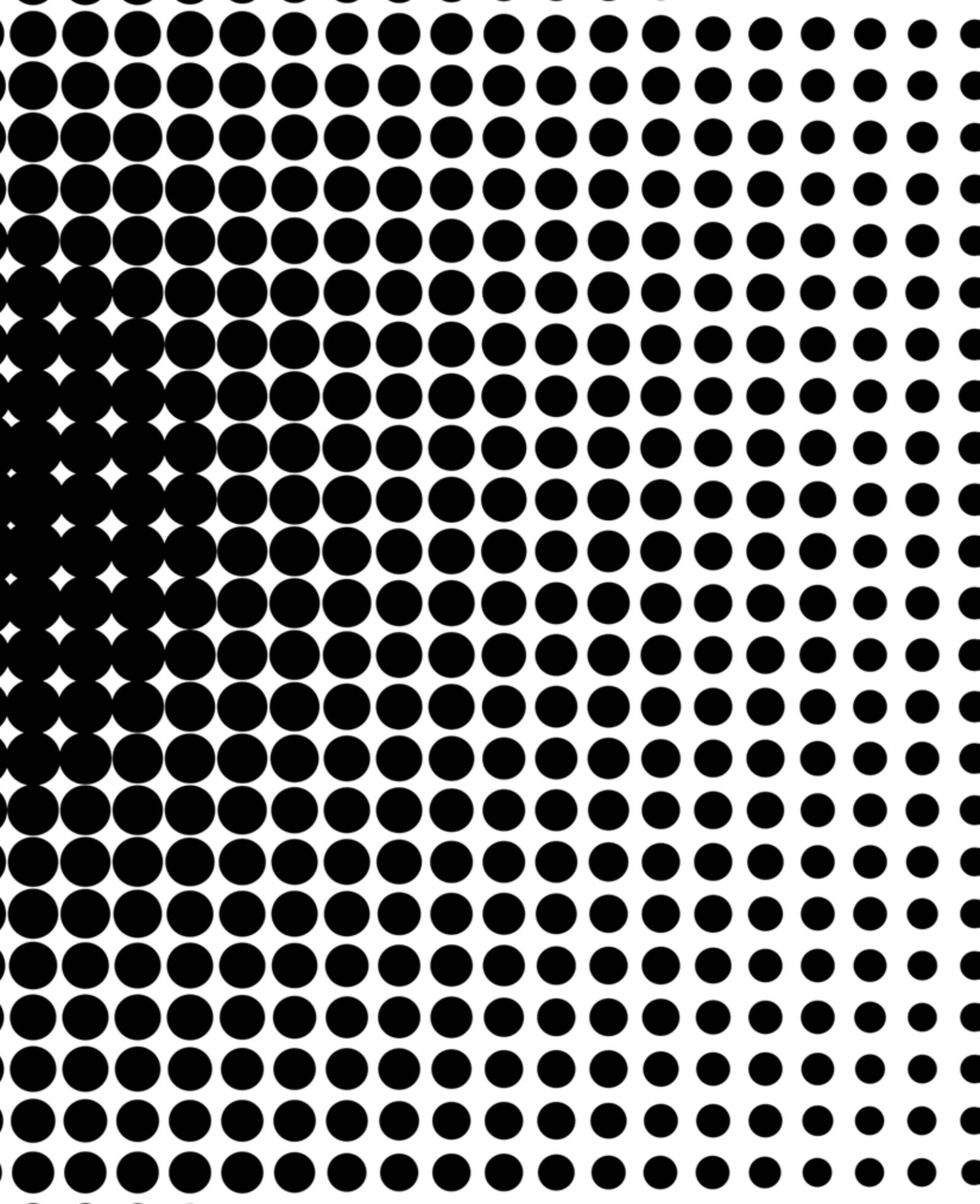


BROKEN SAVIORS

THE BOOK OF JUDGES



SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE



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INTRODUCTION

USING THIS GUIDE

In this study, you will peer into the depths of the human soul and watch a nation struggle with its identity in some fascinating ways. Along the way, we will meet people and things that seem to have the potential to save God's people. But in the end, they prove to be broken saviors that cannot deliver the way our Lord and Savior can.

We created this guide as a companion that will enhance your personal study of Judges. Work through this guide on your own before the weekly sermons. Then bring your answers with you to small group, where there will be a discussion based on the observations and discoveries you have made throughout the week.

These eight sessions will follow the REAP method of Bible study, with some input from our team of writers on the "Examine" sections. If you are unfamiliar with the REAP method, please see week 2 of the START guide, which you can find at summitrdu.com/sji. Here's what each session will look like:

BROKEN SAVIORS

Example Session

Introduction: A few words to set the stage and provide background.

READ: Passages to focus on and a few basic observation questions to get your personal study going.

EXAMINE: Some comments to guide your study through particular themes in Judges. The passages are rich, so each session has two or three "Examine" portions.

APPLY: Several application questions to go with each "Examine" portion. Your answers to these questions will be the main substance of the small group discussions. Small Group Discussion Guides are at the very end of each session.

PRAY: A small guide offers some suggestions for how to pray along with the themes of each session.

Looking Ahead: Since we cannot study every chapter of Judges in eight weeks, this is a reading plan that will get you through the entire book in conjunction with the sessions. This reading is crucial as background to each session.

Your first "Looking Ahead" assignment is to read Judges 1 to 3.

The weekly rhythm of your study of Judges should look something like this:

First half of the week: Do the “Looking Ahead” assignment found at the end of the previous session.

Second half of the week: Focus on the specific passages listed after “Read,” and complete the study.

Small group meeting: Bring your completed answers, sermon notes, and additional resource notes to small group. Share with your group from what God taught you that week. Repeat the cycle with the “Looking Ahead” reading at the end of the session.

Additional Resources: The writing team found the book of Judges to be incredibly rich. Some guides have bonus info boxes with helpful quotes, background, and important references. Judges also confronts us with some challenging passages. Articles on summitrdu.com/sji from various experts and contributors from around Summit will help make sense of the difficulties you might encounter when interpreting Judges. Issues from holy war to sex to comparative literature will be covered in the articles.

Leaders, be sure to make use of those articles when needed. Weekly leader guides will also be posted on The City to help you construct your small group meetings around the sessions in this book and the upcoming sermons. These will be enhanced versions of the “Small Group Discussion Guides” at the end of each session.

ADVICE FOR READING JUDGES

Know the underlying THEME: God's mercy.

A mentor of mine would dispel a common misconception about the Bible when he would often insist that “the God of the Old Testament is the God of mercy and the God of the New Testament is the God of judgment” (not the way you thought that was going to go, was it?). Judges is an Old Testament book that proves his point. Throughout this book, God makes a routine out of habitual, long-suffering mercy toward his people. Judges is filled with violence, intrigue, civil war, abuse, judgment, power-grabs, and horrible sin; but whenever his wayward people cried out to him, God sent a deliverer to give his people peace. This is the mercy of a loving Father who warned them often about their behavior and watched in pain as they repeatedly returned to destructive cycles. Things get so bad by the end of the book that God has to completely change how he relates to his people. The first few chapters of First Samuel finish the story of Judges and start the age of Kings. What is the rationale for the change? If the whole nation cannot stay true to God's laws, perhaps one man can — the king.

Discover the PATTERN: A cycle of idolatry.

Think of the 12 judges in these stories more as “tribal leaders” than as political or legal decision-makers. The judges' main function is to deliver the Israelites from the oppression of one of the surrounding nations. Only Deborah is depicted as concerning herself with the internal politics of God's people. The repeated cycle of Judges (which occurs six times throughout the book) can be described simply as “rebellion-retribution-repentance-rescue.” Israel's behavior gets worse and worse with every cycle as they forget that God is the source of both their correction and their deliverance. At times, the “punishment” by God was simply to allow them to live under their own oppressive, sinful, and idolatrous habits. By the end, things are so bad that you wonder why God does not completely abandon them and why he somehow still wants to be in covenant relationship with them.

Understand the GENRE: Narrative history.

Judges is a history book, but it is history with a theological point to make. Know this when you read Judges: You should find very little redeeming value in most of the characters and their actions. Do not try any of this at home! This is not a book of heroes; it's a book about how bad things become when people stopped obeying God and did “whatever seemed right in their own eyes” (Judges 17:6, 21:25 NLT, cf. Judges 18:1, 19:1). The relevance of reading Judges today is in seeing all the different ways the Israelites found to destroy their own souls. When they were paying no attention to God, they looked to power, sex, approval of others, self-righteousness, and false religion to fill their lives. We may not attach a little wooden figurine (a literal “idol”) to what we are doing, but our society is riddled with this same idolatry. The results then and now are devastating, and God's own people finish the age with the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah and an ensuing civil war.

See the TRUE JUDGE.

In our preaching at The Summit Church, we like to relate the Old Testament to Jesus and show how he fulfills the promises, hopes, and expectations of the Israelites. How in the world can we find Jesus in the pages of a book like this? Here's how: The Israelites are going to discover that none of this idolatry can save them. Their “heroes” are deeply flawed men, and when the people are left to their own devices, all hell breaks loose. God's mercy prevails, and his people make it through a very dark era. God was able to show mercy instead of judgment because the true Savior of Israel was perfect — and he was broken to remove our sin, guilt, and shame.

From the era of the Judges through the time of the Kings (see the next article), the underlying question is whether God's people will follow God's leadership. Throughout this period, God gives judges, deliverers, mediators, prophets, and kings to be his representatives to the people (and vice versa). In Acts 17:31 (cf. Acts 10:42), Paul declares that there is now one man who has been given that responsibility for all time. Everything that the judges were supposed to do for the people — to deliver them from enemies, provide peace, instill unity, give direction, speak God's words, and so on — are all met in Jesus. His Kingdom is coming, and his deliverance is permanent!

Just before Judges in the Bible is the book of Joshua. Joshua has two story lines, including one that is about God's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham. This promise is fulfilled completely (see Joshua 21:41-45); on the other hand, the second storyline is that Israel themselves failed to drive out all the inhabitants of the land (Joshua 23:4ff). The end of the book of Joshua is very pessimistic about how faithful Israel will be in the Promised Land; Joshua tells them they will not be able to serve God (Joshua 24:19-28).

Judges begins with the end of Joshua as a backdrop and continues the pessimism that has been predicted. It tells of Israel's worsening unfaithfulness in the land and God's grace extended to them over and over in spite of their behavior.¹ There is a phrase occurring four times in the book in Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, and 21:25: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6 ESV). This is the reason given for the peoples' behavior. Any time a recurring phrase like this appears, we should pay very close attention to it! What is the author — and ultimately God — trying to communicate to us? Why is this significant? We have to go back to the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis to Deuteronomy) to find our answer.

In poetic language and three times in the Pentateuch, Moses tells of a kingly figure that is coming in what may be translated from the Hebrew as "the last days." In Genesis 49:8-12 this figure comes from Judah and will be like a lion with a scepter and "to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (v. 10); in Numbers 24:17-19 he is a star coming from Jacob that will defeat Israel's enemies (also verses 7 to 9 contain kingly language and lion imagery); finally in Deuteronomy 33:20-23 there again is imagery of one who is ruling as well as some lion imagery. There are other textual features that tie these passages together but are too detailed for discussion here. Suffice it to say that there is a coming kingly figure that is presented as one who will rule over all his enemies and to whom all the nations will render obedience.

The author of Judges implies that because this king has not appeared, there is no unity in or faithfulness to God. The book of Judges recounts the time before the monarchy in Israel when the tribes were all living on their own without any unifying influence. The term "judge" as used in this book is not to be understood so much as a judicial position as in our society but more as a deliverer who rallies the people and is used by God to push back the oppressors that have been raised up to discipline the people in response to their rebellion. The kings that are raised up after the time of the judges in Israel are a unifying influence to whom all the people give allegiance. The book of Judges shows us the continual decline of Israel's faithfulness and points us to the time of the King. Who will this King be who can bring wholeness and renewed faithfulness?

Immediately following Judges is First Samuel, which contains the inauguration of the first king of Israel, Saul. Is he the promised King? No, Saul is a terrible failure because of his disobedience to God. The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles go on to tell us of various kings and how the people of God prospered under good kings but were unfaithful under bad kings. None of these kings were the King to whom the Scriptures were pointing. Even the good kings had dramatic failures. King David is an example of a good king who had moral failings of adultery and murder. The King to whom Moses and the other authors of the Old Testament point is none other than Jesus! John in his vision of Jesus in Revelation uses the same language from Genesis 49 to identify him: "Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered" (Revelation 5:5a).

Our prayer is that this study will enhance your appreciation and honor for the True King and Judge. Now read Judges 1 to 3 to get started!

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

SESSION 1: THE CYCLE OF IDOLATRY

INTRODUCTION

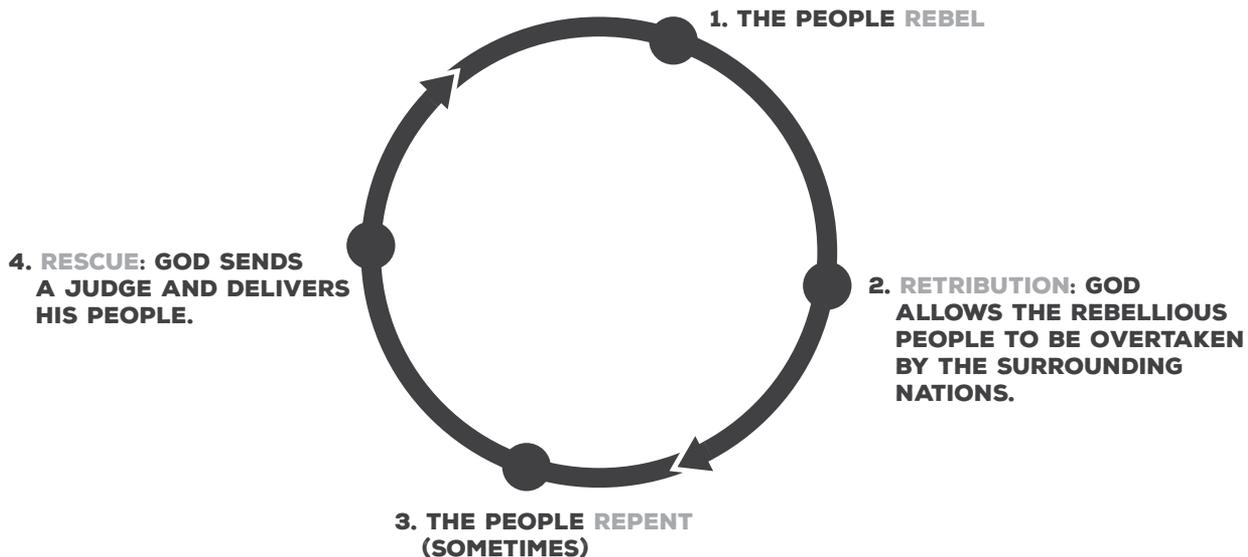
The book of Judges is like a great searchlight peering into the depths of our sin and rebellion against God. The stories and truths within are not just archaic tales with no relevance for us today. Rather, they are real stories about the nature of the human heart. God gave us this book so that we might know ourselves. The pattern of idolatry in Judges lies within each of us, but our God is patient and merciful. Let us find our refuge in him throughout this study!

Judges begins by looking backward and ends by looking forward.¹ In order to appreciate all that God has to say through this book, we need to take a step back to the book of Joshua, which recounts four major victories for the people of Israel:

1. Crossing into the Promised Land
2. Taking possession of the Land
3. Dividing the Land
4. Serving the Lord in the Land

Following these events, the book of Joshua reaches a climax in chapter 24 with the covenant renewal at Shechem. Picture it: Joshua gathers everyone in the nation and speaks God's word to them and challenges them by saying, "Choose whom you will serve." The people insist they fulfill their vow and worship only God. Joshua is skeptical and warns them solemnly, but the people insist they will be obedient.

What happens next unfolds in the book of Judges, and it is not pretty. Essentially, the nation of Israel begins a cycle of forgetting, sin, and idolatry that leaves it devastated. The cycle looks something like this:²



¹ Timothy Keller, *Judges for You* (The Good Book Company, United States, 2013), 15.

² Adapted from Keller, 207.

Judges, then, is mainly a story of how the people failed to do what they vowed at the end of Joshua. Throughout the book, the cycle simply gets worse and worse (Judges 2:19). This book might be considered a “divine cautionary tale” about how God’s people constantly turned from knowing, loving, and obeying him to do “whatever seemed right in their own eyes.”³ Ultimately, the purpose of the book of Judges is to show us the consequences of our religious disobedience and point the way to the true King who will lead his people to God!

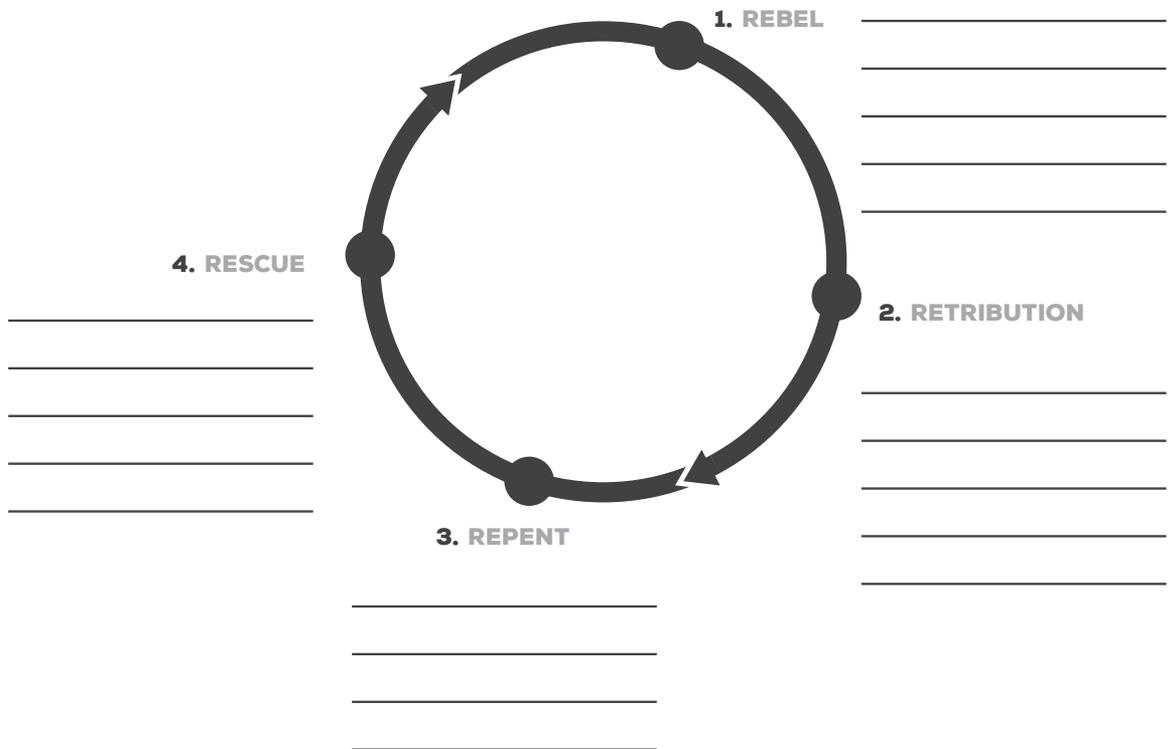
READ: JUDGES 2:1-3:6

Make a short list of the key words, phrases, and ideas in the passage:

Summarize the passage in your own words:

What does this passage teach you about God? What does it teach you about humankind?

What key words does the passage use to describe each phase of the cycle? Use those words to fill in the chart below:



³ Keller, 9.

EXAMINE: MISSION “NOT-ACCOMPLISHED” (JUDGES 2:1-10)

Judges 2:1-3:6 forms an introduction to the book that shows what happens when God’s people turn from worshipping him and fail to pass on the faith to the next generation. Upon entering the Promised Land, Israel was commanded to cleanse the land from idolatry by breaking down the altars and places of false worship. Chapter 1 details the extent of Israel’s failure (Judges 1:27-36).

To be sure, in human standards Israel gave it a valiant effort; “they got a lot done for the kingdom.” But, they also sold themselves short. They compromised, as you see here: “And the LORD was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron” (Judges 1:19). God was with Judah, but Judah’s fear won the day. He feared his opponents more than God. His “I can’t” turned into an “I won’t.”

Chapter 2 begins with a stark reminder that God’s grace has been with the people. They were never alone in battle. God was with them the whole time to establish them so that his people might be a blessing to all nations. Thus, their failure to fully trust and obey God in their task of cleansing the land reveals two things:

1. First, they lost perspective. Somewhere along the way they forgot that God had singlehandedly brought them out of the mighty land of Egypt.
2. Second, because they lost perspective, their obedience was only half-hearted. God ceased to be precious to them, and both their hearts and the land were compromised.

Judges 2:10 is a powerful warning to the Church today: “And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.” One generation lost perspective and became half-hearted in their obedience, and the next forgot all together.

COMPLACENCY, THEN COMPROMISE

On Israel’s half-hearted obedience, Tim Keller says: “It is always impossible to lay blame neatly when one generation fails to pass its faith on to the next one. Did the first generation fail to reach out, or did the second generation just harden their hearts? The answer is usually both. Mistakes made by a Christian generation are often magnified in the next, nominal one. Commitment is replaced by complacency and then by compromise.” (Keller, 31)

APPLY

Where in your life has an “I can’t” turned into an “I won’t?”

What steps can a Christian generation take when it becomes apparent that perspective on the gospel is lost? What steps can a family take in the same situation?

What are you actively doing to pass on the faith to the next generation? What can you do this week along these lines?

EXAMINE: A CYCLE BEGINS (JUDGES 2:11-3:6)

The cycle is beginning. One generation compromises, the next forgets and completely abandons God (Judges 2:11-12). This cycle centers on one thing: idolatry. The people of Israel repeatedly abandon and forsake the one true God to pursue the delights and pleasures of this world. Consequently, God's anger is kindled when his people replace him with other things.

Understandably, we often avoid thinking about God's anger and wrath. Yet, God's anger is an outworking of his love, like a parent or a spouse (imagery often used for God in the Bible). God is angry about our sin and spiritual adultery because he wants more for us; he wants to give us himself! Our souls were built for God, but we so easily give them to other things that promise us the world and leave us empty handed. We tend to make peace with our sin when God wants us to put it to death. The cycle of forsaking God in Judges is a picture of our heart.

This chapter and the cycles of idolatry that follow serve to point us to the True Judge, Jesus Christ: "Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them" (Judges 2:16). Strikingly, every time God raised up a judge, the people of Israel ended up forgetting God's promises and abandoning him for other gods. Jesus came to deliver us from our enemies but also to make us new. He came to give us a new heart that could finally break the cycle. This is a call to repentance, a call to check our lives and ask, "Am I making peace with sin the way the Israelites were in Judges 3:5-6?"

APPLY

What does idolatry look like today in the communities you live in? How are you currently personally affected by some form of idolatry (yours or someone else's)?

How is God's anger an expression of his love?

Is there an area of your life where you see a similar "cycle" of rebellion-deliverance-rebellion again?

How does the gospel give us the power to break these cycles and live in obedience?

PRAY

Read Jeremiah 31:31-34.

- Thank God for the new covenant in Jesus and for the promises in this passage.
- Spend a few minutes meditating on what you've read and discussed, thank God for what he has revealed to you, and pray for strength to walk in obedience.
- Pray for one another, that God will transform those parts of our lives where we are saying "I won't."
- Pray that we as a church would be faithful to pass on the faith to our children.

LOOKING AHEAD: READ JUDGES 3-5

In these chapters, you will read about the "golden age" (if there is such a thing) of the Judges period. Enjoy the peace and good government of these chapters — they might be the last you will see in the book!

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

BROKEN SAVIORS 1: THE CYCLE OF IDOLATRY

Opening: For a few minutes in your group, pray that God would save us from destructive patterns of idolatry. Then read Judges 2:1-3:6 as a group.

Ask these discussion questions:

1. What did you learn about the book of Judges from this weekend's sermons? What else from the sermon impacted you?
2. What observations from the "Read" section did you make that were the most significant to our understanding of this text?
3. God openly expresses his anger toward his people in Judges. How is God's anger an expression of his love?
4. What steps can a Christian family take when it becomes apparent that perspective on the gospel is lost?
5. What kinds of things are you actively doing to pass on faith to the next generation?

Break into groups of three for these next questions:

6. What areas of your life do you see a similar "cycle" of rebellion-deliverance-rebellion again? How is the gospel giving you the power to break these cycles?

Pray for each other in those groups of three, that you would acknowledge God's proper anger over your sin and that he would help you see victory. Praise him for all the ways he has delivered you — past, present, and future.

Homework: Read Judges 3 to 5.

SESSION 2: DEBORAH, BARAK, & SAFETY

INTRODUCTION

Judges 4 tells the story of two heroic women and a warrior who needed a bit of handholding. After Ehud died, the Israelites again did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin the King (Judges 4:1-2). This is not a new experience for them. This cycle is repeated as Israel's memory begins to fade:

1. The Israelites do "whatever seemed right in their own eyes" (rebellion).
2. The anger of the Lord burns against them, and they are given over to the neighboring kings and people (retribution).
3. Israel cries out for a Savior (repentance).
4. God raises up a judge and delivers them out of bondage (rescue).
5. The cycle is repeated.

READ: JUDGES 4:1-24

Make a short list of the key words, phrases, and ideas in the passage:

Summarize the passage in your own words:

What does this passage teach you about God? What does it teach you about humankind?

Make a list of all the positive outcomes that happen under Deborah's supervision.

EXAMINE: MORE THAN A PROPHET

Deborah is introduced as a woman who was a prophetess and who was judging Israel at the time. But she is a little bit of a different judge than we will normally meet in this book. Her "judging" is more of what we mean in the modern sense of an internal administrator. She is deciding legal matters and leading the nation's affairs, kind of like Moses. The rest of the judges have more of an external focus, leading military campaigns against the nations and delivering the people from oppression.

Even though it is not her role, she winds up helping in the military offensive against Sisera. She calls Barak, who is a general over an army in Israel, and challenges him to go out and fight Sisera, the general of Jabin's army. She promises that the God of Israel will deliver Sisera into his hand. This episode in Judges is arguably the high

point of the book in terms of individuals and their faithfulness. Deborah is portrayed as a good prophet of Yahweh, faithfully arbitrating between people and accurately mediating the word of God in her time.

As a result of the deliverance and her role in it, Deborah gets a “victory” song in chapter 5, something which only occurs with Moses previously! Deborah is a leader and prophet in Israel, which is a role typically held by a man. She is exemplary in Judges and perhaps the clearest “Christ” figure in the whole book. Like Jesus who is the prophet, priest, king, judge, and mediator for his people, Deborah also fulfills multiple roles for Israel. The author of Judges portrays this strong, faithful woman showing the high value of women in leadership. Unfortunately, Israel’s treatment of women deteriorates significantly throughout the book, which is a major sign of their general moral failure and decline.

APPLY

Is there something in your life that tempts you to qualify or compromise your obedience to God?

In what ways do you look to the characters of this story as role models?

EXAMINE: A GOLDEN AGE

It is an interesting exception to the formula of Judges that Deborah is a judge, but Barak is the one commanded to bring deliverance. Why is this the exception in the book? Look at how Deborah speaks to Barak: “Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, ‘Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun’” (Judges 4:6b). The question may imply that Barak has already been commanded by God to deliver Israel, or it could be that she mediates the command of God to Barak in this moment.

He responds by saying, “If you go, I’ll go; if not, I’m not going.” Deborah agrees to go with him but says that this will result in Barak forfeiting the glory of the victory to a woman. Barak, understandably, lets fear make him hesitate in carrying out God’s commands. He wants extra assurance that God will be with him in battle by asking God’s prophet to accompany him. Barak’s weakness foreshadows the descent of the rest of the judges to come. Barak’s hesitation in obedience to God turns into Gideon’s constant need for reassurance, which gives way to outright disregard for following God’s commands only a few generations later.

WOMEN DELIVERERS IN JUDGES

- Deborah (Judges 4:1-5:31), a prophetess, led effectively and helped Israel defeat the king of Canaan.
- Jael (Judges 4:17-22) acted skillfully in a unique moment and killed the fierce general Sisera.
- “A certain woman” (Judges 9:50-57) mortally wounded the usurping king Abimelech during his siege against her town.

Thus, the author of Judges in the first half of the book establishes the dignity and worth of women. In the second half, there will be an unfortunate shift in the Israelites’ regard for women.

Really, we end up with three people who have a hand in delivering Israel this time around. Deborah the prophetess, Barak the general, and Jael the average citizen who sees an opportunity and proves courageous. All three share in the glory of victory, while Deborah and Barak sing the triumphant song together in chapter 5. Though Barak is portrayed with his weakness of prioritizing his safety over obedience, the cooperative nature, particularly of Deborah going with him, shows us that we need each other. Galatians tells us to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). The Bible also says in 1 Peter 4:10, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” Deborah willingly agreed to go with Barak into battle as a way of serving him in his mission for God.

APPLY

In what ways can you serve your brothers and sisters in the mission of God?

We see glimpses in this chapter of the hard work that it takes to achieve peace. The biblical concept of peace (shalom) is much more than simply the absence of war. What does this chapter teach us about building a peaceful community?

The three main characters have very different but important roles in helping their people. What is your part in contributing to a peaceful community (think beyond church)?

What are some ways that a desire for “safety” holds you back from doing something great for God’s Kingdom? Be specific about what you think God has called you to do.

PRAY

Open your Bible and read Galatians 6:1-10. Meditate on “the law of Christ”. Ask God to restore you, heal you when you are weary of doing good, and guide you in doing good for everyone.

LOOKING AHEAD: READ JUDGES 6-8

Gideon is a “good” judge with some glaring weaknesses. Watch for how his story starts out very hopeful and ends with some frightening foreshadowing.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

BROKEN SAVIORS 2: DEBORAH, BARAK, & SAFETY

Opening: Discuss which public figures have emerged as leaders and role models for you in the last year. Then read Judges 4:1-24 as a group.

Ask these discussion questions:

1. What stood out to you from the sermon this weekend?

2. What observations from the “Read” section did you make that were the most significant to your understanding of this text?

3. How are the characters in this story role models for us today?

4. What does this chapter teach us about building a peaceful community?

5. The three main characters have very different but important roles in helping their people. What is your part in contributing to a peaceful community (think beyond church)?

6. What are some ways that a desire for “safety” holds you back from doing something great for God’s Kingdom? Be specific about what you think God has called you to do.

Pray: As a group, identify areas in our community that group members care for. Spend a few minutes praying for peace and health in those communities.

Homework: Read Judges 6 to 8.

SESSION 3: GIDEON & SECURITY

INTRODUCTION

These chapters tell the story of Israel's delivery from the Midianites. Gideon, God's chosen instrument of delivery, is a man who requires assurance at every turn. Though Gideon's faith is weak and his requests tedious, we see God graciously reveal himself time after time. God grants small signs and massive victories, but Gideon tends to hedge his bets and focus on his own security.

READ: JUDGES 6:11-24, 36-40, 7:1-23, & 8:22-28

Make a short list of the key words, phrases, and ideas in the passage:

Summarize the passage in your own words:

What does this passage teach you about God? What does it teach you about humankind?

EXAMINE: BROKEN FAITH IN THE FACE OF DIFFICULTY (JUDGES 6:11-24, 36-40)

When the Angel of the Lord comes to Gideon to announce God's intention to deliver the people of Israel, Gideon asks a very pointed question in return: "If the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has forsaken us" (Judges 6:13). Gideon and all of Israel are letting their immediate circumstances determine their view of God. The Israelites want God to save them, but they still value their altar to Baal (Judges 6:28-30). Gideon longs for the end of oppression but doesn't believe that God could use him to do it (Judges 6:15).

We often ask God for his mercy and provision, but then we don't believe he is accomplishing either if our lives aren't comfortable and safe. Most everyone has come to a point where they say, "If God really cared about me, then things wouldn't be so hard." This is because, like Gideon, we are letting our circumstances determine our view of God. Tim Keller sums up misinterpretation of God's ways quite well: "We essentially say: Lord, why don't you remove this problem? Instead of saying: Lord, please make me the person who can handle this problem."¹

APPLY

Has there ever been a time where you doubted God's presence or intentions because of your circumstances?

¹ Keller, 73.

If someone is unsure of God's goodness because of his or her present situation, how would you talk that person through it? What Bible verses would you use?

EXAMINE: GOD DELIVERS (JUDGES 7:1-23)

After Gideon has been reassured through many signs of God, there is a streak of victorious encounters where God seemingly stacks the deck against Gideon and the Israelites, yet the enemy is routed at every turn. God creates a scenario where the victory will be so obviously supernatural that Israel will have no justification for boasting and the only reasonable conclusion will be to honor God alone. This is God's true fix for the problem. While the Midianite oppression was painful, the root of the problem was Israel's continued idolatry. Israel was crying out to God for deliverance while still maintaining altars to Baal. It is not until after Gideon has been sent to tear these altars down that God begins to deliver his people from Midian.

APPLY

Great stories of victory always have the deck stacked against the hero. What are some of your favorite examples from movies, TV, books, or even video games?

Where in your life right now are you crying out to God for his blessings but still refusing to follow his commands?

EXAMINE: BROKEN ACTION IN THE FACE OF SUCCESS (JUDGES 8:1-28)

Even in the midst of a victory that was undeniably brought about by God alone, Gideon and Israel begin to revert back to their old ways. The men of Ephraim are angry because they want their part in the glory of victory, and Gideon is quick to honor them out of fear for his own safety (Judges 8:1-3). When the people of Succoth and Peniel refuse to feed Gideon's men out of fear, he vows revenge instead of offering the same type of reassurance that God so graciously gave him (Judges 8:7-9).

After the enemy is completely defeated, Israel does the exact opposite of what God intended and refuses to give him the glory for the victory. Instead they ask Gideon to rule over them — not just him but also his sons and grandsons. The people of Israel wanted him to rule as king! While Gideon does reject the offer formally, he begins to act as a king functionally. He expects monetary tribute, he takes many wives and a concubine, and he even creates a golden ephod for his own home when such things were strictly reserved for the tabernacle of God (Judges 8:24-27).

Gideon goes right back to seeking worldly comfort and security, even though he has seen the miracles of God firsthand. While we would love to shake our heads and disapprove of Gideon, we too can be guilty of treating God like this. We beg for his intervention when times are tough only to turn our backs on him when the troubles are resolved. Like the Israelites, what we truly need delivery from is ourselves.

Gideon's failure as a judge points us to the ways that Jesus brings us healing. Gideon took vengeance on those who did not come to his aid, but Jesus prayed for his enemies in the midst of his execution. Gideon wanted all the benefits of royalty with none of the responsibility, but Jesus offers to share all the benefits of his kingship while bearing the burden of your sin.

APPLY

Gideon's reaction to the towns failing to feed his men is way over the top. What are some of your "hot-button" issues that cause you to overreact at times?

Are there any areas of your life where you are honoring God with your words but then doing the opposite with your actions?

In what ways has Jesus healed your need to feel secure and reassured?

PRAY

Take a few minutes to silently express your fears about your present circumstances to God. Then read Romans 8, and take joy in the promises that are made to those who receive Christ.

LOOKING AHEAD: READ JUDGES 8:22-10:1-5

Pay close attention to how Gideon's failures play out in his son Abimelech's life.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

BROKEN SAVIORS 3: GIDEON & SECURITY

Opening: Pray as a group for the courage to live out God's commands.

Break into three similar-sized groups for the first two questions. Have one group discuss the reading from chapter 6, one group chapter 7, and one group chapter 8.

Ask these discussion questions:

1. What are the key observations that you made about this chapter?

2. How are you applying the truths of this chapter to your life?

Gather together, and have one person in each group give a short summary of what you discussed.

Ask the group these discussion questions:

3. What did you learn from the sermon that enhanced your study of Gideon's story?

4. What would you say to someone who doubts God's presence in his or her life?

5. How has Jesus healed your need for security and reassurance?

Pray in groups of three. Use Romans 8:1, 5, 18, and 39 to pray together. Thank God for his assurances in your life. Thank God for his gift of the Spirit, and ask that the Spirit would continue to work in all of us (be specific about how the Spirit is working in you).

Homework: Read Judges 9.

SESSION 4: ABIMELECH & POWER

INTRODUCTION

Judges 9 tells the story of Abimelech, who seized control of Israel from his brothers by force. He was Gideon's son by a concubine from Schechem. Gideon left Israel in a state of relative peace and religious purity, but the end of chapter 8 describes rapid deterioration after the loss of their judge.

Gideon gave Abimelech a curious name, which translates from Hebrew as “my father is king.” This hearkens back to a poignant conversation in Judges 8:22-23 where Israel asks Gideon to essentially begin a monarchy. Gideon answers correctly by saying that only God will rule, but the end of Gideon's “reign” suggests that he overstepped his authority in subtle ways.¹ The text box on the below shows the uses of the word “king” in Judges and why it is striking that Gideon named one of his sons “my father is king.” When you see that Abimelech is made “king” in Judges 9:6, it is a huge indication that something has gone wrong in this story. After all, this is the age where God is raising up judges to save Israel.

KINGS IN JUDGES

There are 39 uses of the word “king” in the book of Judges, and they are mostly referring to the nations around Israel. Here is how the word usage breaks down throughout the book:

Chapters 1-8: Twenty uses of the word “king,” 19 of which refer specifically to the kings of Mesopotamia, Moab, Canaan, Hazor, and Midian. Notably in chapter 5, Deborah calls to the kings to hear that the Lord is stronger than any king that marches against him and his people.

Chapter 9: Five uses of “king” in addition to the name Abimelech (“Melech” is king in Hebrew). This is the only reference to there being a king in Israel in the entire book.

Chapters 11: Ten uses of the word “king,” all in reference to the kings of surrounding nations such as Amon, Edom, Moab, and Amor.

Chapters 17-21: Four uses of “king,” all in the thematic line, “There was no king in Israel.”

Thus, Chapter 9 is a clear break in the storyline of the judges. Abimelech tried to gather power over God's people from within in a period when God was raising up judges instead.

READ: JUDGES 9:1-21, 50-57

Make a short list of the key words, phrases, and ideas in the passage:

Summarize the passage in your own words:

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*, (Great Britain, Christian Focus Publications, 2013), 111-113.

What does this passage teach you about God? What does it teach you about humankind?

EXAMINE: A SPECIAL PLACE RUINED (JUDGES 9:1-21)

Shechem is where most of the drama of Judges 9 takes place. In fact, the area is mentioned 25 times in this one chapter! The place is significant in Israel's history for two important reasons: 1) God met Abram there (Genesis 12:6-7) and told him that it was the Promised Land, so Abram built an altar there. 2) Joshua gathered the tribes of Israel to Schechem, where God and the Israelites renewed their covenant (Joshua 24).

Sometime in the few generations between Joshua 24 and Judges 9, Schechem ceased to be a special place. In this chapter, we see "worthless and reckless" fellows living there and its inhabitants worshipping Baal. Jotham stood above Schechem to proclaim judgment over its idolatrous and usurping inhabitants. By the end of the chapter, Shechem would become the scene for treachery and massacre.

APPLY

Write in the boxes below the places that have the most value for you in the following categories:

Childhood Memories

Spiritual Significance

Other

Have any of these places changed significantly in recent years? Why did that place hold significant memories for you? How did you feel when you saw what happened to it later?

How can you cultivate and protect your home as a place where you and others regularly meet with God?

EXAMINE: A DIFFERENT KIND OF RULER (JUDGES 9:7-21, 50-57)

It is shocking to read about an Israelite ruler usurping power the way Abimelech did (Judges 9:2-6). He killed roughly 70 of his own brothers just so he could be the sole ruler of Israel. Likewise, the men of Schechem conspired and murdered to get their kinsman on the throne. Neither had regard for how God was ruling his people, nor did they respect the instrument of God's salvation (Gideon).

Jotham accurately predicted that the conspiracy where they gained power for themselves would itself go up in flames (Judges 9:16-21). Judges 9:56 records the theme verse of the chapter: "Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers." Notice that God's activity in judgment is somewhat "behind the scenes." The usurpers grabbed power in an instant, while God waited for

circumstances to play out. Abimelech thrust himself into the spotlight, while God influenced the leaders of Schechem to do what they are normally prone to do (Judges 9:23). God's judgment on evil is sometimes carried out through subtle means, sometimes letting evil actions be its own punishment (see Romans 1:18-32).

God mercifully overturned the three years of turmoil in the next chapter (Judges 10:1-4). There were 45 years of peace for Israel carried out under two "minor" judges. Thus, God saved Israel not from kings of neighboring countries but from its own king and its own evil. God sent a different kind of ruler in Tola to undo the abuses of power. This points us forward to the kind of leader that God will ultimately put over his people. Jesus gained our allegiance not by killing but by dying in our place. Jesus will be gentle with his own people, not bruising a single reed (Isaiah 42:3, quoted in Matthew 12:20).

APPLY

How have you seen power corrupt a person, whether in history or in your own life?

How have you seen God wield power differently from humanity's normal pattern?

Think of areas in which you have influence at work, at home, or in society. How does this passage guide you in how you use that power?

PRAY

Read Isaiah 42:1-9.

- Pray for leaders in our society, that they would wield power in a Christ-like manner.
- Pray for each other, that you would deal faithfully with those who look to you for strength and guidance.

Read Isaiah 42:10-17. Spend a few minutes giving God boisterous praise for great things he has done in your life!

LOOKING AHEAD: READ JUDGES 10-12

Look for comparisons and contrasts between Abimelech, Tola, Jair, and Jephthah.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

BROKEN SAVIORS 4: ABIMELECH & POWER

Opening: Ask the group what they learned from the sermon this week. Spend a few minutes discussing everyone's thoughts. Then pray and read Judges 9:1-21, 50-57 as a group.

Ask these discussion questions:

1. What observations from the "Read" section did you make that were the most significant to our understanding of this text?
2. What are some of your favorite places that hold strong memories for you? Have any of these places changed significantly in recent years? Why does that place hold significant memories for you? How did you feel when you saw what happened to it later?
3. How can you cultivate and protect your home as a place where you and others regularly meet with God?
4. How have you seen power corrupt a person, whether in history or in your own life?
5. How have you seen God wield power differently from humanity's normal pattern?
6. Think of areas where you have influence at work, at home, or in society. How does this passage guide you in how you use that power?

Pray for each other in groups of three. Have each person share family concerns and praises. Pray that in our homes and workplaces, God's rule over our lives would be apparent to others around us. Ask for wisdom and grace in interacting with co-workers and friends.

Homework: Read Judges 10 to 12.

SESSION 5: JEPHTHAH & SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

INTRODUCTION

So far in the “Broken Saviors” series, we have looked at various flawed characters who God used to show Israel their need for him. The story of Jephthah, emerging from a particularly dark time in Israel’s history, highlights the self-righteousness of both the people of Israel and the “hero.”

In order to understand the context for Jephthah, we begin in chapter 10, where relations between the people of Israel and Yahweh have reached an all-time low. The Israelites have forsaken Yahweh for foreign gods and have reached what one commentator calls “the climax of the process of her Canaanization.”¹ This means the people of Israel have become indistinguishable from those around them through their idolatry. As a result, when the people cry out for deliverance after being sacked by their enemies, God responds sarcastically by telling his people to seek salvation in the gods they have chosen (a fulfillment of Deuteronomy 32:37-38).² Finally, the Israelites confess their sin and “[become] impatient over the misery of Israel” (Judges 10:16). The next two verses tell us that the Israelites then began to search for a leader who would deliver the people from the encamped Ammonites, thus the stage is set for Jephthah.

READ: JUDGES 11:1-11, 11:29-12:7

Make a short list of the key words, phrases, and ideas in the passage:

Summarize the passage in your own words:

What does this passage teach you about God? What does it teach you about humankind?

EXAMINE: THE SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS OF ISRAEL

Chapter 11 introduces Jephthah, who is described as a “mighty warrior” but is the son of a prostitute. This immediately makes him an outsider, as he was born out of sin and adultery. His brothers, who do not want him to have a share in their inheritance, eventually drive him out. Judges explains that Jephthah then attracted “worthless fellows” around him as he fled from his family (Judges 11:2-3).

However, once God’s people find themselves in danger from the attacking Ammonites, they seek out Jephthah. He asks why they would send him away and then come seek his help (echoing God’s words in Judges 10:11-14). At the start, Jephthah appears to be a godly leader since he:

1. Declared God’s faithfulness to his people (Judges 11:15-28),
2. Pointed to God as the ultimate Judge (Judges 11:27), and
3. Was an effective military leader.

¹ Daniel I. Block, *New American Commentary: Judges, Ruth* (Nashville, Holman Reference, 1999), 344.

² David Jackman, *The Preacher’s Commentary: Judges/Ruth* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1991), 166.

However, this salvation will come with a price. The leader who remembers what it was like to be rejected will perpetuate the rejection against a different tribe (Judges 12:1-6). The self-righteousness rampant in Israel at this time caused strife and tribalism throughout the land.

A major lesson to draw from this first section concerns our own self-righteousness. In our individualistic culture, it's easy for us to become self-righteous and overlook people because of their background, personality, or anything that makes them different (even a lisp!). This passage helps us confront such flippant rejection of others. The Israelites should have known better, since they started out as a despised, rejected, and oppressed people. God chose them, restored their dignity, and reminded them to treat the aliens among them with the same dignity.

COMPASSION FROM EXODUS

Exodus 23:9 (cf. 22:21) says, "You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." God calls us to break cycles of alienation by our given capacity for empathy and compassion.

APPLY

What evidence of self-righteousness do you see in this passage?

How have you seen self-righteousness breed hatred and harsh treatment of others?

How does the gospel heal us of any notion of self-righteousness?

EXAMINE: THE SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS OF JEPHTHAH

The falling action of the Jephthah story shows us that even this broken savior is prone to the terrible consequences of self-righteousness. On his way to make war on the Ammonites, Jephthah makes a rash vow to God, promising that he will sacrifice whatever first comes out of his house if he is able to defeat his enemies. Tragically, upon returning home, he is greeted immediately by his daughter.

Scholars have debated whether or not Jephthah actually killed his daughter or "sacrificed" her by forcing her into a life of virginity.³ Those who say she did not die have trouble with the duplicity of the man who had just declared the faithfulness of God so eloquently (Judges 9:16-27). God was clearly on his side, so how can he be committing such a heinous act in the very next moments?

But Jephthah's duplicity is precisely the issue throughout the entire story. He knows the scriptural history of Israel down to a "T" in his long speech defending his actions to the Amorites (Judges 11:16-27), but he doesn't

³ Davis, pages 144-147 has an excellent discussion of this.

know enough of God's law to refrain from child sacrifice? He was once a rejected brother who now is complicit in massacring thousands from a brother tribe? The Israelites cannot commit to the covenant vows they made to God in any form, but this one vow is the vow that Jephthah made sure to follow?

This is the action of a man that needs to feel that God is on his side — but he does so on his own terms, according to his own set of morals. One commentator in particular thinks Jephthah may have been wishing to be closer to God, thinking that through a sacrifice he might be able to gain special favor. However, Jephthah's worry was unfounded, as the Spirit was already with him (Judges 11:29). Jephthah was trying to be righteous in his own eyes by doing something that would make God love him more, but he often failed at many other simple commands that God had already clearly given. His own failures coupled with the failures of those he tries to lead make for a sad ending to this broken savior story.

The contrast to Jesus, our True Judge, is stark. Instead of being self-righteous, Jesus selflessly laid down his life for others. He responded to offenses and ridicule by absorbing them and paying for them on the cross, rather than repaying his enemies. In his death, he provided the basis for unity among all races and ethnicities in the world, rather than presiding over tribal hatred.

APPLY

What warnings are you taking away from studying the life of Jephthah?

How can Christians know that the Holy Spirit is always with them? What are some things you can do to focus your heart and mind on Christ when you don't feel the Spirit's presence?

PRAY

Pray for each other, that you would not fall into self-righteousness but wholly rely upon Christ in every situation.

Pray that your neighbors and those unbelievers you are engaging would turn from their various broken saviors to the salvation found in Christ.

LOOKING AHEAD: READ JUDGES 13-16

Keep track of the positive contributions that Samson makes to the Israelites and weigh them against his negative results. What is your evaluation of Samson as a judge?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

BROKEN SAVIORS 5: JEPHTHAH & SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

Opening: Ask the group what they learned from the sermon this week. Spend a few minutes discussing everyone's thoughts. Then pray and read Judges 11:1-11 and 11:29-12:7 as a group.

Ask these discussion questions:

1. What observations from the "Read" section did you make that were the most significant to our understanding of this text?
2. What warnings are you taking away from studying the life of Jephthah?
3. What evidence of self-righteousness do you see in this passage?
4. How have you seen self-righteousness breed hatred and harsh treatment of others?
5. How does the gospel heal us of any notion of self-righteousness?

Pray for each other in groups of two. This prayer time will focus on repentance. Share with your prayer partner where you have noticed self-righteousness growing in your own heart. Repent of sinful thoughts, actions, or reactions that you've had in relating to other people in your life. Thank God for accepting you into his family. Ask the Spirit to reassure your heart that he is always with you and that Christ has already done everything necessary for you to be accepted by God.

Homework: Read Judges 13 to 16.

SESSION 6: SAMSON & PERSONAL DESIRE

INTRODUCTION

Judges 13 to 16 tells the story of Samson, whose story starts with lofty promise. His birth narrative (Judges 13) begins to frame our expectations with such hope that we don't see again apart from the birth of Samuel, John the Baptist, and Jesus. Here is a child who was promised to a barren couple, a sign that God was going to do something mighty in Israel. Samson was to be set apart from birth (Judges 13:4), consecrated to God, and would "begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines." Surely he was a mighty man, and on several occasions he is filled with the Spirit of God for some mighty deed. However more often than not we continue to see a very broken savior: a man who pursues illicit sexual relationships outside of the covenant, who mistreats and uses women, who is given to anger and rage, and whose chief virtue is seen to be the murder of Philistines (Judges 16:30). What are we to make of such a "deliverer"?

READ: JUDGES 14:1-11, 16:1-22

Make a short list of the key words, phrases, and ideas in the passage:

Summarize the passage in your own words:

What does this passage teach you about God? What does it teach you about humankind?

EXAMINE: RAMPANT DESIRE OVER GODLY DISCIPLINE

From the start of Samson's adult life, we see him pursue whatever pleasure he happens to lay his eyes on at that moment. One of God's commandments to all Israel when they took the Promised Land was not to take the daughters of foreigners as wives (Deuteronomy 7:3). Yet Samson sees a Philistine woman who pleases him and immediately demands his father that she be procured for him because she was "right in [his] eyes" (Judges 14:3). What a contrast to Jesus saying to his Father in the garden, "Not my will but yours be done!"

Samson also has no hesitation to eat honey from a lion's carcass when the Mosaic law clearly states that even touching a dead body would be enough to make someone ceremonially unclean (Leviticus 11:8). Samson then goes to Gaza to sleep with a prostitute after a series of personal battles — an action that might cause the reader to ask, "Is this guy even trying? Is anyone even going to tell him 'no'?"

Finally Samson gets involved with another Philistine woman named Delilah (at this point he doesn't even bother with marriage), who betrays him numerous times without any protest from him as long as she continues to provide him with sexual gratification. Samson only takes action when it suits him. His set of extraordinary skills should place him as a military leader and God's chosen instrument to deliver Israel from the Philistines. Samson, however, rejects discipline and the responsibility that comes with his Nazarite vow and instead simply roams the countryside in search of whatever pleases him.

APPLY

Are there places in your life where you have rejected God's path for you to pursue your own pleasure?

EXAMINE: THE KIND OF MAN GOD USES

When you read that the Holy Spirit “rushes upon Samson,” and then he performs a violent deed, does it bother you? Does it make you uncomfortable? It doesn't fit within our category of the type of person God uses. But we have good news: God doesn't wait for men or women he can use to fulfill his purpose. What if God could accomplish his will through the wicked as well as the righteous? Samson is not being held up as a model of godliness; his actions violate the Mosaic law on countless occasions. God uses Samson in spite of his sinfulness, not because of it.

Why is that hopeful? Because God can use us, too. Do you think that you have to “clean yourself up” or — if you're more spiritual — ask God to “clean you up” before he can use you? God uses the righteous and the unrighteous alike for his purposes, and while we would certainly hope to be in the first group, God is not waiting on us. We certainly ought to seek obedience above all, but never imagine that God is limited by our obedience or disobedience. Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft remarked, “God can write straight with crooked lines.”

GOD'S WAR AGAINST EVIL

In Genesis 3:15, “he put enmity between the Serpent's seed and the woman's seed. This divisiveness, this hostility, came from Yahweh. He was not going to allow even his fallen creature to cuddle up in the bosom of evil. The Maker of heaven and earth refused to walk away from Eden, shrugging his shoulders and muttering, ‘You win some, and you lose some.’ No, he is the stubborn God who will set all creation ablaze with holy war in order to have a seed and a people for himself. That's why redemption is an act of violence.”¹

APPLY

What is the most shocking part of Samson's story for you?

What is something you want to do to make yourself more useful for God's purposes?

¹ Davis, 182-183.

EXAMINE: SAMSON & VIOLENCE

Samson really is the definition of a broken savior. But we may be shocked to learn that his use of violence does not always contribute to this brokenness.

Consider Judges 15:14-15, where the Spirit of the Lord endorses Samson's violence and fills him with the strength to kill 1,000 men. But why?

Because the God of the Bible is a violent God. Jesus says in Matthew 10:34, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." We must never forget that this world is at war with its Creator and Maker. As followers of Christ, we come as liberated liberators, carrying the message of hope into enemy country. Indeed, some readers may be shocked by this quotation from C.S. Lewis: "If war is ever lawful, then peace is sometimes sinful." Peace will come, but only when the Prince of Peace has cast down the ruler of this world. The lamb (John 1:29) is also a lion (Revelation 5:5).

In what ways is it good news that God is a violent God?

Is there an area of your life in which you are searching for peace but God is calling you to fight?

How does Samson, a broken savior, contrast with Jesus, the true Savior?

PRAY

Thank God that he uses even our weaknesses for his glory!

Ask God to show you your weaknesses, and ask him for strength in those areas.

Pray that God's Kingdom would come here on Earth as it is in Heaven. List some specific ways you would like to see that happen.

LOOKING AHEAD: READ JUDGES 17-18

Take note of how the narrative has shifted. What are some differences in the author's tone and language in this new section of Judges?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

BROKEN SAVIORS 6: SAMSON & PERSONAL DESIRE

Opening: Read Judges 14:1-11 and 16:1-22. Ask the group a couple of opening questions to start.

1. What from the story of Samson surprises or shocks you?
2. What from the sermon helped you understand Samson's story better?

Ask the group these discussion questions:

3. Do you have trouble thinking of God as a violent God? Why or why not?
4. In what ways is it good news that God is a violent God?
5. Is there an area of your life in which you are searching for peace but God is calling you to fight?
6. How does Samson, a broken savior, contrast with Jesus, the true Savior?

Pray: In groups of three, discuss these questions with each other, and let your answers lead you into prayer:

1. *Are there places in your life where you have rejected God's path for you to pursue your own pleasure?*
2. *In what areas of your life is God calling you to fight against sin?*
3. *Pray for each other, that you would see victory over those sins soon!*

Homework: Read Judges 17 to 18.

SESSION 7: MICAH, A LEVITE, THE DANITES, & CULTURAL RELIGION

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of chapter 17, there is a major shift to the third main section of Judges. The first section outlined Israel's failures in obedience to God (Judges 1:1-3:6). Then, God's response to Israel's disobedience is shown through cycles of disbelief and deliverance (Judges 3:7-16:31). Finally, Israel's degenerating departure from God's will is displayed in the final five chapters through the apostasy of one family, one clan, and the entire nation (Judges 17-21). The depth of Israel's disobedience is portrayed by how much they mixed the worship of Yahweh with the worship of false gods from their neighbors.

Chapters 17 and 18 tell one story, with two parts. First the apostasy of Israel is depicted in one man, and then the same apostasy is shown in the entire tribe of Dan. The first story revolves around a man named Micah, whose name means "Who is like Yahweh?" What's interesting is that even though he has a name that seems to indicate devotion to the God of Israel, his family life is far from it.

READ: JUDGES 17:1-18:31

Make a short list of the key words, phrases, and ideas in the passage:

Summarize the passage in your own words:

What does this passage teach you about God? What does it teach you about humankind?

In what ways does the religion of the main characters in these chapters appear right? In what ways do their religious expressions appear wrong?

EXAMINE: THE CULTURAL DRIFT OF HOLLOW RELIGION

Micah has stolen a large sum of money from his mother. Micah later returns the money, but not because of any remorse for breaking two of the Ten Commandments (stealing and showing contempt for his parents). Micah's change of direction comes from overt fear of a curse his mother enacts through a local deity. Micah is more afraid of the consequences of his mother's curse than breaking God's explicit commands.

Micah's story does not end when he returns the money to his mother. In her exuberance, she declares that she wants to thank God by creating a carved image covered in silver — you got it, an idol. She has now joined her son in breaking the Ten Commandments (making a carved image). Her religious expression drifted away from God and toward the practices of the people she lived around. Micah, still afraid of his mother's curse and trying to play nice, makes clothes and decorations to go around the idol and ordains one of his sons to become his priest. This shows Micah's complete lack of reverence for God because he ordains a priest for himself. They fail to recognize that God is the one who established the priesthood, and he is the one who makes provision for his worship.

The next major character we meet is a nameless, homeless, jobless Levite who is traveling around Israel trying to find work. Micah meets him, hears his story, and offers him a job and the opportunity to be part of his family. This Levite, contrary to Micah's priest son, is actually ordained by God to minister before him. Yet due to Israel's unfaithfulness to provide for the Levites like God commands, this man is desperate. And Micah makes him an offer he can't refuse, essentially giving him purpose (household priest), financial security (money), and relationship (family, "be to me a father"). These things become more important to the Levite than being faithful to God. He becomes a household priest, when he was meant to lead the nation in worship. He exchanges God's provision for a stable salary. He turns away from having God as his father forever to having Micah as his son for a brief period, as chapter 18 will show us.

The Levite, who was supposed to lead Israel into having a right relationship with God, had also drifted away from God by not remaining faithful to God's word. His acceptance of the general attitude and stance toward God by the people around him led to his lack of faith instead of leading others into faith.

APPLY

When was a time you were absolutely sure you were right about something, only to discover later that you were wrong? What led to your complete confusion over what was true?

What in your life is of such great value that it competes with your love for God? Your job? Your family? Pleasure? Money?

EXAMINE: GREED FILLS THE VOID LEFT BY EMPTY RELIGION

Chapter 18 gives us an expanded view of how cultural religion is an empty savior. In this story, we see an entire tribe do what is right in their own eyes. The tribe of Dan found themselves in an unenviable position. God's promises had been delivered to most of Israel, but not them. In their waiting for God to provide what he had promised and feeling forgotten by God, the tribe of Dan had forgotten God.

Taking it upon themselves to provide for their future and provision, Dan sent out men to find a home. What happens next should make us all shudder. The Danites, in a sense, re-enact the conquering of Canaan (remember the 12 spies in Joshua?). They have gone to war without being directed by God to do so (Judges 18:1). Moreover, they are proceeding in this venture with idols and a bribed priest against a defenseless, peaceable people. This is a counterfeit story with all the outward forms of piety, but all the characters involved are only driven by greed.

These people, feeling forgotten by God, began to act in any way that they saw fit and that justified their actions. They became like the culture around them, and there was no one in their midst to speak against their lack of faith.

APPLY

Despair is a powerful force. Have you ever felt that God was not with you in a particular struggle?

It may tend toward a cliché, but it remains true that you will become like the people you surround yourself with most. List the five closest, most influential people in your life, and describe the impact they have on your faith in God.

Where in our culture do you see forms of religious expression with no real devotion to God behind them?

What is the antidote to cultural religion? How have you shaken off periods of your faith that were dry or empty?

PRAY

Every person and family has in them the ability and tendency to disbelieve God's promises and disobey his commands. And just like God was preparing a king to lead Israel into faithfulness, he has given Jesus as the fulfillment of every promise.

- Praise God for his loving faithfulness (Romans 3:3).
- Confess where you have not been faithful; repent and turn (2 Chronicles 7:14).
- Thank God for his promises, even the ones that have not been realized yet.
- Ask God to help you grow in faith and obedience.

LOOKING AHEAD: READ JUDGES 19-21

If (when) you get too depressed by this section, speed ahead to 1 Samuel 1-8 (Samuel, the last judge) and 2 Samuel 1-7 (David's hopeful reign). God did not abandon his people after Judges, and his delivery from the problems of Judges 19-21 takes him only a generation or two.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

BROKEN SAVIORS 7: MICAH, A LEVITE, THE DANITES, & CULTURAL RELIGION

Opening: Pray as a group for several minutes that God would keep our devotion to him genuine and vibrant. Confess to God where that has been lacking in your lives. Declare to God what you love and honor about his character.

Break into two similar-sized groups for the first two questions. Have one group discuss the reading from chapter 17 and the other group discuss chapter 18:

1. What are the key observations that you made about this chapter?
2. How are you applying the truths of this chapter to your life?

Gather together, and have one person in each group give a short summary of what you discussed.

Ask the group these discussion questions:

3. Where in our culture do you see forms of religious expression with no real devotion to God behind them?
4. What is the antidote to cultural religion?
5. How have you shaken off periods of your faith that were dry or empty?

Pray: Pray as a group using the prayer points from session 1.

Read Jeremiah 31:31-34.

- *Thank God for the new covenant in Jesus and for the promises in this passage.*
- *Ask God to break cycles of disobedience and apathy in your own life.*
- *Pray for one another, that God will transform those parts of our lives where we are saying "I won't."*
- *Pray that we as a church would be faithful to pass on the faith to the next generation.*

Homework: Read Judges 19 to 21.

SESSION 8: THE NATION OF ISRAEL & SELF-DETERMINATION

INTRODUCTION

Judges is a sad chronicle of misplaced identity. When Israel came into Canaan — the Promised Land — they had a clear national identity as the people of God, and they had clear instructions on what they were to do (Deuteronomy 7, Joshua 1:3-8). Their failure to complete the task of conquering the peoples of Canaan has devastating consequences. It is incredible how quickly their national identity fizzled out. God had given them instructions on how to treat each other and those outside their community, with the dignity befitting a people who belong to the Creator God (Leviticus 19:9-18), but this climax of the book of Judges illustrates the opposite.

READ: JUDGES 19:22-30, 20:1-18, 21:1-25

Make a short list of the key words, phrases, and ideas in the passage:

Summarize the passage in your own words:

What does this passage teach you about God? What does it teach you about humankind?

What other biblical stories do these stories remind you of? How about other stories from ancient cultures?

EXAMINE: A NATION LIKE ANY OTHER

What begins as a familial dispute in chapter 19 between a Levite and his concubine quickly escalates into a city-wide crisis. Almost immediately, the problem affects an entire tribe and very soon the entire nation of Israel. The Levite and his concubine are travelling and stop for the night in the Benjamite city of Gibeah. They are given shelter by a local man but not allowed to rest: Some of the local men come pounding on the door of the host, demanding that the Levite come outside so that they can have sex with him. The host refuses but then offers his virgin daughter and his guest's concubine to the men instead. How's that for hospitality?! In an act of unbelievable cruelty, the Levite throws the concubine out the door and goes to bed while his concubine is sexually abused and violated all night, eventually dying from the abuse she sustained.

It is imperative to note here that just because something is described for us in Scripture doesn't mean that it is prescribed for us to do or that God condones the action just because it is "his people" doing it. It is clear from the rest of Scripture — all the way from Genesis 1, where man and woman are created in the image of God, to the Law detailing proper treatment for women and victims of rape — that God does not condone his daughters being treated as property or sexual objects. Such a thing offends God on many levels.

Did you notice the eerie similarities to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19)? Israel had been given every advantage for such a horrific thing never to occur: freedom from oppressors, the divine law, a profitable land all for themselves, and the assurances of a powerful God. Instead, the people of God show a persistent desire to determine their own fate and do what is right in their own eyes. Where does it lead them? Into the same sin, corruption, violence, hatred, and abuse that plagued other nations who never had God's presence. What should have been a beautiful distinction of Israel — that they had no need for a king because they follow God — has now become a shameful refrain at the end of Judges (Judges 18:1, 19:1, 21:25).

APPLY

One of the saddest parts of this last story is that the nameless Levite(s) are complicit in so much evil and idolatry. Why is it important that the “priests” of a community maintain strong values and authentic devotion?

How would you have responded to the morally outrageous crimes done in Judges 19 to 21? How is this story inspiring you to take action against a specific injustice in our own world today?

The New Testament says that all Christians play the role of “priest” in the culture that we live in (1 Peter 2:9). How are you fulfilling the role of “priest” to your friends and neighbors?

EXAMINE: FINALLY UNIFIED, BUT FOR WHAT?

Finally stirring up the moral outrage of the Israelites, this event unifies them around a common goal. The tribes come together in shock (Judges 19:30-20:11), and upon hearing the Levite's version of the story (carefully edited to absolve him of any wrongdoing), they demand that the tribe of Benjamin give up the abusers. Benjamin refuses (are they really unified in defending their rapists?). In the course of the ensuing battles, all but 600 members of the tribe are wiped out. Israel has diminished itself by more than 60,000 men, practically killed off one of their own tribes in an act of fratricide, and vowed not to give their daughters in marriage to the surviving members, ensuring their extinction. Chapter 21, amazingly enough, finds them blaming God for Benjamin's near extinction! The fragmented tribes begin to rally together around a problem that they caused.

While the tribes coming together to avenge the death of the concubine and to make provision for the survival of the tribe of Benjamin could be interpreted as a hopeful sign, they are coming together for all the wrong reasons. The tribes end up deciding to create a loophole in their vow not to give their daughters for the propagation of Benjamin. They realize that no one from the town of Jabesh-Gilead joined the battles, so the men of Benjamin are free to put the entire town to the sword and abduct the virgins to take as wives. But there are not enough virgins, so the Benjamites are instructed to lie in wait outside the annual festival to the Lord at Shiloh and kidnap more virgins to be their brides. The story begins with the sacrifice of a woman to save one man from sexual violence and ends with the endorsement of the kidnap and rape of hundreds of virgins, who are essentially sacrificed to save the tribe of Benjamin.

Way back at the beginning of our story, the people stood at Shechem and vowed to live by God's laws (Joshua 24). They were unified around a purpose, a ruler (God), and a national identity. They were given one job: to drive out all the inhabitants of the land. They did not do it, and by the end of Judges we see it had nothing to do with an aversion to violence or a sense of "justice." Now they had to "purify" the land by getting rid of their own brothers. When Israel forgot that God called them out to be his, they forgot who they were. When we don't know who we are, we don't know how to act; we very quickly default to "every man for himself," "you do you," and everyone does "whatever [seems] right in their own eyes."

ALTHOUGH THEY KNEW GOD...

Paul says in Romans 1:21-23, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." The shocking weight of how Judges has ended is that this is truer of God's people than it was about "Gentile nations."

APPLY

How does being rooted in the knowledge that we are created by God with dignity and called to be his sons and daughters determine how we view and treat each other?

In what ways are we affected by the moral relativism of doing "right in [our] own eyes"? How are we influenced more by culture than we are by Scripture?

How does the gospel offer a strong (the strongest I know of!) basis for unity?

PRAY

Read Ephesians 2:11-22 and pray through the passage. Thank God for sending Jesus Christ to reconcile us to each other and to him. Pray the true unity in and among churches in our area. Pray that our peace would have a positive effect on surrounding communities. Praise God for the Cornerstone that holds us all together, Jesus Christ.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

BROKEN SAVIORS 8: THE NATION OF ISRAEL & SELF-DETERMINATION

Opening: Pray as a group for several minutes that God would keep us close to him and away from destructive patterns of sin.

Break into three similar-sized groups for the first two questions. Have one group discuss the reading from chapter 19, one group discuss chapter 20, and one group discuss chapter 21.

1. What are the key observations that you made about this chapter?
2. How are you applying the truths of this chapter to your life?

Gather together, and have one person in each group give a short summary of what you discussed.

Ask the group these discussion questions:

3. Why is it important that the “priests” of a community maintain strong values and authentic devotion?
4. The New Testament says that all Christians play the role of “priest” (1 Peter 2:9) in the culture that we live in. How are you fulfilling the role of “priest” to your friends and neighbors?
5. How does being rooted in the knowledge that we are created by God with dignity and called to be his sons and daughters determine how we view and treat each other?
6. In what ways are we affected by the moral relativism of doing “right in [our] own eyes”? How are we influenced more by culture than we are by Scripture?
7. What major themes and ideas have really stood out to you in our study of Judges? What kind of impact will this have on your faith long-term?

Pray: As a group, thank Jesus for his great mercy and leadership. Praise him for being the True Judge that will bring righteousness and justice. Declare to him why you are looking forward to his return.

HELPFUL RESOURCES AND WORKS CITED

Best Resources, in order of excellence and usefulness:

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Keller, Timothy. *Judges for You*. United States: The Good Book Company, 2013.

Block, Daniel I. *New American Commentary: Judges, Ruth*. Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 1999.

Some other helpful commentaries:

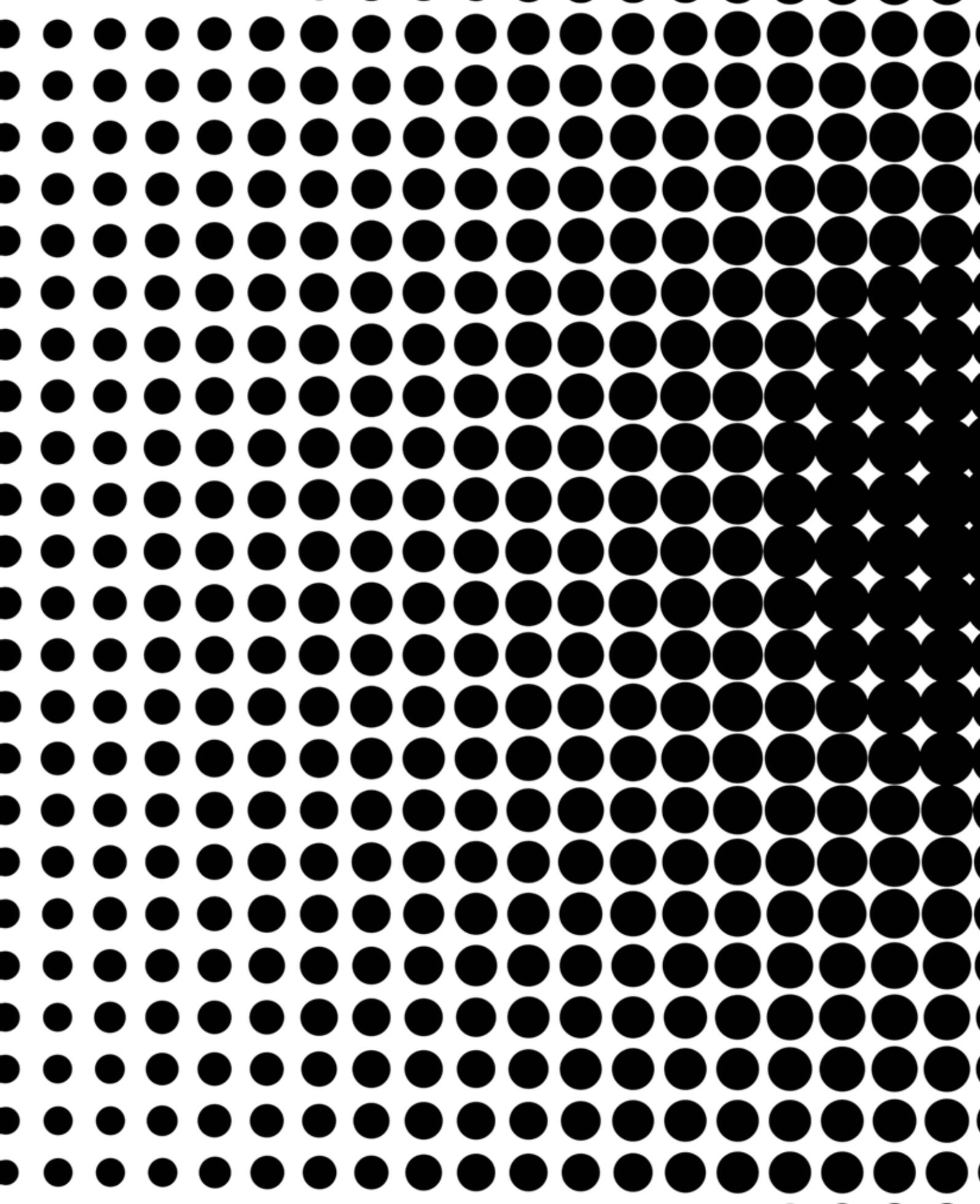
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Alter, Robert. *Ancient Israel*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2013.

For even more resources, go to: summitrdu.com/sji





summitrdu.com/sji