



Good News
Bible Reading Program

A free educational service provided by the United Church of God, *an International Association*

— September 2002 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1 Sept	Continuing and incomplete conquest	Judges 1
2 Sept	Israel's unfaithfulness after Joshua's death	Judges 2
3 Sept	Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar	Judges 3
4 Sept	Deborah and Barak	Judges 4
5-8 Sept	THREE-DAY BREAK (one of four planned breaks in the year)	
8 Sept	The Song of Deborah	Judges 5
9 Sept	Midianite oppression; Gideon's first works; Sign of the fleece	Judges 6
10 Sept	Gideon's army of 300	Judges 7
11 Sept	Gideon's diplomacy, vindication, humility and foolishness	Judges 8
12 Sept	King Abimelech	Judges 9
13 Sept	Tola, Jair, and the Ammonite oppression	Judges 10

Starting September 14, there is a break in the program for 18 days. Regular reading resumes October 1. (There are four planned breaks in each calendar year. This allows more time for personal study at these occasions and perhaps an opportunity for you to catch up in the reading if you have fallen behind.)

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Highlights to Think About from This Month's Reading

Introduction to Judges (Judges 1)

September 1

The second book of the Prophets, Judges spans the approximately 325 years from the death of Joshua, some 25 years after Israel's entry into the Promised Land, to shortly before the coronation of Israel's first human king, Saul. Though it may have been written by various authors, adding to the storyline as events transpired—e.g., the Song of Deborah and the parable of Jotham—it was probably put into its final form by the last of the judges, Samuel, in the 11th century B.C. The Talmud states, "Samuel wrote the book which bears his name and the book of Judges" (*Baba Bathra 14b*).

Moses and Joshua were, of course, the first of Israel's judges. But once in the Promised Land, others followed. The judges were military men and governors whom God led to deliver Israel from foreign oppression and who then had a responsibility to "judge" the people in concert with the priests and Levites (Deuteronomy 17:8-9). Each judge acted in a capacity similar to the later kings of Israel, except no hereditary line was involved. No judge after Moses and Joshua exercised authority over *all* Israel, but each functioned within a limited geographical area for a particular period of time.

As for general themes, the book of Judges shows that Israel's national existence depended on her obedience. In a monotonous cycle: Israel rebelled; God allowed them to be conquered by an enemy king; they were vassals to a foreign nation for a period of years; Israel cried to God; and God raised up a judge to deliver them. The cycle may be described as sin, servitude, supplication, salvation. (Notice that God always gave more years of peace than years of captivity—often at a five-to-one ratio.)

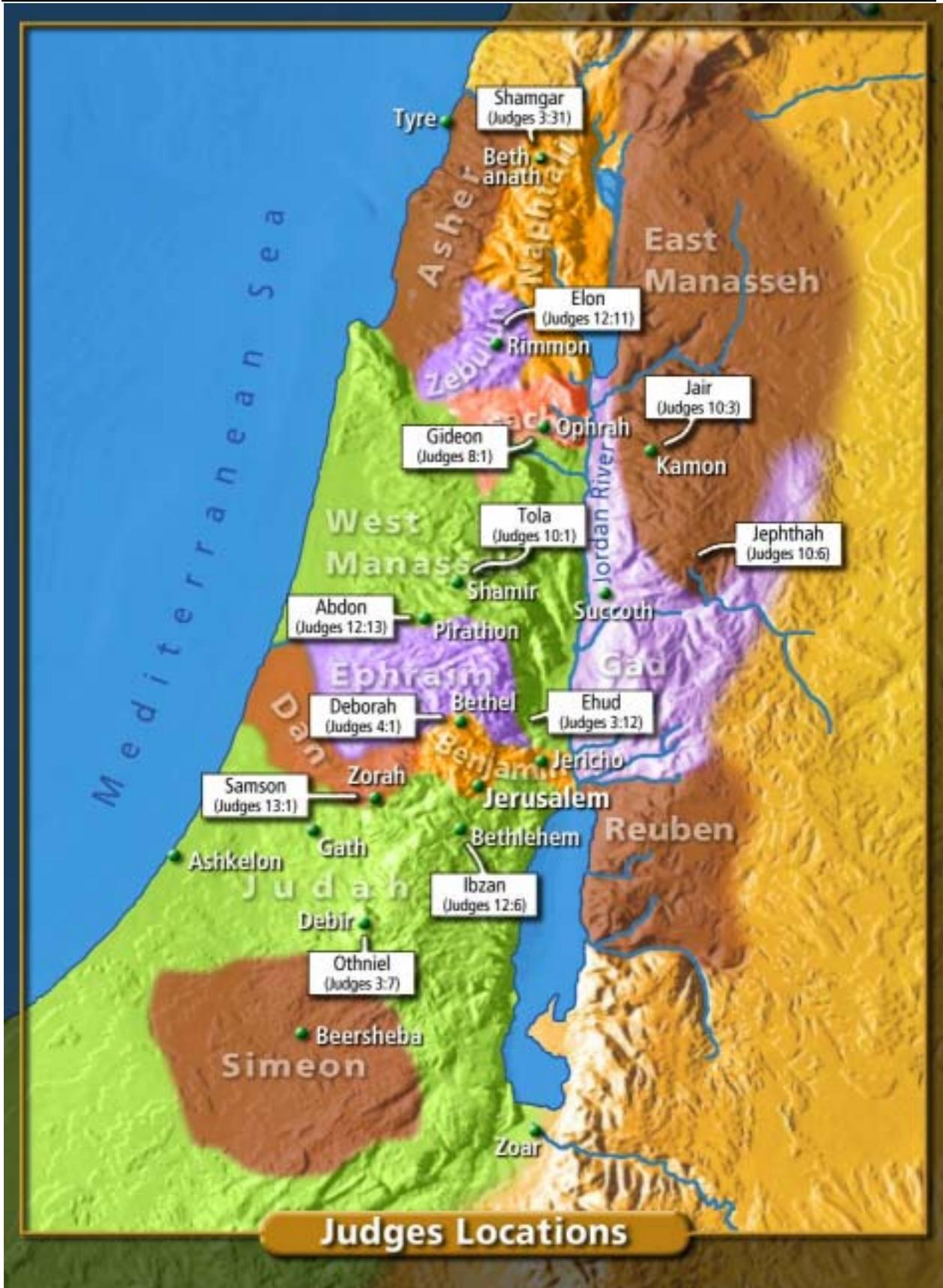
Judges also shows the necessity of right leadership. Each time God delivered Israel, He called a specific individual to lead them into battle, and to be judge over them when they were freed. And when that leader died, the nation returned to its apostasy (with the exception of Samuel, the last judge, whose situation was rather different, as we will later see).

Judges is a book about people set on "doing their own thing" ("In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes"—Judges 21:25; also 17:6; 18:1; 19:1). The absence of a human monarch allowed the people a great deal of personal freedom. But such freedom without adherence to God's moral instructions inevitably leads to anarchy and confusion. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25).

The *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* on Judges notes that the period of the Judges set the stage for the apostasy that later led to the national punishments God visited upon Israel and Judah. "Few periods in Israel's eventful history are as important as the period of the judges. During these centuries the nation took the wrong turning that led to her downfall and near-destruction. The apostasy of the later generations has its origin in the early years of the settlement, and there is a clear line between the time when the nation first went after Baal and the dark age when the Jerusalem Temple itself was defiled with all the trappings of the Baal worship, not excluding cultic prostitutes (2 Kings 23:4-7)" (p. 11).

Because many of the tribes allowed Canaanites to continue to dwell in the land, the influence of Baal and Asherah worship retained a foothold. Worship of these pagan gods involved the most vile acts, including sodomy and prostitution in religious rituals. For these and other abominations, God would eventually send His people into captivity.

Bible scholars have a problem with Judges because "there is general agreement that the problem of harmonizing the chronological data presents insurmountable difficulty" (*Soncino Commentary*, introductory notes to Judges). Some 50 different methods of calculating the chronology of Judges have been offered. This is because many of the judgeships overlap, the last chapters of the book are out of sequence, and many scholars—dating Israel's conquest of the land too late—do not allow the full amount of time between the conquest and the beginning of the monarchy.



Halfhearted Conquest (Judges 1)**Sept. 1 Cont'd**

After God had brought Israel out of Egypt, He told them that He would bring them into a blessed land whose inhabitants were to be utterly destroyed (Deuteronomy 7:1-2). Israel was to show no mercy, nor make any covenant with them. Nevertheless, God said He would not expel the Canaanites immediately, but would, little by little, drive them out before Israel, lest a sudden depopulation of the land be to Israel's hurt (Exodus 23:29-30). This God would have done, if only Israel would have remained faithful to the task.

The business of conquering the land was begun under Joshua. All the days of his life it appears that the Israelites remained generally faithful to the task, though Joshua complained about their lack of zeal even during his lifetime (e.g., Joshua 18:3). But after Joshua died, Israel's zeal definitely slackened. The people became more interested in enjoying God's blessings (a settled life in a new land) and less interested in carrying out His directives (exterminating the Canaanites). Their shortsightedness would haunt the new nation throughout its entire history and ultimately lead to its downfall.

Judah and Simeon began well, working together to clear their inheritances of the Canaanites. Most of the highlands were secured for Judah and Simeon, but the Canaanites of the lowlands were better armed and resisted the two tribes. God was not willing to then remove those Canaanites. Instead, they would be removed later.

The people of Benjamin, however, were not so zealous. When they could not drive the Jebusites from Jerusalem—Jebusites who had been driven from the city by Judah, but then had returned to reinhabit it—the Benjamites did nothing. They did not seek assistance from their brother tribes but instead chose to allow the Jebusites to remain. Benjamin pursued the occupation of its territory halfheartedly, and the Jebusites would remain until David's day.

The story was much the same with the other tribes. Ephraim and Manasseh left many Canaanites dwelling in their land. Asher did likewise. Naphtali followed suit, and Dan allowed itself to be driven away by the Canaanites who held its allotted territory. Thus the stage was set for a continual train of miseries. The halfhearted conquest would result in repeated wars, intertribal disputes, inefficient national government, frequent apostasies in which Canaanite religious practices were embraced, and, as a result, eventual expulsion from the land.

God never gives a command that cannot be followed, at least in the letter. Though the doing of the command might be difficult and may require considerable time and effort, the latter end always proves to be immeasurably better than the results of neglecting to obey the command.

As Christians we have been given the command to fight the good fight of faith, pressing onward to receive our reward in the spiritual "Promised Land" of God's Kingdom. It requires consistent and energetic effort, and there are always spiritual Canaanites who oppose us and attempt to drive us from our inheritance. How have you pursued your inheritance? Have you slacked off? Have you warred with half a heart? Are you willing to fellowship or run with spiritual Canaanites, not recognizing that to do so only means eventual expulsion from your inheritance? If so, now is the time to repent, redouble your efforts and make a good warfare. And while warring, do not forget to aid your brother as he strives for his inheritance also.

When Restraint Is Taken Away (Judges 2)**September 2**

The halfhearted efforts of the Israelite tribes in dealing with the inhabitants of Canaan as God had instructed resulted in God's refusal to drive out the remaining Canaanites. Instead, those Canaanites would be a continual source of misery and frustration for Israel. Yet when God told Israel that He would not drive out what Israel was only too willing to live with, all Israel could do was weep and sacrifice. They were unable to bring themselves to repentance. They were unable to rise up with one voice, confess their sin, and rededicate themselves to the prompt fulfilling of God's command if He would grant them forgiveness.

This lamentable condition was the result of missing components in Israel's character and government—components that are *vital* to any enterprise. The first component is strong, fearless, visionary leadership. Without leaders who are willing to lead, willing to set forth a vision and fearless in its pursuit, the people involved in the enterprise will limp along, wandering from pillar to post, never accomplishing any great thing. For Israel, the generation that went in to the Land of Promise under Joshua was a generation that had such leaders. Men like Joshua and Caleb, and the elders of

Israel, though making occasional mistakes, were not afraid to lead. The vision was clearly laid out for them and they pursued it fearlessly, despite occasional errors.

But after Joshua and his generation died, the leaders who filled their offices were not cut from the same cloth. These men, and the people they led, “did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10). Now certainly they did know *about* God. They had been keeping His feasts, observing His Sabbaths, sacrificing at His tabernacle, and certainly they had heard the stories of the Exodus under Moses and the conquest begun under Joshua. These men, however, did not “know” the Lord nor His works in the sense of having personally experienced them.

These are the second and third necessary components to right character—a personal knowing of God and a sharp remembrance of His works. The second generation knew *of* God, but they did not personally *know* God; they had become lax in their spiritual condition. They knew *of* the Exodus, but they did not *lay to heart* the lessons of it. They knew *of* the conquest, but they had largely grown up during one of those tranquil periods in which God intended that Israel dwell in the land already conquered and build their strength for the next period of conquest.

A personal knowing of God, a remembrance of His works and strong, visionary and fearless leadership act as internal and external restraints on the carnal nature’s desire to let down, compromise and just make do. When any one of those three elements is missing, the people are loosed of restraint and end up living comfortably with sin. Israel’s second generation lacked those qualities, and as a result they did not pursue their God-given inheritance with vigor, but preferred to make do with what they had, to compromise and live with a certain amount of sin.

By not studying the Old Testament, people can slip into the same errors without realizing their predicament. Indeed, ancient Israel is supposed to be an example for us (see 1 Corinthians 10:1-9). As Christians we cannot afford to make the same mistakes. Each of us must come to personally know God, to have *real* and daily experience of Him. Each of us must develop a sharp memory for what God has done for Israel, for the Church and for us in our private lives. Leaders must lead. Do not be timid or fearful. A light yoke is laid upon each of us, therefore let us all work the harder that we may partake of a very bountiful harvest.

Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar (Judges 3)

September 3

All of the Israelites’ weeping and sacrifice did nothing to restrain them from mixing with the detestable heathen in the Land of Promise. “And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons; and they served their gods” (verse 6). Israel simply did not have a heart to obey God (Deuteronomy 5:29). The effect was disastrous: conquest and reduction to servitude under gentile kings.

The first servitude in the land was under Cushan-Rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia, and it lasted for eight years. This king’s name “means ‘Cushan of Double Wickedness’; this may not have been his actual name, but instead a name pinned on him by the author of Judges for ridicule [or perhaps one that the people called him for the same reason]. Note that this name is found four times in two verses (vv. 8, 10), which may support the point that the author was mocking the king” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 3:8). The brevity of the servitude under him may be accounted for by the fact that it was Othniel, the nephew and son-in-law of Caleb (Judges 3:9; compare Joshua 15:16-17), whom God used to restore Israel’s freedom. Othniel probably saw and participated in the initial conquest, making him a transitional figure from the generation that saw the earlier works (compare Judges 2:7) to those who didn’t. It may be that some of the first-generation zeal was in Othniel and that his fearless leadership was able to rally a more repentant and zealous spirit in his brethren. For 40 years Israel had freedom. But after the death of Othniel and his restraining influence, Israel returned to the slavery of idolatry.

With the return to idolatry came the inevitable return of servitude to a foreign nation. This time it was Eglon, king of Moab, who subdued Israel. After 18 years, God provided release through Ehud, who assassinated Eglon. Once again, Israel had rest, this time for 80 years. But once again, Israel lapsed into disobedience.

The deliverance by Shamgar is related in a single line. It may be that he judged contemporaneously with Ehud, perhaps taking a more westerly area of administration. He is said to have slain a large number of Philistines, which would put his activity in the western lowlands of Judah. We cannot know for certain.

Since Israel is said to have gone astray after Ehud died (Judges 4:1) we may conclude that Shamgar's deliverance occurred after Ehud's judgeship began (3:31) and that he died before Ehud. Beyond that, *The Nelson Study Bible* makes some interesting points: "Moreover, Shamgar delivered Israel but did not *judge* it [at least, that is not expressly stated]. Even the name Shamgar is not Hebrew. Yet he was the son of Anath—clearly a Semitic name. This may mean that he was from the town of Beth-Anath in Galilee; more probably, however, Anath is derived from the name of the Canaanite warrior goddess. If so, then it is ironic that God used a foreign warrior to deliver Israel" (note on 3:31).

Deborah and Barak (Judges 4)

September 4

Once the restraining influence of Ehud's leadership was removed, "the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD" (verse 1). *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* refers to the quotation here as "the sin phrase." It occurs six times in the book of Judges (see 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). For their rebellion this time, God sold them to Jabin, king of Canaan in Hazor, who cruelly oppressed them 20 years. Long before, Joshua had defeated a king of Hazor named Jabin (Joshua 11:1-15). The same name has been found in a text from the archaeological site of Mari on the River Euphrates (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 4:2). Such facts may suggest that *Jabin* was a title rather than a proper name, like *Abimelech* among the Philistines or *Ben-Hadad* among the Syrians.

It does not appear to have dawned on the Israelites that as they continued to disobey God their periods of servitude lasted longer and grew more intense in severity. Neither did it occur to them that, one way or the other, they were going to serve *someone*—God or a gentile. Their service to God was light and held great reward, but their service to the gentiles was always heavy and bitter. Were these men mad in not being able to discern such things? No, they were simply carnal, and carnality does not like restraint of any kind—enabling their willing blindness to reality.

At this time Deborah was judging Israel. How she became a judge we do not know, but perhaps her status as a prophetess caused Israel to seek counsel and justice at her word. Her judgeship, however, took place during the oppression of Jabin and must have been limited to religious matters and civil matters of little consequence to him. It was while she was judging Israel that she received a revelation instructing her to call Barak and inform him that God had chosen him to free Israel.

When Barak came to Deborah and received word of God's intention, he agreed to assume the task but only if Deborah would accompany him. Barak's reluctance is not too difficult to understand when one considers that what made Jabin's army so formidable was the presence of 900 chariots of iron. These were strategic superweapons when pitted against forces without them, such as Israel's. Furthermore, the number of chariots suggests that Jabin had built a very large standing army. To attempt to defeat such a numerically superior and well-armed force would be quite daunting, and trepidation, especially given Jabin's cruelty, would be the natural response. Also, Barak may have questioned the truth of Deborah's revelation. Was she issuing a false prophecy, one of her own making? If she would go with him, Barak could be assured that the prophecy was true—else why would Deborah hazard her life for what she knew to be a falsehood?

Fear, of course, is an enemy of faith. And despite the fact that Barak is recorded in Hebrews 11:32 as an example of faith, his wavering in this situation would cause the honor of victory to go to a woman, leaving Barak somewhat disgraced. Nevertheless, Barak still consented to the task, perhaps expecting that woman to be Deborah—which would not have seemed so bad considering the important position she already occupied. Instead, God chose yet another woman, further stripping Barak of honor.

Many of the judges raised armies from only one or two of the Israelite tribes, which is evidence that Israel was probably more of a loose tribal confederation at this time. Barak's army was drawn primarily from Zebulun and Naphtali. Chapter 5 of Judges reveals that smaller elements of Issachar, Benjamin, Manasseh and Reuben were also present, but Reuben (true to his nature, Genesis 49:3-4) vacillated. Large parts of Manasseh remained beyond Jordan, and Dan and Asher preferred to continue their shipping trade rather than engage in a war of liberation. At this time in their history, Israel had no strong central government that organized and legislated for all the nation. The individual tribes acted in their own self-interest, with most of the governmental authority of the nation being vested in the tribal elders.

The engagement at the River Kishon was a complete rout of Sisera, general of Jabin's army. The entire Canaanite army was exterminated, and Sisera fled on foot. Unhappily for Sisera, he came

across the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Exhausted and begging water, Jael instead gave him milk—a wise move considering the sleep-inducing properties of milk. Sisera’s fatigue combined with a large amount of milk sent him fast off to sleep, a slumber so dense that Jael was able to sneak into the tent and kill Sisera by driving a tent peg through his skull.

With his army destroyed, all his chariots captured and the military genius of Sisera gone, Jabin’s days were numbered. Israel grew stronger and stronger until they finally killed Jabin and destroyed his persecuting power forever. And Israel had peace 40 years.

THREE-DAY BREAK

September 5-7

Starting September 5, there is break in the program for three days. Regular reading resumes September 8. (There are four planned breaks in each calendar year. This allows more time for personal study at these occasions and perhaps an opportunity for you to catch up in the reading if you have fallen behind.)

The Song of Deborah (Judges 5)

September 8

“The Song of Deborah is one of the finest examples of an ode of triumph preserved in Israelite literature...[with] a vividness, an almost staccato effect of action and a spirit of sheer exultation” (*Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, chapter 5 summary). The song celebrates the outcome related in our previous reading—a most unexpected deliverance from an apparently unconquerable and desperately cruel foe.

Considering all that transpired, the opening lines of the song are most instructive: “When leaders lead in Israel, when the people willingly offer themselves, Bless the LORD!” While this is not an exact translation of the Hebrew here, the idiom used being somewhat obscure, it does perhaps convey the intent behind it. And the sentiment is certainly a true one in any case. For strong, fearless, visionary leadership combined with a people who willingly offer themselves to God produces an irresistibly powerful and successful combination. Wherever there is vacillation and little success among God’s people, at least one of these two factors is missing.

The song gives some very interesting details of God’s maneuvering in the deliverance from Jabin, as well as the conditions of Israel’s servitude to that terrible king. Verses 4-5 reveal that God caused a major rainstorm just before or during the battle. No doubt the muddy ground mired the heavy iron chariots of Jabin, vastly reducing his army’s strength and demoralizing his troops. God often uses weather to confound armies, and it has even apparently happened in modern times.

Verses 6-9 reveal the severity of Jabin’s oppression. Main highways were desolate of traveler, whether trader or pilgrim; all took the rougher unknown, but safe, trails through the hill country. Moreover, the many small Israelite villages were under constant fear of destruction, and as a result many were depopulated, the people either moving to larger cities or preferring tent dwelling, as did Jael.

Verse 20 has been interpreted in several ways, with some scholars preferring to understand it as an ironic slap at the Canaanite practice of astrology, while others view the stars as symbolic of real heavenly forces, implying that Israel had angelic help in its fight against Jabin. Another explanation is that the reference is to meteors.

Gideon’s First Works (Judges 6)

September 9

Deborah and Barak’s victory brought Israel 40 years of independence and peace. But Israel again did evil in the sight of God, and God once again delivered them over to their enemies, this time the Midianites. For seven years the Midianites, with smaller contingents of Amalekites and Mesopotamians, would raid Israel during harvest seasons, swooping down and confiscating all the produce of the fields. Many Israelites took to the hills to live in caves, no doubt because the invaders would seize even the foodstuffs stored in houses, and dwelling in highland caves provided a place both of security and of safe storage.

Gideon was a Manassite, but of the smallest of that tribe’s clans, and he himself the “least” in the house of his father—implying the smallest, youngest, least important or least thought of. In any case, he was clearly not a man of any considerable wealth or influence. But God often works through the unknown and apparently insignificant. This is also true of New Testament times (see 1 Corinthians 1:26).

During this oppression, God, through His prophet, plainly told Israel why they were being oppressed (verses 8-10). Yet, when the Angel of the Lord—who seems to have been the Lord Himself in this case (compare verses 12, 14, 16, 23), i.e., the preincarnate Christ as messenger of the Father (compare Genesis 16:10-13)—appeared to Gideon, Gideon asked why all this had happened. Apparently few paid any heed to the words of the prophets. Nevertheless, the time for punishment was to be ended, and God had chosen Gideon as the instrument of that deliverance.

Our introduction to Gideon is somewhat humorous. He is threshing wheat not out in the open on a threshing floor as would normally be the case, but hidden in a winepress out of fear of the Midianites stealing the grain from him. Yet this divine Messenger's first words to fearful Gideon are, "The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!" (verse 12). "Both statements seemed absurd. First of all, where was the God of Israel? Second, anyone with eyes to see could know that he was no mighty man of valor. Gallant generals and fearless warriors did not hide from the enemy in winepresses" (Phillip Keller, *Mighty Man of Valor*, 1979, p. 25). But God often refers to people according to what they will become. Gideon certainly didn't come across as mighty or valorous initially, but by believing and trusting in God, he ultimately lived up to the confidence God placed in him and truly became a mighty warrior, a man of valor. Interestingly, the name Gideon itself actually meant "Hewer," "Feller" or "One Who Cuts Down," perhaps implying an *overcomer*. And after God's calling, Gideon would begin fulfilling the meaning of his name.

His first action was to destroy the local altar to Baal—another sign that few Israelites were listening to God's prophets. When the local officials sought to put him to death, Gideon's father Joash challenged them to let Baal prove his own divinity by taking vengeance on Gideon through some supernatural means. The challenge was ironic, because it would show Baal completely incapable of taking vengeance upon anyone—Midianite, Amalekite, Mesopotamian or even the smallest, most insignificant man in Manasseh. Of course, nothing happened. Joash then called Gideon by the name Jerubbaal ("Let Baal Plead" or "Let Baal Take Revenge"), thus making him a living taunt to the worshipers of Baal.

The destruction of the altar, and the confounding of the Baal devotees, gave evidence to Gideon that God was on his side. He would need the encouragement of that thought, for then the seasonal raids of the Midianites and their confederates commenced. When they appeared, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon and he gathered an army from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali—again, only a few of the tribes of Israel.

While the Spirit of the Lord had come upon Gideon, he had as yet developed little faith. He required another sign from God that God would truly deliver Midian into his hands. While this was probably for his own sake, he may also have felt it necessary for the Israelites to know, with the evidence of such signs, that God had chosen him to fight the battle. In any event, God did perform the famous fleece signs. Gideon, we can see, was still used to walking by sight, not faith. Nevertheless, the success of his enterprise was not to come from his strength but God's. The signs were given, and Gideon was emboldened.

Gideon's Army (Judges 7)

September 10

The army that Gideon gathered numbered 32,000 men, too large for God's purposes. If the battle had been engaged, Israel would have attributed the success of the battle to their large numbers. Therefore, God set about paring down the force. First, those who were afraid of battle would be dismissed. That left 10,000 soldiers. Still too many. So God instructed Gideon to bring the army down to a stream or pool. There Gideon was to separate the men into two groups—those who scooped water in their hand and brought it to their mouth, and those who got down on all fours to drink by placing their face in the water. Those who scooped the water numbered 300, and those were the men God chose.

As to why God chose this method, we simply do not know. However, being such an unusual occurrence, it is deserving of a comment here. *The Nelson Study Bible* offers a note on this division, the merits of which you may judge for yourself: "Some commentators have suggested that the men who did not get down on their knees were maintaining a higher degree of military readiness by drinking out of their hands. However, they may be reading too much into the account, for the text does not indicate any reason for Gideon's preference. The reference to the way a dog laps might even be derogatory since dogs were despised creatures in the ancient world [as they were considered worthless scavengers] (1 Sam. 17:43; 2 Kin. 8:13; Matt. 7:6). If so, God's role in the victory

becomes even more apparent, since the three hundred who were left were the ones who did not even have the common sense to drink in a normal fashion. God's comment in v. 7 seems to reinforce this suggestion" (note on Judges 7:4-5). Still, others stress the *alertness* of a dog as a positive. Whatever the reason, we are still left with an incredible miracle of winning with only 300 men.

When the battle was engaged by night, Gideon gave every man a torch, a clay pitcher and a horn. As the troops dispersed in the night, descending on the Midianites in the valley, Gideon gave the sign. The horns blew, the pitchers were broken, the torches flared and a great shout was made—all simultaneously. This was an important stratagem. Normally only the commander of a body of men would have a horn and a torch, so the sound of 300 horns and the sight of 300 torches made it appear that Israel had a very large army. Moreover, the sound of 300 clay pitchers breaking simultaneously would have carried down the valley walls sounding like the clanking of military armor. The valley walls would also have caused the noises to amplify. The sight of the torches and sound of the Israelites' horns and shouting terrified the Midianites, who imagined a huge army bearing down on them. It was every man for himself, most fleeing without their armor or battle gear, thus becoming even easier prey for Gideon and his little band. In the confusion, the Midianites, Amalekites and Mesopotamians even slaughtered each other in the dark in their panic and desperation.

So God, by the most insignificant man in Manasseh leading an insignificant troop, wrought a great victory for Israel. And there was peace for 40 years (8:28)

Gideon's Diplomacy, Vindication, Humility and Foolishness (Judges 8) September 11

Though Gideon's little band completely routed the Midianites and their allies, nevertheless he called to the men of Ephraim to come down and aid in completing the victory (7:24). The Ephraimites were quick to the task, taking the territory pointed out by Gideon, and capturing and executing two of the leading Midianite princes, Oreb and Zeeb, whose heads they proudly brought to Gideon (verses 24-25). But the meeting with Gideon was not entirely pleasant. The men of Ephraim sharply upbraided Gideon for his refusal to call them to the initial engagement, feeling that they had been denied their rightful part in a great battle (8:1). Gideon's reply astutely appealed to the vanity of the Ephraimite men. "Though you were called to aid in the mopping-up activity, yet you have done far better than I," he basically told them, "for you have taken and killed two Midianite princes—and how shall my little skirmish compare to that!" (compare verses 2-3). Thus said, the Ephraimites' anger was assuaged.

As Gideon and his men returned to the land of Israel, exhausted and faint with hunger, they came to Succoth and asked the elders of the city for provision to continue their pursuit of other Midianite leaders. The elders of Succoth refused, saying that it looked to them like Gideon hadn't captured *anyone*. The men of Penuel, upon the same request, made a similar reply. In both cases Gideon promised to return and punish the cities for their impertinence. According to the culture of the day, Gideon had every right to make the request, for he was a fellow countryman who was warring against Israel's foes. The actions of the Succothites and Penuelites showed disloyalty and cowardice. When Gideon captured the two Midianite kings, he returned to Succoth and Penuel and carried out his threats, whipping the elders of Succoth with thorns and breaking down a defensive tower in Penuel.

The victory achieved by Gideon was so stupendous that the men of Israel were intent on making him king. But Gideon refused—*God* was Israel's king, and Gideon made sure to impress that point on the men of Israel. Gideon did take a reward, however, which was also his due according to the standard of the day. But Gideon behaved foolishly, for he took his reward of gold and made an ephod—a ceremonial religious garment—of it. It became an object of veneration by the Israelites and, sadly, even proved a snare to Gideon and his family (verse 27). When Gideon died, the people went back into total idolatry, even building a temple to Baal (verses 33-35; 9:4).

Gideon's story presents the first signs of a yearning for kingship in Israel. As previously stated, most of the real governmental power in Israel at the time was in the hands of the elders of the various tribes, and the tribes tended to look to their own interests, even when the national fortune or honor was at stake. The repeated cycle of servitude and deliverance began to expose the weakness of the tribal confederacy as it then existed and to awaken a desire for a more powerful central government. Sadly, the repeated cycle of servitude and deliverance did not impress on the Israelites the need for fidelity to God and the covenant. *That* was the lesson they should have learned. But men seldom blame their own evil hearts, preferring rather to blame "the system."

Supplementary Reading: “Gideon: When a Few Make a Majority,” *The Good News*, Sept.–Oct. 1997, pp. 27-29.

King Abimelech (Judges 9)

September 12

As stated in yesterday’s reading, when Gideon died, the Israelites went right back to their old ways, fornicating with the gods of the Canaanites. How quickly do men turn when the restraining influence of a righteous man is removed!

Although Gideon did not become an actual king, he did have a heavy influence on all aspects of public life. In fact, the large number of sons born to him after his victory—70!—indicates that Gideon amassed a rather large harem (8:30), something usually reserved for kings. So although he did not become a king *de jure*, he was apparently the *de facto* king in Israel. This is also indicated by the name of one of his sons, whom he actually gave the royal title of Abimelech (verse 31), which means “My Father Is King”—and Abimelech’s remarks indicate that Gideon’s 70 sons were placed in important positions of leadership (compare 9:1-2).

While Gideon earlier realized that he should not be crowned king, it is possible that he later didn’t see things so clearly, particularly when we consider what happened with the ephod and his having many wives. (The multiplying of wives to oneself was forbidden to the kings of Israel in Deuteronomy 17:17 because it carried the danger of turning the one doing so away from God—and this principle was certainly applicable to anyone.) Furthermore, Gideon’s strong leadership, the deference of the people of Israel toward him, his personal lifestyle and the role of his sons in governing Israel probably did little to dispel the notion among the people that, even if he was not an actual king, he might as well have been.

Nevertheless, it is nowhere stated that Gideon ever actually assumed the *title* of king—and, with what is made of this issue in chapters 8 and 9, we would certainly expect the account to say so if he had. Thus, it is most likely that he never did. Naming his son Abimelech was perhaps a recognition of what he *effectively* was—not what he *truly* was. And perhaps he was even hopeful of being blessed with some kind of dynastic succession of leadership, as presumptuous as that seems to be.

Whatever the case, it is clear that Gideon’s son Abimelech *did* want to be acknowledged as king. Upon his father’s death, Abimelech realized that if he did not move immediately, he would forever lose his opportunity for that honor. His first action was to gain the support of his mother’s influential Shechemite family, who saw that if Abimelech reigned in Israel, they would likely obtain high posts in the new government and all the benefits that went with them. This led the men of Shechem to throw their support, and money from the temple of Baal-Berith there, behind Abimelech. With the new money, Abimelech hired an entourage to accompany him—putting on the airs of a king, a public relations move. With the support of a significant city, and a personal entourage, Abimelech next eliminated any potential competition by murdering all his brothers, Gideon’s sons. Immediately, the men of Shechem and Beth Millo crowned Abimelech king. Pathetically, this occurred at the terebinth tree at Shechem, where Jacob, so many years before, had commanded those of his household to put away the foreign gods that were among them (Genesis 35:4).

Jotham, the youngest of Gideon’s sons, was the only survivor of the massacre. His long parable of the trees who sought a king charged the men of Shechem and Beth Millo with the grossest foolishness and the most treacherous dealings against Gideon, and he called forth a destruction upon them in repayment. Being the only blood descendant of Gideon, he knew Abimelech would do all he could to take his life, so he fled and hid.

The pact between Abimelech and his Shechemite supporters lasted for three years. Thereafter, “God sent a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem” (verse 23). What caused the breach is not stated, but the disaffection caused the men of Shechem to support one Gaal, son of Ebed, in his bid for the throne. The rebellion was brought to a quick end—Abimelech killed Gaal and destroyed the city, including its pagan temple—and thus the treachery of the Shechemites against Gideon was repaid.

On the heels of this victory, Abimelech attacked another city, Thebez. But during the attack, a woman dropped a grinding stone down onto Abimelech’s head. Dying, he ordered his armor-bearer to kill him, lest it be said that he was killed by a woman. And so Abimelech’s treachery against his father Gideon was repaid.

God watches over His people. When the righteous cry out to him for deliverance from their enemies, God will act, although the unfolding of the events may, to all outward appearances, seem to have little to do with God. In the case of Abimelech, all God had to do was break the league between the Shechemites and Abimelech. The natural wickedness of the players involved would serve to bring things to a conclusion. And, true to His word, those who seek to exalt themselves will be abased.

Tola, Jair and the Ammonite Oppression (Judges 10)**September 13**

After the reign of Abimelech, which does not appear to have included much territory other than Shechem and its surrounding villages, Tola judged Israel and worked some kind of deliverance, although we do not know against whom. He judged 23 years.

Following Tola, Jair judged 22 years. His 30 sons were noblemen and rulers of as many cities in Gilead, thus indicating that Jair had a rather large administrative apparatus, which exercised significant influence in Gilead and probably further afield. Since no mention is made of a deliverance made by Jair, it appears that he continued the era of peace produced by Tola.

The 45 years of peace and relative fidelity to God were shattered upon the death of Jair. Israel ran wholeheartedly back into idolatry, embracing the gods of not just the Canaanites, but also of the Syrians, Sidonians, Moabites, Ammonites and Philistines. And so, for 18 years God sold His people into the hands of foreigners—the Philistines and Ammonites, two of the very peoples whose gods Israel adopted. From the catalog of pagan gods, and the scanty notes of the Ammonite invasion into the territories of Ephraim and Benjamin, it would appear that the greater part of the oppression fell on the tribes east of Jordan, and that the Ammonite invasion might have been a coordinated effort with the Philistines to divide Israel down the middle.

When the 18 years elapsed, Israel came to its senses and, for the first time, the cause of their misery is actually stated by them in the account—their rejection of God and attachment to the Baals. But when they cried out to God, He rejected their pleas and told them He would not save them. Nevertheless, Israel repented and served God. Eventually, God could no longer endure the misery of Israel.

Ammon gathered in Mizpah, and Israel met them. But who would deliver Israel?

Starting September 14, there is a break in the program for 18 days. Regular reading resumes October 1. (There are four planned breaks in each calendar year. This allows more time for personal study at these occasions and perhaps an opportunity for you to catch up in the reading if you have fallen behind.)

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