

LIVING BY FAITH IN AN UNBELIEVING WORLD

SOSL 3/98-99

The Book of Judges

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION (*Revised*)

Historical setting

The first and last verses together clearly frame the historical setting of the book of Judges. It covers the period between the death of Joshua and the end of the Exodus (1:1) and the beginning of the monarchy (21:25).

Who were the “judges?”

The “Judges” who arose during this period were not primarily judicial officials in the contemporary sense. (Of all those mentioned in this book, Deborah came closest to what we consider a “judge.” The people brought “cases” to her as she held court under the Palm of Deborah--see 4:5.) Rather, they were mainly military leaders who meted out justice to evildoers and oppressors. In other words, they were “deliverers” or “saviors” who redeemed the people from slavery. When we read in Psalm 96:10-13 that the Lord will “*come to judge the earth*,” it means he comes to rule it and to liberate it from bondage. The narrator tells of twelve of these deliverers:

Othniel (3:7-11)

Jair (10:3-5)

Ehud (3:12-30)

Jephthah (10:6-12:7)

Shamgar (3:31)

Ibzan (12:8-10)

Deborah (4:1-5:31)

Elon (12:11)

Gideon (6:1-8:35)

Abdon (12:13-15)

Tola (10:1-2)

Samson (13:1-16:31)

Relevance for today

Israel had strong leadership under Moses and Joshua during the exodus, and later under David and Solomon in the monarchy. In both eras there was a strong human leader who represented God and ruled society on the basis of divine law. But in these intervening years, the Israelites lived in a “spiritually pluralistic” society. Due to Israel’s various failures, the society of Canaan was a mixture of pagan and believing peoples. There are many parallels between that situation and ours today. Largely due to the failures of the church, believers in the West find themselves living in a religiously pluralistic society. Individual Christians work and live among a great variety of gods--not only those of other formal religions, but also the gods of wealth, celebrity, pleasure, ideology, achievement. Our era can also be characterized by the phrase, “*every man did what was right in his own eyes*” (21:25). Thus the book of Judges has much to say to the individualism and paganism of our own day.

Since there was no Moses and no king--who “judged” Israel during that time? A superficial answer would be to say that God raised up charismatic individual leaders--“judges” who navigated the people through crises. But Jephthah had a better understanding when he referred to “*the Lord, the Judge*” (11:27). In other words, in times when believers live as a minority in a pagan society, they are to look directly to God as their Lord and Judge. They are to follow his lead, and not the spirit or powers of their age. That is extremely difficult, as this book shows us. Judges is mainly the story of how believers failed in this task. (Later, during the Babylonian exile, there are more ‘success’ stories, such as Esther and Daniel. Earlier, there was another success story in Joseph.)

Christians reading Judges today must ask: how can *we* be sure to follow God rather than the idols of our society and neighbors? How can we renew ourselves when we fail or fall?

Themes to look for

As can be seen from the list of judges above, the narrator gives some judges major treatment, while others get only a single verse of mention. That immediately alerts us to the fact that the book of Judges is not merely a history book. (It is not less that true history, but it is much more.) The narrator is not just a reporter, but a teacher. What are his themes?

This is the place for a first word of caution. One commentator summed up the book of Judges as “despicable people doing deplorable things” and as “trashy tales about dysfunctional characters.” As the history unfolds, even the “heroes”, the judges, become increasingly dysfunctional and flawed. They do many appalling things, and their efforts have less and less redemptive effect. It is a dismal story. The reader will be led to ask, again and again, “what in the world is this story doing in the Bible?” The answer is an important one--it is the gospel! Judges shows us that the Bible is not a “Book of Virtues;” it is not full of inspirational stories. Why? It is because the Bible (unlike other faiths) is not about emulating moral examples. It is about a God of mercy and long-suffering who continually works in and through us despite our constant resistance to his purposes. With that in mind look for the following themes.

1. God relentlessly offers his grace to people who do not deserve it nor seek it nor even appreciate it after they have been saved by it. The book of Judges is not about a series of role models. Though there are a few good examples (Othniel, Deborah), they are early and do not dominate the narrative. The point is that the only true hero is God, the only true savior is the Lord. Judges is ultimately about grace abounding to chief sinners. God’s grace will triumph over the stupidest actions.

2. God wants lordship over every area of our lives, not just some. God wanted Israel to take the entire land of Canaan, but instead they only cleared out some areas and they learned to live with idols in their midst. In other words, they neither wholly rejected God nor wholly accepted him. This half-way discipleship and compromise is depicted by the book of Judges as an impossible, unstable compound. God wants all of our lives, not just part.

3. *There is a tension between grace and law, between conditionality and unconditionality.* Readers will find in Judges a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, God demands obedience because he is holy. On the other hand, he makes promises of commitment and loyalty to his people. Will his holiness and his conditional commands (“do this and then I’ll do this”) override his promises (“I will always be with you”), or will his promises override his commands? Put it this way--are his promises conditional or unconditional? Judges is crucial, in that it shows that neither answer to that question is right. Nearly all readers of the Old Testament take a “liberal” view (sure, God will always bless us as long as we are sorry) or a “conservative” view (no, God will only bless us if we are obedient). But Judges will not resolve the tension. One commentator says: “It is this tension [between conditionality and unconditionality] more than anything else that propels the narrative.” Only the New Testament gospel will show us how the two sides are both true because of the death of Christ on the cross.

4. *There is a need for continual spiritual renewal in our lives here on earth, and a way to make that a reality.* Judges shows that spiritual decline is inevitable, and spiritual renewal then becomes the continual need. We will see a regular, repeated decline-revival cycle. Some of the elements in this renewal include repentance, corporate prayer, the destruction of idols, and anointed human leaders. Renewal happens when we are under the right master/ruler; slavery occurs when we are under the wrong master/ruler. Judges is the best book in the Old Testament for the understanding of renewal and revival, while Acts is the best place in the New Testament. Watch however, for the fact that the revival cycles in Judges become weaker and weaker as time goes on, while in Acts they grow wider and stronger.

5. *We need a true Savior, to which all human saviors point, through both their flaws and strengths.* As we noted above under #1, the increasing magnitude of evil and brokenness in the narrative points us to our need of a savior, not role models. But the decreasing effectiveness of the revival cycles and the decreasing quality of the judges point us to the failure of any human savior. The judges themselves begin to point us to someone beyond them all. In Othniel we learn that God can save through all, in Deborah that he can save through many, in Gideon that he can save through few, and in Samson that he can save through one. God will save by sending the One.

6. *God is in charge, no matter what it looks like.* The most pervasive theme is maybe the easiest to miss. God often seems almost absent from the scene in Judges, but he never is. He works out his will through weak people and in spite of weak people. His purposes are never thwarted, regardless of appearances. The mills of God may grind slow, but they grind exceedingly fine.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Read Judges 1:1-2:5. Which of the six themes do you see any traces of in these first verses?

2. (In groups of 2 or 3)--Which of the themes would be most helpful to you? Why is it personally relevant right now?

THE ISSUE OF “HOLY WAR”

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Read and mark

“!” - for something that helped you

“?” -for something that raised a question

THE PROBLEM

One of the biggest problems the modern reader has with Joshua and Judges in particular and the Old Testament in general is God’s order to Israel that they “drive out” and evict the inhabitants of Canaan from their homeland. Here we have a nation doing what today would be condemned by world opinion. What is done seems identical to modern “ethnic cleansings,” as when one ethnic group seeks to violently force out or wipe out another group. While we would consider it legitimate for people to engage in warfare in order to defend their homeland, most today would not allow it legitimate to aggressively go to war to confiscate someone else’s homeland. And in addition, Judges seems to give a warrant for “holy war.” If we allow the conquest of Canaan in God’s name to be a righteous action, then why cannot others claim that they are going to war in God’s name against “wicked infidels” and to treat them with violence. What do we say to all this?

A FALSE SOLUTION

It is far too easy to respond that the Old Testament “was a more primitive stage in religion”, and that “it contains many barbaric statements and directives that we cannot accept any more.” There is a severe problem with such a view. Why can’t we accept them now? The main reason that we consider the conquest of Canaan problematic is because it breaks the sixth commandment (“thou shalt not murder”) and the eighth commandment (“thou shalt not steal”). But the 10 Commandments is in the Old Testament (Exod. 20)! So if we reject the Old Testament as God’s true revelation, then on what basis do we object to the “immorality” of the conquest? It is arbitrary to say “I like Exodus 20” but “I don’t like Judges 1.” If the Old Testament is not God’s Word, then who’s to say that one chapter is better than the other? To deny the authority of the Old Testament in order to “solve” this issue is like burning down your whole house in order to kill a rat that lives in it. If we don’t know what God’s Word is, then what is wrong with a little imperialism?

The real problem (and it *is* a real problem!) is that God allows the Israelites to do in Joshua and Judges what he forbids anyone else to do all through the rest of the Bible. The moral law, as it is laid down in both the Old Testament and the New Testament for all time--is completely against conquest. When we kill people who have not attacked us and take their land, that is always considered theft and murder. So why does God allow this exception here? And why can’t this part of the Bible be used as a warrant for “holy wars” today?

A WAY THROUGH THE PROBLEM

There are several all-important differences which distinguish the mission of Israel to occupy Canaan from any other military action. Before or since.

1. First, the war is not carried out on the basis of race. God's order to evict the Canaanites is not a directive to remove or kill people of a different race. When the invasion of Canaan began, Israel's spies were helped by Rahab, a resident of Jericho (see Joshua 2). Rahab was not only a Gentile, but a prostitute--she could have been seen as both a racial and a moral "outsider." Yet because she trusted in the Lord of Israel, she was incorporated into Israel and stayed in Canaan. The purpose of the mission was to "*break down the altars*" of the idols (Judges 2:3) and evict pagan worship, not necessarily the people of any particular race. So this campaign is not a warrant for the warfare of one ethnic group against another.

2. Second, the war is not carried out on the basis of imperialistic expansion. Even within this special mandate, God does not allow the Israelites to plunder or enslave any of the people with whom they do battle. They are to be defeated and driven out--period. For example, in Joshua 7, Achan is judged for keeping plunder from a Canaanite town. What was normal for all military actions and invasion at that time was completely forbidden to the Israelites. Why? Because the purpose of the mission was not to become prosperous and powerful but rather to create a country in which the Israelites could serve and honor God. (The need to evict the Canaanites was probably due to how subject to temptation the Israelites were. In other words, the eviction was not a testimony to how virtuous the people were, but to how spiritually weak they were!) So this campaign is not a warrant for the imperialistic colonization by one country against another country.

3. Third, the war is carried out as God's judgment through direct revelation. To Joshua (in Joshua 1:1-9) and through Joshua (in Joshua 23:1-16) and again through the priest's ephod (Judges 1:1) God gives specific, verbal revelation to the Israelites to evict the Canaanites. Nothing less direct and unmistakable could be the basis for such action. (It would not be enough to say--"we've thought about it and we think the Lord is leading us to break the sixth and eighth commandments!") But why would God command such a thing?

One theologian has called this "the intrusion ethic." God, of course, knows the end from the beginning. He alone has the right and the knowledge to see persons who will be condemned on Judgment day and to bring a judgment down on them "early." Thus God, the Judge of all, can determine to mete out justice on them now, rather than waiting for the Last Day. Therefore the future judgment "intrudes" on the present. (So what is happening is not really more "primitive" but more "advanced.") This is not totally unusual, because the blessings of the gospel are also intrusions of the future grace into the present.

Therefore, this is not a mandate for believers in general to move coercively against unbelievers, nor any warrant for a "holy war" by one faith against another. The way we know the Lord's will is to read the 10 Commandments and the other directives of the Bible to us--*not* to try to emulate everything described in all the histories of the Bible. Many people run into the same problem when they say, "we are running our church just like God commands us to in the book of Acts." In Ephesians and 1 Timothy, Paul clearly lays down principles for church order. But at some points, the book of Acts only describes what the church did, not what God told it to do. We must be much more cautious in drawing conclusions from historical passages.

CONCLUSION

This issue highlights the importance of the orthodox Christian view of God's revelation. All branches of the church--Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant--agree that the Bible is entirely the unique revelation of God's will. There are two opposite views, however that could be very dangerous and lead us into "holy war." On the one hand, some people believe that they are getting direct revelation from God--on an equal level with that which Moses or Joshua or the apostles received. If you believe in that sort of "continuing revelation", then there is no control or check against "holy war." You could always say that God is calling you to attack in his name and wipe out some group which is "of the devil." On the other hand, many, many people do not believe the Bible is a final revelation at all. But if you don't believe in an authoritative Word, then there is also no control or check against "holy war." You could always say that your conscience and conviction is calling you to attack and wipe out some group of people. But if I believe the orthodox view of the Bible, then there is a very real control and check on how I use political power.

READ WITH HUMILITY

It is extremely easy for contemporary people to feel condescending or offended by the actions of many of the characters in the book of Judges. The command of God to conquer Canaan is difficult enough to understand. But in addition, we read here of how Israel deviated from God's will and continually suffered deep moral lapses. The supposed "good guys" often treat women and people of other races in evil ways. But the modern individual must not assume that, if you had been born in this ancient era, you would have been so much more enlightened than everyone else. You should realize that you have the advantage of living in a society deeply influenced by the 10 Commandments and other Biblical sources of our civilization. When you read of these ancient men and women, remember that our own inner natures and hearts are not fundamentally better than were theirs. Be willing to look for the ways in which you are like the people in the narrative. Don't pander to your own ego by focusing on the ways in which you are unlike them.

Week1

JUDGES 1:1-2:3

HALF-WAY DISCIPLESHIP

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1. Read Joshua 1:1-9 and 23:3-13. Here is the mission of the Israelites, given by God through Joshua just before he died. a) What are the specific directions they are given? b) Why do you think God is so careful to insist that military bravery be combined with whole-hearted discipleship in this campaign? c) Do you see in this passage any of the reasons mentioned last week that this is not a warrant for future "holy wars."

2. Read 1:19-35. Though beginning well (1:1-18), the Israelites eventually fail to drive out the Canaanites. Make a list of all the reasons given (or hinted at) in the text for why various tribes failed to do so.

3. Read 2:1-3. a) How does God assess the reasons for the Israelites' failure to drive out the Canaanites? b) What does he say in v.2 the real purpose of the campaign was? c) In the light of Joshua 1 and 23, why do the reasons given in vv.19-36 constitute not just military failure but spiritual unfaithfulness?

4. a) Is there anything in your life about which you can say "I can't do" but about which God may say, "you won't do"? [Read 1 Cor.10:13. Is there any place in your life that you are not taking this promise seriously?] b) What two things does God say that the Israelites have forgotten in 2:1? How can we overcome our excuses by reflecting on the same two items?

5. 2:1-3. a) What tension do you see between the first "I said" in v.1 and the second "I tell you" in v.3? b) How does this dramatic tension make the story of the Judges gripping? c) How does Jesus Christ solve this dilemma? d) What practical implications are there for us when we break one of God's laws?

6. 2:1. a) The Angel of the Lord comes up from Gilgal. Why would God want them to remember Gilgal as they heard the charge of disobedience? (Read Joshua 5: 4-10 on what happened there.)

7. 2:3- God says that the Canaanites allowed to stay will now become a "thorns" and "snares." What things have you allowed to stay in your life

which should be expelled? How do they become a snare? Pray to God for a 'wedding' of his power and your willingness to remove it.

Week1

JUDGES 1:1-2:3

HALF-WAY DISCIPLESHIP

SOSL 3/98-99

1. Read Joshua 1:1-9 and 23:3-13. Here is the mission of the Israelites, given by God through Joshua just before he died. a) What are the specific directions they are given? b) Why do you think God is so careful to insist that military bravery be combined with whole-hearted discipleship in this campaign? c) Do you see in this passage any of the reasons (mentioned last week) that this is not a warrant for other “holy wars.”

a) Specific directions.

- 1) First, they are told the dimensions of their new land in 1:4.
- 2) Second, they are told to “*take possession of the land*”, as the nations are “*pushed out*” (23:5) and “*driven out*” (23:9) by God when the Israelites do battle with them.
 - (a) This does not envision genocide, but decisive battles with every nation, no matter how strong. They are to be brave in their fighting, expecting God to give them military victory (1:9; 23:3, 9-10).
 - (b) It also precludes enslaving the nations or using their forced labor. They are to be sent away.
- 3) Third, they are told not to enter into partnerships (covenants) with them, or serve their gods, or intermarry with them (23:7-8, 12).
- 4) Fourth, this military activity is to be accompanied by a very close and vital spiritual life--a walk with God. This implies that they are not to expect success if they do not accompany all their work with a) meditation on God’s Word (1:8) with the mind, b) obedience to God’s will with the life (1:7), and c) love to the Lord with the heart (1:11). A very complete description of the life of faith!

b) Why the combination of bravery and spirituality?

- 1) First, it is hard to be truly brave without faith in God. The kind of bravery that does not arise out of faith in God would be adventurism, or macho-heroics, or plain cruelty. Only faith-based bravery will keep people from atrocities on the one hand or cowardice and ineffectiveness on the other.
- 2) Second, it would take a lot of very strong faith in the Word of God in order to conduct this campaign in the way God wishes. On the one hand, they can never turn back from fighting any people-group in Canaan, no matter how much stronger they are than the Israelites. Ordinary military policy dictates that you don’t fight superior armies. On the other hand, they can never just plunder and enslave any people-group in Canaan, no matter how much weaker they are than the Israelites. Ordinary military policy dictates that you don’t go to the trouble of driving people out who aren’t dangerous and whom you can dominate and exploit economically.

c) Is this a warrant for other Holy Wars?

- 1) First, it is clear, especially from v.5, that this is a very direct judgment of the Canaanites by God himself. “*The Lord your God himself will drive them out...before you.*” It is surprising how careful Joshua is in his wording. He never exactly says that the Israelites are to “drive out” the Canaanites. Rather, they are to be driven out by the Lord through the means of the military action. So God is coming down to mete out justice against these nations, and the Israelites are simply his instruments. This supports the idea that this is an “intrusion ethic”, in which God carries out Judgment day “early.” This is not a general warrant for believers to move against unbelievers.

2) Secondly, it is clear that the purpose for “driving out” the Canaanites is not vengeful or economic/political but spiritual. They are to be removed so the Israelites will thrive spiritually and not to follow their gods (23:7) or fall under their religious influence. They were to build a home country to serve God in. Thus this is not a warrant for imperialistic war, in which one nation expands its power by conquering another.

2. Read 1:19-35. Though beginning well (1:1-18), the Israelites eventually fail to drive out the Canaanites. Make a list of all the reasons given (or hinted at) in the text for why various tribes failed to do so.

a) In v.19, we are told that the men of Judah could not succeed because the Canaanites *had iron chariots*. The reason given is the superior military equipment of the opposition.

b) In v.27 and again in v.35, we are told that the men of Manasseh (and Dan in v.35) could not succeed because the Canaanites *were determined to live in that land*. Here there is no claim of greater military resources or numbers. Rather, the reason given is superior will-power and tenacity--superior bravery.

c) In v.28-33, we are told that many of Israel’s tribes resorted to enslaving the Canaanites or putting them to forced labor. This reason implied seems to be that it was more economical and convenient to enslave them than to drive them out.

3. Read 2:1-3. a) How does God assess the reasons for the Israelites’ failure to drive out the Canaanites? b) What does he say in v.2 the real purpose of the campaign was? c) In the light of Joshua 1 and 23, why do the reasons given in vv.19-36 constitute not just military failure but spiritual unfaithfulness?

a) How God assessed their failure.

To most readers of chapter 1, there seem to be very plausible reasons for why the Israelites did not succeed in their campaign--superior military might, superior fortitude, economic convenience, etc. How could they drive out iron chariots when they had none (v.19)? When the first chapter account says “*they were unable*”, we are inclined to agree. They should not be held responsible.

But God does not accept this evaluation, and he does not appear to give any credence at all to the reasons given. God’s assessment of the Israelites’ performance is scathing. “*You have disobeyed me*” (2:2). Period. This is a flat contradiction to the claim of v.19 that they were “*unable*.” He says in 2:3 that he had promised to drive the Canaanites out if the Israelites had obeyed him, but now “*therefore...I will not drive them out.*” The reader asks--“why didn’t God drive them out before, when the Israelites tried so hard?” But God’s lawsuit in 2:1-3 means that their efforts must have been half-hearted or non-existent. God had promised to drive them out, if they were “*very strong*” (Joshua 23:6a,10).

Since 2:1-3 is a direct message from God, we must conclude that chapter 1 (which seems to contradict God’s assessment) represents Israel’s perspective and their “spin” on why they failed in their mission. Some commentators have noted that chapter 1 and 2 together are a narrative *tour de force*. The readers are lulled into sympathy with the Israelites, by reading their own “press releases” about their campaign. Then suddenly we are confronted and

shocked by God's categorical condemnation. This leads us to realize that we are all like Israel in this self-deception. (See question #4 below.)

In summary, the Israelites said, essentially, "we could not drive them out" but God is said in response, "you would not."

b) The real purpose of the campaign.

In 2:2, God says that they failed to "*break down their altars*" (2:2)--which is an excellent summary of the purpose of the campaign. As we have noted previously (see "The Issue of Holy War"), the military campaign is not an "ethnic cleansing" because a converted pagan (Rahab--Josh.2:1ff.) is allowed to stay in Canaan. Also, the campaign is not an imperialistic conquest, since no one is allowed to take plunder or slaves. This is the purpose--to cleanse Canaan from *idols*. That is the point. By allowing the Canaanites to continue living in the land--for whatever excuse--the end result is that idols were being worshipped in the midst of the Israelites.

c) Why the Israelites were faithless not failures.

First, the Israelites were specifically commanded to go bravely to battle against superior forces (23:9-10; cf.1:9). In fact, Joshua at one time specifically commands them to go against iron chariots (Josh.17:16-18). God promised that they would prevail in every instance. When Deborah actually did stand up against iron chariots, there was a victory (as we will see in Judges 4-5). To avoid superior armies is normal policy if you are conducting a campaign along "normal" imperialistic lines. When the Israelites failed to engage them, it showed a disobedient lack of faith in the purpose of God's mission and his power to help them.

Second, on the other hand, Israelites were specifically commanded to force out people that they could easily enslave. But the Israelites' decision to keep Canaanites as forced laborers shows that they had lost sight of the purpose of the mission. To not "waste" economic advantage and unnecessary bloodshed, and to keep people as a subjugated labor force is normal policy if you are conducting a campaign along "normal" imperialistic lines. But the mission was not to make money, but rather to have a place where they could serve God as the only God. So when the Israelites failed to drive them out, it showed a disobedient lack of faith in the purpose of God's mission and his power to help them.

Michael Wilcock says that between chapter 1 and 2 there is a "dialogue." He summarizes the dialogue like this:

---'Why have my plans for occupation not been carried through?'
---'We lacked the military capability for the final push.'
---'But did I not say that if your willingness was wedded to my power, I myself would see to the expelling of the enemy? Something has gone wrong with that 'wedding'?'
--Wilcock, p.27.

4. a) Is there anything in your life about which you can say "I can't do" but about which God may say, "you won't do?" [Read 1 Cor.10:13. Is there any place in your life that you are not taking this promise seriously?] b) What two things does God say that the Israelites have forgotten in 2:1? How can we overcome our excuses by reflecting on the same two items?

I suggest that if this is a large group, people break off in pairs to reflect and share on this question one-on-one for about 10 minutes. It will be easier to think of specific personal

answers. Before you break up, read the categories of possible answers immediately below. Conclude by praying for each other in pairs.

a) Where are you saying “I can’t” but God is saying “you won’t?”

This is a very searching and threatening passage to apply to ourselves. It means that there may be all sorts of things in our lives which we think we are “unable” to do, but which we actually are refusing to do. Much of the book of Judges shows how God is faithful to us despite our disobedience--that is comforting. But this shows that God in his grace will still insist on removing our self-deception.

There are an infinite variety of possible answers. I’ll present three fairly common general categories. First, many of us justify ourselves by saying, “I can’t forgive this (or him, or her).” I am “unable.” Yet God commands forgiveness (Matt.18:35). This means that we can determine to put aside anger and soften our hearts with the knowledge of grace and the gospel--but we hide under. Another very common example is some kind of difficult truth-telling. We say, “I can’t tell him the truth (or share the gospel with him or her, etc.)” I am “unable.” But God tells us to “speak the truth in love” (Eph.4:15, 25). A third general category is temptation. We say “I can’t resist doing this, though I know I am wrong.” We must be careful, because sin has addicting power, and it is true that we may not be able, with sheer will power, to stop doing something by ourselves. But we can get help, admit our problem, humble ourselves and become accountable.

1 Cor.10:13 is a good verse to read. As usual, the Old Testament graphically portrays what the New Testament expresses as principles. 1 Cor.10:13 is a promise that God will never put us in a position in which we cannot obey him.

b) What two things does God say that the Israelites have forgotten?

From the inside, our excuses seem cogent and overwhelming. From the outside, God sees that any disobedience is a failure to remember a) what he has done, and b) who he is. In 2:3, before he tells them that they have disobeyed, God says, “*I brought you up out of the land of Egypt.*” That refers to his saving work. Anyone disobeying God has essentially failed to remember what he did to save them. Then he says, “*I will never break my covenant with you.*” That refers to his holiness and faithfulness. Anyone disobeying God has essentially failed to remember who he is.

5. 2:1-3. a) What tension do you see between the first “I said” in v.1 and the second “I tell you” in v.3? b) How does this dramatic tension make the story of the Judges gripping? c) How does Jesus Christ solve this dilemma? d) What practical implications are there for us when we break one of God’s laws?

a) What tension do you see between the “I said”s?

The tension between the first and second “sayings” is probably stronger than the English translation indicates.

“2:1 and 2:3 should be read like this: ‘I said, I will never break my covenant...and I also said, If you compromise with these nations I will not drive them out’. It is as though the Lord is saying, ‘I have sworn to give you the whole of this land, yet I have also sworn not to give it...to a disobedient people. You put me in an impossible position. What is this that you have done? And by what fearful means do you think I am to solve this dilemma?’” --Michael Wilcock, p.27

Wilcock puts it perfectly. Here is the impossibility. On the one hand, God is holy and just and cannot tolerate and live with evil. On the other hand, God is loving and faithful and cannot tolerate the loss of people he has committed himself to. (We see the same contradiction in Exodus 34:6-7, and in many other places.) This a tremendous, seemingly irresolvable tension in the narrative--but also in the whole Bible.

b) How does it propel the narrative--how does it enhance the story?

Commentators have noticed that this vicious tension in 2:1-3 creates a major “dramatic” tension for the story that will keep the thoughtful reader in suspense. Will God finally give up on his people (but then what of his faithfulness)? Or will God finally give *in* to his people (but then what of his holiness)?

c) How is this resolved in Jesus Christ?

It is only on the cross that we can understand how God is able to resolve the tension. On the cross, our sin was imputed to him, so that his righteousness could be imputed to us (2 Cor.5:21). There, God poured out his wrath on Jesus Christ in the sinners’ place---he satisfied both justice (because sin was punished) and love (since now he was able to accept and forgive us). That is why Paul says only the cross makes God be both “*just and justifier of those who believe*” (Romans 4:26). This is the only way that God can both love us conditionally AND unconditionally. Jesus fulfilled the conditions of the law for us, so that now God can stay committed to us no matter what.

d) How does this effect us practically?

We live in this “paradox”--though because of Christ we know it is not a contradiction. On the one hand, we know that we do have to obey God’s Word. Why? If God’s will and his holiness is so crucial that the Son of God would die to fulfill it, then we can never, ever give up on obedience. If we know what he did for us and why he did it, it makes us deeply long to be like Christ and have his obedient, holy, radiant character. Yet on the other hand, when we fail to obey God, even again and again, we know God never will give up on us. So if we know the gospel, we can not “resolve” this tension by either simply giving in to sin or living under a burden of guilt and fear.

6. 2:1. a) *The Angel of the Lord comes up from Gilgal. Why would God want them to remember Gilgal as they heard the charge of disobedience? (Read Joshua 5: 4-10 on what happened there.)*

Why did the Angel of the Lord “come up” from Gilgal? Surely the Angel of the Lord does not live in Gilgal! So why the reference? It was at Gilgal in Joshua 5 that the people made a covenant with the Lord, and where he said, “*Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you*” (Joshua 5:9) “Gilgal” means “to roll. It means on that day God forgave their sin and entered into a relationship with them by grace. When the Angel came from Gilgal, it was a reminder of the Israelites salvation by grace--which is the basis for all repentance. God is thus not saying, “now you won’t be saved because you weren’t good!” Rather, he is saying, “how can you live like this when I’ve saved you by my grace?” This is very important to remember! The Angel coming from Gilgal puts the repentance on a “grace” rather than a “works” basis.

7. 2:3- *God says that the Canaanites allowed to stay will now become a “thorns” and “snares.” What things have you allowed to stay in your life*

which should be expelled? How do they become a snare? Pray to God for a 'wedding' of his power and your willingness to remove it.

I suggest that people end the meeting by thinking of this silently and praying silently.

This again is an application question with many possible answers. Again, I will propose some very broad categories. First, there are sins--things that are like alcohol to an alcoholic. They need to be just removed, taken out totally. Second, there are idols--things that are like food to a person with an eating disorder. They must be put in perspective and not allowed to run our lives.

Week 2

JUDGES 2:1-3:6

LIVING AMONG IDOLS

SOSL 3/98-99

1. 2:2-3. a) What is was the main reason that the Israelites were to drive out and “not make a covenant” with the Canaanites? b) If the Lord is the only true God, how can the Canaanite gods be both a “thorn” and “snare”?

2. 2:6-19. List the stages of a continually repeated cycle that the children of Israel went through. [If you get stuck, cf. these verses with 3:7-9 where all the stages are repeated.]

3. Cf.2:7-10 with Deut.6:4-9, 20-23. In what ways may one generation fail to pass its faith on to the next generation? Did you have Christian parents? What was your experience?

4. 2:16-19. Two groups are contrasted here—each group vying for control of the Israelites. Name each group and explain a) how they are like each other, and b) how they are opposite.

5. 2:17. What does the word “prostituted” tell us about idolatry? About God and the relationship we must have with him?

6. The people’s failure (as a group) to take all of Canaan both resulted from and represented their failure (as individuals) to give God exclusive lordship over their whole lives. A good way to determine if Christ is Lord of an area of your life is to ask two questions: a) Am I willing to do whatever God says about this area? b) Am I willing to accept whatever God sends in this area?

Name one or two (at most) areas where you are not passing these tests.

What, then, is controlling you in that area?

7. 2:20-3:6. What does this section tell us are two reasons that God did not drive out Israel’s enemies? How is this “judgment” also a form of mercy? Cf. this passage with Heb.12:1-13. How has something difficult been a mercy in your life?

Week 2

JUDGES 2:1-3:6

LIVING AMONG IDOLS

SOSL 3/98-99

Introduction

In the book of Judges, the people of Israel continually fall into idolatry. Most readers will think that during these lapses the Israelites stopped worshipping the Lord and began worshipping other gods. (e.g. 2:12). But a more detailed case study of the times, given in Judges 17:1ff. shows that what most Israelites did was to combine the worship of the Lord with idols. See Judges 17:3, for example--*She said, 'I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord for my son to make a carved image and a cast idol.'*

The pagan world-view was that there were many gods (e.g. of agriculture, business, love, music, war), each of whom had a proscribed area of influence, and none of whom demanded lordship over every single area of life. In this view, everyone had his or her own god(s), chosen or discarded on the basis of one's interests and needs. It was a "mix and match" religion in which the worshipper was sovereign, negotiating was necessary. Paganism therefore could accept the existence but not the exclusive sovereignty of the Lord, who demanded that his worshippers give him absolute lordship over every square inch of life.

This is the greatest danger, then for believers in a pagan world. It is *not* so much that the believer becomes an atheist, but that idols are combined with God in the heart. If a believer lives in a city where commerce is not just a practice but a functional god--providing people with identity and security--the danger is that the Christian maintains his or her doctrinal beliefs and ethical practices but divides heart worship between the Lord and money/career.

1. 2:2-3. a) What is was the main reason that the Israelites were to drive out and "not make a covenant" with the Canaanites? b) If the Lord is the only true God, how can the Canaanite gods be both a "thorn" and "snare"?

a) What was the main reason the Israelites were to "not make a covenant"?

Notice the sentence: "*You shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.*" This means that God sees the two as mutually exclusive. The only way to avoid a covenant with the people is to destroy their idol worship. That was why they had to evict the Canaanites. They were not being sent away because of their ethnicity or their morality. The Jericho harlot Rahab was allowed to stay in Canaan when she put away idolatry and embraced the Lord. They were not being sent away to gain political power. The whole point of the mission was to cleanse the land of idolatry.

b) If the Lord is the true God, how can idols be a "thorn" and "snare"?

In the introduction we showed that idols always represented some aspect of the created order. A god was always the god of *something*--war, or the river, or the mountains, or marriage, or business, and so on. Thus though there may not have been a literal supernatural being who (for example) represented commerce, yet the idol worship made that aspect of creation into a source of security, identity, and power. A worshipper of the god of commerce, makes money and career into his/her meaning in life, and source of all joy and happiness. In other words--an idol is anything that you add to God as a requirement for being happy. It is anything to add to Jesus as a requirement to have a meaningful life.

Now we see why these gods certainly could be a “thorn” and a “snare.” (1) *Thorn*. When we make something into an idol, it continually makes us miserable. It hurts us and robs us of joy. Why? Because first, if we fall short of it, it can not “forgive” us. If we make our children an idol, then when their lives become troubled, we are robbed of joy. We cannot receive life joyfully without our children’s love and happiness. (2) *Snare*. When we make something into an idol, it binds and enslaves us. We have to have it, so we cannot say “no” to it. We are addicts. That is why many people work too hard, or give themselves to certain relationships that are really destructive.

2. 2:6-19. List the stages of a continually repeated cycle that the children of Israel went through. [If you get stuck, cf. these verses with 3:7-9 where all the stages are repeated.]

a) Rebellion.

First, we see in vv.10-13 that there is a rebellion. This rebellion had two sub-stages. (1) First--they forgot. v.10 says that they “*knew neither the Lord nor what he had done.*” The word “know” probably does not mean that they did not “know about” the Exodus and the Red Sea, but rather that the saving acts of God were no longer precious or central to them. They had not learned to revere and rejoice in what God had done. In other words, they had forgotten the “gospel” that they were saved from slavery in Egypt by the gracious, mighty acts of God. (2) Second--as a result of forgetting the gospel--they turned to idols, they “*served the Baals.*” The word “Baal” is a Canaanite word for “Lord.” They served the mini-lords. “Ashtoreths” were female fertility gods.

b) Oppression.

Second, we see in vv.14-15, that as a result there was oppression. Various people-groups rose up or invaded and either plundered or enslaved the Israelites. They no longer had the strength to resist.

c) Repentance.

Third, we see in v.18 that God would send rescue when “*they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them.*” That was the instrument through which God moved to relieve and save them. As we will see later (e.g.3:8-9), that this “groaning” usually took the form of prayer, repentance, and the smashing of their idols.

d) New Leadership.

Fourth, we see in v.16-19 that God sent his salvation through ‘judges’--anointed leaders who liberated the people from their slave-masters.

However, the advice of the judges was not heeded in any kind of lasting way (v.17). Always after (or sometimes before) the death of the judge, the people slipped back into their paganism. (v.19) It means, of course, that we need something better than a human judge, better than a human savior. Human saviors can only deliver the body, but not the soul.

There is every indication that this “cycle” is not only a cycle but a downward spiral. We will see as Judges progresses that the judges themselves as well as the “revivals” they lead become weaker and more flawed every time.

3. Cf.2:7-10 with Deut.6:4-9, 20-23. In what ways may one generation fail to pass its faith on to the next generation? Did you have Christian parents? What was your experience?

It is always impossible to neatly “lay blame” when one generation fails to pass its faith on to the next one. Whose is responsible? Did the first generation fail to reach out or did the second generation just harden their hearts? The answer usually is both/and. [An interesting example was early New England. Nearly all the first settlers in 1620-1640 were vital, Biblical Christians. But by 1662, the first generation realized that many of their children and grand-children were only nominal believers. They had to institute the ‘Half-way Covenant’, allowing persons to vote who were only baptized as infants, but not necessarily church members.]

Compare Jdg.2:7-10 and Deut.6:4-9, 20-23.

Deut.6:4-9 tells us what needs to be done to pass our faith on. (1) v.5-6 tells us that we ourselves must love God whole-heartedly. We are to “*have these commandments on your heart.*” That means that we are not hypocritical or inconsistent in our behavior. The commandments are not only kept mechanically or partially. Rather, God has an impact on all of us, through and through. That is the first reason that a younger generation can turn from the faith of an older one. Younger people are unusually (and often self-righteously) sensitive to any inconsistency. One example is how Baby Boomer youth turned away from orthodox Christianity when it saw how the churches tacitly or even actively supported racist policies and practices and when they saw it oppose the Civil Rights movement.

(2) Second, v.7 we are to apply and reflect on the gospel practically, not only academically or abstractly. (I know that v.7 can be mistakenly read to mean that parents ought to be lecturing their children incessantly!) The reference to “*sit...walk along...lie down and...get up*” refers to routine, concrete daily life. Instruction in God’s truth then is not to be so much a series of lectures and classes. Rather, we are to “*impress*” truths about God by showing how God relates to daily, concrete living. This is call to be wise and thoughtful about how the values and virtues of the gospel make distinctively influence our decisions and priorities.

(3) Third, v.20ff. tells us that we are to link the doctrines of the faith to God’s saving actions in our lives. We are to give personal testimony to the difference God made to us, how he brought us from bondage into freedom. We are not only to speak of beliefs and behavior but of our personal experience of God. We are to be open about our own struggles to grow, we are to be transparent about how repentance works in our lives. We are not to be formal and impersonal in the expressions of our faith. (“*we were slaves...but the Lord brought us out*”)

In summary, we must be consistent in behavior, wise about real life, and warmly personal in our faith.

History and personal experience both show us that these three things are very hard to carry out on a broad scale. Most Christians rely on institution and formal instruction to “pass on the faith.” We think that if we instruct them in true doctrine and shelter them from immoral behavior and involve them in church and religious organizations--that we have done all we can. But youth are turned off, not only by bad examples, but also by parents who are not savvy about their (children’s) lives and world, or who can not share their interior lives with God.

In Judges 2 we are not told exactly what the first generation of believers did with their children. 2:10 is key, however. It says the new generation “*knew not*” the Lord. The word “know” in the Bible has a relational, personal connotation. It does not mean to simply “know about”, but rather to have personal experience of something. This is the very thing that Deut.6 was written to avoid. We know that the Deut 6 formula is not a “technique” that guarantees that one’s children will be believers--because their own wills and choices play a

large role. However, when a whole generation turns away, we have to expect that the parents had failed to model and disciple their children.

4. 2:16-19. Two groups are contrasted here—each group vying for control of the Israelites. Name each group and explain a) how they are like each other, and b) how they are opposite.

The two groups are the gods of Canaan versus the judges God sends. This contrast is clearest in v.17, where it says, *“they would not listen to their judges, but prostituted themselves to other gods.”*

a) They are like each other in that both groups demand the Israelites to follow (v.19-*“following other gods and serving them”*), listen (v.17-*“listen to their judges”*), and obey them. Since the judges over and over are said to “save” (v.16, 18) the Israelites, we can say that they also turned to the false gods to “save” them in times of trouble (see Judges 10:14). So both the gods and the judges were saviors and masters, Saviors and Lords.

b) They were *unlike* each other in that the salvation of the judges was by sheer grace and compassion of God (v.18-*“he had compassion on them as they groaned”*) Groaning is hardly a way of earning your salvation! Salvation-by-groaning is nothing my free grace. God sends the salvation simply because the people’s hearts are breaking. Despite their disobedience to the Lord, he saves them. But there is not indication anywhere of the Canaanite gods “having compassion.” False gods can make people into servants (v.19) who are deeply, stubbornly enslaved. But they cannot show grace or forgive.

“Idolatry is polytheistic because it can never be sure that any contact has been made with reality or that the worshipper has ever done enough....All false religion is based on works, on what the worshipper does, or gives, or achieves to persuade the deity to grant his request. The concept of grace is totally foreign, because that is the centerpiece of the revelation of the living God....

“There is still the attraction of false religion...today. At base, all are saying, ‘You can make it with God. You can get what you want from him, if only you follow these rules’....That always appeals to the natural human heart, because it requires no submission to God, no dying to self. That is the attraction of religion! Instead of making me utterly dependent on God’s grace, it boosts my ego by pretending that I can actually manipulate God into giving me what I want by my devotion, commitment, sacrifice or whatever.” Jackman, p.56.

5. 2:17. What does the word “prostituted” tell us about idolatry? About God and the relationship we must have with him?

In this vivid little image, the Israelites have become prostitutes. Prostitutes (then, and often now) are persons who are quite out of control, desperate, and are giving oneself without getting any real pleasure or love in return. This word tells us that when we serve an idol, we come into an intense relationship with it, which uses us but does not truly care for us. It also implies that when we make an idol out of a relationship or a job or money or children or parents (etc.) we essentially make ourselves completely vulnerable to it, and become little more than slaves to it.

On the other hand, it tells us that God sees all sin as “adultery” because he does not simply want us to obey him as a citizen obeys a king, or just to follow him as a sheep follows a shepherd, but because he wants us to love him as fully as a wife loves a husband. In both

the Old (Ezek 16) and New Testament (Eph.5) God calls himself our bridegroom. This means he does not only want exclusive legal commitment, but deep and intimate love with us.

The implication is that the only kind of relationship with God which will avoid idolatry is a passionate, personal relationship of love.

6. The people's failure (as a group) to take all of Canaan both resulted from and represented their failure (as individuals) to give God exclusive lordship over their whole lives. A good way to determine if Christ is Lord of an area of your life is to ask two questions: a) Am I willing to do whatever God says about this area? b) Am I willing to accept whatever God sends in this area?

Name one or two (at most) areas where you are not passing these tests.

What, then, is controlling you in that area?

7. 2:20-3:6. What does this section tell us are two reasons that God did not drive out Israel's enemies? How is this "judgment" also a form of mercy? Cf. this passage with Heb.12:1-13. How has something difficult been a mercy in your life?

We see (in 2:19) that despite all God's judges and deliverers, the heart of the nation remained unchanged. So God says that "therefore" he will not do what he had promised to do--namely "drive out" the enemies. Since the people has violated their side of the agreement, God is no longer bound to his.

But here we see again something of the "unconditionality" yet "conditionality" of God's promises. Though he does not drive the Canaanites out, he now uses the presence of the Canaanites to accomplish two things for Israel. First, he leaves the enemies there "to test" Israel (2:22; 3:4). Now a test is both a negative and a positive--a judgment and a mercy. Tests can be failed, of course, and thus they can remove us completely. But tests also challenge us. They force us to learn and study and pull ourselves together and rise up to meet them. In this way, the presence of the enemy often created difficulties that forced Israelites to think about their relationship to God and the wisdom of his ways. Secondly, he says that the enemies are there "only to teach warfare" (3:2).

"Why would [this be necessary]? The answer must surely be that it is just that, the conflict with other nations, that enables Israel to know her God. Her oppressors in Egypt, her opponents during the wilderness journey, the occupants of the land she was about to take over, each in turn compelled the Lord's own nation to recognize something more of what made him, and therefore her, distinctive." Wilcock p.32

"God will teach them to know war in the hope that this will develop their dependence upon him in every situation of need." Jackman, p. 61

Hebrews 12:1-13 shows us that since Jesus triumphed only through suffering and trouble (v.1-3) so we too should expect "conflict" in this life. We should see it as God's "discipline"

(v.5) and “*training*” (v.11) [The Greek word for “training” in v.11 is *gymnazdo*, the word from which we get the word “gymnasium.”] The conflicts God sends us into are like the exercises that coach sends an athlete into. While we sprint, we are taxed and drained and we feel we are getting weaker, but actually we are becoming stronger. We must respond to these conflicts by neither take them too “*lightly*”, shrugging them off, or by becoming discouraged (v.5)

Week 3

JUDGES 3:7-31

EHUD: THE UNEXPECTED LEADER

SOSL 3/98-99

Introduction

To the first readers of this passage, the great surprise would have been that Ehud, the man God used, was “*left-handed*” (v.15). God swears by his right hand, he has pleasures by his right hand, and his chosen One sits at his right hand (Is.62:8-9; Ps.16:11; 110:1) Why? Since most people were right-handed, the right hand was a symbol of power and ability. But most intriguing is the term in 3:15 which literally reads “*unable to use his right hand*”. It is very possible that Ehud’s right hand was paralyzed or disabled in some way.

1. Why did the Israelites do evil and turn to idols, according to v.7? How does 2 Pet. 1:5-9 shed light on the root reason we do wrong? Cf. how in Joshua 4:19-24 this problem is addressed. How can you address it today?

2. vv.7-11. This is the first example of a “revival” that God sends to people who have become spiritually cold. What does God send to bring the renewal about? What do the people do? How can you keep these same factors present in your life?

3. vv.12-19. Why do you think the king would be so foolish as to be meet alone and unprotected with a member of an oppressed, enemy nation?

4. vv.15-30. Compare how the Othniel and his deliverance is like Ehud’s. Contrast how they are not alike.

5. What can we learn for ourselves from the differences between Othniel and Ehud? Consider lessons about: a) how spiritual renewal comes, b) why troubles sometimes come to us.

6. What does the “unexpected” nature of Ehud’s leadership tell us about: a) why God chooses to use the people he does. [cf. this passage with 1 Cor.1:26-29.], and b) what God will finally do for the salvation of the world? c) How then should we expect the world to regard us?

7. Choose an application question for discussion: a) Can you think of some of your inherent deficits that God could develop into assets in his service? b) How could some troubles in your life be an opportunity for spiritual renewal? c) Have you been putting God ‘in a box’ in some way--demanding that he act in a certain way, ‘according to the rules’?

Week 3

JUDGES 3:7-31

EHUD: THE UNEXPECTED LEADER

SOSL 3/98-99

Introduction

In the long introduction, the author showed that Israel failed to drive idols out of their land, which created a dramatic “tension” between God’s holy commands, and his loving, faithful promise. He demands obedience, yet he has promised to save them. As a result of this “tension”, the children of Israel go into a cyclical pattern of decline and revival. God continually chastens them for their sin, but he then delivers them from their peril. He never casts them off, but continues to graciously and severely work for their growth. Beginning in 3:7, we now get specific “case histories” which reveal these principles.

READ Judges 3:7-11

1. Why did the Israelites do evil and turn to idols, according to v.7? How does 2 Pet. 1:5-9 shed light on the root reason we do wrong? Cf. how in Joshua 4:19-24 this problem is addressed. How can you address it today?

Why did the Israelites do evil?

The reason that the Israelites did evil and served idols was because “*they forgot God*”. It does not say “they forgot about God”. Surely they did not literally have a memory failure. They knew their history, and they knew God existed. But in the Bible, “remembering” and “forgetting” has a spiritual significance. When people in the Old Testament asked God to “remember your promises to our fathers” or to “remember not our sins”, they did not believe that God could literally forget that something happened. What does it mean then, to “forget” or “remember”? When God is asked to “remember your promise”, he is being asked to act on what he knows. When someone asks God to “remember not my sins”, he or she is asking that God not act on what he knows.

Therefore, to say that the Israelites “*forgot*” God is to say that they no longer were controlled by what they knew. We could put it another way. Though they knew who God was and what he wanted--those things were not real to them. Jonathan Edwards taught that this is the main problem people have, spiritually. What we know with our heads is not “real” to our hearts and our whole beings. We may acknowledge intellectually that something is true, but in our heart of hearts it does not grab us or penetrate us or control us. So, the reason that the Israelites (and all of us) continually needed revival was because truths about God which were once vibrant and real to us eventually become unreal. Our hearts are like a bucket of water on a very cold day--they will freeze over unless we regularly smash the ice that is forming. Though we know truths about God, we have no sense upon our hearts of their reality. We know them, but we don’t “taste” or “see” or “feel” them. Therefore, other things--idols--become more real to our hearts and we serve them instead. That is what v.7 shows us.

How does 2 Peter 1:5-9 shed light on this.

This letter is written to Christians. And in vv.5-7, Peter urges Christians to grow progressively in their character. They need to be growing in self-control, kindness and so on, he tells them. But what if they are not growing, but rather are struggling with temptation, a lack of love, etc.? Does he tell them, “well, you will just have to try harder?” In v.9, he tells them the reason such a person would fail to grow is that “*he...has forgotten that he has been*

cleansed from his past sins". Peter is saying that, if the forgiveness of Christ and his salvation was "real" to you, you would not be living as you are. This shows that the problems the Israelites had we today still have, even those of us with the Holy Spirit who believe in Christ. This is still the root problem--we continually lose the sense on our hearts of the gospel--what Christ has done for us.

How does was this problem addressed in Joshua 4?

Joshua creates what he calls a "memorial" (see Josh.4:7). Twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan are used as concrete, vivid reminders of how God led them into the promised land by sheer grace. They did not build a bridge or fight their way over. It was a miracle. Then Joshua insists that families, as they go by this memorial, are to tell the salvation-story over and over. The purpose of all this is that *"you might always fear the Lord"* (v.24). "Fear" is the Old Testament word for "spiritual reality". It means that you are not simply in agreement with the truth, but you are affected and controlled by it.

What can you do today?

This is a brainstorming question. There are many answers. Here are just a couple of suggestions. a) Jesus has given us a "memorial" of what he had done for us--the Lord's Supper. When he says, *"do this in remembrance of me"* he is telling us that this sacrament is his way of continually renewing the reality of the gospel in our heart. b) When ever we read the Bible, we should not only study it for content, but we should learn to meditate and reflect on it so that we don't only acknowledge the truths, but we "remember" them and sense them. c) Joshua's memorial was a community event. People reminded each other. We too, need to study God's truths in groups. When several people look at a truth, one person (at least) is usually able to say "wow!". The sense that person has of the truth can then spread to those of us who are stagnant or dead.

2. vv.7-11. This is the first example of a "revival" that God sends to people who have become spiritually cold. What does God send to bring the renewal about? What do the people do? How can you keep these same factors present in your life?

The picture we are given here of revival shows God as the main director, but with the involvement of the people.

First, God sends trouble! In v.8 we are told that he let them fall into the hands of an oppressive pagan king. If God had brought about suffering and difficulty, the people would not have seen their true position. In other words, they would not have seen how spiritually enslaved they were, unless God let them become physically enslaved. Second, God sends spiritual leadership. In v.9 we are told he raised up a "deliverer"--Othniel. Both big revivals and personal renewals happen because God sends someone into your life (or lives) that can lead the way back to God. Third, God sends his Holy Spirit. It is interesting to note a pretty significant difference between Old Testament revivals and the New Testament revivals in the Book of Acts. In the OT, God sends his Spirit down on the leader, the judge. But in the NT, God sends his Spirit down on the church--the whole people of God. (cf. Judges 1:9-10 with Acts 4:31.)

In summary--God sends trouble, leadership, and the Spirit of God.

On the other hand, the people only do one thing, but it is absolutely crucial. They *"cried out to the Lord"* (v.9). This implies that they turned away from their idols, and it implies repentance. Both of these factors are mentioned in later cycles. But it explicitly means that

they prayed as a corporate body, asking for God's help. Corporate, prevailing prayer was the one thing that the people did to prepare for revival.

How can you keep the same factors in your life?

This is another "brainstorming" question with many possible answers. Here are just a couple of suggestions. First, it means that we should not simply wait for trouble to "go away". We should ask ourselves, "what could God do in my life through this? how is this a means of spiritual renewal in my life? what structural flaws in my views and in my character is this revealing?" Second, it means that we must have significant time for both individual and corporate prayer. Third, it means that we must have "leaders" in our lives who are models of the revived/renewed gospel spirituality we want to have. These leaders do not have to be official ordained leaders. However, in general, God sends revivals to groups, and therefore it is best to be part of a church where you see anointed-by-the-Spirit leadership.

READ Judges 3:7-30

Introduction

To the first readers of Judges, the greatest surprise in this narrative would have been that Ehud, the man God used, was "*left-handed*" (v.15). If you look up the references in the Bible to "right hand" you will find that they are all quite positive. God swears by his right hand, he has pleasures by his right hand, and his chosen One sits at his right hand (Is.62:8-9; Ps.16:11; 110:1) Why? Since most people were right-handed, the right hand was a symbol of power and ability. One's sword was kept at the right side. But most intriguing is the term in 3:15 which literally reads "*unable to use his right hand*". Therefore, it is very possible that Ehud's right hand was paralyzed or disabled in some way.

3. vv.12-19. Why do you think the king would be so foolish as to be meet alone and unprotected with a member of an oppressed, enemy nation?

Ehud's "deformity" and handicap is that he cannot use his right hand. This means that none of the enemies would expect him to be dangerous.

"No one is expecting...dexterity in the left hand....if Ehud cannot wield a weapon in his right hand, all assume that he cannot wield one at all. That is why he is acceptable as an envoy to the court of Moab, and why he is admitted to the presence of the king, not only as he leads the group bringing the tribute but as afterwards he asks for a private audience with Eglon. Because of his deformity, he presents n security risk to the Moabite. No doubt that is also why the Israelites have chosen him as envoy in the first place--an eminently suitable person who cannot be seen as a threat to the tyrant they fear." Wilcock, p. 41.

As it turned out, Ehud's ability to use his left hand to wield a knife probably was crucial in his ability to surprise the king.

4. vv.15-30. Compare how the Othniel and his deliverance is like Ehud's. Contrast how they are not alike.

Another way to ask the question: what is expected and predictable about Ehud's deliverance, and what is unexpected and unpredictable?

How they are alike/predictable.

Othniel and Ehud's "revivals" are the same in that a) the people fall into evil and idolatry. That is an absolute constant in all cultures and centuries! b) Second, God again sends trouble (v.8 and v.12) as a way to spiritual chastise, humble and awaken the people. c) Third, the people cried out in prayer and repentance (v.9 and v.15). d) Fourth, the Lord gave an anointed leader (v.9 and v.15), who delivered Israel by leading them in battle (v.10 and v.28).

[*One red herring!* Some will pick up on the fact that there is no mention of the Spirit of the Lord coming upon him, as there was with Othniel. Some conclude that Ehud was not really empowered spiritually in the same way as Othniel. However, Deborah is the only other Judge who is not seriously morally flawed, and there is no mention of the Spirit coming upon her. On the other hand, the Spirit is often said to come upon Samson, but he is the most flawed of all the judges. We will discuss this work of the Spirit later. Meanwhile, it seems we can assume that the Spirit anointed every judge, even when there is not explicit mention made of it.]

How they are un-alike/unpredictable.

First, the oppressor's methods are different. Before Othniel, a single people group, Cushan Rishathaim, forces Israel into service. But Eglon put together a much larger alliance of several pagan nations. He seems to have been a more able statesman and diplomat, rather than a fierce warrior. Perhaps the Israelites were not expecting alliances or a force of such size and power to come down on them.

Second, Othniel and Ehud are very different types of persons. Othniel seems to be a predictable, "leader-type". He is the kind of person we expect to be a leader. But Ehud is not. In a society that was even more cruel than our own to people who were physically deformed or handi-capped, he would have been considered ineffective. No one would have looked up to him. He was a completely unexpected leader.

Third, the mission is different. Though eventually, Ehud leads in battle (v.28) he does not just go to war as Othniel did (v.10). We can imagine the reasons why. a) They would not have followed him if he had not accomplished some shocking victory himself. b) It is very possible that the Moabites would not have been beatable without this kind of "inside job". Many people are unhappy that a chosen servant of God would be a secret agent and assassin. The point, however, is that the Lord used this very unexpected plan and method to free his people--rather than the straightforward 'go-to-war' model of Othniel.

5. What can we learn for ourselves from the differences between Othniel and Ehud? Consider lessons about: a) how spiritual renewal comes, b) why troubles sometimes come to us.

How spiritual renewal comes

a) The most obvious lesson regarding revival and renewal is that it never happens the same way twice. The general foundations for any revival are the same--trouble, repentance, and the Spirit of God. But the specific features beyond those can be extremely different. C.S.Lewis vividly teaches this principle in the "Narnia" tales. The children get into Narnia--a magical kingdom--through a magical wardrobe. But then they are told that, though it is possible to get back, you can't get back again through the same door.

This is a very important principle to remember. It is natural but wrong to think that the means by which God renewed me before will have to be repeated. We may try to read the same book, or go to the same kind of church, or do the same spiritual exercises that worked

before--to no avail. Or a church may try to hold on the “golden” past by refusing to change the way it does ministry.

b) A second lesson about renewal could be that we will need it constantly because the opposing forces will continually take new shapes and pull us down. As we mentioned under the last question, Eglon’s methods were new. Every oppressor’s methods are new. *“Even if you had learned to cope with a Moabite occupation, it would not necessarily prepare you to cope with the scorched-earth policy of the Midianites or the assimilation tactics of the Philistines...you never knew what form the next trial would take...”* (Wilcock, p.46) The same is true in the realm of spiritual growth and decline. Though we may have learned to deal with one kind of temptation or obstacle to faith, we will soon find ourselves facing another kind which we are not prepared for.

Why troubles sometime come

This is a complex subject of course! “Why has this trouble happened to me?” Three general things need to be kept in mind, as a backdrop. a) God hates to see us suffer (Lamentations 3:32-33), and b) he hates evil so much that he sent his Son to experience suffering and die, but c) God has not yet put an end to the suffering and evil that all people experience in this world.

Next, two specific promises to believers must be kept in mind. a) No suffering that happens to us is God’s condemning us and “paying us back”. There is no condemnation for us (Rom.8:1). If God really began paying us back for sin, we would be in far worse condition! Jesus has received retribution for a believer’s sins, so if God took payment from us as well, he’d be getting two payments for our wrongs/debts. b) Second, when believers do suffer, as we continue to live here, God promises that *our* trouble will be lovingly disciplinary (Heb.12:1-14; Rom.8:28). That means, he will control the suffering from the world that comes into our lives so that it will wake us up, deepen us, refine our faith, give us wisdom about our hearts and the nature of the world, and enrich our experience of God. Therefore, when troubles hit us, we should remember that God is seeking to help us have more of him.

These Biblical teachings are important “backdrop” for reading Judges. God sends the Israelites suffering not simply to “pay them back”, but to redeem them.

6. What does the “unexpected” nature of Ehud’s leadership tell us about: a) why God chooses to use the people he does. [cf. this passage with 1 Cor.1:26-29.], and b) what God will finally do for the salvation of the world? c) How then should we expect the world to regard us?

a) Why God chooses the people he does. (cf.1 Cor.1:26-29)

This is one of the main points of the book of Judges. After Othniel, not a single one of the judges is someone we would expect to be a leader. Deborah, maybe the best of the judges is a woman. Then comes *“a non-entity, Gideon; a bandit, Jephthah; a hooligan, Samson--each in turn as unexpected a leader as the left-handed Ehud, achieving half a dozen different kinds of success by as many different methods.”* (Wilcock, p.46) Each time, God delivers the people in a way totally unexpected, in a counter-intuitive way. Each time with a person who is considered by the world an “unlikely” hero. Why?

First, this shows that God is a God of grace, not works. He takes and uses people who are “at the margins” of society--in order to show that salvation is from him, not from our own human ability. The classic text on this principle--“left-handed salvation”--is 1 Cor.1:26-29. There Paul says that God tends to choose and use people who are weaker socially, physically, and even morally. Why? *“So that no one might boast in the presence of God”.*

Second, this shatters the very heart of the “idolatry mindset”. We saw last week that idols never have sovereignty over every area of life. Idol-worshippers stay fully in control of their lives, and they simply negotiate with idol-gods. They give the idols what they want so the worshippers get what they want. It is not loving submission, but cynical manipulation. In this idol-mindset, it is critical that worship be a reliable, consistent technique. We have to know that if we do X for the idol, that Y will result. But when we turn to God, we see that he demands heart surrender, not partial concessions and negotiations. Israel consistently worshipped the Lord as the idols. But God in his unpredictable salvation destroys this illusion.

“Let us remember that Israel’s flirtation with other gods came from their overdomestication of the living Lord. It was because they thought they had God sewn up, in their pockets---His unbreakable promises led them to presume upon his mercy to the point of indulgence...They thought they had God in a box...they thought that they had trained God. That is always the essence of idolatry...then, God teaches his rebellious people their total dependence on omnipotence by breaking out of their predictable boxes to use methods and [those] that no one could have imagined.”
(Jackman, p.76).

b) What God will do for the salvation of the world.

After Othniel, we see that each judge is “unexpected” as far as the world is concerned. We will also see that each judge has to increasingly do the salvation him/herself. Deborah only marshals part of the people to war. Gideon uses only a small band. Samson eventually has to deliver Israel single-handedly. This all points the way to the most unexpected and “left-handed” person of all.

“Who would have predicted that when the Judge came himself in the flesh, he would come as such a ‘left-handed’ person, with ‘no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him....despised and rejected...’ (Is.53:2-3)?”
(Wilcock, p. 47)

All of the Judges after Ehud point us to Christ. Not because Christ uses subterfuge (like Ehud) or is morally flawed (like Samson), but because they are outsiders, people the world despises. And Christ is the most unexpected and inside-out deliverer of all. Because the figures in the book of Judges all accomplished military triumphs, but Jesus delivered through a crushing defeat and death. In these stories, then God is showing the world that his salvation will not come in the “Hollywood” way at all. It will come from outsiders born in manglers, through weakness, not (what the world calls) strength, through defeat, not (what the world calls) victory, through folly, not (what the world calls) wisdom.

c) What will the world think of us?

It is absolutely natural to want the world’s respect and acclaim. It is even wise, to a point, to get “a foot in the door” by appealing to those things that the world respects. (For example, Paul did not preach from the Bible when addressing pagans in the marketplace.) But ultimately, it is a trap to hope that we, the gospel messengers, will be accepted and admired by the world. How will the messengers of the gospel ever be impressive and acclaimed by the world when its very message is a suffering, defeated Messiah who chooses losers to make his point? This is no excuse for bad scholarship or poor presentations of the gospel. This is no excuse for withdrawing from society to form little Christian ghettos. But in the final analysis, we must not hope to make ourselves something that the world finds polished, attractive, acceptable.

7. Choose an application question for discussion: a) Can you think of some of your inherent deficits that God could develop into assets in his service? b) How could some troubles in your life be an opportunity for spiritual renewal? c) Have you been putting God 'in a box' in some way—demanding that he act in a certain way, 'according to the rules'?

Week 4

JUDGES 4:1-5:31

DEBORAH: THE WOMAN LEADER

SOSL 3/98-99

1.4:1-24. What are the gifts and skills Deborah possesses (4:4-14) What were the effects of her career (5:6-9)?

2. How is the judgeship of Deborah both like and unlike the judgeships of the Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar?

3. How does Deborah's career modify both the "strong conservative" and "strong liberal" views of women's leadership?

4. Read 4:6-16 and cf. with Hebrews 11:32-34. Barak is praised for the faith he exercised in this campaign. a) In what ways does he show faith? b) In what ways does he point the way to the ultimate Savior/judge?

5. 4:17-22 and 5:24-31. a) How does 5:29-30 perhaps shed light on the motives of Jael? b) How does God's concern with the thing he wants done relate to his concern with the methods of the person who does it?

6. 5:1-31. How is the Song's description of the same events different from the historical account in chapter 4?

7. Choose application questions for discussion: a) Do you have a Judges 5 perspective on what is happening in your life, or only a Judges 4 perspective? How could Deborah's perspective on some recent events help you? b) Is God calling you, like Barak, to do something for which you won't get much credit? How can you respond in faith? c) Can you pray like Jesus does for your enemies, or only like Deborah?

Week 4

JUDGES 4:1-5:31

DEBORAH: THE WOMAN LEADER

SOSL 3/98-99

Introduction

Chapters 4 and 5 of Judges is very interesting, because each chapter deals with the same event, but one from the perspective of the historian, and the other from the perspective of the poet/musician.

1.4:1-24. What are the gifts and skills Deborah possesses (4:4-14) What were the effects of her career (5:6-9)?

First, Deborah was a “prophetess” (v.4). We see her exercising this gift v.6 when she tells Barak, “*The Lord commands you...*” This means that she preaches and teaches the Word of God. Second, she was very wise. She “*held court*” under the Palm of Deborah (v.5). Notice that this did not so much mean a “queen’s court” as a real judge’s courtroom. People came to have “*disputes decided*”. This means that for some time she had been recognized as a wise counselor and judge and people came to her with all sorts of social, legal, and relational “cases”.

Third, she was a leader. 4:9 says she was “*leading*” (NIV) or “*judging*” Israel. We have seen before that to lead and to judge was the same thing. She was given authority to rule. This call to leadership is put in a very vivid way in the Song--5:6-9. Deborah says that under idol-worship, Israel fell into great social decay. Shared, common life ceased. “*Village life in Israel ceased.*” 5:7. This means that things got so bad that it was every family for itself. There was not a common life of culture, commerce, etc. But Deborah became “*a mother in Israel*”. The implication is that she acted as a “parent” for the larger community, so that individual families could become part of a larger “family” of the whole nation. She “rose” into power in order to do this.

Fourth, she seems to have had a tremendous inspirational gift. This probably is an extension of her abilities as a prophetess and a leader. She “stirs” up Barak and the army-- “*This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands! Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?*” Fifth, Deborah was a poet/musician. Her “song” is considered by most scholars to be one of the great artistic works of the ancient world.

Her tremendous gifts led Barak to refuse to go into his campaign without her. (See #2).

2. How is the judgeship of Deborah both like and unlike the judgeships of the Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar?

Deborah’s judgeship is **like** the others in its most basic patterns. Though it is not mentioned directly, clearly God’s Spirit came upon her (making her a prophetess) so that through her God could deliver his people from a military oppressor. Secondly, Deborah’s judgeship is *like* most of the other judgeships because it is so unexpected. Remember last week’s study. Women, especially in ancient times, were not usually rulers and leaders. Deborah becomes one of the many “unexpected”, paradigm-busting saviors who point to the ultimate Savior, who saves in the most “inside-out” ways, clean contrary to the wisdom of the world.

But Deborah's judgeship is mainly **unlike** the others. (1) First, it was unlike in that it was in many ways the greatest of all. Of all the twelve judges mentioned in the book, none is depicted as the wise, talented, brilliant, and godly person that she is. Only Othniel is seen in such unmixed positive terms--all the rest are seen as very flawed. But even Othniel seems to have been simply talented in one way--as a military leader. He "*went to war*" (3:10). That is the only talent we read of which is used by God to deliver Israel. But, as we have seen, Deborah is multi-talented.

(2) But second, Deborah is also very different in that she alone is not a warrior. Though she goes with Barak to the military campaign, that was not originally her plan. There is no indication that she literally led anyone into battle (3:14). That leads to a third related difference. (3) In every other case of deliverance, God raises up one person--the judge--to deliver Israel alone. In Samson's case, the deliverance is *literally* alone. He has nearly super-hero-type strength which enables him to fight battles with the oppressors single-handedly. But even in every other case, from Othniel on through, there is never any more than one single hero and protagonist. In every other case, one person gets all the honor. Only in this chapter of Israel's history do we see a "team" of deliverers--Deborah, Barak, and Jael. *All* the honor goes to no one person (4:9). Jael uses subterfuge, Barak is not really the leader of Israel, and Deborah is not the military hero. Deborah, however, is the one who creates a team. She identifies, recruits, and encourages Barak with her Spirit-anointed leadership gifts. She is the one who "puts it all together"--but no other judge does anything like this at all.

(4) Finally, we can say that Deborah was a different in that she led from wisdom and character rather than sheer might. She came closest to being a fully-orbed *leader* of her people instead of just a general. There is no indication that any of the other judges actually "judged" cases as Deborah did. She wisely directed people in how to live. She restored "village" life--meaning she re-wove the social structure. She was as good a judge in peace-time as in war-time. The other judges simply broke the power of the oppressors. In all this, Deborah was more a fore-runner of the monarchy and even the Messiah, who was "*wonderful Counselor...Prince of Peace*". (Isaiah 9).

3. How does Deborah's career modify both the "strong conservative" and "strong liberal" views of women's leadership?

Please forgive me for bringing up such a vast and "hot" topic, but the career of Deborah very obviously leads us to reflect on this subject. The question is chosen to moderate the discussion away from polarizing view points.

A "strongly conservative" view will insist that women should not as a rule be in positions of leadership in family, church, or society at all. Though women often have to step in and take such a role, it should be the normal scheme of things. A "strongly liberal" view, however, will insist that "gender roles" are basically a fiction, that women and men are simply interchangeable when it comes to leadership. Women will and should not differ from men in when and how they lead.

The conservative view is challenged by the fact of Deborah's career. In 4:9 it is stated that Deborah was "*judging*" or "*leading*" Israel (the words are the same). Of all the judges, Deborah (except for Othniel) This had been going on for some time. If women are never to be in positions of social leadership, why was Deborah clearly called by God as both a prophet and a judge?

This view often responds that Deborah was an anomaly caused by the “abdication” of Barak and other men. This view has been bolstered by the NIV translation’s rendering of 4:9. Barak says he won’t go to war unless Deborah goes with him. The Hebrew is translated to read, *“but because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours...”*. If this reading is correct, then Deborah is rebuking Barak for timidity. That means that both Deborah’s accompaniment of Barak and the victory of Jael are ‘punishment’ to Barak. This fits the conservative view. It means that the prominence of women in leadership is really an anomaly caused by the unwillingness of males to take up leadership.

A point in favor of this rendering is the fact that the withholding of honor from Barak does seem to be some kind of penalty. But there are some very good reasons to reject this view. The Hebrew can also be translated as the NIV footnote says-- *“but on the expedition you are taking, the honor will not be yours...”*. Here’s why that rendering is more likely. (1) First, why would Barak’s desire to take Deborah along with him constitute disobedience? When Moses is given the same command to go forth, he says to God *“not unless you go with me”*. God’s response is identical to Deborah’s *“I will go with thee.”* (See Exodus 33:12-17). We have seen how godly and anointed Deborah was. Why would it be disobedient of Barak to want such a godly woman with him? Second (and this is telling) Heb. 11:32 lists Barak as a great hero, who *“through faith conquered kingdoms...and routed foreign armies”*. That is quite significant. Barak is put in the same sentence here with Gideon, Samson, and Jephthah. We are told that his victory was done in great faith. Notice that Deborah is not named in this list. It was a greater act of faith on Barak’s part than Deborah! So in the NT we learn that Barak showed great faith to ask for Deborah’s presence and help, and to go into a battle knowing that he would *not* get all the honor--that a woman would begin the campaign and another woman would end it.

All this undermines the conservative belief that Deborah was only a judge because Barak and others were too timid. Deborah’s career makes it hard to insist that the Bible forbids women to take leadership positions in society.

The liberal view is challenged too, by the shape of Deborah’s career. The liberal view denies the relevance of gender differences with regard to leadership. Why? Some conservatives have insisted that a woman’s “feminine” characteristics make it difficult for her to lead. This has led the more liberal to insist that “anything a man can do a woman can do”, and to dismiss gender differences as socially constructed fictions.

But Deborah’s leadership skills and strategies are very distinct from those of her male counterparts. First, she is not a warrior--she cannot physically lead the army. Therefore she has to recruit someone who complements her gifts. Related to that, we see that secondly she is a team builder, not a “lone ranger”. [As we noted in #2 above, she is the only judge who does not accomplish the deliverance single-handed. There are, not one, but three “channels” by which God destroys the oppressors: Deborah, Barak, and Jael.] While the male judges are highly independent and warlike, Deborah is a team builder who creates interdependence between leaders. Thirdly, the other judges are excellent in warfare, but show little ability during peace time (cf. Gideon). But we saw in 5:7 that Deborah was excellent in building community.

This supports the idea that gender distinctions have an abiding effect on the way leadership is carried out. Many thoughtful people today are pointing out that the way women lead *is* different than the way men lead, and these differences lay along the same lines as we see in Deborah’s history. Unfortunately, many of these same commentators are insisting that the woman/leader approach is inherently better. But it seems much wiser to say that male and female leadership approaches are appropriate for different situations.

It is a mistake to say: a) men should always lead, b) women are always better leaders, or c) women can do anything men can do and men can do anything women can do.

Conclusion: Deborah's career can by no means be the basis for drawing conclusions about male and female roles and leadership. Judges 4 and 5 are written to simply tell us what happened, not what should have happened! It is not written to teach us about gender roles per se. Inferences we draw about gender must be tentative and tested against the rest of Scripture. We cannot put implicit inferences up against explicit teaching elsewhere in the Bible. But Deborah does point to something we *do* see taught elsewhere, namely that women are equal in dignity and ability, but differences in gender are to be expressed through some differentiation in role within the church. In the Old Testament, there were three great offices--prophet, priest, and king (or judge). Some women were prophets and some were judge/queens. But there were no women priests. In the New Testament, women are free to use their gifts in any role but elder (1 Tim.2:12).

Why? This is God's way to express this "equal but not equivalent" nature of gender. Gender differences are to be rejoiced in and embraced as a gift, not used to oppress (on the one hand) and not feared and loathed (on the other hand). This Biblical view does not fit in with current views of doctrinaire traditionalists or secularists today.

4. Read 4:6-16 and cf. with Hebrews 11:32-34. Barak is praised for the faith he exercised in this campaign. a) In what ways does he show faith? b) In what ways does he point the way to the ultimate Savior/judge?

a) In what ways does he show faith?

Only three or four people out of the whole book of Judges get named as one of the "heroes of the faith" in Hebrews 11. We mentioned under #3 that the unhelpful NIV translation of 4:9 makes it much harder to see why Hebrews would have such a lofty view of him. But with some reflection we can see why.

First, Barak's faith exercises itself in courage. He is told that he must lead an army into battle against a force of vastly superior technology. Yet Barak went. At this time the Bronze Age was ending and the Iron Age beginning. Those nations with the ability to develop iron tools and weapons were virtually invincible against those who could not. An iron chariot could charge through foot soldiers like a hot knife through butter. The Israelites could muster 10,000 men (4:10), but Sisera had 900 chariots along with "*all the other men*" (4:13). This was more than a match for the Israelites. In human terms, it would be a slaughter.

Second, Barak's faith exercises itself in humility. He is told that he must be prepared for the fact that, despite all the valor he would have to exhibit, "*the honor will not be yours*" (4:9). A woman (Deborah) was the impetus for the campaign, and another woman (Jael) would strike the final triumphant blow. So Barak would not get "the glory". Yet Barak went. Even if the withheld glory was a punishment, it was remarkable that Barak would go. [But see under #3 for the reasons why this is unlikely.] It would have taken remarkable maturity for a man to be willing to share the honor of battle with a woman. Many people today will admire Barak as being a modern, "enlightened" man who shows that his male ego is under control. But it is wrong to read our modern sensibilities back into ancient history. Barak was able to subjugate his normal fierce masculine independence and pride out of faith in the Lord, who was speaking through Deborah. That brings us to a third aspect to his faith.

Third, Barak's faith is exercised itself in obedience to God's Word. Deborah is a prophetess, and her directions to Barak is more than "advice". She says, "*The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go...'*" (4:6). That is the first time Deborah says, "Go!" The second time she says "*Go!...Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?*" (4:14), he charges down the mountainside. Barak's faith is not just a kind of general humility. That would mean he was simply an "enlightened", non-macho type man. Rather, his humility springs from his obedience to the Word of the Lord as it comes through Deborah.

b) In what ways does he point to the ultimate Savior/judge?

In his faith, Barak conforms to the pattern of the great Deliverer--he empties himself of glory and becomes obedient (Phil.2). Through his humble, obedient faith, God redeems his people. He would do the same thing on the cross.

"...the New Testament Savior-god is reflected in Barak, who like him is a man under authority and does nothing apart from that authority (Lk.7:6-8; Jn.8:28-29), cannot act independently of the one who sends him (Jn.5:19), and is victorious through obedience (Rom.5:19; Phil.2:8-11; Heb.5:8-9)." Wilcock, p.123, n.24.

5. 4:17-22 and 5:24-31. a) How does 5:29-30 perhaps shed light on the motives of Jael? b) How does God's concern with the thing he wants done relate to his concern with the methods of the person who does it?

a) Jael's motives.

Deborah's song is rather fierce at the end of the Song! As a woman, Deborah knows how Sisera's mother and her ladies-in-waiting will be waiting for him to come back victorious from battle, as usual (5:28). But as they talk about the "usual" campaign of Sisera we get a glimpse of his normal results of one of his campaigns. "*A girl or two for each man*" (5:30). It was normal for Sisera's armies to steal and rape and subjugate women--one or two for every soldier as "spoils of war". [The NIV translation "*girl*" is not illuminating. The Hebrew word roughly means "*wench*" or "*girl-slave*". It means the women would become sex-slaves.]

Now we know something of the justice and irony of what happened to Sisera. After making the lives of many women into hellish nightmares, now two women finally bring him down. Deborah engineers the military campaign and Jael strikes the actual blow. This probably accounts for Deborah's triumph song being so pointed and vehement. It also is deeply ironic that Sisera's women should now finally know the grief that he had visited on so many other women and families for so many years.

This probably gives us some insight into Jael's motives. It is possible that she simply had faith in the God of Israel and wanted to strike a blow against the enemy of God's people. Such noble impulses may have been the dominant ones. But since she was not an Israelite, and since this was an age of terribly low-grade spirituality it is much more likely that Jael hated Sisera for his cruelty and even perhaps for the havoc he wreaked on people that she knew. Jael's husband and tribe were political allies (or at least formal non-belligerents), but Jael obviously had personal reasons to despise Sisera and his king Jabin.

b) Jael's method.

The method of Jael's attack on Sisera deepens the irony of the passage even further. Setting up and taking down tents was considered the work of women. Therefore, the tent peg and hammer were essentially a woman's household appliance! It was especially ironic that the abuser of women would die by a female hand with a woman's tool--not even a spear or lance. In that age, death at the hand of a woman was particularly humiliating, of course. All this

was probably designed by Jael to make Sisera's death the most devastating possible defeat for him and his army.

Nevertheless, we cannot overlook the fact that Jael's methods is a clear violation or at least a "flouting" of the 10 commandments (e.g. those vs. killing, lying). Some would say that, since she was not a believer, she was not responsible to obey God's law. But Jael also broke all the very strong policies and rules of Middle Eastern hospitality. It was treachery by the standards of any culture. Deborah's blessing of Jael does not mean that she is a model of faith or virtue.

In the final analysis, we have to remember that God often uses people to do what he wants to happen without violating their personal responsibility or condoning their methods. Judas is perhaps the classic example. Other places we read of God using a people (such as Assyria) to punish Israel, even though God held Assyria responsible for their brutality.

6. 5:1-31. How is the Song's description of the same events different from the historical account in chapter 4?

Observers will find many differences to note, and we do not have to describe them all here. First, the main, foundational difference is that the Song's approach is more *theological*. It looks beneath the surface of the historical specifics and sees God's hand behind it all. In the historical report, the Lord is named in only three verses (and each time in a quote from Deborah). But in chapter 5, the Lord is literally everywhere. It is *he* who marches out to war when Israel amassed its troops (5:4-5). In other words, Deborah reveals that it is God who is the Judge behind the judge, and the general behind the general.

Because of this theological perspective, we actually learn a historical fact that is not evident in chapter 4. According to 5:19-23, the rout of Sisera's army was because of a flash flood in the Kishon valley. In the Song, it is the stars of heaven and the rising river (cf. 5:4-*the heavens poured down*) that fight for the Lord (v.23). Barak is not even mentioned! Truly, the victory was God's. Sisera would never have come out to fight Israel on the plain in his chariots if it was the rainy season. In rain and wet ground, the iron chariots become immobilized and "sitting ducks" for foot soldiers. But God's miracle evidently was that the rain came out of season at a time Sisera would never have expected it.

[Note: This sheds much light on 4:14-15. One commentator suggests that Deborah saw the thunder clouds coming and realized what God was doing, so she cried to Barak, "*Look! God has gone out ahead of you! Go!*" and Barak charged down the mountainside with 10,000 men as the "*heavens*" poured down against their enemies. What a picture!]

Besides the main theme, the Song tells us other details we did not know about, such as the effects of idolatry on the social fabric (5:6-9), and that many of the Israelites failed to come to the aid of their brethren (5:15-18).

[Note: Many people question how fierce and blood-thirsty the Song is. This raises the broader issue of how often Old Testament texts (especially some of the Psalms) seem to speak hatefully of enemies, while Jesus tells us to love and pray for our enemies. This is not the time to deal with that issue. Suffice it to say that when the people of God saw God's justice falling on sin and evil on to Jesus Christ dying on the cross, it changed our attitude toward our enemies. It is good and right to want to see justice done, and evil destroyed by a holy God. The Old Testament saints had a much dimmer view of how that was to be done. We now can yearn for justice and still pray for our enemies. Jesus, praying for those who were killing us is now our model for dealing with those who oppose us.]

7. Choose application questions for discussion: a) Do you have a Judges 5 perspective on what is happening in your life, or only a Judges 4 perspective? How could Deborah's perspective on some recent events help you? b) Is God calling you, like Barak, to do something for which you won't get much credit? How can you respond in faith? c) Can you pray like Jesus does for your enemies, or only like Deborah?

a) Keep in mind that Judges 4 is certainly a believing perspective, but it doesn't look beneath the surface, nor have the continual note of "Praise!" that Deborah's Song has.

b) We should remember that while Barak certainly did not get much credit for his victory during his lifetime, he came down to us as one of the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11. Thus we should remember that it only God's opinion that matters.

Week 5

JUDGES 6:1-40

GIDEON MEETS GOD

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1. vv.1-10. What three things happen to prepare the people for revival this time? What did God do? What did they do?

2. vv.1-10. What is the difference between repentance and regret? Read 2 Cor.7:9-11. Which do the people express? How does God try to help them? What do we learn from this for our own spiritual renewal?

3. vv.11-24. a) God starts the deliverance though the people do not yet show signs of repentance. What do we learn from that? b) Who is this talking to Gideon—an angel or the Lord? Why does this figure keep turning up (cf.2:1; 13:1ff.) How does Gideon's fear of dying and his altar shed light on this question?

4. vv.11-16. Is Gideon's assessment of Israel's problem right (v.13) or is God's right (v.1, 14)? How can we make the same mistakes in our lives today?

5. Is Gideon's assessment of his ability right (v.15) or is God's right (v.12)—or are they both right? How is this a picture of what it means to be a Christian? What happens to us when we lose either "side" or perspective?

6. vv.16-40. What ways does the Lord prepare Gideon? How does he show him how to see and deal with a) the enemy among us (vv.25-32) b) the enemy around us (vv.33-35) and c) the enemy within us (vv.36-40). How do we today need to make the same adjustments in our own lives?

***7. Application. How has God helped prepare you to be of service to others?
How has God given you guidance at key times in your life?***

Week 5

JUDGES 6:1-40

GIDEON MEETS GOD

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Introduction

The new oppressors are the Midianites, semi-nomads from the desert. Their aim, however, was different than that of Israel's former enemies. Their goal was not political control, but rather economic exploitation. They pioneered the use of the camel (6:5) in warfare, which enabled them to make swift, wide-ranging raids on a land a long distance from their own homes without fear of any immediate reprisal. Their superior technology enabled them to plunder Canaan of all its food each year near harvest time. They did not set up a military government or levy taxes, but they left the Israelites in a state of complete poverty (6:6). Again we see that each successive oppressor had a very different set of strategies and tactics than the former. Israel was forced into a completely primitive existence deep in inaccessible mountain regions (6:2).

1. vv.1-10. What three things happen to prepare the people for revival this time? What did God do? What did they do?

Most of the initiative is, again, from God. There are three active verbs, and two of them belong to God. We are told about God that a) *v.1- he gave them*, and b) *v.8-he sent them*. On the other hand we are told about Israel only c) *v.6-they cried to the Lord for help*. The people's action is sandwiched between God's two actions. God's first action essentially causes the people's action. Then in response to the people's action, God does something else by way of preparation.

First, *v.1- he gave them into the hands of the Midianites*. Again we see God sends **awakening trouble**. Their economic troubles were part of God's plan for them. The people had been warned not to worship idols. Idols always promise freedom, but they always bring slavery instead. In other words, if you live for money--to become "financially independent"--you will become spiritually *dependent* on money, through worry or pride or over-work. Idolatry always leads to some form of bondage and oppression. God here is aggravating the slavery in order to humble Israel. Notice the interesting similarity between the language of 6:1-2 and Romans 1:24, 26. In Romans, Paul says God "*gave them up*" or "*gave them over*" to the sinful desires of their hearts. This means that God works by allowing natural consequences. This suggests that ordinarily God shields us from the natural consequences of our sins and wrongs. Sometimes, however, he "gives us what we want", and lets the consequences hit us full force. This is a very just and fair way to chasten us.

It would be good to consider two points about how God uses troubles to revive us spiritually.

First, repeated, consistent sin patterns will always bring their own consequences (Gal.6:7), but not because he is vindictive, but because he loves us too much to let us get away with sin, which will break and corrupt us (Heb.12:1-13). Second, we should not assume (as Job's friends erroneously did) that any trouble or suffering is due to sin in our lives. Suffering will always have a purpose (Rom.8:28) in God's plan for us, but it is not necessarily sent (as here in Judges 6) to awaken us because of some besetting sin. Jesus suffered terribly, according to God's gracious plan, but it was not because of his sin. So our suffering is not necessarily due to sin (John 9:1-3).

Second, in response to this awakening trouble, the people begin to awaken! They do not ignore God, turn away from God or curse him, but rather they *v.6-cried out to the Lord for help*. Again we see that corporate prayer--a wide-scale calling out to God for salvation ("*help*")--is critical for spiritual renewal and revival.

Thirdly, *v.8- he sent them a prophet, who said...*" So secondly God send **a convicting message**. It is interesting to notice that God's first response to the people's cry (v.6) is not to send a savior or salvation, but to seek to convict them more deeply of their sin, through preaching. The prophet comes and helps them to understand why they are in the trouble they are in, why idolatry is so wrong. He reminds them who God is and what he has done for them. Some have called this a "covenant lawsuit". The prophet, in a sense, is God's attorney, who comes to the Israelites and points out how they have violated their contract.

So we see here that God wants not just a call for salvation in general, but repentance in particular. He wants them to understand their sin.

2. vv.1-10. What is the difference between repentance and regret? Read 2 Cor.7:9-11. Which do the people express? How does God try to help them? What do we learn from this for our own spiritual renewal?

The Bible makes a clear distinction between true repentance and mere regret (or remorse). Both (as we see in the 2 Corinthian passage) are characterized by very deep sorrow and distress. But they are completely different. a) First, "worldly" sorrow or regret does not produce any real change while repentance does(2Cor.7:11). Why? It is sorrowful over the consequences of a sin, but not over the sin itself. If there had been no consequences, there would have been no sorrow. There is no sorrow over the sin for what it is in itself, for how it grieves God and violates our relationship to him. Therefore, as soon as the consequences go away, the behavior comes back. The heart has not become disgusted with the sin itself, so it remains rooted. b) Second, "worldly" sorrow stays regretful, while repentance removes all regret about the past. Why? Real repentance comes to focus on the only real permanent result of sin--the loss of the Lord. Repentance always makes us more able to accept and "move past" the things that happened. When we realize that God has forgiven us and we haven't lost him, we feel that earthly results are rather small in comparison. We say, "I deserved far worse than what happened. The *real* punishment fell into Jesus, and will never come to me." After real repentance and restoration to God, we do not hate ourselves, and we do not hate our lives. When a person is inconsolable, it means they have made something besides God their *real* god and savior (e.g. money, friends, career, family). It is an idol, and its loss is therefore impossible to heal without repudiating it as an idol.

The fact that God sends a prophet is a strong indication that the people who are crying out for his help (Judges 6:6) are not repentant yet. Their history of fast relapses is strong evidence that their "outcryings" were really "worldly sorrow" as Paul defines it. The nature of the sermon also shows that God is trying to convict them down into deep repentance. Regret is all about "us" (how I am being hurt, how my life is ruined, how my heart is breaking) but repentance is all about God (how he has been grieved, how his nature as Creator and Redeemer is being trampled on, how his repeated saving actions are being trivialized and used manipulatively). The sermon (Judges 6:8-10) is enormously God-centered. The Lord says: "*I brought you up...I snatched you...I drove them from before you...I said to you 'I am...your God'*". So it is quite clear that the goal of God is to get them from beyond regret to remorse.

Unfortunately, there is no indication that the people responded in repentance to the prophet's sermon. This is completely in line with the quick relapse, even within the lifetime of Gideon, into idol-worship.

What can we learn for ourselves? This is an application/brainstorming question. There are many more things we can learn than we can mention here. a) One thing is that we have to listen to God's Word. It is interesting that the people cried out for some dramatic miracle, and God sent them a sermon--an exposition of the Word of God. There is no getting around the study of the Bible. That is where we learn who we are; that is the means through which God brings spiritual renewal in our lives. b) We need to discern in ourselves is the difference between the normal lapses on the road to increasing Christian maturity versus a "stuck" repeated pattern of lapses which shows no signs of real progress. If you are continually falling into the same spiritual pit, and your falls are not decreasing in numbers or intensity, then you may be responding in regret rather than repentance. In other words, you may be simply regretful for the troubles of your sin, but unwilling to identify or reject the idol under the sin which is still attractive to you. The big problem here is that we often cannot get a good perspective on our hearts all by ourselves. Many people who are making progress feel they are not, and many people who are not making progress are in denial about it. This is why we need several strong Christian friends and Christian leaders who can help you tell the differences.

3. vv.11-24. a) God starts the deliverance though the people do not yet show signs of repentance. What do we learn from that? b) Who is this talking to Gideon--an angel or the Lord? Why does this figure keep turning up (cf.2:1; 13:1ff.) How does Gideon's fear of dying and his altar shed light on this question?

a) Why does God start the deliverance of the people before they repent?

Here again we see how the tension between God's holiness and his grace "drives" the narrative. We said before that God has demanded that his people be holy, yet he has promised to support and prosper them (see comments on Judges 2:1-4). We have here a perfect illustration of this here. God seems to respond very harshly to the call for help (6:6) by sending them a prophet to warn and exhort and convict them of sin. What a response to a cry of distress! This seems a much more severe response than we would give someone begging for mercy. But now, the angel of the Lord goes forth to recruit and prepare a Judge and Savior for Israel, even though there is no indication of any real repentance. This is a much more gracious response than we would give someone. God seems on the one hand to say and do very severe things, and then on the other hand to be giving unconditional support and love to the people. What do we learn here? a) That God's holiness will not eliminate his grace, or vica versa. They must both be expressed, because they are equally who he is. Within the book of Judges we never see a resolution--not until we get to the cross of Christ in the New Testament. His substitutionary death enables God to be both "just and justifier" of those who believe (Romans 3:26). b) We also see that God does not wait for us to repent before he begins to save us. We repent because he's begun his saving work--he does not begin his saving work because we repent! c) Basically, we just learn that God is compassionate and will never give up on us.

b) Who is the angel of the Lord?

We met the angel in Judges 2. And he shows up again in chapter 13 to announce the coming of Samson. The angel appears to Joshua before the battle of Jericho (Josh.5:13ff.) and to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3) and on the mount (Exodus 33-34) and to Abraham before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra (Genesis 18). In appearance, the angel of the Lord does not seem to have been all that overwhelming. It is not until the miracle of v.21

that Gideon is sure that this is a divine figure. (This seems quite different from other places in the Bible where angels are so radiant and glorious that the onlookers fall down on the ground.) So this is a very human-appearing figure. But there is a remarkable mystery and “tension” in all the Biblical descriptions of who the angel is.

On the one hand, we are told “*the angel said*” in v.12 and v.20, but we are also told “*the Lord said*” in v.14, v.16, and v.18. If we try to conceive of the angel as a kind of “communication channel” or “speaker phone” for God, we run into the phrase in v.14- “*The Lord turned to him and said.*” So here we have something remarkable. This figure is the angel of the Lord, and yet also the Lord. What does this mean? This is one of the mysteries of the Old Testament which is impossible to understand without the New. If there is one God, how can he both be in heaven, having sent this visible figure, and at the same time *be* the visible figure. If this was simply God come in human form, why doesn’t it just say he is the Lord, rather than also one sent by the Lord? (The word “angel” means messenger.) The only explanation that makes sense is that we have here an indication that our one God is nonetheless multi-personal. We have a deep hint of the Trinity. There is good reason to see this figure as Christ, the Son. His concern even then was to bring salvation and “peace on earth”.

The final evidence that the angel of the Lord is an uncreated, divine person, is that Gideon knows this himself. When he cries out that he has seen the angel “*face to face*” (v.22), God has to assure him that he won’t die. Gideon’s response was one of enormous gratitude. He creates an altar “*The Lord is Peace*”. This shows he knows that he should have died, to look upon the face of a holy God (cf. Exod.33:20). But he also knows that somehow, God has provided grace so that he can be at peace with him. Gideon celebrates his reconciliation with God--not knowing at all how it could be possible that a sinful man could stand in the presence of a holy God and yet live. But the answer is the angel himself. There is one who will come to earth who is the Lord and who will pave the way for us to be acceptable in God’s presence.

4. vv.11-16. Is Gideon’s assessment of Israel’s problem right (v.13) or is God’s right (v.1, 14)? How can we make the same mistakes in our lives today?

Israel’s problem

Gideon’s assessment of Israel’s condition in v.13 is--“*You are not with us, you abandoned us and put us into the hands of Midian.*” But we, the readers know that God put them into the hands of Midian because he had not abandoned them! It was “awakening trouble”. Second, Gideon’s assessment of Israel’s need is that they need great deeds and a Savior such as Moses. And God, says, shockingly--“*you* are the salvation I am sending. You are the great deed-doer I am sending. You are my Moses for this generation.”

Application

What do we learn from this? It is extremely clear and convicting. We are continually making the same two mistakes. a) First, we are sure that our troubles mean that God has left us, instead of thinking that God is working in us for good. b) Second, we are often waiting for God to do something to us or for us, instead of in us. In other words, we may be saying, “Lord why don’t you remove this problem” instead of “Lord, make me the person that can handle this problem”. Another way to put it. We are like people on a boat, and a rock ahead of us is sticking 3 feet out of the water and will destroy our boat. We pray, “Lord, remove the rock.” But God may be wanting to raise the level of the water four feet to go over the rock. Often, God wants to do a great work of character formation within you, rather than to remove the obstacle or problem from your life.

5. Is Gideon's assessment of his ability right (v.15) or is God's right (v.12)—or are they both right? How is this a picture of what it means to be a Christian? What happens to us when we lose either "side" or perspective?

Gideon's ability

As Gideon himself tells us, he is *"the least in my family"* (6:15). The very scene underscores this. For fear of the Midianites, Gideon is afraid to winnow his wheat out in the open air, where the breeze catches the grain and separates it from the chaff. He is afraid of doing that and becoming too visible to enemy eyes. So he is crouching down, trying to thresh his wheat in the pit of a winepress. Suddenly the angel speaks to him. He probably jumped out of his skin! By *"the least"* Gideon would have meant that he was the economically and socially the poorest member of the poorest clan in his tribe. He was from "the wrong side of the tracks". He probably was shy and reserved and very unassertive.

Why, then, did the Lord very pointedly call Gideon *"you mighty warrior"* (v.12)? One answer is that the Lord was being highly ironic, almost mocking Gideon. An opposite answer is that *"he is like the Gilbert and Sullivan character who sings of himself as 'diffident, modest, and shy' when he is nothing of the sort."* (Wilcock, p.78). In other words, he is really quite strong and valiant, but he just hasn't "gotten in touch" with his own potential.

Both of these answers are wrong--they take neither God's power nor his word seriously. God is on the one hand talking of what Gideon most definitely is *in him*. See how in v.14 the Lord says to take *"the strength you have"* and combine that with v.16 the knowledge that *"I will be with you"* and that *"I am sending you"* (v.14). So the knowledge of God's fellowship and calling, combined with what ability he had, would make him the champion. So both Gideon and God are correct.

Application

Here we see a foreshadowing of what it means to be a Christian. On the one hand, in ourselves, we are sinful and lost, but in Christ we are accepted and loved. If we ever forget one or the other, we fall into serious trouble. If we forget our sinfulness, we become over-confident, unloving, bad listeners, judgmental, undisciplined in prayer. If we forget our acceptance and lovedness, we become anxious, guilty, driven, and so on.

6. vv.16-40. What ways does the Lord prepare Gideon? How does he show him how to see and deal with a) the enemy among us (vv.25-32) b) the enemy around us (vv.33-35) and c) the enemy within us (vv.36-40). How do we today need to make the same adjustments in our own lives?

a) The enemy among us.

It is no surprise that Gideon's own father Joash has an altar and a pole for the worshipping of Canaanite dieties. Notice how Gideon knew all about the Exodus story and the Lord (v.13). The Israelites had not abandoned worship of God for the worship of idols. They had combined the worship of God with idols. They worshipped God formally, but their lives revolved around agricultural idols (if they were farmers) or commerce idols (if they were in business) or sex-beauty idols, and so on.

"The gods have not changed, for human nature has not changed. and these are the gods that humanity regularly re-creates for itself. What does it want? If it is modest--security and comfort and reasonable enjoyment; if ambitious--power and wealth and unbridled self-indulgence. In every age there are forces at work which promise to meet our desires--whether political programs, economic theories, career options, philosophies, lifestyle options, entertainment programs--all having one feature in

common. They promise that they can make our lives better than we can make them ourselves, yet at the same time they appear amenable to our manipulating them so we can get what we want without losing our independence....Here is the enemy among us. We say we worship the Lord...but the world has crept in and controls our heart..."

Before they can throw off the enemies around them (the Midianites) they have to throw off the enemies among them--the false idols of Canaan. This is always the main way that we get renewal in our lives. God will not help you out of your obvious, visible problems (money problems, relationship problems, etc.) until you see the idols that we are worshipping right beside the Lord. They have to be removed first.

Gideon is essentially being told here to make God the Lord of every area of life. We are not to add anything to Jesus Christ as a requirement for being happy. We are not to use God to get what we really want, but we are to see and make God that which we really want.

b) The enemy around us.

Now, in vv.33-35 we see "*the Spirit of the Lord*" came on Gideon and he began to get the wisdom and might that will enable them to deal with the visible, obvious oppressors--the Midianites. Gideon had to remove the less obvious idols before he can remove the more obvious oppressors.

c) The enemy within us.

However, the root cause of all our problems is "unbelief". The reason we have the enemies around us ("Midianites") is because of the enemies among us ("idols"). But the reason we have idols, is because down deep we don't trust God. The serpent suggested that we couldn't trust God, and that is what we have believed ever since. The real reason we don't worship him fully is because we are afraid that, if we give ourselves to him utterly and make him the supreme desire of our hearts, he will let us down.

God helps Gideon with his unbelief with the famous sign of the "fleece". Many people have castigated Gideon for this action. If, however it was so wrong and sinful, why did God respond? Others have imitated Gideon in this action. They say: "Lord, if you want me to take this job, let me get a phone call from them today." But we must be careful. When Satan asked Jesus to "test" God by asking for a "sign", Jesus rebuked him. So what is going on here?

Commentators have noted that Gideon was very specifically asking God to show him that he was not one of the forces of nature (like the other gods) but was sovereign *over* the forces of nature. Gideon, then, was not looking for "little signs" to help him make a decision. He was really seeking to understand the nature of God. We have to remember that he did not have the Bible, nor many of the "means of grace" that we have now (the Word, prayer, the sacraments, Christian fellowship). He was very specifically addressing the places where his faith was weak and uninformed. We cannot use this as a justification to ask for little signs and signals. Gideon was not doing so--he was asking for supernatural revelation from God to show him who he really was. This therefore is not about how to make a decision. This is about how we need to ask God to give us a big picture of who he is. We need to know the attributes of God as he reveals himself in his word.

We also learn, however, that God responds to requests to "build up faith". Essentially, Gideon was saying, "help my unbelief" (cf. Mark 9). He was asking for more faith, and God answered him. He will do the same for you.

***7. Application. How has God helped prepare you to be of service to others?
How has God given you guidance at key times in your life?***

Week 6

JUDGES 7:1-25

GIDEON LEADS TO VICTORY

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1. vv.1-8. Who is sent home and why? Why did God want to reduce the size of Gideon's army?

2. vv.1-8. "You have too many men for me to deliver..." (v.2). How does this principle shed light on how God has worked in your life? (cf. 2 Cor.12:7-9). What do you tend to "boast" in?

3. vv.8-15. Why does God send Gideon into the Midianites' camp? List all the things this incident tells us about a) about God, and b) about us?

4. What do you need assurance about? [Or what lessons do you need God to tell you over and over?] How does God assure and teach you?

5. vv. 15-25. What did Gideon's battle plan have going for it? Where does the strategy for the "surprise attack" come from? How does the strategy that was chosen fulfill the dream of the barley loaf?

6. Where are you feeling "outnumbered"? or in need of some intervention? How can you: a) accept the limits God has given you, and b) accept that 'God's power is made perfect in weakness'? Can you ask the group to join you in your "battle" by praying for you?

7. Think back over all of chapter 6 and 7. Make a list of everything God had to expose Gideon to in order to help him reach his potential as a leader?

Week 6

JUDGES 7:1-25

GIDEON LEADS TO VICTORY

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1. vv.1-8. Who is sent home and why? Why did God want to reduce the size of Gideon's army?

Who is sent home and why?

The first group which is sent home are those *“who tremble with fear”* (v.3) This was 22,000 men out of the 32,000--over two thirds! These were people who were able to admit publicly that they had no heart for battle. When Gideon offered to release anyone who was afraid to fight--he was using a pretty good psychological screening device. Surely there were many who were very frightened of battle but were unwilling to admit it. Those who were so willing to admit their fear in public would also be far more likely to retreat in battle. The reason it was good to send them home is a practical one. Fear is contagious, as we can often see in Judges. When any significant body of soldiers panic and flee, it can sap the determination of everyone and lead to a rout. (See Deut.20:8.) Though it was surely discouraging to lose these numbers, it was still very practical to let them go. This move was concerned for the morale of the army.

The second group is sent home for much more obscure reasons. 9,700 out of the 10,000 remaining are given another test. They are brought to a body of water at a time when they would be thirsty. All but 300 knelt down and put their mouths into the water to drink, while the smaller group used their hands to scoop up water into their mouth and “lap” it. God tells Gideon to only use them. Why did God make this a test? What was its purpose?

People have differed over the answer. It is typical for people to conclude that the 300 were being more alert and watchful. It is often assumed that they held on to their weapons and stayed on their feet while the others drank in such a way that they were defenseless. But surely this is a stretch. The text does not say anything about holding on to weapons. Unlike the first “screening”--this test surely does not measure well how good a warrior a man would be. Besides that, the common idea that this was a small group of “elite” troops goes completely against the purpose of the reduction in numbers.

Why did God reduce the army?

God makes it very clear in v.2--so that Israel will not think *“her own strength has saved her.”* This is the greatest spiritual danger there is--that we should believe that we can or have “saved ourselves”. The lesson we always need to learn is that salvation is by grace and God’s action, not by earning it with our actions.

Again we see the principle of salvation we see continually in Judges and the rest of the Bible. God does not save through expected means, or through strength. Most of the Judges are unlikely and the victories defy the world’s logic. Gideon is a man from a weak family in a weak tribe, and now he must face the Midianites with only a handful of men. This points the way to the greater Gideon, who was born in a manger and who won our salvation in his weakness.

2. vv.1-8. “You have too many men for me to deliver...” (v.2). How does this principle shed light on how God has worked in your life? (cf. 2 Cor.12:7-9). What do you tend to “boast” in?

Another way to put this principle is found in 2 Cor.12:7-9. God does not simply work *in spite* of our weakness, but *because* of it. He says that his saving power does not work when we are strong or think we are strong. How does this work practically?

First, this principle is the basis for salvation itself. We cannot be saved if we think we are good or able. God's saving power only works on us when we admit that we have no worthiness or goodness in ourselves.

Second, this principle explains how repentance works. Paradoxically, it is only as we repent and sorrow over our failures before God that his love and grace become more precious and real to us. For example--if someone says to you: "I paid one of your monthly bills", you don't know how overjoyed to be until you hear how big the bill was. The bigger you understand your debt to be, the greater your joy in his payment will be. So it is only as we see our weakness that the strength of knowing God's grace and love comes.

Third, this principle explains how we almost always grow. Our problems come because good things have become too important to us. Anger, fear, discouragement come because of "idols"--good things have become things we feel (at an emotional level) will really save us and give us worth. It is only when these things are threatened or removed that we turn and find our safety and significance in the Lord. That makes us stable and deep. This principle is perfectly mirrored here in this story. Gideon (and all Israel) was going to put its confidence in its fighting men, but God removes them so that the victory will lead them to trust in God in new ways.

You may wish to share specific cases of how a loss or experience of weakness led to a) salvation, b) or growth.

3. vv.8-15. Why does God send Gideon into the Midianites' camp? List all the things this incident tells us about a) about God, and b) about us?

Why does God send Gideon?

It is pretty obvious that the result of the visit to the camp was God's purpose. The result of what Gideon heard was--"he worshipped God" (v.15). Then he came back and "called out, 'Get up!'" (v.15). So God wanted to assure Gideon one more time and fill him with confidence and joy.

What does this tell us about God?

First, we see that God is the one who takes the initiative. Gideon needs this, but does not ask for it.

Second, we see that God is a teacher. He is always, always instructing us in the way we should go (Ps.25:9-10,12).

Third, the teacher is very kind and sensitive. In v.10 he says: "If you are afraid to go into the camp, take your servant." Remarkable for the King of the Universe to think of such things.

Fourth, God goes out of his way to assure us. The whole book of 1 John is written to say that we can "know that we know him" (1 John 2:3). The work of the Holy Spirit is to assure us that we are his (Rom.8:16). God does not simply adopt us as his children, but then he provides numerous ways to know that this is true. If you love anyone, you are willing to assure them of your love--and God is the same.

Fifth, we learn here that God may ask us to take risks on the way to assurance. Going into the enemy camp is dangerous (thus the advice to take Purah). In the same way, we may find that we lack assurance of God's presence with us because we never do anything bold--we never do anything that is beyond our human ability to do.

Sixth, we learn that God can use secular sources--non-Christian people--to give us wisdom and insight. Here we see that God had inspired at least the second and maybe both of the Midianites who Gideon overheard. The second one clearly perceived God's will (v.14). We must not forget that God gives wisdom and grace to all sorts of people, besides believers, from whom we can learn (Rom.2:14-15; James 1:17).

Seventh, this all shows us the patience of God. Though we need confirmation and assurance over and over again, God does it.

What does this tell us about us?

Evidently, the need for repeated assurance and repeated lessons must be one of the main points of the narrative. Gideon cannot sustain his direction or his energy without repeated lessons and lots and lots of confirmation and re-assurance. Of course, he is no different than we are. When we see the narrative "telescoped" as it is, the impression is that Gideon is very weak. But if we think of our own spiritual history, we will see the same thing. How many times have we felt: "I'll never forget or doubt God again?" Yet soon we have again become indifferent or anxious. How many resolutions have we made that we have not kept? We aren't any different. We never relax and trust him. No matter what he does for us, our deeply unbelieving hearts are quite stubborn.

4. What do you need assurance about? [Or what lessons do you need God to tell you over and over?] How does God assure and teach you?

What do you need assurance about?

There are many possible areas you may need God's assurance and instruction. One major area is the basic assurance that God loves and accepts you as his child. After we fail or sin in a significant way--how do we know that he has not rejected us? Another major area is the assurance, during troubles, that he is working wisely within it all, that he has not abandoned us. Another major assurance sometimes comes when we are not sure that we have made the right decision. Sometimes God can confirm to us that we are going in the right direction.

How has God assured you at times you needed it?

Basically--whatever God has done to lead you to deep worship and confidence (v.15)--is an example of how he assures. But there are three categories of ways God helps us that are suggested by the text and the narrative. First, God assures us through his word. (In the story, God apparently has sent a special revelation in a dream to one of the Midianites. God's revelation here confirms the promise he made by revelation previously to Gideon.) When we read his Word and especially his promises, we often find that the Holy Spirit comes and makes the promises both real and sweet to us (Rom.8:16).

Second, God often assures us through other people. Here, God does not give Gideon his promise directly, but rather he gives it through the mouth of another. It is important to have others who are close friends who can do this. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* discusses how often God puts a word of assurance in our mouths for our friends. Third, God often assures through circumstances of life, as here. Gideon just "happens" to overhear this conversation. Such "coincidences" often bring God's assurance to us.

Those are the categories. Now think of ways that God has brought you his assurance in your life through the Word, the Spirit, friends, circumstances. Celebrate them and thank God for them.

5. vv. 15-25. What did Gideon's battle plan have going for it? Where does the strategy for the "surprise attack" come from? How does the strategy that was chosen fulfill the dream of the barley loaf?

The battle plan

Gideon's battle plan was brilliant in several ways. First, this strategy eliminated the factor of numbers and size of the armies. Obviously, any strategy Gideon used would have to compensate for the huge disadvantage they had in size. This did so beautifully. The whole point was for the Israelites to appear (and sound) far greater in size than they really were. Second, this strategy eliminated the factor of skill or strength of the competing armies. It did not take any prowess or power to break a jar and blow a horn! In any battle, there is the possibility that the enemy's superior skill would lead to a defeat. But this strategy brilliantly removed military skill level as any factor at all. In this battle plan, it was only the Midianites who would be doing the fighting--with themselves! The Israelites simply stood "in their position" (v.21) while the Midianites slaughtered each other and ran (v.21-22).

Thirdly, the timing was brilliant. Gideon "attacked" just after the Midianites had changed the guard on the middle watch (v.19). The night time (6pm to 6am) was probably divided into three watches of four hours each. One third of the army took turns standing guard around the camp while the other two-thirds first ate and relaxed and then slept. This would have been the situation just after the middle watch (10pm). One third of the army would have been walking back through the camp to their tents, while another third would have been asleep. Thus, when the noise woke up the sleepers, they would have rushed out of their beds to see the camp filled with armed men. In their confusion and fear, they began to fight the returning soldiers. That is what led to the massive slaughter.

Fourthly, the battle plan eventually deploys the thousands of Israelites who had been left behind. If all that original Israelite army had fought the Midianites directly, many of them would have been killed and wounded. Now they are fresh and able to pursue the Midianite army, tattered and bloody from fighting with itself (v.23-25).

Fifth, the "technology" of the Midianites' camels was eliminated. (Review the notes from last week.) The camels gave the Midianites an unequalled ability to move its army rapidly over great distances. This battle plan made the camels a non-factor. In fact, it is possible that the camels might have added to the confusion and mayhem in the camp.

Where did this brilliant strategy come from?

The text does not tell us that God directly revealed the brilliant strategy to Gideon. There is every indication that he came up with it himself. That would certainly rank him with history's military geniuses. But on the other hand, we must recognize how God led him so beautifully into his work of genius.

First, it was God that had forced him to confront the Midianites with only 300 men. It was almost as if God had given him a riddle. "You have 300 men to defeat many thousands of Midianites. How can you do it?" Obviously, if God had not forced him into such a situation, he never would have given thought to how to create a rout with a handful of men. God knew Gideon could do it. But if he had not "painted Gideon into a corner", Gideon would never have thought of his plan. Gideon's part was this--*he accepted the limits God had given him*.

Second, Gideon had finally grasped the principle--that God chooses *what is weak in the world to shame the strong*" (1 Cor.1:26ff.). It is because he began to think of how weakness can be strength that he was able to hit upon his plan. Gideon's part was this--*he submitted to God's saving principle, that his power is made perfect in weakness*.

Third, Gideon had learned in the camp that there was a spirit of nervousness and fear in the Midianite camp. Gideon would never have suspected that if he hadn't done first hand research. But, of course, that first hand research was provided by God.

How does the strategy fulfill the dream?

Barley was the most cheap and common grain available in that time. It was considered the food of the poor. In the dream God sent, a very weak and poor thing unexpectedly becomes a weapon that destroys the powerful Midianites. That is what happened.

6. Where are you feeling “outnumbered”? or in need of some intervention? How can you: a) accept the limits God has given you, and b) accept that ‘God’s power is made perfect in weakness’? Can you ask the group to join you in your “battle” by praying for you?

This question might lead members to share some sensitive topics, so be quick to listen and slow to speak or “fix” one another.

There are an infinite number of possible answers to this question. But consider the following. When we face a trouble, we often try extremely hard to change the circumstances or we pray to God to have it removed, when God wants to use the trouble to deepen our character so that we can “escape” it by becoming able to “endure” it (cf. 1 Cor.10:13). We fail to see that the limits God has given us (as in Gideon’s case) may be the only way for us to reach our potential spiritually.

7. Think back over all of chapter 6 and 7. Make a list of everything God had to expose Gideon to in order to help him reach his potential as a leader?

--God gave Gideon promises--that he would be with him and would use him. (6:14-16) This is like the promises we have in his Word.

--God sent three major miracles into his life as assurance. (6:20; 6:36ff.; 6:39ff.) We too usually experience a couple of very dramatic interventions in our lives where God shows his power.

--God asks him to get his family life in order before he goes out to the larger tasks of leadership in the world. (6:25ff. He cleanses his own family life of idols.) In the same way, we cannot be effective in service to others if we are not doing right by our families.

--God sends the Spirit of the Lord (6:34) to give him courage and confidence. In the same way, we must experience his power and joy in prayer (Rom.8:15-17)

--God teaches him the principle of the gospel--that we are not saved by works but God’s grace. (7:2) In the same way, we do not really “get” the gospel until God has had to show it to us again and again. Our guilt, anger, anxiety are all because we don’t believe we are saved by grace, not works.

--God tells him how *he* sees Gideon--“a mighty man of valor” (6:12). It is God’s assessment of us, and not our assessment of ourselves, that we must be controlled by.

Week 7

JUDGES 8:1-10:5

THE FAILURE OF GIDEON'S HOUSE

1. 8:1-17. Observe Gideon's response to the Ephraimites (vv.1-3) and the men of Succoth and Peniel (vv.4-17). a) How were the responses of all three groups to Gideon similar? b) What do you think Gideon was feeling on the inside when they dealt with these groups?

2. 8:1-17 a) How is Gideon forgetting the "lesson of the 300" (7:2)? b) What kinds of emotions result when you forget God's grace?

3. a) 8:1-17. Why do you think Gideon's response to Succoth and Peniel was different than to Ephraim? (refer to 7:24-25) b) 8:18-21. What do we learn here is the reason that drove Gideon with only 300 men to pursue relentlessly (8:4) and attack a superior (8:10) force? c) One commentator says that Gideon proves we must "beware of the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit!" What do you think that means? What does it mean for us?

Background Note:

The ephod of the high priest (Exodus 28) was a breast plate that covered the wearer's front and back. It was covered with ornamental gold patterns and studded with gems. On the front of the breastplate were the Urim and Thummim--two stones that were used to receive 'yes' or 'no' answers from God. (Many believe that they were two sided stones, much like coins. When they were 'flipped', two 'up-sides' meant yes, two 'down-sides' meant no, and a mixed result meant 'no answer'.) Gideon's ephod (8:24-27) was a copy, and it was an effort to ascertain God's answers to their questions. People came to worship it as an idol.

4. 8:22-35. a) Why did Gideon decline the offer of kingship? b) How could Gideon resist the invitation to rule in the place of God (v.22) yet worship an ephod in the place of God (v.27)?

5. a) What good thing becomes an "ephod" and a "snare" in your life? b) How is prosperity a greater spiritual test than adversity?

6. 9:1-57. a) How is the story of Abimelech distinctly different than that of every other leader we have profiled? b) Why would the narrator devote so much space to this? c) How did Gideon's actions sow the seeds for the disaster of Abimelech (8:29-31) d) How does the parable of the bramble bush (vv.7-21) shed light on the meaning of the narrative?

7. 10:1-5. What is so striking about the simple record of the two judges, Tola and Jair?

Week 7

JUDGES 8:1-10:5

THE FAILURE OF GIDEON'S HOUSE

SOSL 3/98-99

Introduction

Though Judges records a series of revival “cycles”, the cycles become weaker as time goes on. Israel is on a downward spiral. We see this in the career of Gideon. For the first time, the people begin to “backslide” during the tenure of a Judge-Savior. And one of Gideon’s sons, Abimelech, is a spiritual disaster when he becomes a ruler.

1. 8:1-17. Observe Gideon’s response to the Ephraimites (vv.1-3) and the men of Succoth and Peniel (vv.4-17). a) How were the responses of all three groups to Gideon similar? b) What do you think Gideon was feeling on the inside when they dealt with these groups?

a) All three groups were showing Gideon a lack of respect. Ephraimites were essentially jealous. They wanted the glory. Their question: “*why didn’t you call us to fight Midian?*” (v.1) is gratuitous. It is very unlikely that Ephraim would have responded to a call from Gideon or would have been willing to march under his command. Remember that Gideon was from a very low-status family in a low status tribe (6:15). Ephraim appears to have been one of the strongest tribes economically and militarily. Gideon (probably rightly) did not call on them because they would not have come with him. However, now they are very eager for “a slice of the pie”. The victors over Midian would become very wealthy with all the booty and plunder. They were angry that they had not been brought in on the deal. Thus they are sharply criticizing Gideon, even though he is the victorious general. Actually they are really only confirming Gideon’s original concerns. Even now they show him very little deference and respect, but rather they begin to berate and scold him. Despite all he has done for Israel, they will not give him any respect.

Succoth and Peniel, in a different way, also show a lack of respect in and gratitude to Gideon. They “*taunt*” (8:15) Gideon. In spite of his weariness and risk and the brilliance of his military work up to now, the towns refuse to give him supplies and support during his support. They say, “Do you have these Midianites in your hand? No? Then don’t look to us for help!” They mock him and predict that he is not going to be able accomplish his objective--to overtake and capture them. If he doesn’t accomplish his objective, the Midianites will regroup and return and destroy the towns that helped Gideon, as well as Gideon himself. So they are saying, “You’ve been lucky up to now! There is no way you are going to be successful. You are in over your head! Don’t expect any help from us! Dig your own grave, mister. Leave us out of it.” So again, Gideon finds that despite all he is accomplished, he still cannot command any respect from the people he has risked all to save.

b) Gideon’s words and deeds give us some indication of what he was feeling. First, his pride has been very hurt. He very pointedly mentions how they “*taunted me*” (8:15) . Despite all that he has done, he cannot command the admiration and honor he feels he deserves. Second, that hurt pride and “loss of face” has been turned into a violent rage. He tells Succoth that he will return to “*tear their flesh with desert thorns*” (8:7) and then he does so (8:16). The word “*tear*” means literally to “thresh”. Grain was “threshed” out of its husks by pulling heavy, sharp objects over it. Gideon evidently “threshed” their flesh by flailing them with sharp thorns and briers. It is probable that all or most of them died. He also sacked and killed the men of the town of Peniel. So Gideon acted as a man who has experienced a

painful loss of face or respect. He *“teaches them a lesson”* v.16 in respect by torturing and killing them.

2. 8:1-17 a) How is Gideon forgetting the “lesson of the 300” (7:2)? b) What kinds of emotions result when you forget God’s grace?

a) In 7:2 God makes the startling claim, *“you have too many men for me to deliver Midian in their hands.”* Why? *“that Israel may not boast against me that her own hand has saved her.”* God says that there is a terrible spiritual danger involved in the reception of any blessing. Our hearts deeply believe that we can save ourselves by our own ability and power. So we use any victory in life as a confirmation of that belief. For example, imagine a man who works extremely hard at his job because he needs to prove himself through financial success. What is the worst thing that can happen to him? Someone says: “career failure”. Of course, someone who is basing their happiness and identity on their work will be devastated by career failure. But at least, through the failure, he may be disabused of his illusion. He may realize that a person’s dignity is not measured by his status or money, and he may realize that those things could never fulfill. No, the worst thing that can happen to him is “career success”. Success will only confirm his belief that he can fulfill himself and control his own life. He will be more a slave to success and money than if he failed. He will feel proud and superior to others. He will expect deference and bowing and scraping from others.

This is why God wanted Gideon’s victory to be so miraculous that everyone--including Gideon--would know it was an act of free grace. God wanted no one to begin to make an idol out of Gideon’s military brilliance, nor an idol out of military power. He wanted no pride and arrogance to grow, which always leads to a violence. But we see here that despite all God’s precautions, Gideon does expect honor and gratitude for what he has done. The people of Succoth and Peniel might be excused at disbelieving that Gideon with his little band would be able to finish off the Midianites. But Gideon does not say, “yes, I know it is hard to believe we can beat them. But it is all God’s grace.” Instead, he says essentially, “you dare to doubt *me*? I’ll show you my power when I get back.” Gideon’s need for gratitude and respect shows that his success has been the worst thing for him. He is now becoming addicted and dependent on his success.

b) There are many answers to this question. Here are four possible ones. When we forget that we are saved by sheer grace, not by our performance, then--

-- we may become filled with anxiety. “If I slip up, if I make a wrong move here, I could lose everything.” But we must think, instead, “All the things I have are really gifts of grace. They aren’t here because of my performance, but by God’s generosity. He loves me enough to lose his only Son for me, surely he will continue to give me what I need. Console yourself”

--we may become filled with pride and anger. “I am not getting what I deserve! People are not treating me right! Who do they think they are?” But we must think, instead, “All the things I have are really gifts of grace. I have never gotten what I deserve--and I never will! If God gave me what I deserved, I’d be dead. Humble yourself.”

--we may become filled with guilt. “I have blown it! My problems mean he’s abandoned me.” But we must think, instead, “All the things I have are the results of God’s grace. I never earned them to begin with--so I couldn’t have un-earned them. He accepted me long ago even though he knew I would do this. This was in my heart all along--I just didn’t see it, but he did. He’s with me now. Be confident, Self.”

--we may become filled with boredom and lethargy. "Sure, I'm a Christian. Sure I have good things. So what?" But we must think, instead, "All the things I have--every one--is a gift of grace. The very fact I am a Christian is a miracle. Be amazed. Be in wonder, Self."

3. a) 8:1-17. Why do you think Gideon's response to Succoth and Peniel was different than to Ephraim? (refer to 7:24-25) b) 8:18-21. What do we learn here is the reason that drove Gideon with only 300 men to pursue relentlessly (8:4) and attack a superior (8:10) force? c) One commentator says that Gideon proves we must "beware of the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit!" What do you think that means? What does it mean for us?

a) So why does Gideon's responses become increasingly violent? Why does he control himself with Ephraim but grow increasingly uncontrolled as the chapter goes on? We should remember that Ephraim was simply a lot stronger militarily. They had already destroyed two of the kings of the Midianites (7:24-25) while Gideon had as of yet not captured any. Perhaps Gideon was simply intimidated by them. He could not strike at them, because he didn't have the power. The snub and scolding by Ephraim was hard to take, but he held his tongue. However, now the "smart" of his humiliation before them made it harder and harder to take the taunts of Succoth and Peniel. Gideon simply stored his hurt and anger until the accumulated weight of it became too much for him to hold back. So the reason for Gideon's increasingly violent temper is the power of accumulated bitterness.

b) We get a shock when we get to 8:18. He asks them, "*what about the men you killed at Tabor?*" We here learn something that the narrator has not told us until now. These two kings had killed Gideon's brothers. And he admits (v.19) that he would not have destroyed them otherwise. In other words, Gideon's ruthless, remarkable pursuit and brave attack had really been motivated by a desire for personal vengeance. This is why Gideon now asks his oldest son, Jether, only a boy, to kill them. It would be both humiliating to the enemy to have a mere youth do the execution, and it would be "fitting" (in Gideon's mind) to have his son kill the murderers of his own uncles. But this is also both bloodthirsty and cruel. Poor Jether is petrified, and so are Zebah and Zalmunna. (One commentator says that a boy could "hack and bungle the execution". They urged Gideon to do the job, since it would be both less painful and less humiliating.)

c) Michael Wilcock writes:

Gideon has become, even on the testimony of his enemies, a man of majesty (8:18) and strength (8:21). But there is something less than admirable at the heart of him. for all the development of his great abilities. Beware the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit! Wilcock, p. 86.

The "gifts of the Spirit" are abilities for doing, while the "fruit of the Spirit" are character qualities of being. "Gifts" are God-given abilities to lead, speak, think, counsel and otherwise perform. "Fruit" are qualities of love, joy, peace, humility, unselfishness, and so on. One of the greatest dangers for Christians is to "rest on our gifts" while neglecting the cultivation of fruit. We may flatter ourselves because we help so many people, or because we are able to lead ministries, or because we have deep Biblical knowledge that therefore we are walking with God. But underneath we may be harboring selfishness, pride, rage, anxiety that is not being dealt with by prayer and God's grace. Gideon is an example. He has become remarkable in his abilities. He is now a great leader, with God's help. But he has not cleansed his heart of pride, fear, and anger with a knowledge of God's grace. This means that we too must not neglect the "interior life" of prayer, repentance, and self-examination.

Background Note:

The ephod of the high priest (Exodus 28) was a breast plate that covered the wearer's front and back. It was covered with ornamental gold patterns and studded with gems. On the front of the breastplate were the Urim and Thummim--two stones that were used to receive 'yes' or 'no' answers from God. (Many believe that they were two sided stones, much like coins. When they were 'flipped', two 'up-sides' meant yes, two 'down-sides' meant no, and a mixed result meant 'no answer'.) Gideon's ephod (8:24-27) was some sort of reproduction, and it was an effort to ascertain God's answers to their questions. People came to worship it as an idol.

4. 8:22-35. a) Why did Gideon decline the offer of kingship? b) How could Gideon resist the invitation to rule in the place of God (v.22) yet worship an ephod in the place of God (v.27)?

a) Gideon is offered the kingship of all of Israel. The offer in v.22 is for one man to be the ruler of all the tribes, and to have that rule be a dynastic one, passing on down to Gideon's descendants. This is a major departure from the rule of the judge. A judge was anointed by God as evidenced by his (or her) abilities to deal with the crisis at hand. But kingship would be appointed by human beings and would pass on down to others automatically. The purpose of kingship over judgeship was ostensibly stability. But Gideon rightly discerns the underlying motivation for kingship. The people want a king rather than to be ruled directly by God (v.23). In other words, Gideon realizes that Israel's problems had not been due to the fact that they needed a stabilizing human king, but they were due to the fact that they had not obeyed their true, divine king fully. The desire to create a human king was really a slap in the face of God. It was an implicit statement that their problems had come because of their inadequate forms of government, rather than from their lack of loyalty to the Lord.

Ultimately, the desire to have a human king was really the desire to "wrest control" of their governance away from God. With a king, there would be no need to wait for God's choice of a savior. So the desire of kingship is another effort at self-salvation. They do not want to be dependent on God's grace and salvation.

b) Ironically, Gideon almost immediately contradicts the very thing he has just said. He asks for a financial reward for their deliverance. Then he takes the new wealth and creates his own copy of the ephod of the high priest, which is at the Tabernacle in Shiloh (18:31). The ephod was something that designated the true tabernacle where God chose to dwell, and it was also a way to discern God's will in times of crisis. But Gideon, in order to enhance the standing of his own house, makes his own copy. This means that he essentially sets up his own rival tabernacle. This is just as much a way of trying to "control" God as setting up a kingship. (In many ways, it is even more overt!) Gideon wanted people to come to him for God's guidance, instead of the tabernacle God himself designed. Gideon was using God to consolidate his power, instead of serving God.

How could Gideon do this? It is simple. He knew something intellectually which had not really gripped his heart. He had a mental grasp of the doctrine of God's grace, and he could give the right answer in some situations. But his heart had not really understood how this truth worked itself out in all of life. A good example of this is Galatians 2:14. Peter believes the gospel that we are saved by sheer grace, so no one Christian is no better than any other. But though he knows this in his head, he instinctively recoils from eating with Gentile Christians. (He had been trained all his life to believe that pagan Gentiles were unclean and morally inferior to Jews.) Paul confronts him and says, "you are not walking *in line with the gospel*." What Peter knew quite well in his head he still had not completely grasped internally. Therefore he was functionally operating in a different way than he taught with

his head and mouth. It is the same here. Gideon had enough idea about the dangers of self-salvation to reject the kingship, but he fell into idolatry somewhere else.

5. a) What good thing becomes an “ephod” and a “snare” in your life? b) How is prosperity a greater spiritual test than adversity?

a) This story means that any good thing can become a “snare” to us. When we think of “idolatry” we think of the worship of terrible blood-thirsty deities. But here, the worship of the priest’s ephod is a way to tell us that very good things can be, in many ways, worse snares. God wants us to have friends, to have family relationships, to use our gifts in vocation and career--but this shows us vividly that we can make these good things into ways to control God and to put him in our debt and to save ourselves through our performance. Anything that we use in that way “snares” and enslaves us. We have to have them, we have to succeed because they are the way we are going to make it in life.

This story is a very vivid warning for also for Christians who are the most active in church and ministry. The Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon once warned his ministry students, “don’t go into the ministry to save your soul”. He knew that it was very possible to actually rely on your service to God as your salvation. You can very easily “rest spiritually” in your service to God as the reason he should favor you and help you and bless you. That is to make Christianity a savior rather than Christ. It is to worship the priest’s ephod. How subtle. How deadly.

b) Thomas Carlyle was reputed to have said: “only one in a hundred passes the test of prosperity”. When Gideon was a reluctant, frightened recruit he so deeply distrusted his own competence that he needed multiple assurances from God that he would be helped by divine grace. But by the end of his life, Gideon has built an empire and is pursuing advantage for his own family and his own glory rather than God’s. He no longer goes to God for assurance. He is quite sure of himself, and so he falls.

In many ways, adversity is not as spiritually dangerous as prosperity. In adversity we are shown our true weakness and need for God. In adversity, we come to see the things our hearts trust rather than God. In prosperity, we are not forced to see any of this. We saw in early chapter 8 that Gideon had neglected to work into his heart what he had learned that night of the trumpets--that God’s salvation was by grace. Continued success enabled him to continue to neglect the examination of his own heart. In the end, Gideon did not change Israel because his own heart was not changed.

6. 9:1-57. a) How is the story of Abimelech distinctly different than that of every other leader we have profiled? b) Why would the narrator devote so much space to this? c) How did Gideon’s actions sow the seeds for the disaster of Abimelech (8:29-31) d) How does the parable of the bramble bush (vv.7-21) shed light on the meaning of the narrative?

a) Up until this chapter, there has been a very familiar cycle or sequence. First, the people fall into sin, then they cry out to the Lord for help. Third, God raises up a Judge or savior who then leads a rescue. But now we have a complete departure in the person of Abimelech. First, why he rises. Every other figure is brought into leadership by God. But this man--Abimelech--is brought on to the scene because he is a son of Gideon. Second, how he governs. The other figures govern on the basis of some revelation from God. But here authority is not a matter of judging or delivering but rather is a naked exercise of power. Third, his source of strength. It takes some time for the reader to realize that nowhere in this narrative, from 8:34 to 10:6 is the Lord mentioned by name.

b) What we have is a picture of society and leadership with God completely out of the picture. There is nothing more important to see.

c) Gideon lived the life of an Eastern potentate, having many wives and concubines. This always is destructive to the lives of the women and children. Abimelech means “my father is king”--a very odd name, considering that Gideon turned down the kingship. It may mean that Gideon was very proud of his power and/or wished he had been made king. Abimelech, as a mixed race child of a concubine, would have certainly had lower status growing up. His resentment and lust for power and respect would bear bitter fruit.

d) The trees are looking for a king. The olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine all produce very valuable products. Oil, figs, and wine were the staples of the Palestinian economy. If anyone should be king of the trees, they surely are qualified. But finally, the bramble bush volunteers to be king. But the bramble bush does not provide anything useful for anyone. First, it is too short and scraggly to provide shade from the heat, and the only thing that can come out of it is not oil or fruit, but fire. Bramble bushes often caught fire which spread to the other plants and trees to destroy them. Wise horticulturists always removed bramble bushes that were growing near any valuable plants. So the kingship of the bramble bush will inevitably lead to disaster. Only fire can be the fruit of such a plant.

Jotham is simply saying that “your sins will find you out”. Evil always destroys itself. Breaking God’s laws set up strains in the fabric of the universe that will always lead to disaster. Gideon’s actions distorted the heart of Abimelech. Abimelech’s rise to power sowed the seeds of the destruction of Shechem. There is no escape for or from evil.

7. 10:1-5. What is so striking about the simple record of the two judges, Tola and Jair?

These verses don’t tell us much about Tola and Jair, but they tell us volumes about God.

The terminology that Tola “*rose to save Israel*” and that “*he led Israel*” is the same language used of Deborah in 4:4-5. Remember that Deborah was, possibly the best of the judges, and here we see that God has raised up someone else who saved and led Israel in the same way.

But why? Did Israel cry out asking for mercy and help? No. If anything, the ninth chapter of Judges is the bleakest in the whole book. The people have completely abandoned God. He is not even named in the narrative. They have sunk to the depths and they are not even crying out in repentance, yet God sends them back to back (Tola, then Jair) Judge-Saviors. This is astonishing. Justice demands, surely, that this people be cut off. By rights, Israel should not survive as a nation. Yet God responds by sending 45 years of peaceful administration under these two men.

Here we see what we have seen all along--the tension between the conditionality and the unconditionality of God’s dealing with his people. On the one hand, he has allowed them to get very “burned” by their sin. They chose a bramble-bush as king, and whenever we sin, fire comes out from it and burns us painfully. Yet now he responds by sending salvation *unconditionally*. In fact, it is probable that the only reasons the Israelites repent in chapter 10 (and they do it very thoroughly, we will see) is because God through Tola and Jair has provided “space”--rest--that enables repentance and renewal to grow again. Tola and Jair is sheer grace--they are not a response to *anything* good that Israel does at all.

Is God being unjust? If we did not have the New Testament, we would have to conclude that he is. Only the cross will show us that God's truth and justice are not being abandoned in favor of his mercy. Because of the death of Jesus, God is both "just" and "justifier" of those who believe (Romans 3:26). It also means that we have the confidence that he will never leave us or forsake us.

Week 8

JUDGES 10:6-12:15 JEPHTHAH: THE OUTLAW LEADER

1. 10:6-18. a) What is the relationship the gods Israel worships to the peoples that enslave them? b) Why do you think the word 'sold' is used in v.7? (cf. Judges 2:14, 3:8, 4:2 with Rom.1:24-25) c) What does this teach us for our own lives?

a) What is the relationship of the gods Israel worships to the peoples that enslave them?

The Baals and the Ashtoreths were the gods of the 'native' Canaanites. But the gods of Aram (to the northwest) and Sidon (to the north), or Ammon and Moab (to the east) and the Philistines (to the south) belonged to peoples outside of Canaan who often came in to Canaan and oppressed the Israelites. Othniel helped Israel against the king of Aram (3:10), Ehud against the Moabites and Ammonites (3:12), Shamgar against the Philistines (3:31), and Deborah against Canaanites (5:23). In other words, every time Israel worshipped the idols of a nation, that nation ended up oppressing them. In this passage, we read in v.6 that they "*served...the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines*" and then in consequence, v.7 they were "*sold...into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites*". So idolatry leads to enslavement. Later, in v.11, God names seven nations that oppressed them, which is parallel to the seven-fold idolatry of v.6.

It is interesting to notice that not only does idolatry lead to slavery, but slavery to idolatry. You would think that, once a nation was oppressing and enslaving Israel, that they would absolutely hate the gods of that nation. But though the Ammonites had oppressed Israel in 3:13, here is Israel serving their gods in v.6, which leads to greater enslavement (v.7). Despite their pain and misery, Israel continues to worship the same idols that have let them down and brought them into trouble.

b) Why is the word 'sold' used?

This is a strong word. It has been used of what God did in Judges 2:14, 3:8, 4:2 as well as here. When you sell an animal to another, it means the new owner can do with it as he pleases. When we look back at how God "sold" the Israelites before, we know this does not mean that he abandoned them or nullified his promises to them. It does mean, however, that has stopped protecting them in some way. He lets the things they have been serving actually begin to dominate and "own" them.

Romans 1:24-25 makes a fascinating parallel passage. There Paul talks about idolatry. He speaks of people who "*worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.*" (v.25) What was the result? v.24- "*therefore God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts*". The word "lusts" in Greek is *epithumia*, a word that means an overwhelming drive, an enslaving uncontrollable desire. To "give up" means that God allows the things we hope in place of God to become ruling powers in our lives. It is a punishment of "natural consequences". Thus idolatry and slavery go hand in hand. Idolatry leads to slavery and slavery to idolatry.

c) What does this teach us for our own lives?

God says, "If you want to live for money, instead of for me, then money will rule your life. It will control your heart and emotions. If you want to live for popularity instead of for me, then popular acclaim will rule and control you. If you want another god besides me--go ahead. Let's see how merciful it is to you, how effective it is in saving and guiding and enlightening you." So to be "sold" means to be "owned" by the things that you make more important than God.

2. 10:6-18. a) Why does God respond so brusquely to their cry in v.11? What does this tell us about their repentance in v.10? b) Is there a contradiction between v.13 and v.16?

a) Why does God respond so brusquely?

God does not immediately forgive them and begin to answer their prayer. We also saw this in 6:7-10 where the people cried to God and in response God sends them a stern warning. Here God's response is even more surprisingly harsh. He tells them that he will not answer them--that they should cry to the gods they have been worshipping.

Why? One commentator is very insightful:

Up to now we may have given Israel the benefit of the doubt, and assumed that when she cries to him it is a cry of repentance, shallow though that repentance maybe. She is sorry for what she has done, and wishes she were different. But that assumption now has to be questioned. Yes, the cry is one of recognition...recognition, however, is not the same as repentance, as we see from the Lord's reply, 'Go and cry to the gods you have chosen', it is as though he is saying, 'I know what this cry of yours is. It is merely a cry for help, which might just as well be addressed to the Baals as to me.'
Wilcock, p.108.

Michael Wilcock observes that when God says, "*Go and cry to the gods you have chosen*" (v.14), he means that their request is simply the request of a weak party to a stronger one for the alleviation of their misery. They are saying, "OK, you have us over a barrel! We are in trouble because we broke your rules! We cry 'uncle'. Now help us please." But repentance is heart-felt conviction and hatred of what was done, regardless of whether it caused trouble or not. In other words, they are sorry for the consequences of their sin, but they are not really sorry for the sin. It is, as it were, an "idolatrous" turning from idolatry. They are treating God as if he were one of their idols. They are trying to push the right buttons, make the right sacrifices, in order to get him to exert power for them.

b) Is there a contradiction between v.13 and v.16?

In v.13, God says categorically that "*I will no longer save you*", because they have served other gods. Because they have so blatantly broken his covenant and commandments, and because even now they are not truly repenting. So he says in effect, "I am a just God--I must punish you." Then in v.16, we are told that after the Israelites had begun to repent, "*he could bear Israel's misery no longer.*" He said he would not save them--and then he saves them! Is that a contradiction?

On the one hand, many people say "yes, it is a contradiction", and by that they mean it is an oversight on the part of the author--an 'error' in the Bible. But these two statements are too close together for us to imagine that they were some oversight by the writer. Others say "yes, it is a contradiction", meaning that it depicts a petulant, immature God, who gets peeved and makes threats and then changes his mind. But again, does it make sense that the writer would have depicted a God like this if he thought this represented childishness on the part of the deity?

On the other hand, many people say, "no, it is not a contradiction". They resolve it like this. In verse 13, God is saying that he will not save them until they destroy their idols, and when they do, in v.15, he then proceeds to deliver them. But the problem with this view is that v.13 does not say, "I will won't save you until you repent" but "I will *no longer* save you."

Please bear with me when I say--yes it is a contradiction. This is the contradiction we mentioned earlier in the introduction and in the first two chapters. One commentator says:

“Will God’s holiness and his demand for obedience override his promises to Israel? Or will...his gracious promises...mean that he will somehow overlook their sin? As much as theologians may seek to establish the priority of law over [love or vice versa], the book of Judges will not settle this question....This account portrays something of the conflict within God himself about his relationship with Israel. They sin and provoke him to anger (10:6-16), so much so that he swears he will deliver them no more (v.13). And yet he has committed himself to Israel so completely that he becomes himself vexed and indignant about their suffering...”

God’s relationship with Israel is at once both conditional and unconditional. He will not remove his favor, but Israel must live in obedience and faith...” Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. p.126-127

It is tempting to “resolve” this conflict too quickly and neatly. One way is to say, “Basically, God’s blessing is conditional. Unless we live up to Biblical principles, we won’t have God’s favor upon our lives.” The other way to say, “Basically, God’s blessing is unconditional. Even when we sin, God is so merciful that he just accepts us anyway.” Either way we are in dangerous territory. The first approach impugns the power of God’s love and gracious promises; the second approach impugns the holiness and justice of God. The Old Testament does not resolve the tension. Only when we get to the cross of Jesus Christ do we see how God can be both just and loving. There God’s love met the law’s demand.

3. 10:6-16. a) What do these verses teach us about steps to spiritual renewal/ revival? b) What does v.15-16 tell us about real repentance? c) Which of the “steps” do you most need to consider or do?

a) Steps to spiritual renewal.

We need to notice that though each revival cycle shares some broad commonalities with the other cycles, each one is unique in so many of its features. Every time there is something new and different and unlike the past. This warns us not to think that we can keep up our spiritual vitality by repeating the very same actions and rituals from the past. Nevertheless, some “steps” to spiritual renewal can be discerned.

First, there is *some kind of trouble*. Something comes in to our lives to remind us that we are weak and not in control of our lives. For the Israelites, it is always the oppression of some foreign power. But anything can have the same effect that makes us feel bound and weak, that humbles us and underscores our powerlessness.

Second, there is *renewed, prevailing prayer*. This particular passage shows that the prayer cannot be a one-time event. It must continue and it may include a sense of “wrestling” with God. God may seem to turn a deaf ear to us. We may need to do a great deal of soul-searching and reflection. Prayer must be consistent and relentless.

Third, there is *fighting through to real repentance*. (See immediately below). They come through to a deep repentance and conviction of sin.

Fourth, God *raises up a leader* (v.17-18 looks toward this in chapter 11). God anoints certain people to lead us into spiritual renewal. We are not islands--we need community in order to stay warm and vital in our spirituality.

b) What do we learn of real repentance?

Two things at least can be noticed. (Look for others besides the ones mentioned here.)

First, when they say, “Do with us as you wish, though we still beg for mercy” (v.15) that shows a heart change. Before, they were focused completely on their condition and comfort. They were saying, “We are broken--fix us please!” But now they are willing to admit that God is under no obligation to fix them and take away their trouble. This means they are saying, “we want you, even it means we are going to keep suffering”. Why is that a sign of real faith? If we say, “I want you *if* you give me ‘X’”, we reveal that “X” is our real ultimate god. When we say, “I want you regardless of X, Y, or Z”, then we are making the true God our God again.

Second, when they got rid of their idols, they showed that they were going beneath the surface to change their hearts, not just their superficial behavior. Judges shows that the Israelites often changed their behavior in order to curry favor with the Lord, but they kept their idols in their homes, as “insurance”. But repentance gets beneath the surface. It does not just focus on behavior but on motives.

So the two signs of real repentance are 1) a sorrow for sin, rather than just for consequences, and 2) a sorrow over idolatrous motives, not just behavioral change.

4. 11:1-11. a) How did Jephthah’s early history make him an unexpected deliverer? b) How did it, however, prepare him for his Judgeship? c) How is Jephthah like the other Judges and even Jesus in this regard? d) How can terrible troubles prepare you to be a person who mightily helps others?

a) How did his history make him an unlikely deliverer?

In the world’s eyes, leaders are people who have an Ivy League pedigree, strong family background (and thus emotional health), and no police record! But Jephthah is someone without any of these things. He was the illegitimate son of a prostitute, who was driven out of his home, probably as a very young person, by his half-brothers. So he came from (to say the least) a deeply dysfunctional family. Then, in the wilderness, he attracted a band of “worthless” men who lived through robbery. In other words, Jephthah was in organized crime, a kind of underworld boss. Or (more romantically) you could think of him as a pirate. But he was essentially driven into a life of crime. He was a complete outcast and a criminal from a broken home. Yet God raises him up to be the savior.

b) How did it prepare him for his Judgeship?

It is important to notice, however, that Jephthah is not simply prepared to be a savior despite his rejection and marginality and suffering, but through it. Because of his suffering, he has become a mighty warrior, a man of remarkable resourcefulness. And, as vv.4-11 shows us, he is an extremely shrewd negotiator, a man of great intelligence. It was the hardness of his life that made him into a great leader. Had he been raised in comfort and ease, he never would have become anyone like this.

c) How is Jephthah like the other Judges and Jesus?

Again we see the remarkable pattern of God’s salvation. Nearly all the Judges are people who are socially marginal and “unexpected” leaders--people who do not fit the world’s concepts of celebrity, power and greatness. Ehud was handicapped, Deborah was a woman, Gideon was at the bottom of his class and the member of a poor family. But Jephthah in many ways goes beyond this. He was “despised and rejected” by his people. They had “hated” and “driven him out” (v.7). But Jephthah is simply a foreshadow of Jesus himself, who was “despised and rejected” who came to his own but “his own knew him not”.

Most importantly, Jesus did not save us in spite of his rejection and marginality but through it. God saved us through his defeat and weakness. Here, then, we see that this judge is very much like the great judge.

Note: Many have noticed the similarity between the Israelites dialogue with Jephthah in 11:4-11 and with God in 10:10-16. The Gileadite leaders ask Jephthah for help but he replies that they have no claim on him, because of how they treated him. They respond by asking him for help again, this time with more humility. This is exactly the same exchange that God had with Israel. What does this mean? It means that God is setting up this parallel between himself and Jephthah, because God's leaders are a "type" and pattern which point to the true Judge and Savior of all.

d) How can terrible troubles prepare a person to help others?

There are many more ways than I mention here. But here are some ideas. 1) Troubles can make you much more sympathetic to others. Since you've been weak yourself, and you don't insensitively ask, "what's wrong? Buck up!" You are gentler and more patient with people who are suffering. 2) Troubles also can undermine self-pity. A hard and difficult life can make you grateful for what you do have, and a grateful spirit makes you less self-absorbed. Self-pity, on the other hand, keeps you from noticing or understanding the hurts of others, and it drains you of energy necessary for involvement with people. 3) Troubles can teach you methods and means for handling life that you can pass on to others. 4) Sometimes, troubles in your past can give you confidence and hope in dark times in general. You may not have any "answers" to another person in suffering, but the very fact that you survived it and came out the other side is an encouragement and inspiration to those around you.

5. 11:12-28. The king of Ammon justifies his attack on the Israelites by insisting that the land they now live in belonged formerly to the Ammonites (v.13). What three arguments does Jephthah use to refute this claim in his letter of diplomacy? Why do you think this fell on deaf ears?

Jephthah's first argument is *historical*. In 11:15-22, he sets the record straight. When Israel came from Egypt, the Ammonites and Moabites lived in the land east of the Arnon. They asked Moab and Ammon for permission to pass through that land but they were refused. Then they traveled to the land in question (v.13), north of the Arnon to the Jabbok. It was the Amorites and their king Sihon who lived there. When they asked to pass through the Amorites' land, Sihon attacked them (v.20), but Israel defeated them. They therefore won the land by right of conquest (v.21). So Jephthah is arguing that the land was never the Ammonites', and it was won by Israel fairly from the Ammonites.

The second argument is *theological* (11:23-24). Here Jephthah uses an assumption held in common by all the peoples of that time and place. The Lord, the God of Israel, obviously gave them the land of the Amorites by enabling them to defeat Sihon. Surely, the Ammonites would do the same if their god Chemosh gave them a victory (v.24). This is a shrewd argument. By using their own religious premises, he argues that their God gave them the land.

The third argument is one of *legal precedent* (11:25-27). Jephthah reminds them that the king of Moab at that time did not think it necessary to attack Israel in the land north of the Arnon. He certainly had reason enough to want to displace the newcomers to Canaan, but he did not seem to think it necessary. He did not challenge their right to the land. So why now should the Ammonites do so? If their desire was really (as they alleged in v.13) the rectifying of an old injustice, why didn't Balak, king of Moab do so? Why was he content to

live at peace? Finally, Jephthah sums things up with a very powerful closing argument. “We have been here for 300 years”, Jephthah concludes, “why didn’t you attack us before? That proves that we have not wronged you. This is simply a raw, naked grab for power. *You* are doing the injustice, not us.” (cf.v.26-27).

The reason there was no reply to the message was that there was not possible that could refute Jephthah’s arguments. Jephthah shows that he is not just a mighty warrior, but a skillful leader.

6. 11:29-40. What does Jephthah promise God? Why does he promise it? Why does he keep his promise?

What does Jephthah promise God?

Many people have interpreted Jephthah as promising God an *animal* sacrifice. They believe he was expecting an animal to come out to meet him when he returned, and that he envisioned the offering up of that animal. But there are three reasons that is not a right reading. First, it is unlikely that such homes had animals inside (“from the doors of my house”). Second, if an animal was meant, the noun would have been in a different form--appropriate for a ‘neuter’ object--but it is not. But third, if he had promised God an animal, then when his daughter came through the doors he would never have considered the promise to have had any binding force with regard to her.

A few other well-meaning interpreters have read his daughter’s lament that she never married (v.37-38) and posited that all he vowed was that she would be condemned to perpetual virginity. But the request for a two month reprieve (v.37) before the sentence is carried out (v.39) makes no sense unless he literally sacrificed her life. In short, he did promise to make a human sacrifice to God if God gives him victory. He obviously expected it to be a servant or someone else--not his daughter. Jephthah promised human sacrifice to God.

Why does he promise it?

Deuteronomy 12:31 says that human sacrifice is “*detestable*” and something “*the Lord hates*”. There is no doubt about God’s will in the matter. Why then did he?

First, this means that Jephthah had been deeply de-sensitized to violence by the atrocious cruelty of the pagan cultures around him. This is a most vivid and horrible example of how believers can profess faith in God and hold on to some truth, yet let the world “squeeze them into its mold” (cf.Rom.12:2; Eph.4:22-24). Because the culture around Jephthah was violent, he let that worldly violence come in and live alongside of his other true beliefs. Today, we are more likely to let worldly attitudes toward sex and money come in and live alongside other true beliefs. Paul says: “*Don’t be conformed to this world, but be transformed by a renewal of your mind.*” Jephthah’s mind was not immersed in the Scripture. This shows us how deeply basic morality and moral sense had been eroded in Israel. When they had a revival, they continued to hold on to many pagan practices.

But second, Jephthah was not just infected by the pagan’s moral codes, but was still infected by the pagan, works-righteousness understanding of God’s character. Human sacrifice was how you could “buy off” a pagan God. A pagan worshipper did human sacrifice to say, “let me show you how impressed and awed I am by your power.” But the God of the Bible wants only one human sacrifice--the acknowledgment of his Lordship over every area of life. Rom.12:1-“*Make yourself a living sacrifice, which is your reasonable service*”. But this sacrifice is a grateful response to grace (“your reasonable service”). Jephthah was still

thinking of God as someone that could be impressed and controlled through extravagant, lavish gifts.

Why does he keep it?

This is the hardest one to answer. The best answer is an extension of the same reason he made it. Jephthah seems to have no concept of a God of grace. He sees God as basically like the pagan gods--a being whose favor can be earned through flattery and lavish sacrifices. And when he obviously realizes his rash vow has trapped him (v.35), why does he not simply confess its sinful foolishness and break it and save his daughter? The answer is: he does not trust God. He was trapped by his mistrust of God. He seems to believe that God will strike him down if he doesn't keep it. This is the same pagan, works-righteousness view of God that led him to make the vow.

7. What a terrible story (perhaps the worst in the whole book)! What do you think the author hoped to teach us? What lessons can we learn from this incident.

First, let's consider the simplest lessons. a) We must be extremely careful with our words, our promises, our tongue. We also may find that we have said things that do damage that we cannot undo or take back or make better. 'Set a guard over my lips', prayed the psalmist (141:3). There is a certain power to the spoken word that almost creates "tethers" that bind us. (See James 3:1ff.) When we say angry things, it can tie our heart up in anger that we can't shake. If we say harmful words, it may poison a relationship that we can never reclaim. b) Also, we see that God can "write straight with crooked pencils". God brings a lot of beauty and wisdom and does many good things through non-Christians and through Christians with deep problems. But we must realize that even if God is using us, in the lives of others (as he used Jephthah) that is no guarantee that we are spiritual giants We must "beware of mistaking the operation of spiritual gifts for a measure of spiritual maturity". Just because we are good speakers, leaders, or teachers, and just because God is using us, does not mean our hearts are pleasing to him.

But then there are the deeper lessons. a) We are always far more affected by our culture than the Bible. We are far more affected by our culture than we think. It is clear and easy to see, from our position how Jephthah ignored the Biblical teaching on the sacredness of human life and imbibed his culture's view of the cheapness of human life. But surely many people at other times and places would be astounded at how much money Christians in our culture spend on themselves. (That is just one example.) Jephthah makes us look at ourselves and ask, "what enormous blindspots do I have?"

b) The biggest lesson has to do with our inability to believe in a God of grace. In the Garden of Eden, the first lie of the serpent was to make us disbelieve that God had our best interests in mind. Since then, we have always felt we had to control God, that we cannot trust God.

Consider in what ways you would live differently if you really believed God was completely committed to you and on your side?

Week 9

JUDGES 13:1-25

THE BIRTH OF SAMSON

SOSL 3/98-99

1. 13:1-2- How is this cycle of apostasy and renewal a) the same, and b) different from the earlier ones? Why does the writer so often add “in the eyes of the Lord”? (cf. Judges 21:25). What does the term tell us about sin?

a) How it is the same.

We are told that, as usual, the Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord. And secondly, we are told that the result was oppression and slavery. Sin always leads to slavery (Rom.6:12ff.)

b) How it is different.

Even though verse 2 and following shows that God has begun to prepare a deliverer and a salvation, there is no indication that Israel was repenting or crying out. In all the early cycles, the prayer and repentance of the people is crucial (3:9; 3:15; 6:7; 10:10). In 10:1-7 there is also no indication of prayer and repentance on the part of the people, but the description of that apostasy-renewal cycle is very general and sketchy and may have simply been omitted from the account. (See also 3:31, where it is not mentioned). But here we see for certain that Israel has sunk so low spiritually that God has to act for their salvation unilaterally. He saves them even though they have not asked for it, nor even groaned in misery (2:18).

c) Why does the writer add “in the eyes of the Lord”?

This term--“*evil in the eyes of the Lord*” shows up first in 2:11 and is continually repeated. It stands in stark contrast to the last verse of Judges 21:25--“*in those days...everyone did what was right in his own eyes*”. (NIV blurs this verse’s parallel with 13:1 by translating it ‘as he saw fit’.) The writer is making the point that many of the things the Israelites did were not evil “in their eyes”. In other words, by their perception, most or all of their behavior was perfectly acceptable. They did not go about thinking, “I know this is evil, but I am going to do it anyway”. Yet “in God’s eyes”, the behavior was wicked. This teaches at least two things about sin.

(1) Definition of sin. First, this term “*the eyes of the Lord*” in contrast with our “*own eyes*” teaches us that sin does not ultimately consist of violating our conscience or violating our personal standards or violating community standards but rather than sin consists of violating God’s will for us. This flies in the face of the modern thinking, of course. It is continually asserted in innumerable forums and venues, that “only you can define what’s right and wrong for you”. In other words, “my *own eyes*”--my heart’s feelings and my mind’s perceptions--are the only way to determine right and wrong. Common sense contradicts this, even if we didn’t have the Bible. If evil is only determined by our *own eyes*, how can we tell the Nazis that it was wrong to exterminate Jews. (They thought they were doing the human race a favor, or even doing justice for past imagined ‘wrongs’.) But once we admit that our *own eyes* is not sufficient for defining sin, then whose eyes are? Is evil defined by what is so in “expert’s” eyes? Or in the “majority’s” eyes? These views don’t avoid holocausts either. No, the Bible’s answer is the right one. Sin is defined as violating our relationship with God, with violating the will of God for us. What God sees as sin is sin, regardless of what we feel or the experts say or the culture agrees on.

(2) Deception of sin. Second, this term “*the eyes of the Lord*” in contrast with our “*own eyes*” reminds us of how easily self-deceived we are. The Israelites had psychological and cultural rationalizations and supports for their sin, so they were in a kind of “group denial”. In their own “eyes” or perception, there was nothing wrong with what they were doing. Doubtless, there was a deep, unconscious knowledge that they were out of touch with their God, but at

the conscious level, they had no overt guilt and they had lots of explanations for their lifestyles. We don't know what they were, but we must remember that the heart of their (and our) sin is idolatry, and idols are not bad things but good things turned into ultimate hopes and goals. So the line between hard work and making an idol of work (or loving your family and making an idol of it) is a thin one. This should lead us to be very careful to do constant self-evaluation through reflection on the Bible and through personal accountability to others. We are always finding ways to rationalize sins such as materialism or worry or bitterness or pride. They don't look bad in "our eyes". As one writer put it, "Satan paints sin with virtue's colors".

2. 13:1-3. a) What characteristics does this special birth share with that of Isaac, Samuel, John the Baptist, and Jesus? b) What does this list tell us about God? c) Notice the similarity to the announcement in Luke 1:31. How would Samson's birth have begun to prepare Israel for the real Messiah? (see v.5)

a) The list of shared traits.

(1) Each of the sons was a bringer of God's salvation in some way. Isaac bears the Messianic seed. Samuel and John the Baptist are going to be prophets. Jesus is the Savior, of course.

(2) Each of the births was something the mothers were humanly incapable of. The mothers of Isaac, Samson, Samuel, and John were all barren and physically unable to conceive. Thus the birth was miraculous. Had the birth come to women who were physically capable of bearing children, the power of God would not have been discernible. In the birth of Jesus, however, the degree of "miraculousness" goes off the charts. In the earlier births, God's power simply opened mothers' wombs to the fathers. But in Jesus' birth, God actually enabled Mary to conceive without a human father at all.

(3) Each of the births happened in the shadow of disgrace. In ancient times, a woman's fertility was a major part of her honor and dignity. A woman who could not bear children lived under a cloud of shame. In each case, God visited in mercy to lift the shame and disgrace and to bring the mothers honor and joy. In the birth of Jesus, again, the theme goes off the charts. While the other births lifted disgrace from the mothers, the birth of Jesus brought disgrace to the mother. This reminds us that while the other saviors gained honor and glory in order to do their work, Jesus lost all his honor and glory to do his work.

b) What does this list tell us about God?

(1) First, and primarily it tells us that God is a God of grace. God's salvation does not via human ability and performance. God deliberately sends his salvation into the world through people who are weak and incapable of it. Why? It is to show us that salvation has to be accomplished for us by someone else, and to show us that we can only receive it by admitting our weakness and incapability.

(2) Second, it tells us that in general God cares for and works through people who are not respectable and popular and acclaimed. Rather, he tends to care for and work through marginal people who are considered "most unlikely to succeed". We have seen this with nearly every judge in the book. Ehud was disabled; Deborah was a woman; Gideon was from a poor family on the "the wrong side of the tracks"; Jephthah was from the organized crime world. Now we see Samson born to a barren woman. It is the same principle that Nathaniel snorted when he said, "*can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" God loves to confound the world's expectations and turn upside down it's concepts of wisdom, ability, and power (1 Cor. 1:26ff.)

This message in the book of Judges is repeated so often and emphatically that we must reflect on how we can begin to practice it. Do we only ever attempt things that we have the human ability to accomplish? Do we concentrate our friendships among respectable and "sleek" and "connected" people and avoid the unattractive and unsuave and unconnected?

c) How would Samson's birth have prepared for a Messiah?

(1) First, his enormous flaws would have made them yearn for a greater fulfillment of the promise. Samson's 'annunciation' was so full of drama and fanfare, and he himself was so full of might and power, that it would have left Israel yearning for a Savior who was not so flawed.

(2) Second, the annunciation itself asserted that Samson was only going to *begin* the deliverance of Israel. Samson pointed beyond himself to others. The author of Judges would have known, therefore, that Samson was a 'type' of a greater judge--the great King David--who would complete the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines. But we know from our vantage point that the people of God needed an even more extensive salvation than that which David could supply. As David was the greater Samson, so Jesus is the greater David.

(3) Third, the career of Samson would show that God can deliver a whole nation through just one man. We will see more about this in the next lesson.

3. a) What things does God tell Samson's mother(13:3-5)? b) Read Numbers 6:1-21. How was Samson's Nazirite-life unusual? How could living as a Nazirite prepare Samson for service? c) What does this teach us about how God prepares us for service? How has he prepared you for more service to him?

The message of God.

God first announces the miraculous birth of a son (v.3). Second, he says that the child will have to live as a Nazirite (v.4-5) so both the mother and son will have to abide by the Nazirite rule. Third, he says that the boy will grow up to begin a great deliverance of Israel from the Philistines (v.5).

How could living as a Nazirite prepare Samson for service?

The Nazirite vow contained three basic stipulations: the Nazirite a) was not to cut hair during the period of the vow, b) was not to drink any produce from vines--alcoholic or non-alcoholic, and c) was not to contact any dead body. The purpose of the Nazirite vow was to ask for God's special help during a crucial time. It was roughly analogous to 'fasting'. It did was a sign that you were looking to God with great intensity and focus. Keeping one's hair uncut and refraining from the fruit of the vine was a way of showing that you were "in training" toward a goal. By refraining from touching a dead body, you were adopting the stringent rules of ceremonial cleanliness for a priest. Priests were not allowed to touch anything dead because they ministered in God's house every day. Thus the Nazirite was living before the presence of God every day.

[Note: The "clean" laws of the Old Testament included a range of foods and practices that were forbidden to a worshipper who wished to go before God in worship in the tabernacle. These rules were not superstitions. They were God's way to show us that he is holy and that we cannot just go in to the presence of a holy God without purifying ourselves. These were abrogated in the New Testament (Acts 10 and 11) because, in Christ, we are 'clean and acceptable' in God's sight.]

As is clear from the Numbers 6 text, the Nazirite vow was made a) voluntarily and b) for a definite period of time. But Samson was being born into the Nazirite state involuntarily (his parents were taking the vows for him), and he was to stay a Nazirite all his life. Thus his mother was not to drink wine or eat unclean foods, because the Nazirite vow started immediately--when Samson was in her womb! What she ate and drank, Samson-in-utero also would eat and drink. This means that God put Samson under this 'rule' even when he was still unborn. This parallels John the Baptist, who was filled with the Spirit even when he was in his mother's womb (Luke 1:15,41).

How was this to prepare Samson for service? This “*set apart*” Samson. Everyone around him and he himself would see by the unusual standards that he was to be dedicating his life to God’s service. The Nazirite vows (of hair and vine) would mean that Samson (and the community) would always be reminded that he was “in training” for God’s service. Secondly, the vow (of ceremonial cleanness) would remind him (and the community) that he was to always be seeking God’s face and presence every moment of his life. The vows, then were really ways of reminding Samson that God was Lord of every area of his life. He was not to divide his time into “secular” work and living versus “sacred” worship and service on the Sabbath. He was to be always serving God in every aspect and time. We will see, of course, that he did not do this.

What does this teach us about how God prepares for service?

This shows us that God prepares us for service through accountability structures--namely through vows and promises and community discipline. Samson proves that they may not work(!) but that they are still necessary. What accountability structures do we have? We are to relate to one another in community through both formal and informal ties. Formally, we are to join local churches where we trust the leadership and are under their authority. Heb.13:17 is a good example of this. We are to “submit” to our leaders who are “watching over our souls” and who “are in authority over us”. Now no one can be in authority over us unless we make vows and promises to submit to someone’s care and authority over our lives. We can only be the recipients of church discipline (Matt.18:15-20) if we are willing to take vows. Then the community can help us stay on the path of service to God. Informally, we are to admonish each other (Heb.3:13) and confess our sins to each other (James 5:16). This is our New Testament equivalent of the Nazirite vows. (We should no longer use the clean laws, for reasons mentioned above.)

4. 13:6-25. a) What evidences of faith do you find in both Samson’s mother and father? b) Why is the angel’s re-visit both gracious and yet firm? c) How do you react when God won’t give you any more details? Why doesn’t he give us more? d) Why does the angel come back if he has no new information? What does this teach us about raising children (or living life ourselves)?

a) Evidences of faith.

Samson’s mother. First, she simply believed the word from God. She tells her husband the message (v.6ff.), with evident faith, and she had it without any miracle or any demonstration that the messenger was a supernatural personage. Second, she obeyed the word from God. She accepted upon herself the more stringent behavioral code (v.7) in order to have a son who was used in God’s service. Third, she trusted the goodness of God. She explains that God would not have accepted the offerings and would not have recruited them to be parents of a savior if he was going to kill them now (v.23).

Samson’s father. First, he too simply believed the word from God. In this case, it came through his wife. How do we know he believed? (Some people consider his prayer and request for a re-visit to be a lack of faith in God or his wife.) But his prayer in v.8ff. assumes that the prophecy is true. Notice also in 13:12 and 13:17 he says “*when (not if) your words come true*”. Second, he prayed for more help in raising his child. If this was to be a special boy and man, Manoah felt a strong responsibility to raise the child in a way pleasing to God. Third, he showed an understandable desire for “more details”. His request (v.8 and v.12) is basically for more information than God gave them the first time. Surely he can give us more specifics on his will for rearing children!

b) Why is the angel’s re-visit both gracious and yet firm?

It is intriguing that the angel of the Lord, who is probably not an angel but the Son of God himself (see Bible study on Judges 6) is willing to come back, even though he refuses to give

any more information (v.13)! This means that Manoah is not showing a lack of faith, as Zechariah did (Luke 1). The Lord is being very gracious to re-appear and re-confirm in a very vivid way all that he said before. How remarkable that he is willing to come down and come near over and over again. Yet he is also firm. He will not give them any more specifics. They may wish to have lots of rules, but they will have to obey on the basis of the information they have.

c) Why doesn't God give us more?

In general, a parent gives a child fewer details as he or she gets older. When your child is very little, you must virtually follow them around and say "don't touch this" "don't go here" every step of the way. A child doesn't know not to put his finger in a wall socket, and doesn't know not to eat dirt. The older a child gets, the more you expect them to incorporate the parent's values and thinking and wisdom into their own heart so that they don't need detailed instructions all the time. In order to guide children into maturity, parents must increasingly move from lots of external rules to internal motives and principles of wisdom.

In the same way, Christians in the New Testament receive far fewer rules and regulations than believers in the Old Testament. In the OT so much of what you could wear and eat and do was prescribed. And then on the priest's ephod there was the Urim and Thummim which gave 'yes' and 'no' answers to direct questions to God! Many Christians consider this a more advanced level of guidance than we have today. But how could it be? Paul says that instead of being "conformed" (by compliance to external rules) we are to be "transformed" by "the renewal of our minds". Through the Holy Spirit we get "the mind of Christ".

d) Why does he come back when he has no new information?

Many people ask: "why would the angel of the Lord return if he has no new information to give?" Manoah prayed for more help in raising Samson, and the angel apparently refuses to give him any help. But if that is the case, why would he return? A better answer is this-- Manoah *did* get the help he needed to raise Samson, but not in the form he was asking. Manoah asked for information-- "*what is to be the rule for the boy's life and work?*" (v.12). The "rule" for Nazirites is in Numbers 6:1-21, but Manoah was looking for even more regulations and information.

Instead, God gives Manoah a revelation of his glory. He returns to speak of the wonder of his name (v.18) which means testifies to the richness of his glory. Then by ascending in flame (v.20) he indelibly prints in their mind his greatness. Then by not destroying them with his nearness (v.23) he shows his goodness. In other words, the Lord is saying, "you need to know me and my character far more than you need more information. One thousand more rules in the world would not be able to give you direction in the innumerable decisions and choices you will have to make with your son. Only a deep understanding of who I am can give you the guidance you need."

From what we can tell, Manoah was not as sensitive to these spiritual truths as his wife. Samson's own life story indicates that his parents fell quite short in their child-rearing. Yet his message to them is a message to all of us. We need to know God more than we need regulations.

5. 13: 16-21. a) How is the faith of the mother greater in the end than that of the father? b) What lessons for your own life can you see in the father? the mother? c) How many of your problems today stem from a basic mistrust of the goodness of God?

How is the faith of the mother greater?

Basically, the Samson's mother is more spiritually alert than his father through this passage. His mother receives the message and accepts it without question. She does not seem to need to have more details about what to do (as Manoah does). Both times the angel of the Lord appears to *her*, not to Manoah at all.

Then, finally we see that after they both realize that the messenger was really the Lord himself, and they know that no one can see God's face and live (Exod.33), they become fearful for their lives. But while Manoah completely panics, his wife reasons it out. She realizes that they have not died, and that the Lord had graciously come to them when they called, and that they had recruited them for this great purpose. Why would he destroy them now?

"We must consider what this woman did, and the answer is a startling and surprising one--that *she just thought and reasoned*. How simple! And yet how we tend to fail at this point...There is an anti-intellectual spirit with regard to religion. It does not always recognize itself as such...Precise thinking, and definition...have been at a serious discount. The whole emphasis has been placed upon religion as a power which can do things for us and which can make us happy....Never has the distinction between the Christian religion and the cults and psychological agencies been more obscured and confused....The other reason which explains why we fail to think, as this woman did, is that in some sudden crisis we tend to allow ourselves to be stampeded....Now this woman, the mother of Samson, stands out as a glorious example of the opposite of all that...Seeing and observing her husband's collapse, his fear and his whimpering, and listening to his foreboding of evil and his dark prophecies and his doubtings of the goodness of God, she doesn't cry or shout...she thinks, she reasons, she ponders the matter, and with magnificent logic she arrives at the only conclusion that is really valid."

-- D.M.Lloyd-Jones, "*Facing the Unexpected*" Judges 13:22-23.

Basically, Samson's wife shows us that faith is not the absence of thinking, but it is thinking and acting on the basis of the word and promises of God. She thinks about his promise and his graciousness and she reasons it out.

What can we learn?

Like the father, we should pray for and scour the Bible for specifics on how to live in general, and how to raise our children in particular.

Like the mother, we should a) refuse to panic, b) not doubt the goodness of God, c) never think God is capricious or cruel, d) think about your life in terms of all God's promises and dealings with you in the past.

The goodness of God.

There are an infinite number of examples. Here are just a couple.

- (1) Our lack of help to the poor comes from forgetting the goodness of God. (First, we forget how poor and needy we were spiritually, and second, we are afraid that if we are too generous God won't take care of us.
- (2) Worry of any kind is basically a mistrust of the goodness of God.
- (3) Guilt and self-hatred is basically a mistrust of the goodness of God.

6. 13:16-21. How does the angel show who he is? How does this tell us who the angel is? What is remarkable about the fact that it took them so long to realize that this was really the Lord?

Who is the angel?

The Lord shows in two ways who he is. First, he tells him, literally, he name is “wonderful”. This does not mean that his name was actually the word wonderful, but as in Ps.139:6, the name was too marvelous and astonishing to be comprehended. Then he ascends to heaven in the very flame of the offering. This of course points us to Jesus himself, whose name is “wonderful” (Is.9:6) and who also became a burnt offering, a sacrifice.

What is remarkable that it took them so long?

Some people take this to mean that they were spiritually obtuse. But that isn’t real likely. Samson’s mother knows that there is something marvelous about him (v.6-”*he looked like an angel*”). Again, she is more spiritually alert than Manoah, who (we are told) simply thought the man was a prophet (v.16-17).

But the real point is that the Lord became so human and ‘normal’ in form that he was not immediately recognized. Why would he do that? It must be because he wants to come close to us--he seeks us (cf. John 4:23). It shows that his bent and inclination is to clothe himself in such a way that we can be his friends. It points to the incarnation (John 1:1-14; I John 1:1-4).

4d. (Supplemental) Why does the angel come back if he has no new information? What does this teach us about raising children (or living life ourselves)?

d) Why does he come back when he has no new information?

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Week 10

JUDGES 14:1-15:20

THE RISE OF SAMSON

SOSL 3/98-99

Introduction: The story of Samson is famous for its potent mix of sex, violence, and super-power---exactly the stuff of a contemporary summer action film! But if we read it as part of the whole narrative of the book of Judges, we will find it to be at least perplexing and probably disturbing. As Israel's spiritual condition waxes worse and worse, the scene seems to be set for a great judge/leader, perhaps the greatest of all. And chapter 13 with its 'annunciation' prepares us for a wonderful, powerful deliverer. Instead we find by far the most flawed character in the book, a violent, impulsive, sexually addicted, emotionally immature and selfish man. Most disturbing of all, the "Spirit of God" seems to anoint and use his fits of pique, pride, and temper.

1. Read 14:1-5; 15:9-13. What do these texts tell us about the level of conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines at that time? [Note: Timnah was a village in Israelite territory (Josh.19 :43).] How is this a different attitude than the Israelites have shown toward oppressors in the past (see 10:6-12)?

a) What do these texts tell us about the level of conflict between Israel and the Philistines?

We see that the Philistines were settled and living normal lives deep in Israelite territory (e.g. Timnah). They were "rulers" (14:4; 15:11) over Israel, yet their 'occupation' seems completely peaceful. Samson is free to come and go, and there is no resistance (on the Philistine side) to his marriage to a Philistine. In chapter 15 we not only see the Israelites very eager to keep the Philistines happy, but they make no effort to aid Samson in his fight with them (15:14-19). The men of Judah are totally mystified that the Philistines should want to fight them (15:10)--it is the furthest thing from their minds. Throughout Samson's career he fights completely alone with no help from other Israelites at all. So we see that there is absolutely no conflict at all between the Philistines and the Israelites.

b) How is this a different attitude?

In 10:6-12 we saw he cycle that the worship of a nation's idol (10:6) led eventually to the domination of Israel by that nation (10:11). So idolatry leads to slavery to that which is worshipped. But in chapter 10 we see that the enslavement is recognized *as such* by the Israelites. They cried out in distress (10:10). There was conflict and resistance. But now there none at all.

In short, Israel's capitulation to the Philistines is far more profound and complete than any of their previous 'enslavements'. In the past, Israel groaned and agonized under their occupations by pagan powers, because their domination was military and political. But now their enslavement is virtually unconscious, because its nature is that of cultural accommodation. The Israelites do not groan and resist their 'captors' now because they have completely adopted and adapted to the values and mores and idols of the Philistines. Like Samson himself, the Israelites were eager to marry in to Philistine society, probably as a way to 'move up' in the culture. The Israelites no longer had a recognizable culture of their own, based on service to the Lord. One commentator writes:

"The tribes of Canaan still were enemies of Israel, and Israel's distinctiveness was meant to be seen in contrast with them...[But now] Israel has so accommodated itself to the world around her that she wants no rocking of the boat." (M.Wilcock, p.139)

We can't exaggerate the danger to Israel. The Israelites were on the brink of extinction. Within a couple of generations they could have been completely assimilated into the Philistine nation.

2. 14:4. a) How does God's plan for Samson differ from how his parents (or we!) would have expected God to use him to deliver Israel from the Philistines? b) What does this teach us about being patient with God's seeming inactivity?

a) How does God's plan for Samson differ from our expectations of deliverance?

Samson's parents remember the angel's prediction (13:4,5) that Samson would deliver the Israelites from the Philistines. Imagine their distress when Samson, instead of fighting them, wants to marry into them! Clearly they were expecting Samson to be used the way God had used every other judge up until now. They expected him to motivate and recruit the Israelites into an army that would rise up and smite the Philistines and throw off their yoke. But we have seen that the 'yoke' and enslavement of the Israelites was far deeper than it had ever been before. It was almost complete. Even if Samson had the clarity of vision to try the Othniel--Gideon--Jephthah method, it would have failed.

Therefore, God's plan is laid bare in the crucial verse 14:4. This is the key to understanding the whole story of Samson. God uses the very weaknesses of Samson--his 'fraternization' with the Philistines, his sexual appetite, his vindictiveness and temper--to bring about confrontation between the two nations. Samson's weaknesses become a 'blood feud' that leads to more and more conflict and finally the division between the two nations that is so desperately needed. The one thing God must supernaturally supply for the plan to work is Samson's super-human physical strength. Michael Wilcock puts it well:

"The force of 14:4 is that the two communities are so interlocked that even the Lord can find nothing to get hold of to pry them apart. He uses Samson's weaknesses, therefore, to bring about the relationship with this irresistible girl from which so much ill-feeling will flow, and in the process he gives Samson his supernatural strength and the opportunities to use it...So someone is in charge, unsatisfactory though Samson may be as a judge. [The Lord] is making judgments: establishing how far Israel has sold out to the Philistines, deciding what now to do with either party, and then executing the decision as a sentence." (p.139)

See the justice and wisdom of such an approach! Everyone in the story is acting out of their own ungodly character--Samson in his impulsive selfishness, the Philistine woman in her manipulateness (14:16), the Philistine men in their violent threats (14:15), and so on. They are all responsible for what they do. But God "works it all together" for good purposes (Rom.8:28). He arranges things so that all the sins work out to alienate these two nations so that Israel will not totally lose its distinctiveness.

See the faithfulness and love of such an approach! God remains unconditionally committed to his covenant promises. He has promised to love them and give them an inheritance and never break his commitment to do so (2:1). Now here he is so faithful to his promises that he not only fulfills them in spite of their sin, but even *through* their sin. He uses their own sinfulness to bring about deliverance.

We have other examples of this of course, as when God uses the sin of Jacob to bring him to the land where he can grow great and build his family (Genesis 27-32). Psalm 76:10, in the best translation, reads: "*You make the wrath of men to praise you...*" The supreme example

of this is Acts 2:23, where we see that God used the free wicked choices of human beings to put Jesus to death, therefore redeeming the world from free wicked choices! Though the people who put Jesus to death were doing so 'wickedly', God arranged things so their wickedness only fulfilled redemptive purposes.

b) What does this teach us about being patient with God's seeming inactivity?

When we look at chapter 14-15 in this light, it gives us help with both an intellectual and a practical problem.

First, the practical problem. So often we pray for God to bring about his good purposes that he attests to in the Bible (e.g. spiritual blessing, conversions, the triumph of the right and of justice), and instead it looks like everyone continues sinning and disasters keep happening. Look at the escalating carnage of chapters 14-15. It looks like God is completely absent. But here we see him working nonetheless. He does not "force" people to be good--or bad! Yet he works through free choices to bring about salvation. Not even sin and evil can thwart him. And not even our own sin will stop him from redeeming us. We must learn from passages like this to not "put God in a box", insisting that he work in expected ways. We expect him to "zap" people and make them good and wise and then "zap" troubles and make them go away. But we are reasoning/worshipping beings made in the image of God. He works out his good will through our choices, not in spite of them. William Cowper put it well in the old hymn:

*"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take:
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

The intellectual problem is--how can God evidently use such flawed people to get his work done? Shouldn't he only work with people who are very good and godly? Shouldn't he only work through the people with the "right" beliefs and the "right" behavior? This text shows us how wrong it is to put God in *that* box either. A commentator explains it well:

"The implication of such thinking is that you have to be good enough for God to use you, you must have reached a certain standard (set by us!) of moral maturity or theological accuracy. Do you see what we have done? We have perverted the doctrines of grace with a religion of works. The Book of Judges shoots holes through all of that. It is above all a book about grace, undeserved mercy, as is the whole Bible....That is not to play down theological accuracy or to pretend it doesn't matter how we behave....[We will still suffer from our sins]. But we can rejoice that he is also in the business of using our failures as the foundations for his success. Let us never imagine that we have God taped, or that we know how he will work, or when. As soon as we start to say, 'God cannot or will not...until...' we are wrong-footed." (D.Jackman, p.222)

3. 14:1-4. a) Read 3:5-6 and Exodus 34:15-16. Is his parents' concern about his marriage a racist one? b) Read and compare 2 Cor.6:14-16. What is the chief concern in the Bible about 'mixed-faith' marriages?

a) Is his parents' concern about his marriage a racist one?

As Exodus 34:15-16 makes clear, the Biblical prohibition is not against inter-racial marriages *per se*, but against inter-faith marriages. His parents' comment, that the Philistines were "*uncircumcised*" (14:3) is key. Circumcision was the sign that a family was in a personal covenant or relationship with God (Genesis 17). So the prohibition was not against marriage with another race, but marriage with someone outside of the Lord's covenant. (Moses himself was married to a non-Israelite, Zipporah, but one who recognized God's covenant. cf. Exod. 4:24ff.)

b) What is the chief concern in the Bible about 'mixed-faith' marriages?

In 2 Cor. 6:14-16 the apostle Paul renews the appeal to believers to not enter into binding partnerships with those who do not worship God. (The word 'yoked' probably means several kinds of binding relationships, but it *at least* would mean marriage, which is the most binding of all human relationships.) Here, as in Exod. 3 and Judges 3, the main issue is that such marriages weaken a believer's loyalty to God. (Idolatry is mentioned in v. 16). A superficial reading of Paul's statement might lead a reader to conclude that the Bible is concerned that the unbelieving spouse will try to convert the believer. Thus some have people have said, "This is no problem for me. I can marry X because he or she completely respects my faith and will allow me total freedom to practice it." But remember, the context for each of these texts is not other formal religions but idolatry. Idolatry is displacing God by making good, created things more important than God. When you don't share faith with your spouse, there is great pressure to adapt to that by pushing God more to the periphery of your life. You are in an intimate relationship with someone who does not understand what should be the very mainspring/motivation for absolutely *everything* you do. The natural response to this is to make God less central to everything. Otherwise you constantly will be getting blank stares from your mate. This is the reason the Bible urges believers to not knowingly marry an unbeliever.

We should remember, however, that Paul insists that a Christian who is married to a non-Christian should not seek divorce from him or her but should actively seek to build a good marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-15).

4. 14:1-20. a) What do we learn in this chapter about Samson's character? b) Why would Samson not tell his parents about the lion and the source of the honey (14:9)?

a) What do we learn of Samson's character?

First, we see Samson is impulsive. In 14:2 we have a blunt and almost comical anatomy of how he made his choices. Literally, 14:2 reads, "Have *I* seen a woman!....Now get her for me as a wife." He is a completely sensual man in the most basic definition of the term. His senses control him--he reacts, he does not act or reflect. He sees--and so he takes. Literally, 14:4 reads: "get her for me, because she pleases me." This general impulsiveness leads to a specific weakness that we will see as the story proceeds, namely a lack of sexual self-control that is very complete.

Second, we see Samson is unteachable, and he is especially dismissive of parental counsel and authority. The book of Proverbs extensively explains how proud and foolish it is to be unwilling to listen to the advice of others. But Samson's pride in this case is quite extreme, if we put it in its cultural context. In our day it would be more normal for a son to talk back to his parents, but that was not the case in ancient Israel. One commentator says:

In Israelite society the father was the head of the family and as such exercised control...including the choice of wives for sons (e.g. Gen. 24:4; 38:6). It was exceptional for a son to contravene the wishes of his parents in this...realm (Gen. 26:34,35; 24:46),

for the unit was the clan and personal preference was subordinated to it. Arthur E. Cundall, Judges: An Introduction and Commentary, p.162.

Third, we see that he is vindictive and violent. You could argue that he had a right to be angry at how he lost at the riddle-game. But there is no possible justification for killing 30 men, in order to get their garments, in order to fulfill his part of the bet (14:19). Such a reaction is disproportionate to what has been done for him. This is not even as vindictive as an “eye for an eye”--it is a “life for a coat”! This shows that just as he could not control his senses (see above), he could not control his temper.

Fourth, we see his pride has another form--a callous and “flippant” quality. This is not easily seen in the English translation, but several times in the story of Samson we see him making puns and wise-cracks as he kills people. The first example is here in 14:18. The original riddle (v.14) is Hebrew verse--a three-beat couplet--which had the same effect as a sing-song rhyme. When the Philistines solve his riddle, Samson creates a new sing-song couplet, rendered by one commentator:

*“If you’d not plowed with this heifer of mine,
you’d not have solved this riddle of mine.”*

This is a very harsh statement about his new bride-to-be, since a heifer was considered a very stubborn and difficult animal to use in plowing a field! And he “sing-songs” back at them though clearly filled with murderous fury.

The same thing happens as he is slaughtering Philistines in 15:16 where he says:

*“With the jawbone of an ass,
I have made asses of them.”*

Samson has no sense of the seriousness of what he is doing as he battles the Philistines. He shows joking disdain as he kills people. He is a perpetual adolescent.

Perhaps the best way to summarize Samson is this--he is a prisoner of his feelings. He is the reverse mirror-image of a Pharisee, who is a prisoner of his morals. Samson is an extreme version of the ‘younger brother’ of Luke 15--the prodigal who wants his inheritance now and sensual pleasure now. He doesn’t know the meaning of the term ‘delayed gratification’. Yet, ironically, we see that the main reason he is a prisoner of his feelings is the same reason the Pharisees are prisoner of their morals--pride. Samson’s pride feeds his inability to take advice, to check his temper.

b) Why would Samson not tell his parents about the lion?

Fifth, and most importantly, we see him beginning to show disdain for his Nazirite (Numbers 6:1-8) vow. That is the most likely reason that he would not tell his parents about his extraordinary deed of killing a lion bare-handed (14:5-6). Nothing else we know about Samson leads us to believe him to be a person of modesty! He is impulsive about everything, so why wouldn’t he run to his parents and say, “hey, look at what I did”? The most likely explanation is that he knew that one of the three stipulations for a Nazirite was that he could not touch a dead body of animal or human. Eventually, we will see that he betrays his vows to the Lord in a much more serious way. For now, however, we see the cowardly pattern of compromise and cover-up.

5. Samson had these flaws despite having the power of the Spirit (13:25; 14:19). a) What does this teach us about the difference between spiritual gifts-skills and spiritual fruit (cf. 1 Cor.13:1-3 and Gal.5:22ff.)? b) How can we be more on the look out for this problem in our own lives?

a) What does this teach us about gifts and fruit of the Spirit?

How can a person so flawed and even ungodly be the recipient of effusions of God's Spirit? Why would the Spirit be given to someone making no effort to live a holy life. Or at least--if the Spirit *does* come to someone like Samson, shouldn't it be creating a life of holiness? How can a man like Samson be empowered with the Spirit and yet show none of the 'fruit' of the Spirit--such as patience, humility, self-control.

The first answer is that the Bible has always made a distinction that most believers are very unaware of. It is possible to be empowered by the Spirit in gifts and still lack fruit of the Spirit. In I Cor.12 and 14, Paul tells us that 'gifts' of the Spirit are skills for *doing*--abilities for serving and helping people. But in Gal.5:22ff. Paul tells us that 'fruit' of the Spirit are character traits of *being*--qualities such as peace, patience, integrity, self-control. Then in 1 Cor.13:1-3, Paul tells us that it is possible to have skills of teaching and speaking and leadership--'powers' of the Spirit--and lack the fruit of love, forgiveness, and so forth. We have seen this problem before with the immaturity of Gideon and Jephthah, but in Samson we see it most vividly. Samson is given leadership gifts (15:20) despite having little or no maturity of character.

The second answer is that the Old Testament believers did not have the Holy Spirit in the same degree that New Testament believers have him after Pentecost. A remarkable statement in John 7:37-39 sheds light on this. *"This [Jesus] spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."* (John 7:37-39) Obviously, John the writer knew that the Spirit of the Lord had come upon the Old Testament saints, and yet the new indwelling of the Spirit that Christians receive is so much greater that John can speak of the Spirit as not having been "given" until the time of Christ. (See also Acts 2:33; Eph.4:7-12; Matt.11:11) This is the reason why we see in the case of Samson and King Saul in particular the empowering of the Holy Spirit without the deep indwelling of the Spirit.

b) How can we be on the lookout for this problem in our own lives?

This should give us some help in understanding the shallowness of the holiness and character of many of the Old Testament "saints". Nevertheless, Paul's warning in 1 Cor.13:1-3 (cf.Matt.7:22-23) is for us, today and now. The gifts/skills of the Holy Spirit can operate in us, even mightily, and we can be helping people and leading movements--yet our inner personal lives be a complete wreck. In fact, this pattern is so common that there is possibly a parasitic relationship between a 'together' outer life and a 'broken' inner life. Some people who are the most vigorous and effective in teaching, counseling, and leadership are, in their private lives, giving in to temptation, discouragement, anger, and fear.

What can we do about it? First, we can recognize the Biblical distinction between gifts and fruit. Many people in a self-justifying way look at their gifts as a "proof" that they are all right spiritually and that God is with them. "Look at the people I serve and who tell me how much I mean to them! Surely God is pleased with me." But we must not mistake the operation of gifts for the growth of fruit. Second, we must look to our prayer life (rather than to our religious activities) as the best indicator of spiritual health. Is prayer warm, enjoyable, consistent? Are you not only talking but listening and learning? Third, we must avoid "Lone Ranger" Christianity. Intimate fellowship is the best way to insure integrity of our inner and outer lives. Samson is notable for his alone-ness. Not only does he not take any advice, but he never works with others or builds teams. He is a one-man wrecking crew. That is a prescription for the inner-outer division and disintegration.

6. 15:1-20. "Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us?" (15:11)--their question to Samson admits that there is in truth no such thing as harmonious co-existence between the church and the world, for where

there is no conflict it is because the world has taken over.” (M.Wilcock, p.142.) Give some examples of how the church’s efforts at avoiding conflict with the world has been or is now really a surrender?

This question has many, many possible answers. It is an important exercise for the group to generate a good list. One way to get greater insight is to divide the church into some of its parts. Here are some ideas.

a. Earlier in the 20th century, mainline Protestants made a very bold move to be ‘relevant’ to modern people who could not believe in the supernatural. Rudolph Bultmann, a major theologian, said, “no one who uses modern technology can believe in the ancient world of spirits and miracles.” It was thought that modern people would eventually completely lose all belief in a supernatural world. So many churches began the project of ‘de-supernaturalizing’ the Christian message. The Bible was no longer seen as an infallible revelation from God, but as inspiring and flawed ancient stories. The very concept of “conversion” and “the new birth” was dropped. Now to “become a Christian” mean to live a good life of mercy and justice. This took away the “conflict” between Christianity and those who could not believe in miracles, a revealed Bible, or a physical resurrection. But of course, this meant that scientific rationalism was now the real “ruler”.

b. “Liberal” churches tend to seek members among the “cultural elite”--the educated, white-collar professional 20% of the population. White-collar U.S. culture has at least the following idols: (1) personal choice and freedom, (2) absolute tolerance and the rejection of exclusive truth and personal responsibility, (3) professional expertise and status. Liberal churches, in order to attract this culture and avoid conflict have adapted. They accept modern sex ethics, they do not do church discipline, they do not preach Christ as the only way to salvation. Their ministry is supportive and therapeutic and no one is ever warned of the dangers of God’s judgment. The church is run by experts and the laity are not empowered to minister. In general, the popular opinions of liberal-elite culture are adopted and promoted. If churches preached judgment, accountability, moral virtue (as Jesus did)--there would be conflict!

c. “Conservative” churches tend to seek members in the more conservative “heartland” and often among more blue-collar people. The idols of that culture include: (1) an idealized past, (2) the nuclear family, (3) one’s own race and traditional culture, (4) authority. While liberal culture is relativistic, conservative culture is moralistic and makes an idol out of “goodness” and respectability. Conservative culture often values unquestioning deference to leaders, tends to idealize “the good old days”, tends to be racist and superior in its view of its own culture, and tends to put so much emphasis on family-life that singles and single-parents feel like second-class citizens. If churches preached about racism, the need for justice for the poor, and the embrace of the socially and morally unrespectable (as Jesus did)--there would be conflict!

7. Conflict with the world is a necessary part of authentic Christianity. What actions might God be calling you to take that would conflict with many in your “world”?

Week 11

JUDGES 16:1-31

THE JUDGMENT OF SAMSON

SOSL 3/98-99

1. 16:1-3. a) Some have called vv.1-3 a kind of prologue that ‘sets up’ the climactic scenes of Samson’s life. How does it foreshadow and prepare us for what is to come? b) How can success be the worst thing for us spiritually? Have you grown spiritually most through success or through failure?

This incident is fascinating on its own terms, but we must remember that ancient narrators were very economical with their words--an incident was not included unless it is useful to the overall narrative. Why was this included?

a) How it prepares us for the climax.

First, it shows a pattern in Samson’s life--it links both the past and the future. Samson is enticed into an extremely dangerous situation through reckless behavior because of his weakness for women. Then, despite the danger, his enormous strength enables him to simply burst out of the deadly trap. This is what happened in chapters 14-15 and here and so Samson will expect to escape from any trap Delilah can set.

Secondly, the incident shows not just the pattern but how it is deepening and strengthening. His recklessness (going to the capital of Philistia, Gaza), his sexual addiction (going in to a prostitute), and the strength of the trap (he is surrounded by guards in a walled city) are all greater than they were in chapter 14-15. The pattern/cycle in increasing in force and power (like any pattern of addiction). In these ways, the Delilah story is foreshadowed. We expect even greater recklessness and danger, and we get it. Also, the removal of the gates of Gaza also foreshadows and prepares us for Samson’s removal of the pillars of the temple of Dagon in 16:26ff.

Thirdly, the story prepares us to understand why Samson would play such a dangerous game with Delilah later. He had been growing in confidence so that now he believed no enemy could possibly destroy him! No matter how overwhelming the odds, God has given him the physical strength to fight his way out to victory. He came to believe that he could not be defeated, and this story shows how the pattern led him to believe this.

b) How can success be the worst thing for us.

We saw this with Gideon, as well. The more God blessed Samson, giving him strength to fight his foes, the more Samson grew confident of his own invulnerability and the more he engaged in irresponsible behavior. In other words, Samson’s heart used God’s blessings as a reason to forget God.

While adversity is hard on us spiritually, prosperity is even harder. One old minister, after years of pastoral experience, summed it up: “*Outward gains are ordinarily attended with inward losses*” while “*inward gains*”--growth in humility, self-control, wisdom--are ordinarily attached to “outward losses” of financial, vocational, relational failure. We now can begin to see how sin and grace function on two completely opposed bases. In grace God takes even our weaknesses and failures and use them *for* us, but in sin we take even his gifts and strengths and use them *against* him. Our sinful hearts will find ways to use even God’s blessing to ruin our lives. St.Paul speaks of this in Romans 1 when he says that the worst thing God can do to us is to give us our desires--success! The most successful people in the world tend to be the people that are the farthest from God.

Why? Just as Samson falsely inferred from God's blessing--"I can't be defeated, so I can live as I like", so successful people falsely infer from God's blessing--"I got this because I was smart and savvy. I am self-sufficient!"

2. 16:4-21. a) What is motivating Delilah to do what she does? b) What is motivating Samson to play this dangerous game with her? c) Though each says, 'I love you' (v.15) they are really just using each other. What other forms can this sort of relationship take? What is the solution?

a) Delilah's motives.

The original motivation of Delilah is greed for gain (16:5-6). They promise her money (v.5), "so Delilah said..."(v.6). The amount of bribe is quite large, but there is more to it than that. The people who come to Delilah are "*the rulers of the Philistines*" (v.5). This is no longer some band or clan of Philistines that is trying to payback Samson for some incident. These are the leaders of the whole Philistine nation, which means that now Samson is seen as a national menace. For Delilah, it means that if she could turn him over to them she would be a national hero. So the potential wealth, power, and influence being held out to her was very great. She would be set up for the rest of her life. It is very probable (considering what we know of Samson) that she was beautiful, and it is just as probable that she had been a "trophy" for other powerful men. "Finally", (we can imagine her thinking) "I'll be in the position to be an independent player of my own."

But as the process goes on, Delilah's pride is more and more at stake. She says repeatedly "*you have made a fool of me*" (v.10, 13, 15), and indeed he had. By the end, she has to call to the rulers of the Philistines to come back to her home (v.18), since they had given up on her. Why then her persistence? It has become a psychological power struggle. She comes to see that he is playing a game with her, and more and more, out of wounded pride, she determines to beat him at the game. Delilah realizes that Samson is using her, and she goes all out to turn the tables on him.

b) Samson's motives.

Samson's motives are harder to discern, since the narrator gives us less direct information about them. First, we can guess that Samson was motivated by his overconfident love of danger. It is possible that he has become as hooked on danger as he is to women. It gives him a "high" to be in danger, because it has always meant glory for him. Did he know all along that he was in danger? Almost certainly. Delilah's first question is ridiculously obvious (v.6) and it is likely that he realized she wanted to use this information to get him captured. But even if he did not know this in v.6, he certainly knew it the after the first time she tied him up and hid men in the room to capture him (v.9). There is a possibility, we suppose, that she feigned ignorance--"I have no idea how those men got into my house!"--but certainly he now knew her purpose. Yet he continued to play the game to prove how masculine and tough he is. That is how huge his pride had become.

But second, it is also possible that Samson is the kind of "denial" that is typical in classic addiction-syndromes. He may have so needed Delilah's sexual favors and adoration that he was in denial about her motives. It is interesting that he does not finally tell her the truth until she uses the 'trump' card in v.15--"*How can you say, 'I love you', when you won't confide in me?*" This is a not-very-veiled threat to their relationship. "If you don't tell me this--then you prove that you don't love me--and that's the end of it!" It is only then that he tells her the truth. That is evidence that he could not bear to disappoint her even though he was leading him to ruin. This is typical of many destructive relationships.

c) What other forms can this relationship take?

Samson and Delilah are a rather extreme case of using one another rather than serving one another. They each say to each other 'I love you' (v.15), but they mean 'I am attracted to you because you are so useful to me'. Doubtless there was a lot of passion and romance here--but it was all done out of a motive of self-enhancement of oneself rather than self-giving for the growth of the other. Samson is using Delilah to feed his ravenous male ego in two ways. She provides him with the sexual love of a beautiful woman, and with the danger of her connections and the situation. Delilah is using Samson to get fame and fortune. It is a pretty blatant and obvious form of taking instead of giving in a relationship.

But there are far less obvious forms. It is very normal for men to pass over great women (with whom they could have had a better and deeper relationship) who are not great looking. It is very normal for women to pass over great men (with whom they could have had a better and deeper relationship) who do not have good careers. This means we are from the start looking for people who are "useful" in building up our self-images and in getting the kind of comfortable lives we want.

Another less obvious form is the "helper"-syndrome. Often one person in a relationship is very needy and constantly in trouble, and the other person is the counselor-rescuer. In this situation, the needy person uses the rescuer--that is obvious. What is less obvious is that the rescuer is using the needy person as well. He or she needs the other to get a sense of worth ("see how much I do for you") and/or a sense of moral superiority.

What is the solution?

C.S. Lewis talked of the difference between 'need-love' and 'gift-love' that gets at this issue:

"Need-love cries...from our poverty; Gift-love longs to serve....Need-love says of a woman, 'I cannot live without her'; Gift-love longs to give her happiness...You cannot love a fellow creature fully till you love God."

Lewis is simply saying that, unless you have some experience of God's love that fulfills your deepest needs, then you will tend to use other people to bolster yourself or prove yourself. Unless you have that relationship with God, even the most passionate 'I love yous' may really mean 'I need you to make myself feel like I am worth something'.

Samson's inner life and motivations show this lack of God-love that should be a warning to us all. Without it, we will do the same thing in relationships that he did (though not, usually, so blatantly and spectacularly!):

"The strength that [Samson] had was physical and external, not spiritual and inward. That was why he had to look to a succession of women, like Delilah, to try to give meaning and significance to his life. Because he did not have a deep faith-relationship with God, he looked for a [god]-substitute in human relationships, as every person made in the image of God does and must. It was this personal vulnerability, which never found its answer in God, that ultimately brought him crashing down." (D.Jackman, p.251)

3. 16:15-21. Why does Samson tell Delilah the truth?

This is the mystery and the key question of the story. Why--when it was so obvious what Delilah would do with the information (three other times she tried to use it to capture him)--would Samson now tell her the truth?

Many believe that Samson still was in denial about the evil purposes of Delilah. He either believed: a) that she really didn't aim to capture him, or b) while she had in the past, she would not do so now. This is perfectly possible, and there is one piece of evidence the text for it--v.15. There we see that for the first time Delilah asks for the secret of his strength as a test of his love for her. So one possibility is that he has become so emotionally dependent on her that he simply cannot bear her distress. This is quite possible--that he had made Delilah into a kind of "idol", a god-substitute, and now he was deluded as to his real danger. She "nagged and prodded" him until literally *"his soul was vexed to death"* (v.16). A translation "bored" or "tired" does not do justice to the Hebrew term, which means deep distress, "going crazy".

But even if his dependence on Delilah is true, we have indication of something else at work. In v.20, after Delilah has his hair shaved during sleep, she awoke him with the old refrain, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you". We are told, *"He awoke from his sleep and said, 'I will go out as before and shake myself free', but he did not know that the Lord had left him."* It does not say that "he did not know his hair was gone" but *"he did not know the Lord had left him"*. He must have known, the moment he woke, that his hair was gone, yet he assumed that his strength would have still been there. And why not? Samson had been slowly breaking his Nazirite vow over a period of time. We had been breaking it by touching a dead body and throwing a "feast" (14:10--which was literally "a drinking party"). A key phrase is *"I'll go out as before"* (16:20). We have seen that no matter how he broke God's law, God always had given him strength before. Why not now?

So the answer to why he told Delilah is this--he did not *really* believe that his hair or his Nazirite vow was really the source of his strength. He had come to believe that his strength was simply his, that no matter what he did or how he lived he would not lose it. The "web of self-deception", then was not just psychological, but theological. Samson was unable to see how dependent he was on God's grace. He had come to see his strength as an inalienable right, not a gift of God's mercy. He had a view of God that was "magical", and idolatrous. This leads to the next question and issue.

4. 16:15-21. What is the secret of Samson's strength? a) Where does it come from, and b) who really understands this secret?

a) Where did Samson's strength come from?

The Philistines and Delilah must have known that Samson's strength was not innate. People have depicted Samson with the physique of a body-builder, but that is probably not the case. If his enemies were looking for a "secret", they must have known that his physical prowess was not simply the function of his size and muscle-mass. Their pagan beliefs probably led them to suspect a magic: a spell or charm or amulet. That is what the Philistines and Delilah were looking for. That is why Samson fed them likely superstitious "counter-spells" to make fun of their magic-paradigm. For "magic" power is very different than Godly-power in the Bible.

Magic power depends on a) external conditions, and b) their exact manipulation. For example, if a love potion requires three pinches of ground newt's-eye, then you must put in three pinches, not two. And when you have mixed the potion exactly, it simply happens. Magic is then a matter of "pushing buttons" and following the steps and rules to the letter. Then the power comes automatically, it follows laws predictably.

God's power, however, depends on a) internal conditions, and b) relationship. There is no divine power without discipleship. When Jesus sends disciples out with power, he says it is because *"I will be with you"* (Matt.28:19-20) as he does to Moses (Exodus 3-4). To be "*with*"

someone is a Semitic phrase for relationship. The power that comes from a divine relationship is much more complex in its operation and is not “manipulatable”--for it depends on both parties. On the one hand, the power is impossible unless there is a commitment from us to love and serve God. On the other hand, however, it depends also on God. God can still work in our lives even when we are not “following the rules”--so divine power is neither a) acquired easily nor, b) lost easily. Divine power does not come by following a “recipe” of spiritual steps, nor can it be lost automatically when we fail to keep our promises to God. It is unpredictable--“untame”, not at all like magic or technique.

Now here the narrator announces that Samson’s strength was God-power because it flees when “*the Lord had left him*” (v.20). Nothing could be clearer. It was truly not the hair at all, it was the nearness of and relationship with the Lord which was the source and secret of power. Thus the Nazirite vows--no razor, no wine, no dead bodies--were not a magic spell. Samson had been playing very loose with these vows for a long time. More and more he was forgetting that his strength was neither innate nor a magical procurement--but the outflow of his covenant with the Lord. Now, finally, God withdraws the power. Perhaps a line was crossed, when the loss of Delilah’s love was more vexing than the loss of God’s. Perhaps it was simply time to reclaim spiritually Samson by giving him adversity rather than prosperity. But the “secret of the strength”--the presence of the covenant Lord--is taken away.

b) Who really understands the secret?

The answer is no one, not even Samson. The Phillistines and Delilah were looking for a magic conditions that automatically gave and withdrew the strength. But even Samson, by his answer, shows that he didn’t understand the nature of his strength:

“In explaining his ‘secret’ to Delilah he concentrates merely on the externals of the Nazirite vow; but they were never designed to be an end in themselves. The whole point was that the external signs represented the internal reality of a life devoted o God...It seems that Samson did not really understand the secret of his strength. His attitude was very similar to the superstitious practices of the pagan Phillistines among whom he spent so much time.” (D.Jackman, p.250)

Samson showed by his revealing the Nazirite vow that he saw his strength in “magic” terms--he believed it would automatically work, regardless of his heart-relationship with God. Perhaps he had decided that the promise by the angel to his mother that he would deliver Israel meant that he could never be vanquished.

5. What is the source of your spiritual strength? When do you feel strongest, when the weakest? What forms of this ‘magic’ view of God’s blessing exist among us today?

There are many answers! Here is just one answer that bears discussion. “Works-righteousness” is the attitude that God will bless me and answer my prayers as long as I: a) have regular Bible study, b) regular prayer, c) go to worship services, d) live a disciplined and moral life. As a result we often do our Christian duties mechanically, and miss the point of them--which is real fellowship and friendship with God.

For example, *why* do you study the Bible? If you do so simply out of duty, in order to get God to favor you and bless you, then you will read the Bible simply for information. But if you read the Bible out of desire to know God and know yourself, then you will read it more to savor the promises and humble yourself under the commands and rejoice in the depictions of the nature of God. The same thing could be said for prayer.

In short, the power of God comes from *relationship*, from a sense of his nearness and reality. If that is the goal of your Christians duties--they will be conducted in a very different way than if you are using them to get favor and blessing from God.

6. 16:21-31. How is the arrest and death of Samson a) unlike and b) like the arrest and death of Christ?

a) How it is unlike Christ's?

The main way in which Samson's arrest and death is unlike Christ's is that they were the direct result of Samson's disobedience, while Christ's were the result of his faithfulness and obedience.

Also, Samson's final "passion" was clearly redemptive for *him*--Samson. (See the next question #7), Christ's passion was only redemptive for us.

b) How is it like Christ's?

First, both Samson and Christ were rejected and handed over to the Gentile oppressors (not only in chapter 15, but here in chapter 16). They were both mocked and chained and became weak. Like Joseph, Jephthah, and many others, we see that God does not simply save *despite* the suffering and betrayal of the deliverer, but through the suffering and betrayal of the deliverer. That is how God's salvation works--never through strength, but weakness. He uses their rejection to deliver others. If Samson had not been betrayed and weakened, he could not have grown back spiritually and struck the final blow. If Joseph had not been sold into slavery in Egypt, he could not have saved his people during the famine.

Second, both Samson and Christ were both saviors *alone*. Othniel rallied all of Israel against the oppressors (3:7ff), but Deborah was only able to get part of Israel mobilized (5:15-18), and Gideon only had 300. By Samson's time, sin had so decimated the people of God that no one was willing to give himself to the liberation battle. But God was showing that this would not stop his salvation.

"God had shown that He could deliver Israel with an army of willing volunteers; He had also shown that He could save with as few as three hundred...But when the Spirit of God came upon Samson, the Lord showed that He had no need for even three hundred. He could deliver by one." (E.Clowney, The Unfolding Mystery, p.137)

Third, both Samson and Christ gave their lives, but in their death, gave life. Samson was brought out to be mocked and led around, now blind and helpless (v.25). The onlookers in the temple would have probably been in balconies and on the roof looking down on to a central courtyard where Samson was being made a spectacle. Samson, however pushed away the support pillars of the temple, killing most of the spectators in the collapse. We are not told the number, but it would have to be more than a thousand (15:16), including "*rulers*" (16:30). The purpose of God (14:4) was to create a conflict between Israel and the Philistines so that Israel would not completely cease to exist. (See Week 10 Question #1). Samson's death was the final blow that created a permanent alienation between the two cultures. So he saved Israel by dying for them. Jesus, too, died that we might live.

In short, we have in Samson, more than any of the other judges, the pattern of "the victorious defeat". Rejected, beaten, chained--and all alone--finally dying under an avalanche of his enemies, Samson triumphed. God delivers through the victorious defeat of one savior.

7. 16:22-31. Why did Samson's strength return (read Heb.11:32-34 for the best answer)? How does Samson's story illustrate "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor.12:9-10)? How have you seen the principle work itself out in your own life?

a) Why did his strength return?

The first reason his strength returned was the faithfulness of God.

v.22 says "however, the hair on his head began to grow again..." Well, of course it would grow again. So why record it? The point is that the Philistines let his hair grow back. They could not have been such fools as to miss the fact that his hair was growing long again, so they must have concluded that, once shorn, Samson was no longer a Nazirite. And that is true. The Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:1ff) put the Nazirite in a state of 'consecration' for a definite period. Once his head was shaved the period of consecration is over (Numbers 6:13-20). Since Samson's strength flowed out of his dedication to the Lord through his vows, it was natural to conclude that his power was over. This confidence of his captors--to let his hair grow--showed a shallow view of God, of course.

"[The Phillistines knew nothing of the God who does the unexpected (Ehud), whose strength is made perfect in weakness (Gideon), and who never breaks his word. That God had said that Samson would be a Nazirite 'to the day of his death' (13:7). His abandonment of his servant could not but be temporary. The promise was bound to hold, however Samson might despise it. There is grace abounding to the chief of sinners. 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful--for he cannot deny himself' (2 Tim.2:13)]" (M.Wilcock, p.148).

So we see a remarkable case of the theme of Judges--what we have called the 'conditionality' yet 'unconditionality' theme. The Philistines knew only 'conditional' gods, gods who were subject to magic manipulation. The God of the Bible, however, is a God of grace, who is faithful to us even when we are unfaithful to him. He is not bound or limited by the terms of the Nazirite vow.

The second reason his strength returned was that Samson must have been exercising heart faith in God (perhaps for the first time). Hebrews 11:32-34 says that Samson was a 'hero of faith', and surely this is the only place in the story where it could be said that Samson exercised faith. Most interesting is the reference in Hebrews 11:34--"*out of weakness were made strong*". This is a great insight. Samson had been humbled into the dust and had seen his weakness. Thus this last request is a departure from his previous feats of strength. In v.28, first, he asks "*remember me*", which is a humble request for attention. He knows he is quite forgettable, and that God has every right to ignore him. Secondly, he asks "*strengthen me once more*". He has never asked for strength before--he just exerted it. Here is an acknowledgment that of his dependence on God's grace. Samson's real temptation had been to believe that we are blessed by God because of something great and meritorious in us. That was his real sin--not Delilah! It is so hard to remember that we do what we do only because of God's grace.

[Note: It is possible to ask whether the request of v.28 is simply a vengeful one, but the humility of the petition and the God-centered ness of it (he uses the terms *adonai* (sovereign), *Yahweh* (LORD), and *Elohim* (God) shows that his spirit is very different than when he paid back the riddlers at Ashkelon.]

b) How does Samson's story illustrate, "when I am weak, then I am strong"?

We looked at this principle before, especially under Gideon. But the Samson narrative puts this in a most unforgettable way.

“Throughout the Bible there is an extraordinarily ironic strand of thinking. It is expressed most succinctly by Paul on two occasions. In 1 Cor.1:25 he writes that ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men...God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise...’ And toward the end of the second letter, he concludes...‘gladly will I rather boast of my infirmities, in reproaches, in needs...for when I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Cor.12:9-10). It is the substance of this final chapter in Samson’s life. It begins with a strong man who is revealed to be weak, but it ends with a weak man who is stronger than ever he was before.” (D.Jackman, p.243)

It is the gospel! Jesus became weak to become strong. We, too, become Christians in that way. Only those who admit they are unrighteous receive the righteousness of Christ. Then we grow as Christians in the same way. Only those who know their life and strength is totally of grace are not living in the grip of fear, anger, boredom, and despondency.

8. What is the biggest thing God has taught you through

Week 12

JUDGES 17:1-18:25 MEN WITHOUT CHESTS

SOSL 3/98-99

Review:

The book of Judges has concentrated up until now on the times in which God intervened to save Israel from its spiritual decline and slide into idolatry. Each episode in the narrative followed a cyclical pattern, which Michael Wilcock called: *"rebellion, retribution, repentance, and rescue"*. We saw, however, that the rebellion got deeper and deeper until the repentance completely disappeared. More and more the salvation God sent had to be sheer grace--accomplished with less and less cooperation on the part of the Israelites. Finally, in the judge-ship of Samson, even God's rescue had to be through the weakness and defeat of the rescuer! In all these ways, God is pointing us toward the gospel, showing us that his salvation must be through grace that we do not merit, and it is accomplished for us through the weakness and defeat of the Savior.

Introduction:

But these last chapters of Judges are a departure from the earlier narrative structure. The earlier passages give us a bird's eye view of things, usually only saying, "they fell into idolatry"--while these chapters give us a ground-level, detailed view of what life was like in Israel during those times. (Various references within the passages show us that these did not come chronologically after Samson and the other judges, but rather they happened earlier, between the earlier judges.) The earlier passages showed us how God rescued Israel, but these passages give case studies of the kind of spiritual condition he rescued them from. That is why these final chapters barely mention the Lord. It is showing us what life was like when Israel was left to its own resources. This view of humanity-without-God is so bleak that these passages are almost never preached upon or even studied.

1. 17:1-2. A lot of information is packed into this sentence! What do we learn about a) what Micah has done, b) what kind of person Micah is, c) what kind of person Micah's mother is?

a) What Micah has done.

Micah stole a cache of 1,100 silver-shekels which his mother had accumulated. She had not known who had stolen it, and so she had called down a curse on the robber. He, having heard the curse, confessed the theft to his mother, returning the whole amount.

b) What Micah is like.

What does this tell us about Micah's character? It tells us he is neither a very bad or very good person. If he was a thoroughly hard and evil person, he would have not given the money back. On the other hand, it takes a remarkable amount of ingratitude, faithlessness, selfishness, and dishonesty to rob your own mother! And it seems probable that what convinced him to bring the money back was not the pangs of conscience so much as the fear of the curse. In summary, we have here a person of very weak character, with no principles at all. He is hollow--a man without any substance within.

Note: In ancient times, a “curse” was taken very seriously. “A curse was not a mere sound on the lips, but an agent sent forth...an active agent for hurt.” (J.A.Motyer, ‘Curse’, *New Bible Dictionary*, p.283). A Biblical curse was just declaration and prediction that God’s law-breaking would bring destruction. But in the pagan world, a curse was magical-agent sent loose to harm the accursed party. That this view was the view of Micah’s family is reinforced by what the mother does in v.2c. She blesses him, which is the opposite of a curse. In other words, she removes the curse, as he hoped.

c) What his mother is like.

What does this tell us about his mother’s character? On the one hand, she is very forgiving. She immediately showers him with blessing, and complements him as if he had just done a generous deed for her. Yet it also gives us a glimpse of the reason that Micah is the hollow, unprincipled chameleon that he is. She so quickly pronounces the wound “healed” that there is no process for cleaning and removing the infection. Dropping the metaphor--she spares him the pain and process of repentance and reconciliation. Without such pain, there is a) no deterrence to such behavior in the future, b) no insight into his own heart for discerning the reasons and motivations for the theft, and c) no humbling or grace for change. A condemning/punishing parent hurts a child, but so does an excusing/“enabling” parent.

2. 17:1-11. a) In what ways is the worship practice of Micah and his mother ‘orthodox’ and right? b) In what ways does it contradict the 10 commandments and other laws concerning the true worship of God?

a) How is it right?

First, Micah’s mother is very orthodox in that she invokes the Lord’s name (v.2-3)--the covenant name of “Yahweh” (“LORD” in small caps in English translation always renders the name “Yahweh”.) Micah’s family does not claim to be worshipping Dagon or Chemosh or the Baals and Ashtoreths. They are worshipping the Lord in his name.

Second, the shrine that is established (v.5) has both an ephod (a priest’s breastplate for inquiring of the Lord--via ‘Urim’ and ‘Thummim’) and a priest. Even the later (see below) effort to hire a Levite to be a priest shows that externally, they were following the basic rules of divine worship set out in the Mosaic law. They had a tabernacle, a Levitical priest, and a breast-plate.

b) In what ways does it contradict the laws of God?

(1) First, Micah’s mother shows her gratitude to God by creating two idols (v.4)! This is startling because it is a blatant disregard for the second commandment (Exod.20:4-5; Deut.4:16) where God says that no one should make an image of him. God said that he must not be worshipped in a form we create and shape. In the Holy of Holies, over the “throne” of God--the ark of the covenant--there was no image or statue or likeness of God. But it is just as startling that Micah’s mother seems completely unaware of the incongruity. That shows how ‘hollow’ Israel’s religion had become. It was externally ‘right’, but it had no sense of the spirit of true faith.

(2) In addition, Micah sets up his own shrine in his own home (v.5). God had said that there was to be a central tabernacle or temple, set up around the glory-cloud of God (Exod.20:24). When the glory-cloud moved, the tabernacle moved. That was the place that the sacrifices were made, where worship was conducted, where the priest’s “ephod” or breastplate was, where God answered people’s questions. God is not allow the Israelites to worship anywhere they wanted, but Micah sets up his own sanctuary for worship at his convenience. This shows that Israel’s religion had become one of personal convenience.

(3) Third, Micah makes his own son into a priest. Again, this contradicts the Mosaic revelation that only those of the tribe of Levi were to be priest. Micah and his mother, however, want to lift one of their own blood into the priesthood. When a Levite comes along, they consider this to be an improvement (v.7-13), because they know of the Mosaic revelation. This shows that Israel considered obedience to God's laws "nice if you can do it"--they saw obedience as optional.

All these were different ways of violating one fundamental principle. Israel's faith is a *revealed* faith. God reveals himself in his Word--we do not discover him through our reason or experience. In short, God says "worship me as I *am*, not as you want me to be, and worship me as *my* heart directs, not as *your* heart directs." Micah's family shapes a God who is convenient to worship. They follow the laws they like and ignore the laws they don't.

3. The first of the 10 commandments forbids us to worship other gods, but the second commandment forbids us worshipping God by images we make. (Exod.20:3,4) What is the difference?

What is the difference between worshipping images of other gods and worshipping God with images? It is much more blatant to worship 'other gods'. We break the first commandment when we either join other religions, or when we put our deepest hopes into a quest for money or love or a political cause, and so on.

It is much more subtle to take up the name of the Lord and worship according to many of the prescriptions in the Bible, but underneath to fashion a God who fits our desires and hearts. Micah's family "picked and chose" the parts of God's revelation they liked and just ignored the parts of God's revelation they didn't find convenient. Thus they liked the idea of a priest's ephod (containing the Urim and the Thummim for discerning 'yes' or 'no' answers from God), but they didn't like the idea that there could be only one ephod at one central sanctuary. What Micah's family has done is to essentially shape and revise God so that he is manageable and controllable. It is God with the uncomfortable aspects of his character 'dropped'.

Any graven image or depiction of God would automatically reveal part of God's nature but conceal another part. For example, Aaron had made golden calf in the wilderness. This was not another god, but a way to worship God. But while the calf could symbolize the power of God, it cannot show us his righteousness or love. Or, if you painted a picture of God and tried to worship it--would it show him smiling and loving or furious and majestic? It can't express the full range of God's glory, and thus your view of God will be distorted. So worshipping God with images was indicative of an inward spirit which does not want to submit to God as he *is*, but which wants to pick and choose attributes in order to create a God who is palatable to us.

Every culture struggles with the Biblical God in different ways, because he contradicts every society and every heart in some ways. Ancient cultures were very superstitious and magical--God contradicted that by showing that he could not be worshipped by house gods and divination and spells. Modern cultures are very rationalistic and skeptical of the supernatural--God contradicts that by saving us through the resurrection of Christ and demanding the new birth. Some cultures could not believe in a God who forgives such terrible wrongs, while our contemporary culture cannot believe in a God who punishes and sends people to hell. This is why God commanded us to submit to his revelation of who he is.

4. a) *How can we today worship God by images?* b) *How does this lead to problems in our personal lives?* c) *Read Col.1:15. How does the New Testament show us why God forbid anyone to make an image of him? (cf. Col.1:15)*

a) How can we do this today?

Of course, we need to recognize that this is the basis of an old Protestant-Catholic debate. Protestants have always complained that the use of 'icons' for worship by the Eastern and Catholic churches is a bad idea. (This is the practice of gazing at pictures of God, Christ, or the saints as we pray.) Since I'm a Protestant, I don't encourage the use of icons for worship, for the reasons we gave above. The depiction tends to 'hijack' the emotions in just one direction, showing God in only one aspect of his being.

But this is not the primary problem at all. The real issue in worship-by-images is the desire to shape and revise God spiritually. In modern parlance, it is a refusal to let God "be himself" in our lives. We filter out (consciously or unconsciously) things about God our hearts can't accept. In some ways, this is the cardinal sin of our time. How often have you heard someone say, "I don't believe in a God like that--I like to think of God as...." That is worshipping God through the work of our own hands. So in what ways do we do this?

(1) The most serious way we do this is by consciously intellectually rejecting part of the Scriptural revelation of God. We do this whenever we say, "we can no longer accept a God who does this...or who forbids this..." When we use the term 'no longer' we wrap ourselves in the mantle of progress. What is really happening is that we are saying, 'Our culture's distaste for this idea means we must drop it! We must have a God that fits our culture's sensibilities.' This means we are, like Micah's family, reshaping God to fit our society and hearts instead of letting God reshape our hearts and society.

(2) Another way we do this is by simply psychologically ignoring or avoiding those aspects of revelation we don't like. For example, God is very strong on giving our money away and not spending it lavishly on ourselves. But we can just avoid thinking out the implications of this for our own lives. We may know about those passages, but we don't let them challenge us. We are worshipping a God who makes no demands on our money. Or God is very strong on forgiveness and grace, yet we may live a life in which we are very judgmental and unforgiving. We may know about passages on grace and mercy, but we have never really 'heard' them--we have not really 'seen' God for who he is. We are worshipping a God who is a taskmaster, not a shepherd.

(3) Another way we do this is by subjectivizing all morality. For example, two professing Christians may be having sex with each other though they are not married. The reason they may give is that 'they have peace about it'. This is very much what Micah's family has done. They follow God's law if and when it fits their own sensibilities.

b) How does this lead to problems in our personal lives?

One general problem is that it makes it impossible to have a truly personal relationship with God. In a real personal relationship, the other one can contradict you and upset you--then you have to wrestle through to deeper intimacy. But when we simply ignore (either intellectually or psychologically) the parts of God we don't like, it means we don't have a God that can ever contradict our deepest desires or say 'no' to us. We never wrestle with him. He never comes and makes demands on us.

Another way to look at it is to see that at the root of almost *every* personal problem is a refusal to really let God be himself--a failure to accept and embrace God as he truly is. One

example is worry. We worry because we really don't believe God knows what is best or we really don't believe he wants our best--so we question the goodness and wisdom of God.

Another example is how we handle suffering. Elizabeth Elliot in *No Graven Image* gives us a novel about a well-meaning missionary who comes to the jungle and through an accident loses everything she worked so hard for. Many people wrote her after reading the book very incensed. "God would never let such awful things happen to someone who lived for his glory!" But that is a 'graven image'. The Bible shows us clearly that Jesus, who lived perfectly for the Father's glory, suffered a terrible fate. Why? God works redemptively through weakness and suffering. If have a rose-colored belief in a God who does not allow good people to suffer--we will not be ready for life! Our despair will be, really, our own fault, because we did not 'let God be God'.

c Why does God forbid anyone making an image of him? (Col.1:15)

From one perspective, it is very understandable to want to make a depiction of God. We are concrete beings, and we want some expression of God's nature we can touch, see, feel. But God has something that exactly fits that desire. He forbids us to make images of him, because he is giving us his own image of himself. Jesus Christ is the (literally) "*eikon*", image of the invisible God. He fulfills the need for some concrete way to see God's glory. But it is God's perfect image that we are to worship, not one we have made.

This is why Judaism and Islam, which both recognize the danger of graven images, fall short of what the human heart needs. They forbid us to make God what we want him to be, but then they cannot show us a concrete image of what he truly is.

5. 17:1-11. Micah's family-religion is externally orthodox but internally idolatrous. It is not only idolatrous in its understanding of God, but in its approach to him. a) What is the goal of their religion (v.13)? b) What is the means to that goal (v.4-5)? c) What is its standard for behavior (v.6)?

We see that underneath the orthodox claims their religion was identical to that of idolatry in its approach and relationship to God.

(1) First, v.13 shows us the ultimate goal of their religion. "*Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since I have this Levite....*" In other words, the purpose of this religion is to get access to God so you can get him to do what you want. The goal of true faith is to give God access to your heart so he can get you to do what he wants. Religion's purpose is to get God to serve you; gospel faith's purpose is to get your heart to serve him. The goal of idolatrous religion is always to *control* God and secure his favor by "pushing the right buttons" of deference and honor and obeisance.

(2) Second, v.4-5 show that the means of procuring this favor is "*two hundred shekels...made and ephod...put some idols...installed one of his sons as a priest...*" In other words, the means to get God's favor is religious good works and activities, rather than repentance. (He has a shrine, but now through his mother's investment, the shrine becomes far more elaborate.) This is how Micah's mother is trying to "straighten out" her son. When her son robs her, she does not get him to approach God in repentance, but rather she gets him to begin a round religious activity--by setting up a whole family shrine and cultus. A religion of repentance is a religion of *grace*, in which we rest and rely on mercy alone; a religion of rites and regulations and observances is a religion of *works* and activity in which we earn and force the hand of the deity.

"In applying this passage, it is helpful not just to point out the more obvious materialistic [and sensual] idols of our culture, but to explore their Christian equivalents....Religious idols are the most dangerous of all....An idol is anything that I look to give me real life, to protect or to enrich me...It could be our marriage or family life, the achievements of our kids, the success of our church, service for the Lord, our financial generosity, our biblical or doctrinal knowledge, our spiritual gifts. Once we fall in love with any of these good and potentially godly ingredients of life rather than with the Lord as the undisputed Number One in our experience, we are casting our idol, as surely as Micah did." (D.Jackman, p.263)

In other words, when we make any good thing central so that it becomes the means (v.4-5) to the goal of securing God's blessing (v.13), and also becomes the bottom line for our decisions in life about what is right (v.6), then it has become a religious idol.

(3) Third, v.6 shows us the standard for behavior and practice. *"Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."* The older, more literal translation of the Hebrew is "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The ultimate standard for what is right and wrong is our own sensibilities, feelings, and experience. In other words, they judge God by their own experience, instead of judging their own experience by God. This fits in perfectly with the "goal" and "means". Since this religion sets us up as our own Saviors, it also sets us up as our own Lords. The religion centers on me, me--how I can get God to give me what *I* know is good and right. This explains the surprising ability of Micah's mother to happily make an idol in Yahweh's honor. She is not particularly familiar with the divine revelation because she does not think of it as her supreme authority. Her own heart is her authority. "How can it be wrong if it is so sincere?"

We will see that this v.6 is also the very last verse of the book of Judges, so it is very significant. When we make our own heart the ultimate standard of truth, we have made an "idol" of our own feelings--we have deified them. But the result is personal and social ruin.

"We must not be so naive as to imagine this to be a problem confined to ancient Israel or to primitive tribal communities. The essence of idolatry is want to bring God within our pockets, so as control him. Foolishly, we imagine that we can deal with the source of life on the same level as ourselves, so that we can bribe him, or drive a bargain, or compel him to give us what we want out of life. Above all, and at all costs, what natural human beings want is a god that will not make demands on our lives--"
(D.Jackman, p.263.)

6. 17:1-11. Micah's mother promises all of her money to the Lord (v.3) but keeps most for herself (v.4). How is this an important indicator of our heart's spiritual condition?

The main thing this demonstrates is that Micah's mother does not really put him first, or give him sovereignty over every part of her life. This we see when she says she is going to "consecrate" her entire sum to him (v.3), but then she only used 2/11 for worship and apparently kept the rest for herself (v.4). (This is hypocrisy either by Biblical standards (cf. Acts 5:1,2) or pagan standards.

Similarly, many people use a lot of God-language, claiming to have Jesus as Lord, but in actuality, they only obey him in certain 'sectors' of their lives, preserving other areas in which they live as they wish. This sometimes can be very pure hypocrisy, as when a person conducts a secret extra-marital affair. But it is more typical to simply fail to think out the implications of the gospel for every area of life. In Gal.2:14 Paul has to confront Peter with

the fact that he was still allowing racist feelings and prejudices to control him in some areas of his life. Many professing Christians are completely un-Christian in the way they conduct their work life. (They may be as shady or as ruthless as everyone else in their business.) In short, we can “solemnly consecrate” our whole lives to God but only give him part of it.

More particularly, we have many other more direct passages in the Scripture that tell us that when our hearts are changed by grace that we will want to put all our money at God’s disposal (Matt.6:21;

7. a) 18:1-2. Why are the Danites still homeless in Canaan? (Read Josh.19:40-48; Judges 1:27-34; 2:1-3). What can we surmise about their spiritual condition? b) 18:3-21. How do they relate to God in their quest for a home? How do they show all the same spiritual characteristics of Micah’s family?

a) Why are the Danites still homeless in Canaan?

The writer of Judges has already told us the answer to this in the beginning of the book. Dan, like every other tribe, had been given by God a very specific part of Canaan. Their ‘inheritance’ or allotment was spelled out in Joshua 19:40-46. And God told all Israel that (1) if they obeyed and loved him deeply, and (2) if they fought courageously, that he would drive the Canaanites out before them (Josh.23:4-11), even if they were militarily superior (Josh.17:16). But Judges 1:19-36 tells us how the various tribes of Israel failed to fulfill this obligation--they failed to drive the Canaanites out. As a result, Judges 1:19-34 shows that each tribe came to live in their ‘inheritance’ or allotted land along with the Canaanite peoples they were supposed to send away. See 1:21, 29, 30, 32, 33--in every case the Canaanites “lived among” the Israelites.

Dan however, was different. In Judges 1:34 we see that they failed the most in their military obligation. “*The Amorites confined the Danites to the hill country, not allowing them to come down into the plain.*” While the other tribes at least found a home, though it was compromised by partnership with idolatrous peoples, the Danites did not even get in to their land. They were forced to live a semi-nomadic existence in the mountains. This is why they are in search of land they can settle in to do agriculture.

The Bible tells us that sin and disobedience leads to restlessness and alienation. Wickedness makes us like the endlessly tossing sea (Is.57:20; Gen.3:14), while obedience brings us into “rest” (Ps.95:11). Evidently the Danites were eventually so spiritually weak that they lost their identity as believers altogether. In Rev.7:5-8, “Dan” is conspicuously missing from the list of the tribes of Israel.

b) How do they relate to God in their quest for a home?

The men of Dan are exactly like Micah! First, they are in this plight because of their disobedience to God. Second, they show in v.5-6 and v.14-20 a superstitious, idolatrous view of God. They want his guidance and blessing--but they expect to procure it by religious activity rather than through repentance and grace. Third, vv.25-31 shows the naked desire for personal power that is the foundation of everything they do.

It is also possible to see all the same elements in the Levite, Jonathan. He sells his service to the highest bidder! There are no ‘good guys’ or heroes here. Every party a) has whittled God down into a controllable concept, b) is using religious activity as a way to use God, and c) all for the ultimate goal of personal power and gain--the real ‘god’ that is controlling them.

8. 18:30-31. What is significant about this statement? Why do you think this whole fairly uninteresting story is told to us?

It is shocking to see that the Levite who participates in all this is the grandson of Moses himself! Surely the narrator puts this in to prove the modern adage “God has no grandchildren”. Every individual must find God personally and individually. No one is related to God by pedigree. But it also shows how quickly and deeply a nation can decline spiritually.

The story gives us a great example of the “banality of evil”. Evil does not usually make people incredibly wicked and violent--that would be interesting, and it tends to wake people up. Rather, sin tends to make us hollow--externally proper and even nice, but underneath everyone is scraping and clutching for power, to get ahead. We continually just step on each other, as Micah was stepped on by the Danites and his Levite. But after all, he had tried to rob his own mother before these men came and robbed him.

C.S. Lewis calls these folk “Men without Chests” in *The Abolition of Man*. They may have reason (represented by the head) or visceral feelings and drives (represented by the gut), but they don’t have hearts. They are not really choosing, but being driven by their desires for power and gain, by their fears and anger.

We are all in danger of being just as banal and hollow and uninteresting, if we insist on making God “tame” and banal and uninteresting! Only by worshipping the *real* God can we escape this boring fate.

Week 13

JUDGES 19:1-21:25 PEOPLE WITHOUT A KING

Background:

Levite. The Levites were the descendants of Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. The Levites were the only tribe of Israel who were not given an allotment of land in Canaan. Rather than working the land for their livelihood, they were to live near and work in the tabernacle and the worship of God--and they were to be supported by the tithes and gifts of the rest of the people. (Read Numbers 18:20-24.) The actual priests were Levites who were descended from Aaron (Numbers 3:10), while the rest of the Levites assisted the priests in the work of the tabernacle. The Levites were considered by the Lord to be consecrated to his service and ministry (Numbers 3:5-13) and thus had a special responsibility to be holy.

Concubine. “A secondary wife acquired by purchase or as a war captive, and allowed in a polygamous society....” (New Bible Dictionary, p.246.) A concubine was essentially a slave-mistress who was not a prostitute, but was not a wife in the full sense of the term. She was a ‘second-class’ wife, a slave-mistress, a sex-object. That is why sometimes in this passage the Levite is called the ‘master’ of his concubine (19:27) but once her ‘husband’ (v.3). While God makes clear in the beginning (Gen.2:24) and in the teaching of Jesus (Mark 10:7-8) that marriage is to be between one man and one woman, many believers in intervening times nonetheless had both multiple wives and concubines (e.g. Abraham in Genesis 16:2-3) contrary to God’s design. But from the history of Abraham through Jacob down to Solomon, the practice of polygamy is revealed in the Bible to bring heart-ache and pain in every family without exception. What we see here in Judges is that a Levite, who should have been quite holy, has been shaped by the pagan culture surrounding him, by buying a concubine and treating her like a piece of property.

1. 19:1-10. Read the ‘Background’ notes above. What can you tell about the relationship of the Levite and the concubine from—a) how she left him, b) how long he waited to go to her, c) why (it is implied) she returned with him? Why do you think her father was so extravagantly positive to the Levite?

2. 19:11-25. a) How does the narrator foreshadow the character of this city in vv.18-20. b) How does the incident of vv.22-25 compare and contrast with the one in Gen.19:1-11? What are we to learn from the parallels?

3. 19:25-30. a) Why would the Ephraimite offer two women, even his own daughter, rather than the Levite? b) Why do you think the concubine did not enter the house (v.26)? c) List the details given us in vv.26-29 about the Levites treatment of the concubine. What do the details tell us about their relationship? Why does the narrator give us hardly any details of the mob’s treatment of her all night, but all this about the Levite seeing her in the morning? Why this focus?

4. 19:25-20:7. a) Why do you think the Levite was indifferent to her abuse and rape, but furious upon her death? b) Compare the Levite's account (20:4-6) with what really happened. c) Compare the moral performance of the Gibeah mob with the moral performance of the Levite. What is this all saying about human nature and sin?

5. a) 20:1-18. The stress in these verses is on the unity of Israel (see vv.1, 2, 8, 11). Compare 1:1-2 with 20:18. What is ironic and tragic about this unity here at the end of the story? b) Why did the Benjamites not turn over the guilty men (vv.12-15)?

Background:

The battle of 20:19-47. The Benjamites lived in a hilly terrain which favored a defending force. Though vastly superior in numbers, the Israelites could only send in one or two tribes at a time to fight in the narrow space defended by the Benjamites on the first and second days, the Benjamites defeat the Israelites and there is great slaughter and sorrow. God twice gives them answers (through the priest's ephod) as to who to send each day, but these answers are no guarantees of success, as they were in the past. Finally on the third day, the Lord assures them of victory. Israel chooses a new strategy. One force of Israelites first engaged the Benjamites and began to withdraw, drawing the main force of Benjamites after them. But as they moved away from the city of Gibeah (v.29-31), another, larger force came up behind the main force of Benjamites and took Gibeah (v.34-39). Then they all turned on the Benjamite army that had been drawn away. Soon all but 600 Benjamites were destroyed (v.47).

6. 20:48-21:9. a) What evidence is there that there is bitterness and sinful anger driving this conflict rather than a concern for justice? b) How does anger and resentment affect you? What can we do to avoid vindictiveness?

7. a) Did the civil war 'purge the evil from Israel' (20:13)? Why not? b) What could they have done instead? c) 21:10-24. How does the rest of the chapter illustrate that 'sometimes it is a worse sin to keep a promise than to break it'?

8. 21:25. How is this an appropriate bottom line for the book of Judges? How does the following quote shed light on the book of Judges?

***"Whatever controls you is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our life."* – Becky Pippert**

9. What is the single most helpful or striking truth that you have learned for yourself in your study of the book of Judges?

Week 13

JUDGES 19:1-21:25 PEOPLE WITHOUT A KING

Introduction:

This is the last part of the 5-chapter “appendix” to the book of Judges. In this appendix we have two “ground level” examples of what Israel’s life was like between judges. Last week, the case study revealed the “hollowness” and “weightlessness” of Israelite culture and religion. On the outside, it invoked the name of the Lord and utilized the forms of Biblical worship, but at its core it was idolatrous. That is: 1) it relied on religion rather than repentance, for 2) a goal of manipulating God rather than serving and loving God, and 3) it was grounded in human experience rather than divine revelation.

The first story in the appendix (17:1-18:31) was very rather banal and slightly comical. It depicted weak-willed, opportunistic, and unprincipled people trampling on each other. That is why we readers are unprepared and stunned by the violence this second story--it goes far beyond anything we have read already. Even by modern standards, it is deeply repulsive to both ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ sensibilities. But though it is very different in tone, its theme is the same (21:25) as in the first story (17:6)--the need for a Savior-King.

Background:

Levite. The Levites were the descendants of Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. The Levites were the only tribe of Israel who were not given an allotment of land in Canaan. Rather than working the land for their livelihood, they were to live near and work in the tabernacle and the worship of God--and they were to be supported by the tithes and gifts of the rest of the people. (Read Numbers 18:20-24.) The actual priests were Levites who were descended from Aaron (Numbers 3:10), while the rest of the Levites assisted the priests in the work of the tabernacle. The Levites were considered by the Lord to be consecrated to his service and ministry (Numbers 3:5-13) and thus had a special responsibility to be holy.

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1. 19:1-10. Read the ‘Background’ notes above. What can you tell about the relationship of the Levite and the concubine from--a) how she left him, b) how long he waited to go to her, c) why (it is implied) she returned with him? Why do you think her father was so extravagantly positive to the Levite?

a) How she left him.

She did two things. First, she was 'unfaithful' to him (v.2a). Literally the Hebrew says she 'played the harlot'--i.e. she committed adultery. Secondly, she left him and returned to her family. The reason we know that she was very alienated from him was that she took the extraordinary measure of leaving her master--which was quite impermissible in that society. She was either angry or disgusted with him. This is not surprising. A concubine had an even worse lot than a modern mistress. Today, if a man has a mistress on the side but refuses to commit to her and marry her, she at least is living separately and has both the opportunity and the right to see others. But a concubine was not only not a full wife, but she was owned by her lover. So on the one hand, the man keeps much of his independence and can see or marry other women, and yet his mistress has no independence or rights at all. He would not make a full commitment to him, so is it surprising that she has not made a full commitment to him? He is using her, and she returns the favor.

b) How long he waited to go to her.

Just as her leaving shows a great deal of alienation from the Levite, the Levite's delay is evidence that his affection for her is not strong. Some people have proposed that he was giving her time to 'cool off'--but that is surely reading modern sensibilities into an ancient culture. He evidently did not want her back at first, out of anger or indifference, but eventually he began to feel his desire for her again. Again we see that the relationship is based on his drives and passions, not on a personal and legal mutual commitment, as in a real marriage.

c) Why she returned to him.

Though we told that the Levite came to her family with a riderless donkey (for her v.2) and tried to "*persuade*" her (v.3), it is very interesting to notice that there is nothing that says she was persuaded. There is no reference to her response at all except that she took him in to meet her father (v.3). We never hear another thing from her while in her father's house. The text simply says in v.10 "*the man left....with his concubine*" (v.10). Why is there no statement that "she listened to him" or "she agreed to return"? Instead all the action shifts to the interaction between the concubine's extremely hospitable and gushingly positive father. Every indication is that the father essentially gave her back to the Levite, rather than allowing her to make any decision.

Why was the father so obviously over-solicitous? The penalties for both adultery and leaving one's owner were severe--death and disgrace of the family. He would have been overjoyed that the Levite did not 'prefer charges' and simply wanted to take her home again. The pressure on the concubine to return would have been enormous. Her father simply would have not permitted her to stay.

In summary, we are prepared for what comes out explicitly later. The girl is basically an object, a piece of property that produces sexual favors for her master. The relationship is not really a personal one at all. This is a deep perversion of the 'cleaving'--the deep unity and oneness (Genesis 2:24)--that God intended for two people in marriage.

2. 19:11-25. a) How does he narrator foreshadow the character of this city in vv.18-20. b) How does the incident of vv.22-25 compare and contrast with the one in Gen.19:1-11? What are we to learn from the parallels?

a) How does the narrator foreshadow?

The concubine's father is an example of normal Near Eastern hospitality. It was considered extremely important to provide full hospitality not only to people you knew, but to strangers that came to your door. (Compare Heb.13:2). This was especially necessary in a time when

there were no 'inns' or motels. All societies, cultures, and religions accepted this. Therefore it is quite unusual that the Levite and his two servants could show up in the middle of an Israelite city and not find anyone to speak to them or welcome them. What had happened to the normal decency of the city? This represented some sort of break-down of normal 'neighborliness'. But the second foreshadow hints at something even darker than selfishness and indifference. The Ephraimite man says, essentially, "You better come with me! Whatever you do, *do not spend the night in the square.*" (v.20) The Ephraimite apparently knows just how deeply society and character has broken down in this Israelite town. It is positively dangerous for an outsider to be caught outside after dark. What is this? This is not the wilderness where there are wild animals or wandering marauders. What is going on?

b) Compare the incident with Genesis 19:1-11.

The two incidents are mainly alike: 1) Strangers come to the town, 2) a band of men surround the house, pound the door, and demand to have the male(s) to have group sex with them, 3) the host begs the men not to do this but they refuse to relent, and 4) the host of the house offers to the men some women in the house, instead. The differences are only two: 1) In Sodom we are told that every man in the whole city was part of the mob, while the gang in Gibeah was only "*some*" of the men of the city (v.22) 2) The men in Lot's house, being angels, simply struck the men blind. But the men of Gibeah took the concubine and gang raped her and brutalized her.

What are we to make of the parallels?

The message is pretty obvious. The Israelites had received enormous privileges that no other nation on earth had been given: the covenants of Abraham and Moses, the law and the prophets, the tabernacle worship and promises, the mighty acts of God bringing them out of Egypt, and the shekinah glory cloud over the ark of the covenant. (See Rom.9:4-5.) Other nations had only the glimmer of God's law in their consciences, and therefore they are not held to the same standards (Rom.2:1-12; cf. James 3:1ff.) Yet here we have Israelites acting exactly like the Canaanites and pagan nations that had received none of these things. This is, then a fitting climax to the book of Judges. We have seen throughout that Israel declines deeper and deeper during this period. This is the bottom--they cannot go deeper.

Note: Many have taken hold of Judges 19 and Genesis 19 to prove that homosexuality is wrong--but these passages are not good places to draw inferences about the practice. The sin of these two bands of men involve much more than homosexuality. They wanted to rape the Levite, and later they rape the concubine instead. It is quite clear from the narration here that the rape of the concubine was very evil, but that does not prove heterosexuality is wrong! So we can't infer that homosexuality is wrong from these passages. However, there are several other passages that do speak quite clearly that homosexuality is not God's design: Lev.18:22 and 20:13 in the Old Testament, and Rom.1:18-32, 1 Cor.6:9-10, and 1 Tim.1:9-10.

3. 19:25-30. a) *Why would the Ephraimite offer two women, even his own daughter, rather than the Levite?* b) *Why do you think the concubine did not enter the house (v.26)?* c) *List the details given us in vv.26-29 about the Levites treatment of the concubine. What do the details tell us about their relationship?* *Why does the narrator gives us hardly any details of the mob's treatment of her all night, but all this about the Levite seeing her in the morning?* *Why this focus?*

a) Why would the Ephraimite offer the women?

On the one hand, it is likely that the Ephraimite honored and respected his guest for being a Levite. As we noted in the background note above, Levites were set apart by God as his

representatives. It is clear that the evil of the men of Gibeah was increased by their complete disregard for the status of the guest. But that cannot be the sole or main reason for the Ephraimite's astonishing willingness to even give his own daughter to be raped. After all, the Levite's man-servant was also in the house, and he was a complete stranger. Why not offer him? They wanted a man after all. No, what this incident shows is how all the men, even the Ephraimite and Levite, essentially saw women as property and chattel. This is contrary to Gen.1:27, where we see that both man and woman are created in God's image, as the crown of creation. If that is the case, then the life of a woman could not be less valuable and expendable than the life of a man. But rather than live from the "creation ordinances" (Genesis) of God's Word, they had simply imbibed the reigning popular attitudes toward women. They had been completely "conformed to this world" (Rom.12:1-2).

b) Why didn't she enter the house?

One possibility is that she was so physically near death that she did not have the strength to go in. She could only crawl to the door. Another possibility was that she was so immobilized by despair or fear or fury at what her 'master' did that she could not bear to enter and face him. A third possibility was that she had been so ravaged that she could not bear to face anyone at all.

Verses v.25-29 is remarkable narration. One of the marks of good writing is that it *gives* us the experience of an event rather than telling us how we *ought* to experience the event. (C.S.Lewis said to a writer, "Don't tell me it was delightful or terrifying--describe it so that I am delighted or terrified.") The narrator here exhibits great economy of style that is gut-wrenching in its poignancy. There is no gory details, only sad ones--"*there was no answer*". (v.28) (See also under part c. below). By this sparing style, the narrator draws our hearts out toward her. "*If ever a human being endured a night of utter horror, it was [she]....that night must have been for her...as dark as the pit itself.*" (Cundall, p.197-198).

c) Why no details of the mob's treatment of her, but of the Levite's treatment.

Verse 25 in the most general terms covers the whole night in which the concubine was in the hands of the men of Gibeah. But from v.26ff we get a very specific picture painted. First, she falls down in the doorway to the house, v.26. Second we learn that the Levite had slept through the night while she was being beaten and raped--he "*got up in the morning*" v.27a. Third we are told that when he opened the door he had already made all his preparations to leave, since he "*stepped out to continue on his way*", v.27b. In other words, he had not immediately sought to discover what had happened to her, but went about his business. Fourth, we are told that when he saw her, she lay there sprawled out, with her hands stretched out in the most pathetic way, so he knew she was not just sleeping, v.27c. (It is also hardly possible that he would not have been able to see how abused she had been.) Fifth, we are told that he simply told her to "get up and get going" like you would speak to an animal. There was no expression of surprise (e.g. "what happened?") nor sympathy (e.g. "you are hurt!") Sixth, we learn that he mutilates her dead body and cuts her into twelve pieces in order to inflame the rest of the nation against the men of Gibeah

Why the focus? What do the details tell us?

The details inevitably draw our attention to the unbelievable callousness and inhumanity of the Levite toward a woman who was his lover. The narrator is trying to show us that the sin in this event is by no means all on one side, even though the rest of Israel does not see this.

4. 19:25-20:7. a) Why do you think the Levite was indifferent to her abuse and rape, but furious upon her death? b) Compare the Levite's account (20:4-6) with what really happened. c) Compare the moral performance of the

Gibeah mob with the moral performance of the Levite. What is this all saying about human nature and sin?

a) Why was the Levite not angry at the rape, but vengeful at her death?

As we have seen, he knew what he was sending her into. He sent her out to a mob “*pounding at the door*” (v.22). (Some translate that they were “throwing themselves at the door”.) He knew their mood and must have known the terrible experience she was going to have. Then all of the details of vv.26-29 show his lack of personal concern for her. But when he sees she is dead, he is filled with vengefulness. Why? The only conclusion is that he considers her his property, but not his love. She has value as a commodity, and now she has been ruined. When he cuts her up into pieces in order to inflame the nation against Gibeah, he reveals finally that he has no affection and respect for her at all. It is clear that the pagan culture’s idea of a ‘second-class wife’ and women-as-chattel had deeply penetrated the sensibilities of this man.

b) Compare the Levite’s account with reality.

This is a remarkable self-serving account, well edited to hide any wrongdoing on his part. 1) First, he at least exaggerates the original intentions of the men of Gibeah. He says the men of Gibeah had gathered to kill him (v.4), when their purpose had been sexual (v.22). (But because of the death of the concubine it was easy to convince others that the original purpose of the men had been murder.) 2) Second, he completely leaves out the fact that he callously sacrificed his concubine rather than fighting to protect her. So no one hearing this account would have suspected that he contributed to the death of the girl. This certainly would have added some fuel to the fire. Had the rest of Israel known about the Levite’s own foolishness and hardness of heart, they might have been more balanced in their reaction.

c) Compare the moral performance of the mob with that of the Levite.

The men of Gibeah certainly appear to be the villains, since their sins are so overt and heinous. They tried to do homosexual gang rape but had to settle for heterosexual gang rape. They show their complete disregard for human life sexually. But the Levite’s moral performance is, though more subtle, no better. We saw that he sends her out to the mob, then sleeps like a baby, says “get up” to her battered body, and then mutilates her corpse. It is no exaggeration to say that the very relationship of this man to his concubine had already been a ‘violent’ one, though not physically.

What do we learn about sin?

In short, this passage shows the truth of the first two-and-a-half chapters of Romans. In Romans 1 Paul says that the obviously debauched pagan world, with its orgies and lusts is lost in sin, but in Romans 2 he says that the moral religious person is also lost in sin. Under the surface, both are proud toward God and inhuman to others. He sums it up with the famous categorical statement: “*No one is righteous, no not one...All have gone astray, they have together become worthless.*” (Rom.3:10,12).

5. a) 20:1-18. The stress in these verses is on the unity of Israel (see vv.1, 2, 8, 11). Compare 1:1-2 with 20:18. What is ironic and tragic about this unity here at the end of the story? b) Why did the Benjamites not turn over the guilty men (vv.12-15)?

a) What is the irony and tragedy about the comparison of 20:18 and 1:1-2?

In the beginning, Israel begins its conquest of Canaan as a unity. They ask the Lord by “who should be the first to go up to fight?” (1:1) and the Lord answers, “Judah” (1:2). But soon the unity of the tribes is lost. Throughout the history of Judges, the unity of the tribes is a spiritual issue. Sin tends to divide us, and so we often see squabbling and dissension

between the tribes erupting. The accomplishment of Othniel (3:7-11) was to unite all the tribes again to fight against the enemy. Deborah however cannot do it, and she condemns the tribes that did not join her in battle (5:15b-18,23). No other Judge is able to get this unity. Before and after Gideon's victory (8:1-9) and Jephthah's victory (12:1-6) inter-tribal fighting and rivalry prevails. By the time of Samson, we find the God's Judge has to fight single-handedly.

Now, finally, here at the end of the book, Israel is united before the Lord again! In 20:18 it assembles and asks, "who shall go up first"? and is gets the answer "Judah"--just like in the beginning. But the tragic irony is that it is uniting to destroy some of their own people. This cannot be an accident of the narrative. The writer is showing the failure to conquer Canaan and walk with God has led now to fratricide and civil war with their "*Benjamin, our brothers*". This tragic phrase is repeated in 20:23 and 28.

b) Why did the Benjamites not turn over the guilty men of Gibeah?

"Some cooler heads within the leadership [probably] proposed that the absent Benjamites should be given the opportunity to take action themselves against their own erring relatives before the Israel sledgehammer is brought down to crack the Gibeah nut. This initiative causes more problems than it solves, as it brings out in the Benjamites a fierce, misplaced loyalty towards the scoundrels in Gibeah. The upshot is that instead of a police action against a gang of hooligans, Israel finds herself, Israel finds herself facing a full-blown civil war, and one whose outcome is not a forgone conclusion, for the Benjamites though vastly outnumbered are no mean warriors (20:15-17). All the signs are that the fabric of the nation is about to be torn apart." (M.Wilcock, p.170-171).

One idol that is most destructive to human unity is the idol of one's blood or kindred--"my family/country right or wrong". Though common decency tells us that the men of Gibeah violated all moral standards, the Benjamites close ranks and refuse to allow any outsiders to find fault with any insiders. When we put our blood or racial ties above the common good and the transcendent moral order, we make a 'god' of our own people.

So now we see how sin builds upon itself. The callousness of the Levite and the sexual licentiousness of some local hooligans has turned into a "full-blown civil war" because of the lack of candor of the Levite master and pride of the Benjamites.

Background:

The battle of 20:19-47. The Benjamites lived in a hilly terrain which favored a defending force. Though vastly superior in numbers, the Israelites could only send in one or two tribes at a time to fight in the narrow space defended by the Benjamites on the first and second days, the Benjamites defeat the Israelites and there is great slaughter and sorrow. God twice gives them answers (through the priest's ephod) as to who to send each day, but these answers are no guarantees of success, as they were in the past. Finally on the third day, the Lord assures them of victory. Israel chooses a new strategy. One force of Israelites first engaged the Benjamites and began to withdraw, drawing the main force of Benjamites after them. But as they moved away from the city of Gibeah (v.29-31), another, larger force came up behind the main force of Benjamites and took Gibeah (v.34-39). Then they all turned on the Benjamite army that had been drawn away. Soon all but 600 Benjamites were destroyed (v.47).

6. 20:48-21:9. a) What evidence is there that there is bitterness and sinful anger driving this conflict rather than a concern for justice? b) How does anger and resentment affect you? What can we do to avoid vindictiveness?

a) Evidence of bitterness.

First, we see that the Israelites put to death every single Benjamite, man, woman, child and even animal! (v.48) That is vastly beyond even the rule of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'! At the very most, justice would have demanded the execution of the hooligans of Gibeah, or just of the Benjamites who came out to fight. What justification was there for the slaughter of the whole Benjamite society? This is the work of bitterness, that always wants two eyes revenge in payment for every one eye lost.

Second, we see that the Benjamites made two "rash vows". They swore to not let any Benjamite marry any Israelite daughter (21:7). We also see that they had sworn that they would kill any Israelites that had not united with the rest of them against Benjamin (21:5). These promises were extreme and unwarranted, and they realized this after they began to cool off. In fact, the oath to not allow any Benjamite to have an Israelite wife created a huge problem for them. They realized that they had effectively exterminated one whole tribe, since only 600 male Benjamites had survived.

b) What can we do to avoid vindictiveness?

First, we have to realize *what* forgiveness is. Forgiveness is granted before it is felt (Luke 17:3-6). Forgiveness is primarily a promise to a) not bring the matter (the wrong) up to the person, b) not bring the matter up to others, and c) not bring the matter up in your thoughts to yourself. (In other words, it is a promise to not dwell on the hurt and nurse ill-will toward the other.) These are under the control of your will. You are not able to keep a thought from occurring to you, but you don't have to entertain it.

Second, we have to realize *why* forgiveness is. Forgiveness is possible only if you see and feel the reality of God's massive and costly forgiveness of us through Christ. (Matt. 18:21-35) Only the knowledge of our debt to God can put in perspective someone else's debt to us. The forgiveness of Christ gives us the emotional humility to forgive ("who am I to withhold forgiveness when I am such a sinner?") and emotional 'wealth' to forgive ("what has this person really robbed me of, when I have so much in Christ?")

If, 1) with our wills we practice forgiveness, and 2) with our hearts we dwell on Christ's forgiveness--then slowly a feeling of forgiveness will come.

Lastly, we must do forgiveness work in our hearts even before we try to reconcile to someone who has done wrong (Mark 11:25). That way we won't be too angry in our discussion with him and slip into trying to 'score points' and humiliate the person. In reconciliation we are trying to restore the relationship. We do that by admitting everything wrong we have done, by then pointing out any injustice that they have done, and then asking to be reconciled.

7. a) Did the civil war 'purge the evil from Israel' (20:13)? Why not? b) What could they have done instead? c) 21:10-24. How does the rest of the chapter illustrate that 'sometimes it is a worse sin to keep a promise than to break it'?

a) Was the civil war successful as to its stated purpose?

The Israelites sought to "purge the evil from Israel" (21:13), but they did so with coercive force instead of getting to the root cause of the problem. We, the readers, have been subtly shown by the narrator that the hollow character, the banal spiritual superficiality, and the

form-without-power religion of Israel in chapter 17 and 18 has allowed the moral rot that rears its ugly head in chapter 19-21.

We saw that the religion of Israel is very like a very widespread form of religion in our own day. It is 1) superficially similar to the ancient Biblical faith, but 2) it has been shaped more by the surrounding culture than God's divine revelation. 3) At its core it uses religious activities and practices to secure God's favor, and 4) it drops any attributes of God that it finds unmanageable or unpalatable. The result of this veneer of religion is the cult of self-worship, personal power and ego-fulfillment. In chapters 17 and 18 we saw the normal day-to-day results of all this--Micah robbing his mother, the Danites robbing Micah, the Levite selling his religious services to the highest bidder. But here we see that, under pressure, the self-centeredness can explode into blood lust and genocide.

Today, our modern age has, like the Israelites, "tamed" God, by rejecting as "primitive" the idea that anyone can know absolute truth. Modern people are as 'polytheistic' as ancient pagans, molding God and religion and morality 'as they see fit'. As a result, there is (as Daniel Moynihan has noted) many times more 'deviance' in the average U.S. city than there was 60 years ago, even with far more poverty. Why? C.S.Lewis puts it in a classic passage:

"You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more 'drive' or dynamism, or self-sacrifice....In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful." -- C.S. Lewis, "The Abolition of Man"

b) What could they have done instead?

They could have recognized that they were as much under oppression and slavery as if they had a foreign slave-master! Whenever they were under the heel of a *political* enemy, they groaned to God and repented and put away their idols. Their great error here was that they did not recognize that they were in the exact same condition as when they were under the Edomites, the Amorites, the Midianites, and so on. They are spiritually in darkness, but they don't recognize it. They weep and repent, but only *after* the battle and only about the consequences of the war (21:3-4). They do not repent before the Lord as they do in every other time of revival. Why not? Unless they are in economic or political trouble they do not see their spiritual condition. The Israelites should have recognized that the deeper need was a revival.

c) How is a rash vow more sinful to keep than to break?

The superstition of the Israelites regarding their vows puts them into a great conflict. (See the discussion regarding this issue under Jephthah.) In order to keep their vow they first slaughter one town and then kidnap the daughters of another town. How could they not have known that kidnapping and murder were, if anything, more heinous violations of God's law than breaking a sinful, bitter promise? It is, again, an example of relying on religious activities (vow-keeping) instead of repentance and holiness.

8. 21:25. How is this an appropriate bottom line for the book of Judges? How does the following quote shed light on the book of Judges?

"Whatever controls you is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our life." – Becky Pippert

How is this appropriate?

Many commentators believe that the author is an apologist for David, and that he is trying to promote the importance and support of Davidic kingship. He is saying, "Look at the inadequacy of human nature! We need more than these episodic, charismatic military chieftains--we need a permanent king." It may or may not be true that he is aiming to promote David, but he certainly makes a powerful case for the insufficiency of human nature! The book of Judges is *not* 'book of virtues' or a series of 'moral exemplars'. They are 'heroes of faith' only (Heb.11:32ff.) They are mainly deeply flawed and unlikely leaders who God uses *despite* themselves in his grace. So in any case, the author convinces us that we need a savior--but what kind? God may be using the author of Judges to be showing us realities beyond his conscious and deliberate intentions. He has shown us we need a 'deliverer'--but by the end of the book we have come to wonder whether a mere human king will be enough. And by the end of the histories of 1 and 2 Kings and Chronicles, we *do* know that we need someone beyond David himself.

By the end of the book--especially in the life of Samson--we first realize that we need a deliverer who can come *without* being called for, since human beings are not really seeking God (Rom.3:11; 2 Tim.2:13). We will not be able to choose him, he will have to choose us (John 15:16). Second, we come to realize that this deliverer will have to *do it all himself* (Rom.4:4-6; Titus 3:4-6), since we will not be able to contribute anything to our salvation. Thirdly, we are even given the mysterious hint that this deliverer will himself save us through weakness, through a 'victorious defeat'--through his death, not just his life (Phil.2:1-11). Fourthly, we need a king who can "*purge*" us of evil in the heart, not just in society (Judges 20:13). Surely the author of Judges spoke more truly and wisely than he knew! We need a king, but a greater king with a greater deliverance than any human being can perform.

It is the Psalmist who truly sees all the way to the horizon, when he writes:

*"Let the heavens be glad, let the earth rejoice; let the sea resound and all that is in it,
Let the fields exult, and all that is in them.
Then shall the trees of the wood sing for joy; they will sing before the Lord,
For he comes, he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his truth."* (Ps.96:11-13)

Here the Psalmist uses the word "judge" in its original sense of "rule with justice". He realizes that when the true Judge and King returns, all nature (and human nature) will finally blossom and reach peace and fullness. Not until then. We must look to the great Judge and King, or we will serve a false one.

"The real reason for democracy is just the reverse. Aristotle said that some people were only fit to be slaves...but I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be masters. I don't think the old authority in kings...and the old obedience in subjects...was in itself degrading or evil...It was rightly taken away because men became bad and abused it. To attempt to restore it now would be the same error as that of the Nudists. Legal and economic equality are absolutely necessary remedies for the Fall, and protection against cruelty....[BUT] Where men are forbidden to honor a king, they will honor millionaires, athletes, or film-stars instead; even famous prostitutes or gangsters. For spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served; deny it food and it will gobble poison..." C.S. Lewis "Equality" in Present Concerns

In our deepest heart of hearts, we long for the true king.

How does Becky Pippert's quote illuminate the book of Judges?

This quote explains it all! We all must worship-and-therefore-serve something. If we are not enslaved by the true Lord (whose service alone is perfect freedom), then we will serve some 'Baal'. That 'lord' will lead to psychological and social breakdown eventually. All emotional problems, all philosophical problems, and social problems are the result of making some good, created thing into an ultimate thing in the place of God. While personal-emotional idols (work, sex, comfort, power, approval) lead to individual breakdown, so corporate-social idols (my tribe and race, national wealth, military power, 'divine right' of kings or the state) leads to social breakdown.

The great tragedy of the final chapters was that the people did not see that their *real* false masters were not political foreigners but their own inward idols of personal power and happiness.

9. What is the single most helpful or striking truth that you have learned for yourself in your study of the book of Judges?

Week 14

Ps.137; Jer. 28-29

Daniel 1:1-2

EXILES IN A FOREIGN LAND

SOSL 3/98-99

1. Read Psalm 137. a) v.8-9- What did the Babylonians do to break the Jews' spirit during the sack of Jerusalem? What is the Psalmist's response? b) v.2-3- What are the Babylonians doing now to break their spirit? What is the Psalmist's response?

2. To what extent is the Psalmist's attitude justified and to what extent is it incomplete?

3. a) What sort of life in Babylonian society will the Psalmist and those like him have? b) Do you know Christians today who relate to their society in the same way?

4. Read Jeremiah 28:1-4; 29:1-14. a) What attitude toward life in Babylon was Hananiah promoting? How is this picture of the different than the view we saw in Psalm 137? b) Do you know Christians who relate to their society in the same way?

5. How does Jeremiah give a completely different picture of a) God's purposes for them in the city, and b) God's directions for them on how to live in the city?

6. How does this relate to us today? (cf. 1 Pet.1:1)

7. How does Daniel 1:1-2 seem to have the same perspective toward the exile as that of Jeremiah's letter? How can we apply this insight in general to troubles in our own lives? How can we apply this in particular to our own 'sojourn' as believers in an unbelieving culture?

8. Summary: Make a list of all the possible attitudes or stances to a pagan culture that believers may take.

Week 14

Ps.137; Jer. 28-29

Daniel 1:1-2

EXILES IN A FOREIGN LAND

SOSL 3/98-99

Faithful Living in a Pagan Society

Daniel was one of the Israelites exiled and living in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth century B.C. They no longer lived in a secure believing society, under a believing cultural establishment. This book then gives guidance to those who live in a religiously pluralistic society which is at best indifferent and at worst positively hostile to faith in the true and only God. The Israelites in the book of Judges lived among pagans as semi-autonomous tribal societies in an agrarian culture. But the exiles lived as individuals in an urban culture. Thus they are much 'closer' to our condition, and their experience is somewhat easier to apply. The message of Daniel is that *"God is sovereign. He overrules and eventually will overcome human evil."* (Dillard and Longman, *An Intro to the OT*, p.348) It

Broader Historical Background

Under Moses, God entered into a covenant relationship with them as a nation (see Exod.19-24 and the renewal in Deuteronomy). God warned Israel that if they fell into disobedience and idolatry, the result would be a loss of national sovereignty and exile (Deut.28). This disobedience led to the exile of the northern tribes of Israel by Assyria in 722 B.C. Though Judah was spared, but it remained under the shadow of Assyria and had to pay it tribute. As the last good king of Judah, Josiah, lay dying, the Babylonian empire was rising to displace Assyria as the dominant world power. It claimed sovereignty over Judah.

Egypt, which wanted to control Judah, put Jehoiakim (son of Josiah) on the throne. But it could not help when Nebuchadnezzar invaded and claimed Israel as a vassal state (2 Kings 24:1). The Babylonians took back to Babylon many of the treasures of the temple and also a good number of Jews who were in the aristocratic and intellectual elite. Daniel was part of this first group of exiles (Dan.1:1-5) Then, in 597 B.C. Jehoiakim renounced his obedience to Babylon and looked to Egypt for protection (2 Kings 24:7). But Babylon retaliated and moved on Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died (mysteriously--perhaps assassinated) and his 18 year old son Jehoiachin succeeded him and surrendered after a short siege. This time the Babylonians took the whole 'professional' class of Judah to Babylon in exile--10,000 of the military officers, the artists, and the scholars. The purpose of this was of course to essentially destroy the distinctive Biblical culture of the Jews--to assimilate them intellectually, socially, culturally, and spiritually. Finally, the remaining king in Israel, Zedekiah, revolted in 587 B.C. This time Nebuchadnezzar razed the walls and the temple and exiled most all of Judah's inhabitants.

Three Ways to Relate to the World

The exile was a severe test for the faith of the Jews. How would they relate to the pagan society around them? The 'exilic' literature of the Bible shows us the different paths that were open to them. We will compare them before launching into our study of the book of Daniel proper. This way we will better see the path being laid for us out by Daniel.

1. Read Psalm 137. a) v.8-9- What did the Babylonians do to break the Jews' spirit during the sack of Jerusalem? What is the Psalmist's response? b) v.2-3- What are the Babylonians doing now to break their spirit? What is the Psalmist's response?

Psalm 137 is a deeply troubling psalm for the modern reader. It takes us by surprise, since we tend to come to the Psalter with expectations of 'inspirational' and elevating thoughts. Instead, we hear the emotions of searing pain, and are appalled at the climax.

a) How did the Babylonians seek to break the Jews spirit during the sack?

When the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, they took Jewish infants and dashed them upon the rocks. That (v.9) is "*what you have done to us*" (v.8). There are other accounts from ancient history in which the victors in a siege of a city take infants by the feet and smash their heads against the walls or stones. The Psalmist is counseling vengeance, though notice that he leaves as an open question exactly who will do this. He does not say that the Jews will do it. But he predicts that Babylon is doomed to experience the same violence that it inflicted on Jerusalem, and he pronounces 'blessed' or 'happy' those who wreak the vengeance. So there is no prayer for or seeking of forgiveness.

b) How did the Babylonians seek to break the Jews Spirit in Babylon?

The Babylonians are now asking the Jewish exiles to take their harps and instruments and to sing 'songs of Zion'--namely Psalms of praise to God--but for entertainment. They are making this request to 'torment' them. It is a psychological ploy to enforce their superiority. The Psalmist refuses to expose their faith to such ridicule, and therefore they 'hang up their harps' on the poplar trees, and refuse to sing songs of the Lord (v.4).

2. To what extent is the Psalmist's attitude justified and to what extent is it incomplete?

1st, it is right to refuse to 'sing on cue' and expose the high claims of Zion to ridicule (v.2-3). But there is also a danger here. Verse 4 goes on to question whether they can do corporate worship at all in a foreign country. It implies that they cannot proceed to live as a worshipping community until they are back on their own soil, with the temple and in a believing society. Thus the Psalmist and the exiles he represents are unable to envision vibrant spiritual life there. The Psalmist is not teaching error here, since v.5 and 6 show that their loyalty to God and his salvation is more fervent than ever. He is not telling people to give up hope. But there is no ability to concretely understand what form that hope will take if they have to stay in a pagan land.

2nd, it is right to cry out for justice (v.7-9). The form of these verses is judicial. In verse 7, the divine Judge is being given evidence against Edom, which betrayed Israel to the Babylonians. Then in verse 8, an appeal is being made to the basic law of fairness. One commentator points out the simple justice of vv.8-9. If any fair-minded observer is asked the question--"what do the perpetrators deserve?"--the answer would be 'the degree of suffering that they imposed on others'. (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary*, p.460). Therefore, it is quite important modern readers to realize the reality of violence and injustice in the world and the necessity of redressing wrongs. "*Our response to such a scripture should, we suggest, be...to distill the essence of it, as God Himself did with the cries of Job and Jeremiah...This raw wound, thrust before us, forbids us to give smooth answers to the fact of cruelty. To cut this witness out of the Old Testament would be to impair its value as revelation, both of what is in man and of what the cross was required to achieve for our salvation....*" (Kidner, p.461).

However, while the Psalmist is not counseling error, he only takes us so far. "*Our response [to this Psalm] is to recognize that our calling, since the cross, is to pray down reconciliation, not judgment [on our enemies]*.. (Kidner, p.461). The Psalmist can see, rightly, the fact that this awful crime has to be paid for, and he also, rightly, leaves open the question as to who or when it will be paid for. He cannot see what we see, namely that the One who did pay for it was not a warrior who came to take up the sword of judgment but who came to suffer and

bear the sword of judgment himself, so that now all but the impenitent can be forgiven. He cannot see, also, that the One who paid for the Babylonians sin also paid for Israel's sins. All of this changes our perspective radically. *"It is not open to us to renounce or ignore the psalmists, part of whose function in God's economy was to make articulate the cry of 'all the righteous blood shed on earth' (to borrow our Lord's phrase). But equally it is not on to us simply to occupy the ground on which they stood. Between our day and theirs, our calling and theirs, stands the cross. We [then] are ministers of reconciliation, and this is a day of good tidings".* (Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: A Commentary*, p.32) *So this Psalm takes its place in Scripture as an impassioned protest, beyond all ignoring or toning down, not only against a particular act of cruelty but against all comfortable views of human wickedness, either with regard to the judgment it deserves or to the legacy it leaves; and not least, in relation to the cost, to God and man, of laying its enmity and bitterness to rest.* (Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, p.461).

3. a) What sort of life in Babylonian society will the Psalmist and those like him have? b) Do you know Christians today who relate to their society in the same way?

a) What kind of life in Babylonian society will the writer have?

It appears that this writer and those who follow him will maintain an adversarial and hostile relationship with the culture around them. They will fight it and avoid it every way that they can. They certainly will want the Jews to band together in small little ghettos, away (as much as possible) from the main centers of Babylonian power. They will only learn the hated language of Babylon to the degree necessary to survive. They will keep their children from any contact with the language, culture, and learning of Babylon. They will mount protests continually and strive for more freedom from the influence of the dominant culture. Most of all, though, their hearts will be filled with scorn and disdain for the Babylonians due to their sins, and they will have little sense of humility for their own sins that had brought them into this situation.

b) How do Christians today do the same things?

There are many Christians today who relate to the pagan, pluralistic society in the same way. They are angry, even bitter over the loss of "Christendom", an arrangement in Western civilization for centuries in which Christianity was the established faith of the general culture and had a place of privilege. Some of their bitterness may be due to the simple loss of power and prestige. In other cases, people are bitter because they have lost their children or other friends to non-Christian values and practices.

In response many leading voices encourage Christians to flee big cities and public institutions into our own institutions and regions where we are more influential. These Christians mainly denounce the unbelieving society or try to "strong arm" it with protests and complaints and a few legislative initiatives that impose Christian values on the whole community. In other words, many of these Christian voices counsel to a) stay detached and outside the city and to b) remain hostile to it. Many Christians today are like the Jews who wanted to band together in enclaves outside the city. We do so (as the Jews did) partly out of a denial of our true situation, partly out of a desire to stay pure, and partly out of resentment and fear toward the city, and partly out of a superior, self-righteous regard for ourselves.

4. Read Jeremiah 28:1-4; 29:1-14. a) What attitude toward life in Babylon was Hananiah promoting? How is this picture of the different than the view we saw in Psalm 137? b) Do you know Christians who relate to their society in the same way?

a) The attitude of Hananiah and the false prophets:

Hananiah predicts: *“within two years I will bring back to this place...the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon...for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon”*. But the Lord, through Jeremiah, contradicted this and said, *“It will be a long time. Therefore, build houses and settle down...”* (Jer.29:28). God’s denunciation of the false prophets in v.8-9 comes immediately after his directions to a) settle and be involved in the city and to b) seek its peace (v.4-7) and their advice is contrasted with God’s. Therefore we conclude that the false prophets were telling the exiles the opposite of the directions of v.4-7--namely to a) stay detached and outside the city and to b) remain hostile to it. Most of the Jewish exiles at first settled outside the city of Babylon, near Nippur on the Kabar canal (Harrison, p.132). Obviously the prophets were encouraging them to stay separated and stick together and have as little to do with Babylonian society as possible. They told them that the wicked Babylonians would be soon judged by God, and that they would be home soon, back “in charge” of their society through a major divine intervention.

This differs from Psalm 137 in its optimism. Psalm 137 as bleak and though it held on to hope for the future in principle, it could foresee no concrete hopeful picture of the future at all. Hananiah, however, had a wonderfully optimistic view. Babylonia was enormously powerful and Judah was a tiny nation. Yet he prophesies that within 2 years some tremendous intervention by the Lord will happen and all the treasures of the temple and all the exiles will be returned. This would have to be something on an order of an earthquake or flood or a set of plagues on the order of those sent to free the Israelites from Egypt under Moses. So, in short, Hananiah predicts a glorious and miraculous revival and restoration of Israel’s power.

How does the Hananiah-approach to life in Babylon compare to the Psalmist’s? On the inside, one group would be filled with joy and confidence, while the other would be filled with anger and despondency. But on the outside, the effect on lifestyle would be the same. Both groups would refuse to really engage and settle into the city. They would remain in small enclaves, separated from the life of Babylon. One group would be filled with joy and one with despair, but they would both essentially be separatists.

b) Christians today who do the same thing.

Today, the Christians who relate to their society in the same way are often some of the most joy-filled and confident people. They talk confidently of a coming revival; they give all their time to prayer and evangelism and discipleship. They are not, however, taking much time to actually get involved in the life of society--they do not try to tackle poverty or work for better schools or seek to build up the arts and sciences with Christian love, grace, and truth. They are not characterized by the anger and combative nature of those who denounce our culture, yet they are not truly engaged in transforming the culture through sacrificial service-participation. They are just building up their ministries and churches and waiting for the great revival and intervention.

You could say that the first approach was ‘under-spiritual’ and this approach is ‘over-spiritual’. While the first approach is too adversarial and legislative and insufficiently loving and persuasive, the second approach is too ‘pietistic’ and individualistic and insufficiently engaged in the society and culture.

5. How does Jeremiah give a completely different picture of a) God’s purposes for them in the city, and b) God’s directions for them on how to live in the city?

The letter of Jeremiah is surprising because it contradicts both the over-pessimism of the Psalmist and the over-optimism of Hananiah and followers. It shows that God's redemptive purposes for his people are now going to progress through their being 'salt and light', deeply penetrating pagan society.

a) God's purposes for them in the society.

Twice God spells out that he "*carried*" them to the city (v.4, v.7, and v.14, NIV translation). "*Carried*" is also a very active word--it says far more than that God just "allowed" them to be deported. In other words, *their life in the great pluralistic city of Babylon is not a senseless disaster--it is part of God's design for them.* Also, God says that he has set times and a schedule for them. He has put them there for seventy years, two or three generations (v.10). So their sojourn is not an accident or a random event, but part of a careful plan. They will not be in this situation forever, but it is his active plan for them now.

But what *was* the purpose of the exile? Ironically, if the exile had really been only two years long (as they predicted, 28:3,11), it would have been a fruitless and pointless tragedy. But the seventy year exile allows two things to happen. First, the seventy years are "*for Babylon*" (v.10a) itself. This seems to mean that God had "a role for Babylon on the world stage" (Kidner, *Jeremiah: The Bible Speaks Today*, p.100). God had things he wanted to do in the world through them. But there is another way in which the 70 years are "*for*" Babylon. God has sent the Jews--with all the riches of their revealed faith/the Word of God--into Babylon. Though the Jews were not realizing their inheritance (see next paragraph), they were laden with riches from God which, if shared with Babylon, would lead to it "*shalom*". The Jews were to "*seek peace*" (v.7). The NIV translates this single word as "*peace and prosperity*" here to show its tremendous richness. The Hebrew word "*shalom*" is rich and multi-faceted. Essentially, it means well-being and fulfillment in every aspect of existence--spiritual, psychological, social, physical. It cannot be confined to merely "spiritual inner peace" nor to merely outward physical and economic comfort. It means being right with God, with self, with community, with the natural world. This is what the believers are to seek for this unbelieving city!

Second, the purpose of the seventy years are for the spiritual purification and renewal of Israel. v.19 tells the exiles the condition that the Jews have been in. "*For they have not listened to my words...that I sent to them by my servants the prophets*". v.23 shows us that sexual immorality was completely prevalent even among the religious leaders. God's people were in a state of spiritual disintegration. But the exile will change all that. They will develop a rich life of prayer (v.12--"*then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.*"). But they will not simply do petitionary prayer, but will seek fellowship with God in wholehearted openness to him (v.13--"*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you....*"). In fact, God goes so far as to say that the final result of the exile will be to "*prosper you and not harm you*". The result will be a deep and full prosperity that would not have been possible had they stayed in their own land and cities. Without this experience, they would have had no "*future*" or "*hope*" (v.12). They were heading for destruction.

b) God's directions for them in the society.

First, have a *positiveness toward the city*. "*Pray to the Lord for it.*" (v.7b) To pray for a city is to "be on its side". This letter insists that the exiles give up not only their hostility toward Babylon but even a sullen indifference or disdain for it. Of course, Jeremiah had said that there will be a judgment on Babylon (cf. 27:7) if the city does not repent. Thus the Israelites did not close their eyes to its wickedness. Yet they were to become involved with the city and seek its peace and prosperity. It is bad theology which preaches God's honor in such a way as to make you despise and fear and hate your city. Second, *have a vision for the city*. "*Seek the*

peace of the city." (v.7a) This means that we are not simply to seek "church growth" or the prospering of the people of God in the city--we are to seek the prosperity of the city itself. God does tell the Jews to "increase, do not decrease" (v.6b), but he moves beyond that in v.7. Believers are not just to seek prosperity and peace in the city, but we are to seek prosperity and peace for the city. We are to have a vision for what our city should look like, not just for our own group or church. Third, we are to *settle in the city*, raise families there. "*Marry and have sons and daughters*" (v.6a). They are to plan for long term involvement. Fourth, they were to *grow in the city*. They are to "*increase in number there; do not decrease*" (v.6b). This means they are to wax stronger and more numerous. But it also means that they are not to lose their unique identity, but must keep their faith and godly ways. Fifth, they are to *work with thought for the city's welfare*. They are to invest in the community both by "*building homes*" (v.5) and "*planting gardens*" (v.5). When Jeremiah says they are to "*also*" seek the city's prosperity (v.7) he means that they are not to use the city for their own advancement, but are to seek *its* advancement. This of course means to be generous with your giving. But it also means to conduct your career and business in a distinctively Christian manner, with working with integrity, compassion, and justice. Sixth, they are to *seek the city's wholistic peace*. Jeremiah tells them to "*seek the 'shalom' of the city*". This (we have seen) is an unusually rich word, much like the word "blessed". It means far more than superficial happiness or the absence of unrest. It means every kind of harmony and prosperity. That includes at least: (1) love and peace between diverse peoples, (2) love and peace within strong families, (3) safety and decent physical living conditions for those without them, (4) spiritual peace for those without God. Seventh, they are to *pray* for the city. "*Pray to the Lord for it; for it prospers, you too will prosper.*" (v.7) This cannot be seen as an "add on", unrelated to the other directions. Specific, prevailing prayer for the city will help the other functions be done with intelligence, sensitivity, compassion, and willingness.

6. How does this relate to us today? (cf. 1 Pet.1:1)

First, it means that Christians should be humbled before the new pagan, pluralistic situation. Just as with the exiles, the situation is due in large part to our own failings. The church did not lose its position of privilege simply because of 'evil enemies of the faith'. We lost our position as part of God's judgment on our pride, hypocrisy, love for power, prejudice and bigotry, and failure to hold on to the truth. A loss of power has always been the main way the people of God are 'awakened' and chastened for their sins. Church history shows that whenever Christianity wins the power structure of a country and then is supported by that power structure--it becomes corrupted and idolatrous. It is only a loss of power (which comes as a natural judgment on our corruption) that chastens, humbles, and purifies the church. Nothing else seems to shake us out of our denial! So first we must look at ourselves and be willing to admit that the primary reason for the new pagan, pluralistic West is the church's sin. We must be far harder on ourselves (in gracious, humble repentance) than we are on the unbelieving culture around us. That was a major lesson for the exiles, and for us. Our first response should be repentance. We should be very understanding toward people who have failed to believe in Christ because of the weakness of the church's testimony.

Secondly, it means that Christians have much to offer the unbelieving society for its blessing! If the Jews--brought in chains by a violent oppressor nation--were to see themselves as "sent" and called to both bless the city (v.7a) and be blessed by the city (v.7b), then surely we are! Just as with them, the fact that we are in a city is no accident (Eph.1:11; Rom.8:28). Just as with them, we are children of Abraham (Gal.3:29) and we are always living in earthly cities in order to both bless it and be blessed by it (Gen.12:1-7; cf.Heb.11:8-10). Therefore, we must see that God has specific ministry purposes for us in the city. He purposes to bless the pagan cities with the presence of Christians, just as he purposes to humble and teach the Christians through the pagan cities.

7. How does Daniel 1:1-2 seem to have the same perspective toward the exile as that of Jeremiah's letter? How can we apply this insight in general to troubles in our own lives? How can we apply this in particular to our own 'sojourn' as believers in an unbelieving culture?

The opening verses echo the shocking statement of God's sovereign purposes in the exile. *v.2- and the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God.* Since Daniel is one of the captives carried off, and since God gave Jerusalem and the captives into Nebuchadnezzar's hand, then Daniel's condition is the result of God's plan. This is everywhere taught in the Bible, that difficulties and trials in the life of God's people are ways that he gets his good work done in their lives.

In Jeremiah's letter, God says that the exile is not an accident or a disastrous obstruction of God's purposes for his people. God "sent" them into a pluralistic, pagan, major city (Jer.29:4,7). It was their 'mission', even though it was also a judgment due to their sin. God purposed to bless both the pagans and the believers through this exile (see immediately above). So here again we see that the exile into a pluralistic society is part of God's plan and purpose.

"All too frequently we tend...to see our trials and temptations...as isolated nightmares. God, however, sees them from a different perspective. They are important and connected punctuation marks in the biography of grace He is writing in our lives. They give formation, direction, and character to our lives. They are all part of the tapestry He is weaving in history. He uses them to build up our strength and to prepare us to surmount greater obstacles, perhaps fiercer temptations. (Sinclair Ferguson, Daniel, p.44)

8. Summary: Make a list of all the possible attitudes or stances to a pagan culture that believers may take.

1. "Accommodationist" - Simply giving in and adopting the pagan culture's values and world-view, both internally (world-view perspective) and externally (customs and habits of dress, food, language). "Immigrant" model
2. "Privatization" - Taking on the pagan culture's values and world-view in your public life and your general view of things, while maintaining compliance with a set of rules for believing behavior in more external matters of dress, language, etc. ("Christian sub-culture")
3. "Ghettoization" - Removing oneself from the pagan culture almost totally by creating a complete alternative society. Never doing education or business in partnership with non-believers. ("Christian anti-culture") "Tourist model"
4. "Engagement" - Engagement with the pagan culture and co-working with pagan people but in ways that reveal the distinctiveness of the values of the kingdom of God. ("Christian counter-culture") "Ambassador model"

Week 15

Daniel 1:1-21

A MODEL AND A HOPE

SOSL 3/98-99

1. Review the ways that a believer can relate to a pagan society? (See “Living in a Pagan Society: Five Models”). a) What helped you most in the reading? b) What questions did it raise.

2. Without a spirit of scorn or superiority, share some examples of Christian practice that grow out of any of the four inadequate models.

3. Now share some practical ways we can live out of the fifth model.

4. 1:3-8. How does Daniel’s stance and relationship to Babylonian culture in vv.3-8 accord with the perspective of Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles (Jer.29)?

5. 1:6-16. a) What would the king’s purpose have been for this course of study for the young Jewish men? b) Why do you think they refused to eat the king’s food?

6. How does this give us any guidance for our own stance toward our pagan culture?

Week 15

Daniel 1:1-21

Living in an Pagan Society: Five Models

Introduction:

At Mt. Sinai, God constituted Israel as a nation. In the history of Israel covered by the Bible, there were two eras in which they lived as believers in a pluralistic, pagan environment. First, when they got to Canaan, they failed to drive out the idol-worshipping people groups and, instead, settled in among them. Secondly, when Nebuchadnezzar defeated Jerusalem, he carried most of the Israelites off to live in the city and environs of Babylon. In both situations, believers did not live in a believing nation or culture, where the government, the arts, the cultural institutions were committed to the Lord and his Word and will. They lived in an environment where the dominant and privileged culture was pagan.

Christians in Europe and North America today live in a similar situation. Once, Christianity was privileged in society--it was the dominant culture. The government/culture was either formally or implicitly committed to the Bible and Christianity. But now that has changed, and we find ourselves in pluralistic culture. Therefore, we have been studying Judges and we are about to study Daniel, Esther, and Joseph (in Genesis). Last week we discussed the exile itself and the various reactions that the Jews had to it. Why? When we study these books we learn good and bad models for how believers can relate to an unbelieving, dominant culture. Before we plunge in to Daniel, let's take stock of what we've learned.

Model 1. - The "Un-culture" - Judges 14-16

"Accommodationist" - In this model, believers simply give in and adopting the pagan culture's values and world-view, both internally (in their fundamental values and perspectives) and externally (by learning and adopting the customs and habits of dress, food, language). This is also an **"immigrant"** model. The immigrant comes to a new culture with the goal of blending in and losing any distinct identity. Judges gives us many sad examples of this. By the time of Samson (Judges 14-16), the Israelites were so accommodated to Philistine culture that they were within a generation of losing all distinct identity.

Model 2. - The "Sub-culture" - Judges 17-18

"Privatization" - In this model, believers keep the external trappings of Christian faith and practice, but they adopt the more fundamental values and perspectives of the dominant culture. Often this is called 'privatization' because one's faith is kept to Sunday services externals and does not really shape the way we actually live. To use an obnoxious term, this may be called an **"oreo"** model, in which we are externally one way and actually another. For example, believers may not smoke or drink too much or have sex outside of marriage, yet in their core beings they may be as materialistic and selfish and individualistic, and status- or image-conscious as the society around. In this model, believers may even stay somewhat apart from unbelievers in various Christian ministries, yet they have just 'sprinkled' Bible verses and pious language on a lifestyle that is fundamentally no different from those around them. Thus they are a "sub-culture" is just a sub-set of the dominant culture. The story of Micah and his mother is a perfect example. Though not externally and formally worshipping the Lord, the idolatrous attitude of the surrounding culture had penetrated them to their core. They sought to manipulate God into giving them prosperity and comfort through limited 'buy-offs' of the deity rather than surrender to his grace.

Model 3. - The “Anti-culture” - Psalm 137

“Ghettoization and/or militancy”. In this model, believers respond to the unbelieving culture with a sense of superiority and hostility. They feel highly polluted by the very presence of the unbelieving schools, entertainment, arts, and culture, and feel they cannot really function in the society without having the cultural power. This is the **“soldier”** model, in which believers consider themselves hostile visitors, seeking to undermine the culture. Some take a more passive approach and withdraw from any real interaction, just denouncing and bewailing the moral decay, while others aim to get the cultural power back. Psalm 137 gave us a picture of people who are more angry than repentant over their new powerless situation, and who cannot envision how they can worship and function outside of the land where they had sovereignty.

Model 4. - The “Para-culture” - Jeremiah 28

“Revivalist” - In this model, believers respond not with too much pessimism but too much optimism. They expect a miraculous, sweeping intervention by God which will convert many or most and explosively transform the culture. Therefore, instead of becoming deeply engaged with the society and people around them, working with others to roll back the troubles and problems, believers concentrate completely on evangelism and discipleship building up the church and their own numbers. Christians are pressed to go into ‘full-time ministry’ but not to become playwrights, artists, lawyers, or business people. They form a happy parallel alternative culture, with a goal of picking off individual converts and bringing them in. This is a **“tourist”** model in which the believers are just ‘passing through’, enjoying the society but not becoming involved. The prophet Hananiah in Jeremiah 28 is a great example of this kind of optimistic approach.

Model 5. - The Counter-culture” - Jeremiah 29

“Engagement” - In this model, believers engagement with the pagan culture and co-working with pagan people but in ways that reveal the distinctiveness of the values of the kingdom of God. If anything, they become very conversant with and adaptive to the dominant culture externally (language, customs), but they are at their core very different in the way they understand money, relationships, human life, sex, and so on. This is the **“resident aliens”** or **“colony of heaven”** model. Believers are truly resident, yet not seeking the power or approval of the dominant culture. Rather they show the world an alternative way of living and of being a human community. Jeremiah letter to the exiles in chapter 29 lays this model out. And Daniel, Esther, and Joseph show us how to live it out.

Harvie Conn has a marvelous way of putting this ‘model’:

“Perhaps the best analogy to describe all this is that of a model home. We are God’s demonstration community of the rule of Christ in the [unbelieving] city. On a tract of earth’s land, purchased with the blood of Christ, Jesus the kingdom developer has begun building new housing. As a sample of what will be, he has erected a model home of what will eventually fill the urban neighborhood. He now invites the...world into that model home to take a look at what will be. The church is the occupant of that model home, inviting neighbors into its open door to Christ. Evangelism is when the signs are up, saying ‘Come in and look around’....As citizens of, not survivalists in, this new city within the old city, we see our ownership as the gift of Jesus the Builder (Luke 17:20-21). As residents, not pilgrims, we await the kingdom coming when the Lord returns from his distant country (Luke 19:12). The land is already his...in this model home we live our out new lifestyle as citizens of the heavenly city that one day will come.

We do not abandon our jobs or desert the city that is....We are to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” to which God called us in exile (Jer.29:7). And our agenda of concerns in that seeking becomes as large as the cities where our divine development tracts are found.”¹

The only true model

The first two ‘models’ are over-adaptations (too close to the world) and the third and fourth model are under-engagements (too far from the world). These are not perfectly distinct categories of course, and nobody ‘gets it right’. Nobody except for one. Jesus Christ became really and fully human, one of us, completely “engaged” with us--yet without a bit of sin. The “incarnation” then becomes our ultimate model. We knew God was loving, wise, and holy, but Christ brought the love, wisdom, and holiness of God down and showed it to us in concrete form. That is what we are to do. Christians to be truly “incarnate” in the culture, yet our “citizenship” is in heaven (Phil.3:20). We are to bring the love, wisdom, and holiness into the midst of our culture, yet without sin.

DISCUSSION:

1. a) What helped you most in the reading? b) What questions did it raise?

2. Without a spirit of scorn or superiority, share some examples of Christian practice that grow out of any of the four inadequate models.

3. Now share some practical ways we can live out of the fifth model.

¹ Harvie Conn, *Planting and Growing Urban Churches: From Dream to Reality* (Baker, 1997), p.202.

Week 15

Daniel 1:1-2:30

A MODEL AND A HOPE

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4. 1:3-8. How does Daniel's stance and relationship to Babylonian culture in vv.3-8 accord with the perspective of Jeremiah's letter to the exiles (Jer.29)?

The basic thing we see is Daniel's willingness to be educated in and conversant with Babylonian culture. He and his friends do not refuse the call to get involved in a full 'liberal arts' degree at the "leading pagan university". They became thoroughly conversant with the knowledge and learning of the unbelieving culture. v.4-5.

On the other hand, they resolved to eat vegetables and water instead of royal rich and wine. They draw a line at a certain point--they will not eat the king's food. So they are doing what Jeremiah proposes--they are involved in the life and society of the culture, yet they are a) keeping their conscience clear and heart 'undefiled', and b) showing their distinctiveness in their service to God.

5. 1:6-16. a) What would the king's purpose have been for this course of study for the young Jewish men? b) Why do you think they refused to eat the king's food?

a) What was the purpose of the course of study?

Nebuchadnezzar's main reason for deporting the 'elites' of Israel was to destroy their cultural distinctiveness and assimilate them into Babylonian culture. That would destroy the Israelite's distinct identity as a people "apart". This three-year course of study and food is just 'round two' of the effort to assimilate them. They were given new Babylonian names (v.7) that had to do with pagan gods. They were given a complete education in Babylonian culture. Last, they were to eat the king's food. At the end of the three years, they would be fit for a civil service job (v.5). Daniel accepted the name, and accepted the education, but did not accept the food.

b) Why did they not eat the food?

Commentators are divided on this issue. First, some have said that Daniel did not eat the food because it failed to conform with Jewish dietary laws. But this view is not right, since he does not only refuse the food (to eat vegetables) but the wine (to drink water). Wine was not against any of the Mosaic 'kosher' laws. The dietary laws of Moses were not vegetarian! Second, some have said that Daniel did not eat the food because it had been formally consecrated to idols in ceremonies. That is very possible, maybe even likely, but the author does not say this, and therefore it is unlikely that this is the lesson we are to be learning. Actually, both of these answers miss the subtlety of the lessons we are to be learning.

The most striking thing about this was that there was nothing *intrinsically* unlawful or sinful about this food. Daniel did not reject the food because it simply "broke a rule". This took a lot more thought and reflection than that. In some way that only Daniel and his friends would know, the king's food was a temptation to move beyond just *learning* about the priorities and values of the Babylonians into *adopting* them. Notice that it says the food would "*defile*" them (v.8). That is a religious word--it means spiritual 'pollution'. So that is the general reason that Daniel refused the food. But what exactly were the particular reasons that the food was 'polluting'? We cannot be sure, but here are two very possible reasons.

(1) The first possible reason that the king's food was polluting is that the king's food was part of a rich, luxury-loving lifestyle that was part of the ideal of an idolatrous society. Idol worship is basically a way of seeking power from the gods so you can be secure and prosperous; Biblical worship, however, is a way of humbling yourself and receiving grace so that you become a servant of all. Daniel, in a sense, was willing to go to Harvard but not go yachting and dining at \$150 a person fine restaurants. He knows there is nothing intrinsically sinful about tasting the king's food, but he realizes that it will be tempting to get sucked in to the idolatrous love of money, status, beauty, material luxury, and power--which is the essence of the world-view of pagan elites. He didn't want to lose his heart to that view of life. You could easily continue to worship Yahweh formally, yet still live for upper-crust idols.

(2) An additional reason that Daniel put his foot down was to bear witness to the Babylonians. He wanted to simply let the Babylonians know that they were keeping their distinctive identity. In v.9 we see that God began to work in the heart of the chief official through the witness of Daniel. And the language of vv.11-21 is very interesting. One commentator says that this is a 'wisdom test'. The king's official fears that their more 'simple lifestyle' approach to life will make them pale and weak (v.10)--i.e. it is unwise. Daniel challenges the official to "test" them for ten days. This is not a Biblical teaching that vegetarianism is superior to eating meat! Rather, Daniel is calling the pagans to compare the wisdom of their idols-to-get-power-and-riches world-view with the wisdom of the Lord's way. Daniel is putting his hope in God that the Lord will keep them strong and healthy as a testimony to the Lord's wisdom. In the end, they are (v.15) healthier than those who ate the king's food, and (v.19) wiser than the others who took the course of study.

6. How does this give us any guidance for our own stance toward our pagan culture?

First, Daniel models to us that we cannot simply rely on 'keeping the Christian rules'. The food was not "against the rules"--but in some way he knew that *eating the food would pull his heart away from complete commitment to the Lord* and toward other, idolatrous commitments. Everyone must watch for the same dangers. We have to know our own hearts and the real idols of our culture. In traditional cultures the idols are family, ancestors, tribal connections, duty, custom; in more secular cultures the idols are personal fulfillment, status, beauty, power. Then there are intellectual idols of all sorts that reign in different times and eras. It is not the formal idols (other religions) but the "idols of the heart" that can be smuggled into our lives even when formally subscribing to right doctrine and ethics.

Second, by keeping their commitment to the Lord, rather than falling into idol-commitments, the young men actually came to "see through" the wisdom of the Babylonians and became masters of it, that than being mastered by it. They understood it thoroughly, but they also saw its weaknesses, limits, and errors. What a model! We too must not separate from the pagan culture, but must come to understand all its learning. Yet we must expose the false and bankrupt commitments at the bottom of all non-believing systems of thought. Then we too can become 'masters' of wisdom.

Third, we need to see that the main way we witness to people is not through arguments. They need to see the fruit of God's wisdom in our lives. They want to see how our family life, our business life, our psychological life--goes under the Lordship of Christ. The chief official learned respect for the God of Israel because he saw the fruit of the Lord's service concretely in the health and understanding and character of these young men. (The official also knew saw Daniel's courage in taking this stand). This is the best witness. But do our lives have

anything remarkable or different about them? Is our character and wisdom different from anyone else's? If we have to tell a pagan why we are different, can we do so as winsomely as Daniel?

Sum: We must not just imbibe the world's education and values while superficially, formally keeping God's rules ("privatization of faith") nor should we keep ourselves in Christian ghettos, disengaged from the culture ("separation of faith"). Rather, we must be immersed and engaged in the culture, yet mastering its wisdom and remembering who we are as God's people.

Week 16

Daniel 2:1-49

THE DREAM OF THE KINGDOM

SOSL 3/98-99

- 1. 2:1-3. Why would an absolute monarch like Nebuchadnezzar have such anxious dreams (see 2:31-35)? What does this tell us about the king? How does this apply to us?*
- 2. 2:4-13. Why do you think the king demands that the interpreters tell him the dream as well as its meaning? What particularly infuriates him (v.11-12)? What does this reveal about the source of his agitation?*
- 3. 2:14-30. a) What similarities are there in Daniel's behavior here with his behavior in chapter 1? b) What differences are there? cf. v.27 and v.12. What does the risk Daniel took? c) How does this give us guidance for handling a crisis?*
- 4. 2:31-45. What might the following features of the dream mean? a) The four kingdoms are all parts of one image—and they are all broken “at the same time” (v.35) by the stone. b) They are increasingly strong yet less valuable and coherent. c) The image is pretty clearly an idol. d) How important do you think it is to determine what empire/civilization is represented by each metal section?*
- 5. 2:31-45. a) What differences between the kingdoms of the world and the new kingdom are indicated by the images of the statue and stone? List all you can tell about this coming kingdom from the dream. b) Why is the time of this new kingdom ‘set up’ given so vaguely (see v.44)?*
- 6. 2:27-48. What purposes or results did the dream accomplish?*

Week 16

Daniel 2:1-49

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SOSL 3/98-99

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6. 2:27-48. *What purposes or results did the dream accomplish?*

Week 16

Daniel 2:1-49

THE DREAM OF THE KINGDOM

SOSL 3/98-99

Introduction:

- 1) Daniel 2 occurs after Daniel and his friends had entered the king's service as educated counselors, advisors, administrators.
- 2) A striking feature of Daniel 2 is not immediately evident to the English reader. When 2:4 says: 'The Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic', the entire text thereafter shifts from Hebrew into Aramaic all the way until 7:28. Why? Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of the international world of the time (as Latin later became and as English is today). It was the language that the elites of every country could speak. Daniel is thus the only book of the Old Testament (or the New) which is written in two languages. It is a bi-lingual book. Therefore, the message of Daniel is intended not just for believers/Jews but for all the nations of the world. It is very much a book about how believers are to live "life in the real world".

1. 2:1-3. Why would an absolute monarch like Nebuchadnezzar have such anxious dreams (see 2:31-35)? What does this tell us about the king? How does this apply to us?

It is too easy for the reader to think that the only reason for such a dream was because God had sent it to him (2:28). But God very often works through (rather than in spite of) our given psyche and humanity.

First, it is often those people with the greatest drive for power and success that are actually the most anxious and fearful. Reinhold Niebuhr believed that deep fear and uncertainty lay at the roots of most political tyranny. The lust for power is born, he thought, 'in the darkly conscious realization...of the basic insecurity of human existence.' (Quoted in Ronald S. Wallace, *The Lord Is King: The Message of Daniel*, p.50.) It is fear that often is the reason for the super-confident veneer of many of the most powerful people.

But second, even if fear is not the root cause of a successful career, it is often the *result*. Those who climb very high will feel not more secure, but less, for they know that they are the object of more jealousy and they are in the 'sights' of more competitors. Also, the higher one climbs in wealth, power, or fame, the greater the possibility of a terrible fall. There is now so much to lose. Nebuchadnezzar's dream is only an eruption of these deep fears--which he may have been keeping hidden from himself. No powerful person likes to know how weak they feel underneath. One commentator believes that the colossus in Nebuchadnezzar's dream is the vision he wanted the world to have of him--"an impregnable giant, towering over the world..." but the weakness of the statue at its feet was an expression of his deepest fears that he could not keep it up, or that someone would come and exploit hidden weaknesses. (R.Clements, *Faithful Living in an Unfaithful World*, p.153.)

This all is not to say that there was not a message for the world from God in the dream, but we should recognize that this was an expression of the king's heart condition. Unless we see how the dream gives us insight into the conflicted inner world of Nebuchadnezzar, we will not be prepared to understand his 'breakdown' later in chapter 4.

Application:

First, while our fears may be different in quantity from Nebuchadnezzar's, they are not different in quality. When we build our lives on earthly success, relationships, or conditions,

we experience a great deal of anxiety, much of it unconscious. Why? Because any joy or delight here has 'feet of clay'. Any project, condition, bank account, or career or person is vulnerable, and if we have never been in the icy grip of fear it is because we have had a pretty charmed life. But eventually the precariousness and the fragility of life will come home to us. Either God is our security or we essentially have none.

Second, God often will find a way to show us our need of him by giving us a glimpse of what is really down in our hearts. We are in denial about how angry, fearful, selfish, etc. we really are. Often some situation brings out the worst in us and we are shocked that we are capable of the action we did or the thought we had. But these are only 'warning shots' across our bow. God is not trying to punish us, but awaken us.

Third, the greatest success will never be enough. Here was a man who had sought and found ultimate human power, and yet he is a deeply insecure person. It is not 'getting to the top' that will give you peace and security. Another kind of wealth, another kind of might is necessary.

2. 2:4-13. Why do you think the king demands that the interpreters tell him the dream as well as its meaning? What particularly infuriates him (v.11-12)? What does this reveal about the source of his agitation?

Why does he ask for the dream content as well as interpretation?

There are two possible reasons for Nebuchadnezzar's demand. He may have forgotten the dream. Many people cannot quite recall a dream after awakening--they are just confused and troubled by them. The other possibility is that he was using a sure-fire acid test to be sure that the interpreter was filled with truly supernatural insight. After all, how could he otherwise be sure that his wise men were not just 'feeding him a line'? Actually, we do not need to know the answer to this particular question in order to recognize that Nebuchadnezzar was showing a remarkable amount of distress and alarm over the dream.

What particularly infuriates him? What does this tell us about him?

In v.11 the desperate astrologers say, essentially: "there are limits to what human beings can do! Only a god can do what you want, and they are not at your beck and call." It is *this* statement (v.12) that enrages him and leads to the death decree.

What does this show? Nebuchadnezzar was the most powerful man on earth, but now he is being brought up against the fact that he is still just a man. The dream was bringing him to terms with the his limits and finitude. The wise men in v.12 bring up a very sore subject with a powerful person--"you are just another human being"--there are limits to what human beings can actually accomplish. Nebuchadnezzar's inner conflict now is thrown into relief. The dream is not just some 'predictor of future events'. He forebodes that is about his own fall somehow. But his inability to discover the meaning is then a further reminder that he is not God. As Nietzsche once famously said, "*if there is a God, how can I bear not to be that God?*"

Application:

Again, we must be careful not to think that the king is utterly different than us. Our own desire to be God is seen in numerous ways. Our worry and anxiety often reveals that we are sure we know better than God how our life should go. Much of our drive for beauty or success is a desire for a 'glory' and importance that only God has.

"I'm God and you're not" is the single most difficult message we can get from the Almighty, but he often sends it. ***Follow-up: Has God sent you this message? Recently?***

3. 2:14-30. a) What similarities are there in Daniel's behavior here with his behavior in chapter 1? b) What differences are there? cf. v.27 and v.12. What does the risk Daniel took? c) How does this give us guidance for handling a crisis?

a) Similarities: (1) Again we see Daniel being "tactful" (v.14) with a pagan (Arioch) who had power over him. He must have been a very winsome, persuasive man, since he knew how to talk attractively to people who should not have been disposed to listen. (2) Also, we again see Daniel depending on God to reveal that his wisdom is greater than the wisdom. Both chapter 1 and chapter 2 is a 'wisdom contest'--of God's against the Babylonians. Both places Daniel literally 'stuck his neck out', and if God had not answered or intervened, he would have been lost. (3) Both times there is both an compliance-and-yet-defiance balance. On the one hand, he is simply doing what the king has demanded--interpreting the dream as a wise man. He is doing his job. Yet on the other hand, he lets it be known very clearly that it is God who is the sole source of what he is doing. "*no wise man, enchanter, or magician can explain to the king this mystery.*" (v.27) He is giving God public credit.

b) Differences: In chapter 1, Daniel does not 'make a federal case' out of his conscience problem with eating the king's food. He does everything he can to not publicly, dramatically profess his faith. He is not needlessly 'showy and loud' about his faith. In chapter 1 he only talks to the chief official about it. He does not crow, 'We are believers! We will *not* eat defiled food!' There is no note of anything like that. But here now, in chapter 2, the situation calls for tremendous boldness. He certainly could have told the king the dream without making such a strong statement as he does in v.27-28. He could have easily said, "King, here's the dream and the interpretation", instead of loudly saying, "what I am about to do should show you that my God is superior to all the learning and philosophy and religion of your Babylonian civilization!"

It is breath-taking to compare v.27 and v.12. When he says, "no human being can answer your question--only God" in v.27, he is saying exactly what the astrologers said in v.11 that set him into a rage. So Daniel, though he does not have to make such a bold public witness here--does so. While in chapter 1, when he could have done so--he did not. Why? Probably there are two reasons. One is that he is now older and ready for a bigger test. The second is that he was wise enough to know that there are many issues that only harm the reputation of the Lord and his people when you 'pick a fight'. This is why Daniel was *truly* a wise man.

c) What guidance is there for crises?

(1) Daniel and his friends turned to God in prayer--group prayer. This is the first time we see Daniel at prayer, but it won't be the last. One of the main lessons of the book of Daniel is this very lesson--the importance and centrality of prayer for living a faithful life in a pagan environment. We will be told in 6:10 that Daniel prayed three times a day, regularly. In Daniel 9 we will see a long version of one of the great prayers of the Bible. So Daniel was a man of prayer. Would anyone be able to truthfully characterize you as being a man or woman "of prayer"? We learn in 6:10 that Daniel's prayer life had begun in "early days". It is too late, once a crisis has broken, to suddenly rush into prayer. Of course, it helps, but you don't have the benefits of a forged character and deep skills of resting in God that a prayerful person has. (2) Besides being a man of prayer in general, he was also a man with a spirit of worship and adoration. His prayer of praise in vv.20-23 shows that *in* prayer Daniel did not only do petition and make requests, but he sought fellowship with and experience of God's presence. It is not 'petition' but adoration that makes a person into the kind of great hearted courageous person that Daniel shows himself to be before the king.

4. 2:31-45. What might the following features of the dream mean? a) The four kingdoms are all parts of one image--and they are all broken "at the same time" (v.35) by the stone. b) They are increasingly strong yet less valuable and coherent. c) The image is pretty clearly an idol. d) How important do you think it is to determine what empire/civilization is represented by each metal section?

a) The first part--the gold head--of the statue is a specific kingdom--it is the Babylonian empire of Nebuchadnezzar himself (v.36-39). Therefore, we would certainly expect that the next three would be specific kingdoms as well. Different scholars over the years have had a field day arguing about who the kingdoms are. Some believe they are the Medes, the Persian, and the Greek empires; others believe them to be the Medo-Persian, the Greek, and the Roman empire. But the four empires are all just part of one statue, and besides, when the stone hits the statue, though it hits it on the feet, the whole statue is "broken to pieces *at the same time*" (v.35). How could that be, if each kingdom is a specific kingdom following after the previous. In other words, how could the stone smash all four 'at the same time'--if they are all centuries apart. I think that therefore the statue represents the world kingdoms in general, with all their might, and ways, and power. When the rock comes, all the power of the 'kingdom of this world'--the kingdom of death, decay, sin, and power--will be smashed, and in will come a new kingdom. I think the "at the same time" means that the dream is not giving us a specific sequence of specific kingdoms nor is it emphasizing specific time frames.

b) It is interesting that each kingdom is "*inferior*" (v.39) to the previous, but that does not mean each one is weaker. Rather, the kingdoms actually become more powerful as time goes on--the last kingdom is iron, which *breaks and smashes everything* (v.40). So how are they inferior? First, they are less valuable metals (gold to silver to bronze to iron to clay) and second, they are less and less coherent, They become more and more divided (v.41). If we are right about these not being specific kingdoms, but a description of the 'world system' in general, then what we are being told is that as time goes on, kingdoms will have more and more power (think of technology) and yet morally and even relationally weaker.

c) The fact that the 'world-systems' are depicted as a '*dazzling*' and '*awesome*' statue is a pretty clear indication of idolatry. Notice, that it is the image not of an animal or object but of a man. What we have here is a renewal of the effort of the tower of Babel, which was a great city build not in God's name, but "*to make a name for ourselves*" (Gen.11:4). The world-system seeks to glorify humanity. Commerce, art, culture is carried out "to make a name for ourselves", to glorify ourselves.

d) The teaching and warning and encouragement of the dream is completely intact without knowing the specifics about which metal is which kingdom and exactly when the 'stone is going to hit', and so on. We see here that God alone allows the world system to go on (v.37), that it is essentially the spirit of using human culture for self-aggrandizement and human glory, that the world-systems will increasingly become both more powerful and more wicked, and that God will eventually smash them and put his kingdom in its place. If we come looking for encouragement and direction for our lives in this pagan world--we have it. If we are looking for confirmation of some particular end-time scenario, we will be frustrated.

5. 2:31-45. a) What differences between the kingdoms of the world and the new kingdom are indicated by the images of the statue and stone? List all you can tell about this coming kingdom from the dream. b) Why is the time of this new kingdom 'set up' given so vaguely (see v.44)?

First, we are told that this stone is “*cut out, not by human hands*” (v.34). That is in complete contrast to the statue, which is a work of the greatest human art, skill, and craftsman ship. This means that the coming kingdom is God’s--a supernatural work, not of human origin. It *will not be left to another people* (v.44) which means it is not a temporary human administration but a permanent, eternal, divine kingdom. It is unconquerable, for it will “*crush all those other kingdoms*” (v.2).

Second, we see that the stone is the *least* valuable of all the substances. Stone is even less expensive than iron, since it does not have to be processed at all. So God’s kingdom, despite being unconquerable and eternal and divine, is going to be (by the world’s standards) something small, poor, weak. At least to start, which leads to the third point.

Third, we see that the kingdom of God, despite being unconquerable and eternal and divine, apparently grows over a period of time. Notice that it “becomes” a mountain (v.35) which grows to fill the whole earth. It does not begin as a mountain, but as a stone.

It is perhaps for this reason that there is such a vague reference to the time at which the kingdom of God is “set up”. It says it will be “*in the time of those kings*” (v.44). Which kings? The only kings mentioned are the kings of the four kingdoms. And this obviously is a long time span. So why so vague? Because the dream is indicating that the smashing of the world-kingdom and the growing of the new kingdom overlap in some way. Instead of giving us a single moment at which the old kingdom is removed totally and the new kingdom is installed totally, we are led to think of this as a process. This fits with what we later come to learn is the mission of Jesus. Jesus, the king, comes not once but twice. At his first coming, he inaugurates the kingdom, but at the second coming it fills the whole earth and sweeps the old kingdom away completely.

Jesus claimed to be the stone that the kingdom of God is built from (Matt.21:42-44), and that when he is resurrected, he will be a temple made ‘without hands’.

6. 2:27-48. What purposes or results did the dream accomplish?

See the answer to 4d above. a) Nebuchadnezzar is warned and seems to be deeply impressed (v.47) though we know that it did not convert his heart. Still, he gets very important new information about God that has an impact on his life. b) Daniel and his friends are not only saved, but save many other lives. They move up in power and influence in the culture, though they have clearly renounced many of its values (v.48-49). c) We, reading today, have a hope for the future. You can’t live in a pagan culture without such a hope.

7. Read the following section on the many implications of ‘the dream of the kingdom’. After reading: a) what helped you most? b) do you see any ‘imbalances’ in your own church? In your own life?

Week 16

Daniel 2:1-49

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND LIFE IN THE CITY

Fundamental to NT Christianity is the perspective that we live "between times", between the first and second coming of Christ. Even more intensely, we live in the overlap of the ages. The new kingdom of Christ has begun, but the old kingdom of darkness continues. We live in both the "now already" and the "not yet". George Ladd, put it perfectly in his book title: *The Presence of the Future*. The gospel is: God's future in our present.

Biblical Basics

A. Jesus taught that the kingdom arrived with him.

1. The kingdom has arrived (Mark 1:14; Matt 13:16-17). The kingdom exists in the midst of gathered Christians (Lk.17:20-21). Since the time of John the Baptist, forceful people had been laying hold of it and entering it (Matt.11:12; Luke 16:16).

2. The "strong man" Satan is even now bound by the king, enabling us to plunder his goods, taking away his possessions, as evidenced by Jesus' exorcisms (Matt.12:28-29; Luke 10:17-18).

B. Jesus taught that the kingdom has not arrived fully yet.

1. His disciples were to pray for the kingdom to arrive (Mt.6:10). At the end of time his followers would receive the kingdom (Matt.25:34). The Son of Man will return to bring the kingdom.

2. His agricultural parables show that the kingdom of God is by nature a growing thing, which is planted by Jesus and grows by invisible divine activity. Like a seed its presence is nearly hidden, but still revolutionary, and eventually it will grow into fullness, and overcome all opposition to God's rule. (Mt.4:26-29; Mt.13:31-32, 24-29, 36-42).

C. The apostles speak of the presence of two "ages" or kingdoms at once.

1. Jesus' death rescues us from "*the present evil age*" (Gal.1:4) and brings us from that kingdom "*into the kingdom of his dear son*" (Col.1:13). The two ages overlap: "*the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining*" (I John 2:8)

2. We feel ourselves caught in the tension of living in the midst of both (Rom.12:2; 13:11-14; I Thess.5:4-8). We are already saved yet shall be saved (Rom.8:24 and 5:9-11), we are already redeemed yet we will be redeemed (Col.1:14 and Eph.4:30), we are already adopted yet we will be adopted (Rom.8:15,23), we are already reigning in heaven as kings (Eph.2:6; Rev.1:8), yet some day we shall be kings.

Biblical Balances

A. The kingdom of God is the renewal of the whole world by the healing of all the results of sin: spiritual, psychological, social, physical. "The hands of the king are healing hands, and thus shall the rightful king be known." (Tolkien)

1. The "circles" of alienation and human need. a) Spiritual alienation. Gen 3:8 - We are cut off from God. b) Psychological alienation. Gen 3:10 - We are cut off from ourselves. Unhappiness, guilt, lack of meaning, fear/anxiety. c) Social alienation. Gen. 3:7 - We are cut off from each other. Greed, racism, injustice, family breakdown, class struggle, poverty, war. d) Physical alienation. Gen. 3:17-19 - We are cut off from nature. Famine, disease, decay, aging, environmental problems, natural disasters, death itself.

2. The "levels" of kingdom ministry. The work of the kingdom is to use the gifts of the spirit to heal all the results of sin. Therefore, evangelism and discipleship (circle #1) is basic, but counseling (circle #2), community development, social relief and reform (circle #3 and #4)--all of these are legitimate levels of kingdom ministry that must be embraced.

B. The kingdom is the presence of God's supernatural ruling power already entered into human history, but not yet come in its fullness.

1. The "conservatism" imbalance. The kingdom is too future. This model is strong on evangelism, but is pessimistic about social and even personal change. Tends to be anti-intellectual, seeing intellectual discourse as "wordly". Little view of importance of Christians specifically penetrating public domain with kingdom values. Tends to have a "fortress mentality", an inclination to legalism.

2. The "miraculism" imbalance. The kingdom is too present. This model is strong on expectations of change and expectations of God's presence in worship. But it tends to be naive about remaining sin in the heart, often expecting change to come easily or simply. It tends to have an under developed theology of suffering and give pat answers. People may trust too quickly in the divine origins of their impulses, and not lead with humility. Tend to focus on helping people get personal happiness and escape.

3. The "liberalism" imbalance. The kingdom is too natural. This model de-supernaturalizes the faith. This model is strong on social justice and involvement in the city, but it abandons the idea of a supernatural authority for the Bible and the necessity of the new birth. It is intellectually conversant, but tends to accept modern and even post-modern thought forms. The result is that the church becomes another social service agency without anything distinctive to say or offer. Without a divine Word to judge modern thought forms, the church tends to become a mere reflection of what is already in the city, it can't speak prophetically.

Each of these approaches is inadequate because they are not informed by a Biblical theology of the kingdom. The imbalances are rife in New York. One is strong on evangelism, one strong on worship, one strong on social concern. But each one is in the end ineffective in its strong suit because of its lack of balance. The kingdom model's "tri-pod" stresses dynamic worship, an obsession with evangelism, and discipling people to live the gospel out in society. The kingdom model produces a church *for* the city!

Biblical Applications

John Stott (*The Contemporary Christian*, IVP, 1992) suggests the following applications:

1. Knowledge. We must not insist that there is no truth, that God has not spoken, that no one can know anything about absolute truth. The king has given us his Word. It is right to glory in the revelation of the King's mind in the Scripture. The "already" means more boldness in proclamation. But, on the other hand, we must be humble about our ability to understand the Word perfectly. In our views, especially those that Christians cannot agree on, we must be less unbending and triumphalistic ("believing we have arrived intellectually"). It also means that our discernment of God's call and his "will" for us and other must not be propagated with overweening assurance that your insight cannot be wrong. The "not yet" means more charity in non-essentials, more humility and dialogue and tolerance and openness in areas of disagreement. [[The emerging "post-modern" world view will be extremely allergic to any claims of truth. Thus we must clearly insist on the truth. But since post-modern, "non-ideological" people of the nineties will be extremely sensitive to dogmatism anyway, they will surely sniff out unnecessary dogmatism. We must be humbly dogmatic, open-minded in our dogmatism.]

2. Personal holiness. We must not imagine that holiness is not God's command. His Holy Spirit has actually come into us already, subduing our fallen nature, our selfishness. He cannot live with sin and he must purify us. The presence of the kingdom includes that we are made "partakers of the divine nature" (II Pet. 1:3). An incredible truth! The "already" means more confidence that anyone can be changed, that any enslaving habit can be overcome. [The emerging modern world view is going to be severely anti-rational, and therefore changed lives will be even a stronger part of the Christian witness than ever.] But, on the other hand, our fallen nature remains in us and will never be eliminated until the fullness of the kingdom. We must avoid pat answers, and we must not expect "quick fixes". We must be neither cynical nor naive about personal transformation. We must be patient and realize the complexity of change and growth in grace. The "not yet" means more patience and understanding with growing persons, means to not be condescending nor impatient with lapses and failures.

*"I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I hope to be,
BUT still, I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.*

-- John Newton

3. Healing. We must not doubt that the coming of the kingdom means the healing of the physical brokenness of reality. Jesus showed the kingdom by healing the sick and raising the dead. The "already" means confidence that God can heal and make the physically broken whole. But, on the other hand, nature has not yet been subjugated fully to Christ's rule. It is still subject to decay (Rom.8:22-23) and thus sickness and death is still inevitable until the final consummation. The "not yet" means we must not expect miracles as such a normal part of the Christian life that pain and suffering will be eliminated from the lives of faithful people.

4. Church health. We must not forget that the church is the community now of kingdom power, and therefore it is capable of mightily transforming its community. Evangelism that adds "daily to the number of those being saved" (Acts 2:47) is possible! Loving fellowship which "destroyed...the dividing wall of hostility" between different races and classes is possible! The "already" means more confidence that God can bring revival and transformation of your whole community through the local church. But, on the other hand, Jesus has not yet presented his bride, the church "as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish" (Eph.5:27). We must not then be harshly critical of imperfect congregations, nor jump impatiently from church to church over perceived blemishes. Error and evil will never be completely eradicated from the church. The "not yet" means to avoid the overly severe use of church discipline and other means to seek to bring about a perfect

church today. [In the city, an over-emphasis on the local church leads to empire building and competitiveness. We desperately need to see that the kingdom is broader than our local church. But an under-emphasis on the local church means we will not conserve the fruit. The kingdom institutional center is the local church, the only full-service and long term way to do ministry.]

5. Social change. We must not forget that Christ is even now ruling in a sense over history (Eph.1:22ff). Through "common grace", he gives the world the institutions of family and government restraining evil, and he gives strong consciences and gifts of art and leadership and science to many to enrich the world. Also, Christians are "salt and light", clearly equipped and intended to penetrate the world for good and righteousness. Alongside of trouble and pain, God has worked for improved health care and medical advance, growing defense of human rights, the abolition of slavery, many protections for working people, and so on. The "already" means that Christians can expect to use God's power to change social conditions and communities. But, on the other hand, the kingdom is not yet here in its fullness. There will be "wars and rumors of wars". Selfishness, cruelty, terrorism, oppression will continue. Christians harbor no illusions about politics nor expect utopian conditions. The "not yet" means that Christians will trust any political or social agenda to bring about righteousness here on earth.

Week 17

Daniel 3:1-30

THE FIERY FURNACE

SOSL 3/98-99

1. vv.1-15. a) What is required by the king? b) Why do you think the king was so concerned to have absolutely everyone in the kingdom take part in the worship of the image? c) How does the image relate to the dream in chap 2?

a) What is required by the king?

He requires that every nationality and racial/cultural group in his kingdom had to worship this idol. That is why specifically “*all the peoples, nations, and men of every language*” are twice mentioned as being summoned to its worship (v.4,7). They must all come together for the dedication of the image and bow when the music begins. The summons is very serious, because anyone who fails to worship the image is to be executed by being burned alive in a fiery furnace (v.6).

b) Why was he so concerned to have everyone worship it?

The ancient world was very polytheistic--there was a huge variety of gods. So it was rather unusual for a king to specifically insist that every language and ethnic group within his empire would worship this image. It is very likely, then, that the requirement of universal worship across cultural groups was a deliberate attempt by Nebuchadnezzar to forge a unified empire that was not subject to divisions and dissensions.

Commentators are divided as to whether the statue was meant to be the image of Nebuchadnezzar himself or of some Babylonian god. But in all likelihood the matter was left deliberately vague. The statue...could stand for the spirit of Babylon, or for the emperor himself, or for one of the traditional national gods--or it could act as a syncretistic focal point for all the religions in his realm...to stimulate common devotion to the gods of Babylon whom he expected all people in some measure to serve....Nebuchadnezzar's aim is to develop and unify culture, which above all requires a unifying religion, for religion itself was defined in parts of that ancient world as 'that which binds' and was acknowledged as the best kind of cement to keep a society together....Even those very religious people he had brought from the province of Judah, with their so-called 'supreme God' would surely not deny that the gods of Babylon had a right to be given prominence within the confines of their own territory. The festival was the thing--the solemn glorious inauguration of the cult--the music, the pilgrim excursions to the plain of Dora, the acts of devoted community celebration.

The image is never described, except for its huge size (90' by 9') and its brilliant appearance and rich embellishment. (It was at the very least it was gold-plated, but it might have been solid gold.) What is interesting is that the image is never said to be of any particular deity. When the king speaks to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, he says, “*you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up...*” (v.14). This seems to mean that the image is not of the Babylonian gods, yet there is a very close association. Yet, clearly, to reject the image is to reject ‘my gods’. Thus it does not really represent the gods of Babylon, but rather the Babylonian empire as divine.

c) How does the image relate to the dream in chapter 2?

We saw in chapter 2 that the huge statue in the dream embodied Nebuchadnezzar's longing for world-dominion. But the dream had been a direct warning from God *against* making an idol of human power and glory. Nevertheless, Nebuchadnezzar's building of a huge image of gold seems to be a fulfillment of the aspirations of greatness and grandeur he had expressed in the dream of chapter 2. His imagination fantasized of being honored as a colossus before which all bow as a token of his supreme power. In fact, in the dream, Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom had been the 'head of gold', and now this whole statue is made of gold. Though we do not know that the image was of the king himself, he clearly identifies his own authority and power with it. He is enraged that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego reject "*the image I set up*" (v.14).

In summary, the image is a cult of the worship of Babylon's power, designed to cement the empire together and giving expression to Nebuchadnezzar's hunger for others to worship his accomplishments.

2. Contrast Nebuchadnezzar's words in 2:47 and 3:13-15. What might account for the change? What does this tell about his heart? About our hearts?

Contrast 2:47 and 3:13-15.

In 2:47, he says that "this God *is* the God of all gods", but in 3:13-15 he is angry that Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego would not serve his gods or worship the image he set up. He even seems to actually directly defy the Lord, when he says, "*then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?*" That is an unusual statement, unless he has in mind the claims of the God of Israel to be supreme. So he has gone from admitting the superiority of the Lord to asserting his power against the Lord.

What might account for the change?

The statement of verse 15 ("what god will be able to rescue..") shows that Nebuchadnezzar, like virtually all the thinkers of the ancient world, assessed the reality and power of a god by the success and prosperity the god could deliver. In City A defeated City B, then by definition, City A's god was more real or more powerful than City B's god. That's what a god did-it gave success and victory. Victory is the 'bottom line' of pagan religion. The evidence for the existence and power of a god was very simply the power and status of the god's adherents.

Nebuchadnezzar had been impressed with the Lord at the end of chapter 2 because the Lord's wise man had defeated the other Babylonian wise men. But if that is all Nebuchadnezzar knows, then he has simply "fit the Lord" in to his pagan understanding of deity and religion. He has not really understood a supreme God who cannot be known by religion and works but grace and faith, who often redeems through the weakness of his servants, and who demands Lordship over every area of life, not just some areas.

Therefore, as time went on, and Nebuchadnezzar continued to go on to more victories in the name of his gods, the Lord of Israel began to take his place (in the king's mind) in the gallery of many gods.

What does this tell us about his heart?

First, it shows that Nebuchadnezzar still has received no true spiritual illumination. We see him in 2:47 saying "you revealed this mystery to me" and yet now we see him doing (in the setting up of the image) exactly the kind of thing he was warned against. The king, in a sense, listened to the interpretation, but did not truly "get" it.

Second, it shows that while he now had some respect for the Lord, he had not really come to submit to the Lord in a whole-hearted way. He had been impressed by the Lord, but not converted to the Lord. He had been shaken up, not really humbled. He had had “strong spiritual impressions”, but in fact he was not really any better off. Chapter 3 shows him going further down the very road that God had warned him against. At the end of chapter 2 he had loudly praised God and showed him honor and basically had said, “I’ve really learned my lesson! I will honor the Lord and the true God from now on!” But soon he was right back in to his power-addiction and pride. John Owen writes about this:

As a traveler, in his way meeting with a violent storm of thunder and rain, immediately turns out of his way to some house or tree for his shelter, but yet this causes him not to give over his journey--so soon as the storm is over he returns to this way and progress is made again: so it is with man in bondage to sin. They are on the road....the Law [of God] meets with them in a storm of thunder and lightning from heaven, terrifies and hinders them in their way. This turns them for a season out of their road; they will run to prayer or amendment of life, for some shelter from the storm of wrath which is feared coming upon their consciences. But is their course stopped? are their principles altered? Not at all; so soon as the storm is over...the terror wears off...and they are back on their road. (Quoted in Ferguson, Daniel, p.74)

Put another way, Nebuchadnezzar had been overwhelmed by the power of God, but had not been touched and changed by grace. Owen says people can be changed in external moral behavior out of fear of punishment, when their internal “principles” or motives have not been changed at all. Jonathan Edwards said that it is possible to be externally “virtuous” in behavior out of pride (“I’m better than these other people”) or fear (“I’ll be harmed if I don’t obey”). In other words, it is possible to be moral out of a desire for your own glory and out of a desire to manipulate God--which is exactly the same “pagan principles” that also leads to immorality and cruelty and violence. But when we are converted, we are humbled by a sight of our sin and filled with a knowledge of his gracious love--and then we are moved to live out of gratitude and confidence. Someone said of Christianity: “its doctrine is grace, and its ethics is gratitude” but of religion “its doctrine is works, and its ethics is fear (I obey to succeed), pride (I obey to feel superior), and greed (I obey to get blessed).”

Fear-based morality wears off. It did with Nebuchadnezzar.

What does this tell us about our heart?

Whether we are converted or not--we all tend to “spiritually forget” things. That means that we often (like the king) find some truth about God very, very real and affecting--and later it seems to fade and loses its hold on us. We all tend to forget things spiritually, even if we remember them intellectually. That is, truths do not stay “spiritually real” to our hearts.

In Joshua 4 God tells the children of Israel to take 12 stones from the place where he dried up the Jordan in order to make a pillar of remembrance. It would seem ridiculous to imagine that the people could forget such a remarkable miracle. But this is testimony to the fact that sin makes us ‘forget’. The main difference between a Christian and a nominal believer is that the truth has become ‘spiritually real’ to the heart of the Christian. The main difference between a growing Christian and a stagnant Christian is the truth is ‘refreshed’ regularly to the growing Christian. Nasty things our parents said to us 20 years ago are still on ‘video’ in our souls, but God’s promises are only on ‘audio’. Our hearts can hold on forever to the reality of being insulted or rejected or of being a failure, but it cannot ‘remember’ being assured, comforted or humbled by God. This is the fundamental problem of living in the world. The less real is very real to us; the more real is very unreal to us. So what do we do?

Application questions: How do you try to keep things “spiritually real” to your heart? There are many answers, but here are two very important ones--1) **The Lord’s Supper.** The Lord’s Supper in corporate worship is particularly designed to keep things “real”. The purpose of worship and preaching is to give us again a *sense* of God, to bring us into God’s presence, to make salvation real again. 2) Hebrews 3:13 says that we need at very least **Christian community** daily lest we be hardened by sin. All our problems with worry, temptation, guilt, and anger are due to the fact that God and his salvation is unreal to us at the moment. In both cases, we see that it is “lone ranger” Christians who are the most likely to “spiritually forget”.

3. vv.8-14. Consider the ‘politics’ of this situation. a) Why did astrologers do this? b) How is their accusation designed to stir the king’s anger? c) Why did the astrologers have to tell the king about the non-compliance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? Why didn’t they come to the king and complain?

a) Why did the astrologers do this?

The astrologers specifically refer to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as “*Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon...*” (v.12) This description shows how unique it is that foreigners would have this kind of authority. It was awarded to them at Daniel’s request, of course, after the dream-interpretation (2:49). That was a particularly humiliating and galling incident for the astrologers who could not answer the king’s question about his dream (2:12) and who were denounced as spiritually impotent by Daniel (2:37). This public defeat and the elevation of the foreigners had embittered the astrologers, who clearly “had it in” for the three young Jewish leaders.

b) How is the accusation designed to stir the king’s anger?

There are two hints--one rather subtle, and one more blatant--that are designed to move beyond a simple statement of the facts and stir up the king’s (famous) temper. First, when they say, “*Jews whom you have set over...*” (v.12) they are reminding the king of the exceptional generosity he has shown them. The implication is: “and *this* is how they repay your incredible generosity!” Second, when they say, “*who pay no attention to you*” (v.12), they are directly appealing to the king’s huge ego and (perhaps) pathological need for respect and deference.

In short, the accusers are not only pointing out the behavior of the Jews, but they are also positing motives. They are saying, “they are ungrateful and highly arrogant and disdainful of you.” What they are saying about the Jews’s motives is, of course, completely wrong. This is a very prevalent way of attacking someone under the guise of just offering information. When we tell about other people’s behavior in such a way as to guess and impugn their motives, we are moving from simple reporting to slander and character assassination.

c) Why do the astrologers have to bring the Jews forward?

It is interesting to notice that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not feel obligated to take their stand publicly against the obligatory idol-worship. We would imagine that they could have protested the violation of their conscience. But though their consciences could not allow them to worship the idol, their consciences did not dictate them making a public outcry. Many Christian people feel that they are conscience-bound to speak out and complain about anything that they cannot agree with. But “*people of faith do not have a psychological need to make a ‘big deal’ out of their acts of heroism. They do not need always to be drawing attention to the fact that they are different than others.*” (Ferguson, *Daniel*, p.76). The three Jewish leaders were, of course, engaging in civil disobedience. It is a principle laid down in Acts 5:29: when a civil government requires disobedience to God, then we must

instead disobey the government. Nevertheless, they did not find it necessary to disobey the government publicly.

4. vv.13-18. *There is a remarkable balance in the striking answer of the young men to the king. a) How do they balance respect and defiance? b) How do they balance confidence and humility?*

a) Respect and defiance.

The three young men show respect, calling him “o king” and “o Nebuchadnezzar”. But they have the audacity to say to the most powerful man in the world that they do not intend to make a case for the defense of their position. “*We do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter*” (v.16). They were standing, essentially, in a trial for their lives. They were accused of a capital offense, and they were before the bar--the king. But they bluntly state not that they are innocent, and here is why, nor that the law is unjust and they should not be executed. With enormous calm, they say, “we feel no need to defend ourselves to you.” That is contempt of court.

It’s intriguing to see that, though they had felt no need to ‘make a federal case’ of their civil disobedience, it had not been out of cowardice. They were quite ready to die. Also, we learn for ourselves that sometime there is a time for action, not words. Jesus was given to preaching and teaching, but when the end came, he was essentially silent. It was a time for action, not talking. There also comes times in spiritual journey when it is not time for discussion and refining of understanding but it is time for gritty, dogged commitment and action.

b) Confidence and humility.

The statement combines elements that we ordinarily consider anti-thetical to one another. First, they say that they are convoked God *will* rescue them. (v.17) This consists of two parts: first, that God is *able* to rescue them from the power of the king and his furnace, and secondly that he is also *willing* to rescue them (“*and he will rescue us from your hand*”). That is tremendous confidence--spoken calmly to the king.

But then we are startled, even puzzled, by what seems to be contradictory words. Verse 18 starts literally “*But if not....*” They are saying, “God will rescue us, but if he doesn’t...” Now, if they are sure he will save them, then how can they say he may not? If they admit that he might not save them, then how can they speak with confidence that he will? (It might have been easier to swallow if they only had said: “He can rescue us, but he might not.” But they say, “He can...he will...but if not....”)

What we are forced to do is modify a popular view of faith and the will of God. They have been given much assurance and evidence that they will be delivered. However, they were not so arrogant as to be sure that they were “reading God right”. They knew that he is not “tame” and that he is under no obligation to operate according to their limited wisdom. In other words, their confidence was in God himself, not in some agenda that they were sure God was going to promote. If their confidence had really been in their plan (of deliverance) and not in the wisdom of God, then they would never have said, “but if not...” Rather, they knew that dying would not have meant any terrible mistake. They knew that God knew what he was doing. They were saying, essentially: “We believe that God will deliver us, but that is not the reason we defy you! We do not defy you because we think we are going to live--we defy you because our God *is* God. So we will not serve your gods, whether we are protected from the fire or not.”

The popular view is that “we must believe that God will bless us--and not have any doubts at all!” But think of all the greatest servants, from Joseph to David to Jesus himself, who lived by faith but through whom God worked in their suffering and weakness. If we say, “I *know* you will answer this prayer; you CAN’T not answer it”--then our confidence is not really in God’s wisdom, but in our own. That is not faith in God, but a kind of manipulation flowing out of faith in our agenda.

Actually, the “faith-in-our-agenda” kind of approach seems confident on the surface, but underneath it is anxious and insecure. We are scared that maybe he *won’t* answer the prayer for deliverance. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego really believed “all the way down” to God. So they were not nervous at all. They were ready for deliverance or death--either way they knew God would be glorified. They are saying, “God will deliver us either *from* death, or *through* death. It doesn’t really matter. Their desire is to honor God, not to use God to get off.

The real miracle, then, did not happen in the furnace, but before they ever walked in. God got them ready to face the fire. True faith makes human hearts fearless--yet humble. They had been spiritually fire-proofed before they got physically fire-proofed.

5. vv.19-25. a) What two things amaze Nebuchadnezzar? b) cf. 1 Peter 1:12-14. What does this incident teach us about going through ‘fiery’ trials?

a) What two things amaze the king?

First, v.25 says he was shocked that he saw them “*walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed*”. That, of course was astonishing, but there was something else.

Second, v. 24 asks “*Didn’t we throw three men in?*” because Nebuchadnezzar saw four figures walking around and the fourth looked unusual, to say the least. Literally, the king said that he looked like “a son of the gods”. Evidently, even through the flames, this figure appeared to be a being of enormous power, on a supernatural scale. And we notice that he does not come out with the other three. Who was it? It was pretty clearly “the angel of the Lord” figure that we see in many other places in the Old Testament. That seems to be signaled when Nebuchadnezzar says that the Lord “*sent his angel and rescued them*” (v.28).

Basically, the ‘fourth figure’ is a vivid commentary on Isaiah 43:1ff-- “*Fear not, for I have redeemed thee...when you pass through the waters, I will be with you...when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames shall not set you ablaze.*” God promises to be with us in our fiery trials.

b) cf. 1 Peter 1:12-14; what do we learn about trials?

It is very likely that Peter was thinking of Daniel 3 when he wrote this:

1) First, Peter says “don’t be surprised” by furnaces--i.e. trials and troubles. Just like the three young men were not surprised at having their faith tested, so we should not. 2) Second, Peter indicates that we “participate” in the sufferings of Christ. Christ suffered in the hottest of all furnaces, of course--the furnace of justice--on the cross. He suffered because God brings his strength into the world through weakness and sacrifice. So when we suffer in our cooler, smaller furnaces, we remember that we participate somewhat in that same program--by which God brings his grace and glory in through weakness and suffering. If we don’t remember that, then our troubles will only make us more bitter, guilty, mistrustful, permanently sour. If we do remember it, sufferings can make us more sensitive to others, more humble, more loving, more dependent on God. 3) Third, if we remember that Christ went into the furnace *for* us, then we will feel him in our furnaces *with* us. Peter says, when we suffer thinking of Christ “*the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you*”. It is so often the

case that we experience the presence of Christ with us much more in our troubles than in our successes.

6. vv.28-30. Compare what Nebuchadnezzar knows about God now with what he knew in 2:46-49.

In 2:46-49, the king has seen a miraculous display of wisdom. As a result:

- a. He acknowledges that the Lord is supreme over other gods “*God of gods*”.
- b. He acknowledges that the Lord is in control of human governments and kings “*Lord of kings*”
- c. He acknowledges that the Lord is the supreme source of wisdom “*revealer of mysteries*” and therefore he puts Daniel “*over....all...wise men*”.

In 3:28-30, the king has seen a miraculous deliverance or salvation. As a result he:

- a. He praises God for the first time (“*Praise be to the God of...*” v.28)--something beyond chapter 2, where he only describes him with being the God of Gods. For the first time, he seems almost moved to prayer. However, he still only calls the Lord “the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego”.
- b. He recognizes the importance of faith and “*trust*” toward this God. (v.28). For the first time he sees that this God saves those who put their faith in him. An important new step! In the pagan world, it was possible to placate and satisfy a god with gifts and rituals but with little emphasis on heart trust. Now Nebuchadnezzar could see that importance of faith in relating to this God.
- c. He also begins to see something about the importance of exclusive worship. “*They were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any other god except their God*” (v.28). In the pagan world, it was possible to worship many different gods--no god expected exclusive worship, because no god claimed absolute power and sovereignty. Now Nebuchadnezzar could see visibly that this God saved those who worshipped him exclusively and wholly.
- d. But instead of putting his *own* faith in the Lord, positively and exclusively, Nebuchadnezzar only forbids others to “*say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego*” (v.29). This was important, since it made direct attacks on the Jews now impossible. But it represents still a kind of “limbo” for God in the king’s mind. In chapter 2, he only had come to see that the Lord was a real god, and stronger than most (or any). But he still thought of the Lord in pagan terms--as a God who would give power in exchange for a certain amount of gifts and honor. Now he realized that the Lord demanded whole-hearted trust and exclusive, comprehensive obedience. He doesn’t really seem to know what to do about this personally! Here the king has hard evidence that this God exists and demands exclusive trust and worship, yet he is not prepared to give it himself. So as a compromise, he warns others to respect this religion. It is an intellectually untenable position--but that is where most people are with regard to God.

In summary, Nebuchadnezzar is still only impressed by the naked power of God. He was just bested in a “power-contest” and he is being a gracious loser. “Nice move!”, he is saying to his opponent, “you really are Almighty--I have to give you credit for that! You deserve respect and honor!” But “*Nebuchadnezzar was impressed by the fact that the Hebrews had frustrated his word (v.28) but he showed little or no interest in the word of God in which they had trusted. Nebuchadnezzar would [still] not have been impressed by the weakness and foolishness of the cross by which God would bring final salvation to His people. It was the show of strength....that had impressed him. He still did not think in terms of his pride being humbled or of his need for grace*”. (Ferguson, *Daniel*, p.85)

Week 18
Daniel 4:1-37

THE MAD KING

SOSL 3/98-99

- 1. How is this dream like and unlike the king's dream in chapter 2?*
- 2. Is the dream an indication of what will happen, or of what might happen? (cf. vv.15-17, 26-27)? What does this tell us about why troubles sometimes come to us?*
- 3. Contrast Nebuchadnezzar's actions and words before and after his humiliation.*
- 4. How does Daniel himself stand as a contrast to Nebuchadnezzar? How does his treatment of the king show a balance of compassion and boldness?*
- 5. Compare Nebuchadnezzar's confession in vv.34-37 with his words in 3:28-30 and 2:47-48.*
- 6. What do we learn about human pride in this passage? What harm did it cause Nebuchadnezzar? How did God heal it?*

Week 18

Daniel 4:1-37

THE MAD KING

SOSL 3/98-99

- 1. How is this dream like and unlike the king's dream in chapter 2?*
- 2. Is the dream an indication of what will happen, or of what might happen? (cf. vv.15-17, 26-27)? Compare and contrast Daniel's prediction of v.26 with Jesus' prediction in Luke 22:31. What does this tell us about why troubles sometimes come to us? (cf. Heb.12:10-11 and John 9:1-3)*
- 3. How well does Nebuchadnezzar heed God's warning? How do we receive God's warning? (Think of the ways that the king was sent warnings by God.)*
- 4. a) What is the significance of the lesson of v.17? Why is it so important? b) Nebuchadnezzar is both insecure and abusive. How would the lesson of v.17- practically change those two aspects of his character? c) How would this principle--that success is always an unmerited gift--affect the way a successful man or woman today conducts his or her business and life? (Consider the two practical exhortations of v.27)?*
- 5. vv.19-27. How does Daniel combine both love and forcefulness in his counseling of the king? Which side of effective shepherding do you need to work on more in your care for people?*
- 6. v.27. Here Daniel accuses the king of social injustice and calls him to change his policies. What practical principles are there in Daniel's story for working for cultural change and justice as Christians in our society?*
- 7. Do you think that the particular kind of affliction God sent to Nebuchadnezzar was significant? Was it designed to teach anything?*
- 8. vv.34-37. Compare this confession to the confessions in 3:28-29 and 2:47. Do you think he was 'converted'? Why or why not?*
- 9. What practical encouragement is this narrative for believers living in a pluralistic and pagan society?*

Week 18

Daniel 4:1-37

THE MAD KING

SOSL 3/98-99

Introduction: This chapter is the last of the ‘interventions’ by God into the life of Nebuchadnezzar. Each time God apparently cuts deeper into his heart spiritually. This is the ultimate blow to the king’s sin and pride. Unlike in chapters 2 and 3, Daniel and his friends are not in any danger. This time the focus is completely on the king of Babylon and how God deals with him.

1. How is this dream like and unlike the king’s dream in chapter 2?

How it is like.

First, both dreams are about Nebuchadnezzar’s power and might. Both dreams are about a huge, colossal object that overshadows the whole world. In the first dream, the ‘head of gold’ is Nebuchadnezzar. (So, too, in this dream there is a colossal tree that overshadows the whole world. Again, he is identified with the tree (v.22) as he was with the statue.

Second, both dreams are about the sovereign power of God over human power and might. Both huge colossal objects are brought down in a spectacular fall. The statue is smashed into pieces. The tree is not just cut down but also stripped and its fruit scattered (v.14). Both dreams show how God is in control over even the greatest of kingdoms.

How it is unlike.

First, this dream predicts a personal, specific stroke against Nebuchadnezzar. In the chapter 2 dream, Nebuchadnezzar is only the head of gold on the statue, which represents all the kingdoms of this world. And the blow against the statue strikes the feet (not the head), and tells how the kingdom of God will replace the kingdoms of the earth. But in the chap 4 dream, the whole tree is Nebuchadnezzar. The stroke is against him. The focus is no longer ‘academic’, general teaching. Rather, it is an announcement that God is going to come in and deal with Nebuchadnezzar specifically and personally.

Second, this dream predicts a regeneration of Nebuchadnezzar. The first dream centered on a statue, not a living thing. Once it is destroyed, the destruction is permanent. But the second dream gives us not a statue but a tree, and very pointedly we are told that the tree is cut down--not uprooted. “*But let the stump and its roots...remain in the ground...*” (v.15). The stump is “*bound with iron and bronze*” (v.15) as indication of its captivity--but it nevertheless remains. That is a clear indication that the cutting is ultimately a ‘pruning’--it is a severe stroke, but it is not meant finally to destroy the tree. Regeneration is possible. This is not simple retribution--a tit-for-tat repayment and punishment for sin. This is discipline--a chastening and inflicting of pain designed to correct and redeem. Ultimately, then Nebuchadnezzar will be able to “grow back”.

2. Is the dream an indication of what will happen, or of what might happen? (cf. vv.15-17, 26-27)? Compare and contrast. Daniel’s prediction of v.26 with Jesus’ prediction in Luke 22:31. What does this tell us about why troubles sometimes come to us? (cf. Heb.12:10-11 and John 9:1-3)

Is this dream telling what will or what might happen?

Daniel, in his interpretation of the dream provides a kind of balance. On the one hand, in v.26 he says that what will happen is certain. He says that the command to retain the stump

and roots “means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules” (v.26). On the other hand, in v.27 he pleads with the king to repent immediately in order to avoid the great ‘stroke’ that will fell him. “Renounce your sins....and...it may be that your prosperity will continue” (v.27). This indicates that his choice will have real consequences.

This is typical of all the Scripture. There is always a co-ordinate emphasis on both the complete sovereignty and control of God over all history and the reality and responsibility of our free choices. (Cf. Paul’s statements in Acts 27:22 and Acts 27:31.) Though divine sovereignty and human responsibility appear to contradict each other, it is only together that they really explain what happens in our daily lives. We are both safe in God’s plan and responsible to exert ourselves to follow his will.

So is this dream what will or what might happen? It is a combination of both! It is not a simple prophecy--it is a loving but severe warning.

Cf. v.26 with Luke 22:31 and Heb.12:10-11. What does this teach us about our own lives? There is remarkable similarity between Daniel’s warning to the king and Jesus’ warning to Peter. They are both being told that they will be put under a test that they will fail, and the sin in their hearts will be revealed, and they will be crushed. But though both men are warned that they are going to fall, both men are also assured that they are going to repent and be restored. (Jesus does not say, “if you turn” but “when you turn, strengthen the brethren”. The difference between the two is that Jesus gives us the reason that Simon Peter will turn--“I have prayed for you”--while Daniel does not give any reason. Jesus reveals that repentance is dependent on support and help from God. Though we are responsible for our choices, God helps us and opens our eyes so we can make right choices.

In general, this passage teaches us that sometimes, the troubles in our lives come to “chasten” us--to directly refine and humble us and make us holy. Hebrews 12:10-11 speaks of God’s ‘discipline’ and speaks of it in the context of family and a father’s punishment of his child this is important. There is a difference between the way a magistrate punishes and the way a parent punishes. The magistrate is concerned with nothing but justice and tit-for-tat retribution--the crime must be paid for. The father, however, is not seeking strict justice. His concern is correction and maturity in his child. For example, if a child lies, the father brings just enough pain into the child’s life to wake the child up and prevent him or her from the greater pain that would come should the child grow up into a liar. Is God’s blow to Nebuchadnezzar the retribution of a magistrate? No. If Nebuchadnezzar had gotten what he deserved he would have been wiped out. This is, rather, corrective “discipline” or “chastening”--pain in the life that is designed to make us holy and prevent us from the far greater pain that will come if we don’t become godly.

However, we must be very careful not to think that all troubles or difficulties are “chastening”. When Jesus was asked whether the blind man was blind because of his sins or his parents’, Jesus says, ‘neither’. Suffering and evil in this world is here because of humanity’s sin in general--we are ‘fallen’ and we live in such a broken world. Thus most of our trouble is just part and parcel of being human. Some of our trouble, however, is directly used by God to humble and chasten and grow us.

Therefore, when troubles come to us, we must never think “this is punishment”, because even if it is discipline/chastening, it is not retribution for what we deserve. It is only ever loving discipline, meant to help us. On the other hand, when troubles come we should also not complain that God is being unjust. (If we got what we deserved, we’d all be wiped out!)

3. How well does Nebuchadnezzar heed God's warning? How do we receive God's warning? (Think of the ways that the king was sent warnings by God.)

How well does the king heed God's warnings?

First, the dream itself is rather obvious in its meaning, but Nebuchadnezzar does not seem to want to really face it. Unlike the first dream in chapter 2, this dream is virtually interpreted to the king by the "holy one", the messenger. The messenger: a) calls the tree "him" and "he" (v.15-16), (making it clear that it is the king), b) tells him that he is going to lose his sanity (v.16), and c) even tells him what the lesson is--that God is the sovereign Lord. The identity of the God that the messenger calls "the Most High" should have been very obvious to the king, after all of his experiences in chapter 2 and 3. But despite all this clarity, the king calls in his magicians for an interpretation (v.7). And not only that, he does not call in Daniel until after the other magicians are stumped (no pun intended). Is it possible that the king has forgotten how Daniel interpreted the dream of chapter 2? Not likely. So surely he knew that Daniel would be able to interpret the dream, yet he avoids him at first. All this shows that Nebuchadnezzar is seeking to escape the obvious.

Second, the king clearly does not really heed Daniel's warning. He is found twelve months later in exactly the state of mind that God has warned him against (v.30). So it is clear that the king has resisted God's last message. The dream of chapter 2, the fiery furnace-deliverance of chapter 3, and the dream of chapter 4 were not enough. God had to literally throw the king to the ground before he was humbled.

How did the king receive warnings? How do we?

God sends us warnings that self-centered living is doomed to fail. How do such warnings come about the dangers of pride and the necessity of making him Lord? It may surprise to realize that we get God's warning in the same ways that Nebuchadnezzar did.

First, we have the Word of the prophets. Nebuchadnezzar had Daniel's revelation from God. We have Daniel's but also a whole lot more--the whole Bible! We have far more extensive and vivid warnings about sin than did the king. We should therefore not feel superior to the King of Babylon. We have an enormous advantage over him in our information about the God and the nature of the universe. We have not just Daniel, but Moses, David, Isaiah, all the prophets, all the gospels, Paul, Peter, and John.

Second, we have the example of godly people. Nebuchadnezzar saw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's integrity and faith, and how God worked in their lives. We too have examples of people whose lives are a rebuke to our own. We all see people whose lives we should be emulating, but we do not.

Third, we have the witness of our own heart and consciences. Nebuchadnezzar's dreams were not just supernatural prophecies--they were the expressions of the deep fears and anxieties of his own spirit. Deep down he *knew* he wasn't self-sufficient and all-powerful. Paul says in Romans 1 and 2 that we all suppress the truth of our utter dependence on God. Inside, everyone has a basic knowledge of the reality of God and our responsibility to serve and trust him. One of the lessons of Daniel 4 is that "the sleep of the proud is a troubled sleep". Despite the superficial contentment and prosperity (v.4), the self-referential lifestyle is characterized by deep anxiety, fear, and dissatisfaction (v.5).

Fourth, we have the troubles of life. Nebuchadnezzar's mental illness finally woke him up to his inadequacy and need for God. For most of us, we would never have realized the truth of our need for God without such troubles.

4. a) What is the significance of the lesson of v.17? Why is it so important? b) Nebuchadnezzar is both insecure and abusive. How would the lesson of v.17-practically change those two aspects of his character? c) How would this

principle--that success is always an unmerited gift--affect the way a successful man or woman today conducts his or her business and life? (Consider the two practical exhortations of v.27)?

a) What is the significance of v.17?

The lesson of v.17 is basically a lesson of *grace*. It is saying that anyone who is successful is really simply a recipient of God's unmerited favor. Even the people who are 'at the top' in the world's hierarchy of power and wealth and influence are really '*lowliest*'--they are no better than anyone else. This is a rudimentary form of the gospel--that what we have is the result of grace, not of our 'works' or efforts. *Any success is an unmerited gift*. Now this goes completely against the deepest beliefs and convictions of the world. People who have gotten 'up the ladder' feel very fiercely that they earned it and got there by their superior effort or ability. The teaching that all success is an unmerited gift of the sovereign God is nonsensical and repugnant to us. Yet of course it is true. We are successful because we were born here and now rather than on a mountain in Tibet in the 13th century. We are successful because of the health, brains, connections, schools, talents that were given to us by God. We were successful because of the drive and ambition that he inspired in us. The reason this is so significant is that, if we grasped the principle, it would completely transform how we live and work.

b) How could the truth of v.17 change Nebuchadnezzar?

Two things we see in Nebuchadnezzar's character are (1) his fierce ego-centric touchiness and anxiety (remember his rage at Shadrach and co. for 'not paying him attention'), and (2) his cruelty and abusive use of power. If he knew this teaching of v.17, it would have healed him of both.

First, the abusiveness comes from *superiority*. The reason many powerful people trample on others is because they feel superior in ability or status or because they feel entitled through their superior record and tenure. But if you acknowledge that those in power are "lowly"--no different than anyone else, only put in your position by God--then this brings about a humility that will prevent injustice and abuse of power. You look at others less successful and think "there but for the grace of God go I".

Second, the insecurity and ego come from *inferiority*. The reason many people are so vain and touchy and easily insulted and angered and frightened is because they fear that they will not be able to keep their position, or they feel they are not really capable enough to be in the position they have attained. But if you realize that the reason you are in your position is not due to your performance or due to "luck", but is due to the grace of God, then you can relax and have more confidence.

In short, v.17 is a call to understand a rudimentary version of the gospel. "King Nebuchadnezzar--you must understand the grace of God. Your power has been given to you by grace from God. If you knew that, you would be both more relaxed and secure and more humble and just. If you think you earned your position through your merit and works, you will continue to be both scared and cruel." That is the basic message to the king.

b) What practical difference would the gospel make to our work (v.27)?

If we grasped the gospel, it would change us in the two ways we noted immediately above. First, "my success is a gift of grace" would mean we would be much less fearful, worried, or driven in our work. We'd say "it is not my performance and achievement that is holding me up! It is God." You would relax. Secondly, "my success is a gift of grace" would mean we would be much less proud and indifferent to others who are socially 'beneath' us. We would be kind and treat those less powerful with great dignity. We would not brag about our pedigree and credentials. So we would lose both the 'inferiority' and 'superiority' feelings that success always weighs our hearts with if we forget grace.

But in addition to that, Daniel calls Nebuchadnezzar (in light of the grace principle of v.17 and v.25) to amend his life in two ways. These two ways must be a direct result of the 'grace-vs.-works' understanding of our success. (1) First, he must "*do what is right*". That has to do with one's *personal* ethics. Even though he is a powerful and successful king, he must not be a law unto himself. He is accountable to God to be honest, chaste, kind, and so on. (2) Second, he must "*be kind to the oppressed*" (or literally, "*the poor*"). He must take the power he has and treat the poor with both mercy and justice.

It is fascinating that Daniel draws these two implications from the truth that all success is really an unmerited gift of God. Successful people today need very much to hear this.

First, when we become successful, the normal accountability structures fall away. You become far more mobile, inaccessible, and unaccountable to normal informal relationships. You also may become harder and harder to advise and hold accountable. It is harder for anyone to really see what you are doing. Also, your success leads you to only listen to a smaller and smaller number of people--people of 'your caliber'. As a result, successful people often do not have either the peer-accountability regular small groups or the more formal accountability of submission to church leaders and elders in order to keep them honest and chaste and humble.

Second, when we become successful, the natural tendency of our heart is to think that we merited it. That automatically makes us selfish with what we have and disdainful to those who have less. We do not like being around 'inferiors'--we only want to rub shoulders with similarly influential people. This means we are not concerned for the poor and those with less. We may simply be indifferent and ungenerous with our resources. Often (as in the king's case) we may actively take advantage of others for our own gain.

Summary: If we are successful but we believe in the gospel of grace, it will profoundly change the way in which we go about our business--psychologically and sociologically. Psychologically, we will be both *a)* far less worried and driven, and *b)* far less proud and disdainful of others. Sociologically, we will be much more concerned for the plight of those in need, and we will use our influence and our wealth to seek peace and justice for all.

5. vv.19-27. How does Daniel combine both love and forcefulness in his counseling of the king? Which side of effective shepherding do you need to work on more in your care for people?

"Observe the balance in Daniel's conduct here. On the one hand, he is personally distressed by what he has to say, but on the other he is brutally candid in saying it. In that respect Daniel provides us with an important model of what sound counseling must always be like. I suspect that the narrator intends us to gain courage and wisdom from Daniel's example in our dealings with people. Some Christians are too confrontational in the way they handle people with personal problems. They fulminate in a sanctimonious and unsympathetic way about sin, and one suspects, gain a good deal of private satisfaction from their smug posturing. It is no surprise that their pious rebukes, as often as not, merely serve to reinforce the emotional defenses of those they are trying to counsel.

But equally, some other Christians are not confrontational enough. They have read so much about modern nondirective counseling that they assume the role of a purely passive listener, unwilling to offer advice, let alone admonition, no matter how much the person may need it. Daniel shows us the balance. He listens patiently while the king talks at length. People who are distressed frequently do talk at length. Daniel communicates his own interest in deep empathy with the king's feelings of anxiety

both by his words and by his facial expressions. He is no clinical expert maintaining a professional distance from his client...he is emotionally involved with the situation and personally burdened by the king's predicament. He communicates all this to the king in the way he behaves. Yet he refuses to allow his feelings to deter him from plain speaking. He is absolutely frank about placing responsibility squarely on the king's shoulders....he says in effect, "Would that it were anybody else, o king! But I must speak the truth in love. God sees pride in your life; he doesn't like it..." Roy Clements, *Faithful Living in a Faithless World*, p.122-123

6. v.27. Here Daniel accuses the king of social injustice and calls him to change his policies. What practical principles are there in Daniel's story for working for cultural change and justice as Christians in our society?

Though there may be some differences in emphasis depending on one's denomination and tradition, all Christians agree that society is sick and needs to be renewed. Politically conservative Christians may be more concerned about legal abortion, and politically liberal Christians may be more concerned about the poor, but everyone agrees that there is much injustice and a great lack of 'virtue' and 'values' in society. So how do we work on that as Christians? Daniel's example shows us at least two broad principles.

First of all, we have here a man of God speaking to a pagan king and telling him to change his policies--to bring them into line with the contours of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of Christ will be an 'upside down' kingdom, in which the High King empties himself and becomes a servant of all, and in which the oppressed and humble are raised up, and the proud and powerful are brought down (Luke 1:50-55). Daniel is holding a pagan king responsible to in some way reflect the character of Christ's kingdom by being kind to those in need. "*Christ's kingship is the norm for any and every kingship on earth.*" (S.DeGraaf, *Promise and Deliverance*: vol.I, p.409)

This means that Christians do have a responsibility and right to be involved in the public arenas--government, business, sciences, and the arts--and seek to bring those in their field to reflect the integrity and generosity and peace of the kingdom of God. Many have taught that believers are to simply create Christian communities and practice kingdom values there but not seek or expect to have anyone in the broader society follow the kingdom's contours.

Second, though, on the other hand, we see that it has taken Daniel many years of a) excellence in his work and b) integrity in his character and c) relationship building--before he becomes able to speak in this way. He has 'earned the right to be heard' but studying and laboring within Babylonian society. He does not stay on the outside of that society and picket and lobby and write diatribes. He has on the one hand become completely conversant and engaged in the culture, but he has maintained his distinctiveness as a believer. And he is undeniably the very best at what he does. Until Christians are able to more and more approximate these same conditions, we cannot hope to have any impact on our culture.

7. Do you think that the particular kind of affliction God sent to Nebuchadnezzar was significant? Was it designed to teach anything?

This is completely speculative, but it appears that God's message is--"if you insist on trying to be more than a man, you will become less than a man". The fundamental sin is seeking to be your own God, living for your own glory, self-sufficient in your own power. But this sin of acting 'god-like' is what leads to the most bestial, cruel, sub-human behavior. Only acting like a 'god' will lead to being as vicious as an animal. Pride makes you less loving, more predatory

Some have seen in Genesis 1-3 a similar message. Originally, the world was designed along the following order. (In other words, if we served God, we would have had power over nature as its caretaker.)

God ----> (over) humanity----> (over) nature

But what the sinful human heart wanted was the following order. (In other words, we want God to do our will by arranging the world and nature as we want).

Humanity----> (over) God----> (over) nature

But what actually happened was the following order. (In other words, but seeking to become more than human we became less than human. Now nature 'wins'--it is no longer under our control. Though we toil in the dust, in the end the dust wins (Gen.3:17-19).

God----> (over) nature---> (over) humanity

But in addition to the loss of 'humanity' which is a characteristic of sin, the affliction ends with the king becoming "*greater than before*" (v.36). This is a deep pattern of grace. As Jesus was defeated in order to have victory, as he lost in order to gain, as he died in order to be resurrected, so in general Christians grow and make gains through their losses and griefs. It is the way of the cross.

8. vv.34-37. Compare this confession to the confessions in 3:28-29 and 2:47. Do you think he was 'converted'? Why or why not?

There are four elements in Nebuchadnezzar's last confession.

a) He admits, finally, that God's kingdom is an eternal kingdom, enduring from "*generation to generation*" (v.34). This comes close to an understanding of a 'covenant' promise. It is possible that Nebuchadnezzar is not simply saying here that God 'lasts forever' but that he has made a covenant with his people and will be faithful to save them on the basis of his promise. We can't be sure of this, but it seems possible that he has finally seen that God can be related to through *covenant*. That is a real advance over a general sense that God is powerful. He may be saying that we must be in a covenant relationship with this King.

b) Second, he admits that human beings are '*as nothing*' (v.35). He finally has come to see that "all" the peoples of the earth--even him!--are dependent on God for absolutely anything and everything. This humbling is a pre-requisite for understanding grace.

c) Third, he admits that God's judgments are always righteous and must never be questioned. "*He does whatever he pleases... no one can say 'what have you done'?*" (v.35, cf.v.37). This is more than a general statement. The king is talking about the judgment and blow that he had received from God. And thus he is saying--"I deserved everything I got and more!" That sounds like a confession of sin and an awareness of grace.

d) The fourth element in this confession is not so much a matter of content as of spirit. This confession is far more exuberant, grateful, joyful than the others. In fact, the chapter 3 confession is comical in how he threatens to punish and smash anyone who insults the God of Israel. In the first two confessions, there is nothing but a knuckling under to power--and the only emotion is one of awe. But this confession shows an awareness of sin and grace--and the emotion is far more joyous and grateful.

No one can be sure that the king was 'converted' from this distance. But there is an intriguing hint that the narrator thinks that he was. In v.34, we are told that Nebuchadnezzar "*raised my eyes toward heaven, and [then] my sanity was restored*". The order seems significant. He was not restored until he raised his eyes toward heaven. The implication is that he looked toward God in humility and dependence with what little volition and consciousness he had left. He could not even think straight, but he looked

upward in hope, and this seems to have been the cause of his sanity returning. (See Ps.121:1-
-*I lift my eyes to hills, from whence cometh my help?*)

“Over recent years, I have learned never to despise mentally ill people or to write them off as wrecks of humanity. God is often...real to those who experience mental illness....In that extremity of alienation and loneliness...God can still communicate, human beings can still respond, and spirituality can still grow.” Roy Clements, Faithful Living in a Faithless World, p.129.

9. What practical encouragement is this narrative for believers living in a pluralistic and pagan society?

- a) It means that we should not feel that believers must ‘get back in power’ for God to be honored. God is never out of power.
- b) It means that we must learn to let the kingdom values and the gospel of grace make us distinctive in the way we live our public life.
- c) It means that God can convert anybody. We must not look at anyone, no matter how confident and mighty and think, “there’s someone who will never become a Christian”.

10. Read the following quotes. a) What are the marks of pride in this classic Christian teaching? b) How does Nebuchadnezzar illustrate the marks of pride (see esp. 4:30)? What do we learn about human pride in this passage? What harm did it cause Nebuchadnezzar? How did God heal it? c) What are your main temptations to pride?

Pride is faith in the idea that God had when he made us. Most people are not aware of any idea God had in the making of them...or else it has been lost, and who shall find it again? They have got to accept as success what others decide success is, and to take their happiness, even their own selves, at the quotation of the day.” -- Isaak Dinesen

Pride...leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind....

1) Pride is essentially competitive....Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others...

2) Pride can often be used to beat down the simpler vices. Teachers often appeal to a boy’s Pride (or, as they call it, his self-respect) to make him behave more decently: many a man has overcome cowardice or lust or ill-temper by learning to think that they are beneath his dignity. The devil laughs. He is perfectly content to see you becoming chaste and brave and self-controlled provided he is setting up in you Dictatorship of pride...For Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.

3) Pleasure in being praised is not Pride. The child who is patted on the back for doing a lesson well, the woman whose beauty is praised by her lover, the saved soul to whom Christ says ‘well done’, are pleased and ought to be. For here the pleasure lies not in what you are, but in the fact that you have pleased someone you wanted (and rightly wanted) to please. The trouble begins...the more you delight in yourself and the less you delight in the praise [and the pleasure of the praise-er]. That is why vanity, though it is the sort of Pride that shows most on the surface, is really the least bad...sort. The vain person wants praise, applause, admiration too much and is always angling for it...It shows that you are not yet completely contented with

your own admiration....The real diabolical Pride comes when you look down on others so much that you do not care what they think of you....

Do not imagine if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be...always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him, it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all. [Real humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.]

4) In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that--and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison--you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you. That raises a terrible question. How is it that people who are quite obviously eaten up with Pride can say they believe in God and appear to themselves very religious? I am afraid they are worshipping an imaginary God....Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good--above all, that we are better than someone else--I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil. C.S. Lewis, "The Great Sin" in Mere Christianity.

Week 19

Daniel 5:1-31

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

SOSL 3/98-99

Introduction:

Following the death of Nebuchadnezzar, the power of the empire of Babylon began to decline. After a number of short reigns by various kings, Nabonidus became emperor. Historians have known for a long time that he was the last king of the Babylonian empire. That is why for a number of years, critical scholars claimed that this chapter 5 of Daniel was legendary. Since no 'Belshazzar' appears in the ancient lists of emperors, this supposed 'king' was thought to have been the figment of the Biblical writer's imagination. However, archeology has revealed that Nabonidus in the later years of his reign moved his royal residence far away, leaving his son Belshazzar as the crown regent in Babylon for ten years. Thus the Biblical record is not only true in calling Belshazzar the functioning 'king' (5:1), but even shows historical accuracy when Belshazzar offers Daniel the 'third' highest ruler in the kingdom' (5:7,16,29). Since Belshazzar would have been the second highest ruler only, the third-highest position was the best he could give.

[This background note has a very practical implication. For years, the story of Belshazzar seemed to be evidence for the the historical unreliability of the Bible. Many students and scholars saw it and it undermined their faith in the infallibility of the Scripture. That results in a major change in the way we order our lives. We think we have to judge which parts of the Bible are right or wrong rather than letting the Bible judge which parts of *us* are right or wrong. But after many years, we now know that Daniel 5 is evidence *for* the reliability of the Bible. People that thought they had found an error here (and thus changed their life-philosophy) were completely wrong. What a tragedy! When we come to other apparent contradictions or 'inaccuracies', we should not jump to the conclusion that we have found an error.]

Another important thing to notice is how Nebuchadnezzar is called Belshazzar's 'father' (5:2,11,13,18,22). This does not mean that Nebuchadnezzar was literally Belshazzar's father. In the Near East, any ancestor was called one's 'father'--the term 'grand-father' or 'great-grandfather' was unknown. So if Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's forebear in anyway, this term would have been appropriate. But the term is used even more generally to mean a person in whose shoes one does (or should!) follow. Thus Elisha, the younger prophet, calls older Elijah "my father!" (2 Kings 2:12). One of the whole thrusts of the narrative is just that. Belshazzar gets a warning from God about his arrogance and pride, just as Nebuchadnezzar did. But the 'son' does not walk in the footsteps of his 'father'.

1. vv.1-4. a) What hints are there that this party is more frenetic than is ordinary? b) Considering the fact that an army took over Babylon that night, what might the reason for the party have been?

First, in v.2 we see that Belshazzar gave the order to take the Jerusalem-temple and use them as drinking vessels for their party. Why? Surely a great emperor had plenty of gold and silver goblets. This seems to have been a pretty deliberate act of sacrilege, an deliberately outraging attempt to show utter contempt for the God of the Jews. Why would he pick on the God of the Jews? It was probably well known in the Babylonian court how Nebuchadnezzar had seemingly been won over as a devotee to this 'supreme God' of all gods. This then was an intentionally arrogant assertion of power over this supposed powerful diety.

Second, in v.4 we see that this feast had a religious aspect--"they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone." This leads us to ask,

'was this great banquet a bacchanalian festival designed to propitiate those ancestral divinities that Babylon for too long had neglected? If so, then the defilement of the temple may well have been a public repudiation of Nebuchadnezzars' known sympathies for the cult of Yahweh...which Belshazzar quite probably regarded as an unpatriotic foible on Nebuchadnezzar's part...' (Clements, *Faithful Living in a Faithless World*, p.137).

Throughout the ages, most people have strongly persisted in believing that religion is just an extension and expression of culture. One's beliefs are interwoven with one's nationality and culture. Therefore, for example, an Arab Muslim would feel that, were he to become a Christian, he would no longer be an Arab. This view is embodied in statements like, "I'm English, therefore I'm Anglican; I'm Scottish, therefore I'm Presbyterian; I'm Indian, therefore I'm Hindu". Since this was almost certainly the case with Belshazzar, this feast was likely an expression of nationalistic passion.

So almost certainly, Belshazzar was very directly repudiating any honor and deference to this foreign God that Nebuchadnezzar had been so keen on in his old age.

Third, in v.2-3 we are told that the nobles had their wives and concubines together. Some commentators believe that this was the sign of a particularly wild and frenetic party, since one did not ordinarily 'mix' wives and concubines together in the same event.

What might the reason for the party have been?

It would have been impossible for the whole Medo-Persian army to have come upon the city of Babylon by surprise. All the records show that the Babylonians had already been defeated by the advancing invaders and they had retreated into Babylon and shut themselves up. In that Babylon had strong fortifications and strong supplies, many (including Belshazzar) thought that they could last out a siege. So

1. First, the party is bravado.

So Belshazzar knew that the enemy was at the gate--and this is the way he reacted. He dealt with his anxiety by bravado. (If he had any anxiety, that is. If he had none, then his ego had led him into delusions about reality.) He defied the God who claimed supremacy and the humbling of kings before Himself by taking the Lord's things and trying to lord it over *Him*. He confidently praised his own gods as sufficient to protect and maintain his power. He threw a huge party, an orgy, to show his absolute disdain for the the idea that there was any power who could make him 'sweat' or cower. Here is a true "master of the universe", "a self-made man who worships his creator". But

2. Second, the party is denial.

Like the addict to substances who gets a high to take his or her mind off reality, so the party has to also be a way for the elite of Babylon to avoid thinking about their true condition. It was a way to live in the illusion that their wealth and power would last.

2. How can entertainment and recreation function in a similar way in the lives of us today?

Surely the frenetic pursuit of recreation and entertainment today by many people serves the same function--namely, to keep us from thinking about the fragility and precariousness of our true condition.

Who, for example, wants to think about what happens after we die? Who wants to think even think about the *fact* that one day (relatively soon) we will face our final day, and what will our lives have amounted to? And if, when we die, we rot and go to nothing, what difference does anything in life make--what have we to be happy about? On the other hand, if there *is* an afterlife, have we lived in such a way to be prepared for it?

These kinds of questions, though completely rational, are considered morose, even pathological, by many. Plenty of thinkers, Christian and non-Christian, have recognized that our quest for fun and pleasure and parties is a form of denial--or at least postponement--of the serious and big questions about the meaning of life.

For example, Ernest Becker, a Jewish author, wrote in *Denial of Death* that he believed that frantic human efforts to achieve and enjoy are really efforts to hide from ourselves the fact that we are going to die and go to nothing. Another example For example, Pascal wrote:

"We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us from seeing it."

Most poignant is Edward Fitzgerald's *The Rubiyat of Omar Khayyam*, which refers famously to Belshazzar's feast:

*"Ah, fill the Cup--what boots it to repeat
Howtime is slipping underneath our Feet:
Unborn To-morrow, and dead Yesterday,
Why fret about them if To-Day be sweet!*

*The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety and Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a Word of it.*

So, the 'handwriting is on the wall'. We are going to die and be judged. But we work hard at partying so as to avoid the inevitable reality of it.

3.vv.5-9. Why is Belshazzar more terrified, seemingly, than Nebuchadnezzar ever was (v.6 and v.9)? How does this manifestation of God compare with those to Nebuchadnezzar? Read Exod.19:9-22, Is.6:1-8, and Heb.12:18-24,28. Why is this response typical? What does it teach us about God and ourselves?

Nebuchadnezzar had two vivid dreams (chap 2 and 4) and saw a miracle (chap 3). But he never saw a visible apparition of God's supernatural power. In chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar was troubled, to the point that he could not sleep (2:1). In chapter 3 he was astonished. In chapter 4, it says he was 'terrified' by the dream (4:5). But the description of Belshazzar certainly goes beyond that. We are told that he could not stand up, but his legs gave way and he collapsed (5:6), and that he grew even more terrified than that (4:9). It is possible that Belshazzar is sensing the presence of God, which always leads any human being to feel weak and 'undone'. Rudolph Otto, in his famous work, *The Idea of the Holy*, wrote about 'numinous awe', the trauma that human beings feel when the sense the presence of the divine. It is not *pleasant!* Despite the popular sentimental idea that the 'presence of God' is a warm and

comforting experience, the Bible says that it is not. Whenever anyone in the Bible actually draws near to God, it is a terrifying experience. Exod.19:9-22 shows this. When God's presence comes down on to Mt.Sinai, the whole mountain trembled and shook and smoked, and the people had to be warned to stay back lest the presence of God 'break through' and kill many of them (Exod.19:22). Why?

Isaiah 6:1-8 reveals the answer. Isaiah was a prophet, and even he felt utterly dirty and like he was falling apart when he came into the presence of the Holy. The trauma of holiness is the trauma of comparison. In the presence of the Great, we finally feel small; in the presence of the Omnipotent, we finally feel weak and dependent; in the presence of the Good we finally see how sinful and flawed we are; in the presence of the Creator, we feel our creatureliness. If Isaiah and Moses trembled with a sense of their smallness and sinfulness--and they at least intellectually were committed to these principles--how much worse would Belshazzar have felt, who was utterly opposed to such truths. Rom.1:18-25 tells us that the very truth we most repress is the Glory of God, namely, how absolutely dependent we are on him, and how incapable we are of being our own Masters.

'The greatness of God and the fragility of any human king' was, of course, the very opposite of what Belshazzar was asserting in the feast. He was declaring to the world that he needed nothing, he was afraid of nothing, he was dependent on nothing--but his own power. But the presence of the Holy directly contradicts and tears away this illusion.

John Calvin wrote: *Men are never duly touched and impressed, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God.*

4. vv.10-12. Commentators have noted how odd it is that 'the queen' comes in though all the king's wives are in the hall (v.2-3). Also, she comes in without permission (cf. Esther 4:11). a) Who might she be? b) What role does she play in the story?

a) Who might she be?

This woman is a very interesting figure. First, she is not in the banqueting hall, though essentially the whole number of the highest, 'best and brightest' of Babylon's elite were there. Second, she is by no means any lower rung person--indeed, she enters without being called and is taken quite seriously. Third, all Belshazzar's wives are said to have been in the feast already. Fourth, she has remarkable knowledge of past events. Daniel would now be quite old and the events that she knows so much about show that she must be old as well. Therefore, the commentators are probably right in thinking that this was the "Queen Mother"--the widow of Nebuchadnezzar himself. (An NIV footnote on v.10 calls her 'queen mother'.)

b) What role does she play in the story?

This, of course, creates a scene full of dramatic tension. This regal, older woman clearly shows the greatest respect for Daniel. She remembers, in other words, what the whole Babylonian court has forgotten. She remembers the wisdom contests in which the Lord God of Israel proved his Supremacy and his Sovereignty. She remembers the fiery furnace. Most of all, she remembers the insanity of Nebuchadnezzar and how he had to become a beast in order to become more human, and how he had issued a decree of testimony to this Lord.

Now it is almost impossible that the Babylonian court did not know about Nebuchadnezzar's illness. It is quite possible that it was kept secret from the broader public, so that no word would leak out to the empire's enemies. But certainly the elites knew about it. And they would also have known of his decree in which he told what happened to him and about the

greatness of the Lord (4:1-37). But the Babylonian nobles *did not want to remember*. Most of all Belshazzar did not want to remember. The Queen Mother serves the function of standing as an irrefutable witness to the mighty acts of God that did happen, but that the ruling class did not want to remember.

Her repeated use of the term “*your father, Nebuchadnezzar*” is probably her way of saying, “You should have been following his example but you didn’t! You knew all this.” This fact--of Belshazzar’s knowledge of the evidence for the Lord’s sovereignty--does not come out explicitly yet. It remains for Daniel to have the courage to tell the king about this to his face (v.22).

5. vv.18-24. What four things is Belshazzar accused of?

First, v.22 “*you knew all this*”. This is the sin against knowledge. Belshazzar knew all about Nebuchadnezzar’s experiences and his testimony to the power of God to humble pride. He probably was a young man at court when the insanity happened. The decree of Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4 was public record. But Belshazzar deliberately closed his eyes and heart to the evidence. The Bible says that *all* sin is to some degree a sin of repression of the truth. Romans 1:18-21 says that all persons, to some degree, know that there is a Creator to whom they owe allegiance. But beyond that basic universal knowledge, we all are given different degrees of ‘light’ regarding truth and good and Law and the will of God. And we are judged more severely depending on the level of the ‘light’ we have. For example, James 3:1 says, “*we who teach will be judged more strictly*”, and Luke 12:48 says, “*from whom much is given, much will be required*.” Increased knowledge brings increased responsibility. If we have had great parents, a good church, a comfortable financial situation, God holds us more accountable for our behavior than if we didn’t have them. (This is actually supposed to humble the blessed--there should be no superiority, if we know a lot!)

Second, v.23 “*you have not humbled yourself*” This is the sin of pride. Again we see that human pride is the main point of God’s indictment, just as it was in the case of Nebuchadnezzar. This is apparently a basic root sin. Individually, pride is the source of both inferiority feelings (because it is self-absorption), and superiority feelings, of worry (because I have to be very sure of my judgment about what *should* happen), of bitterness (because I have to be very sure that I am morally better than the person I have a grudge against), even of unresolved guilt (because I have to feel I have higher standards than God, when I ‘can’t forgive myself’.) Corporately, pride is the source of nationalism, tribalism, racism. Pride is always involved in violence, because you must proudly put yourself and your interest far above those of the person you are harming. Pride is usually also the main reason behind boredom and restlessness and cynicism. We feel that we deserve more than we have, or that the blessings we do have are so ho-hum. Jesus made a categorical statement: “*Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted*” (Luke 14:11). This truth differentiates Biblical religion very much from other religions. “Pride” was not usually one of the vices nor “humility” one of the great virtues in the ethical writings of the ancients and other religions. But Jesus goes beyond just saying that pride is a sin. He says that pride will *always* lead to a fall, and rising will *only* come through the humility of repentance and submission to God.

Third, v.23- “*you set yourself up against the Lord of heaven...drinking from the goblets*” This is the sin of using God’s gifts for your own purposes. This is a high-handed sin. Belshazzar knew that the articles of the temple were ‘set apart’ for the exclusive use of the worship of God, but he deliberately took them and used them for his own pleasure and glory, to show his power. This is actually quite typical. We all have gifts that God has given us--our abilities, our wealth for example. When we use our money, for

example, on ourselves, God does not call that 'stinginess' but 'robbery' (Mal.3:8-9). How can it be robbery? Only if God considers our money to be really *his*. He is saying, "you must not use your resources as if they are yours. They are mine, and you must deploy them only in ways that I see fit. You are stewards, not owners of what you have." Belshazzar's use of the temple vessels was his way of asserting ownership. But God in turn, now, exerts *his* rights of true ownership.

Fourth, v.23- "*you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways*" This is sin seems to sum up the other sins. It isn't a) repression of the truth, b) assertion of pride, c) refusal of stewardship. It is, in a way, a summary of them all. Belshazzar *refused to admit his contingency, his dependence on God.*

5. How does God write on our wall? What are some of the ways he shows us our pride, our assumption of divine prerogatives for ourselves?

This question has many, many good answers. But basically, 'the writing on the wall' means that God will not allow *any* life built on pride to endure. There will be a crash to any such kingdom. The crash may be external: economic, political; it may be internal: psychological, relational. But it will come.

6. Compare and contrast how God dealt with Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar. Why does God seem to give Belshazzar less 'chance'?

We immediately notice that God seems to be more impatient and severe with Belshazzar than with Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar got repeated warnings and milder warnings. God was saying to Nebuchadnezzar, several times--'turn or this will happen to you'. But to Belshazzar, he only says, "you are history, buddy". And he says it only once, just before doom falls. Why the difference?

The specific answer is probably in Daniel's indictment. "*You knew*" (v.22). Belshazzar should have 'built' on all the revelation God had given the Babylonian nobility through Nebuchadnezzar, but he did not. Another answer might be this. God certainly knew the kings' hearts. He knew whether Belshazzar would have responded to repeated warnings. Since he gave Belshazzar 'no chance', we can assume that he would not have made good use of those chances.

7. vv.26-28. The strange words here represented three 'weights' or coins of value. Daniel's interpretation uses numerous plays on words to get across the idea of being 'weighed in the scales and found wanting'. What practical help is it to believers living in an unbelieving world, to know that there is a divine Judge, with divine scales of absolute justice?

It is of enormous importance for people who are the victims of injustice and even persecution to believe in a God of justice and judgment, or else they will simply get sucked into the cycle of 'payback'--of endless violence in retaliation for retaliation of violence. In other words, unless we believe in a God of vengeance, we will not be able to forgive and live non-violently ourselves. We will feel the need to take up the sword to pay back. The only way I will be able to live with peace and without bitterness in the world, is if I know there is a judge whose scales and balances are perfect--more true than my own--and who will not let anyone get away with anything. Miroslav Volf is a Croatian Christian who writes about this:

“My thesis that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Xns, especially in the West. But to the person inclined to dismiss it--I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone (where I delivered this chapter as a paper). Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned, and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. The topic of the lecture: a Christian attitude toward violence. The thesis: we should not retaliate. Why?.....the only means of prohibiting violence by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God....violence thrives today, secretly nourished by belief that God refuses to take the sword. If you do this--soon you will discover that it takes the quiet of a suburb for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence is a result of a God who refuses to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent--the idea will invariably die, like other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind....In a world of violence it would not be worthy of God NOT to wield the sword; if God were NOT angry at injustice and deception and did NOT make a final end of violence, that God would not be worthy of our worship.”
(from *Exclusion and Embrace*)

9. Read Luke 10: 1-20. Reflect on the following comment on this passage:

“The Lordship of Satan and of death yields to the in-breaking powers of the new age. Yet, as King Belshazzar’s guests continued to feast unaware that his kingdom had fallen and his doom had been sealed, so the present age is unaware that Satan’s reign is broken. It sees only a writing on the wall, and it cannot read what it sees. For Luke, the mission of the seventy is the continuing task of the church...to make the kingdom of heaven present...in the bestowal of Messianic peace. This presence is sporadic, partial, veiled. It is a writing on the wall...only a token, a minute foretaste of the universal revelation of the kingdom at the glorious coming of Jesus. Thus, Christians...must explain the writing on the wall...that the kingdom of God is impending.” (E.Ellis, *Commentary on Luke*)

How can Christians do what Ellis says?

Week 20

Daniel 6:1-28

THE LION'S DEN

SOSL 3/98-99

1. vv.1-4. For what reasons does Daniel get such a high position (again) under this next king? Why do you think the officials expect to find corruption in him (see v.2)?

First, Daniel was incorruptible.

The second verse indicates that one of the problems with government in that time was accountability *“that the king might not suffer loss”*. What this means is that it was common for those who get into power to become corrupt and cheat both those under them and those over them of their due. They would over-charge and over-tax constituents for services and under-pay the king, and pocket the difference. Today is no different. We hear continually of charges of corruption against officials who have been ‘lining their pockets’ through the abuse of their power and office.

Part of Daniel’s ‘incorruptibility’ is his willingness to be a ‘straight shooter’. We have seen in Daniel 1-2, 4-5 that he is absolutely fearless and willing to tell the truth even when it is dangerous. What a picture of integrity this is! And how different from the other, more typical officials. They are pleasant and manipulatively compliant to the king to his face, but in private they take advantage of him. Daniel is truthful and honest to his face, but in private he fends for the king’s rights.

Second, Daniel was diligent.

The two reasons mentioned in verse 4b for Daniel’s effectiveness was that he was neither corrupt *nor negligent*. This of course is different than being corrupt. A person can be honest, but undisciplined. “Negligent” means that he overlooked nothing, he worked extremely hard, and was highly conscientious.

Third, Daniel was ‘exceptional’.

It is possible to be honest and not disciplined. It is possible to be disciplined but still not very effective. In v.3 we are told Daniel distinguished himself *“through his exceptional qualities”*. This is how the NIV translates, the text, which older versions render: *“because of the excellent spirit that was in him”*. The word means *“excelling”* or *“surpassing”*, and it probably has to do with leadership. His wisdom, ability, character, and vision was overwhelming, and those around sensed it, bowed to it, and followed it. It is a very hard term to render. The NIV probably did as well as a translation can. It means: “Whenever Daniel took up any task, he always did it with such excellence that everyone around him fell into rank, followed him, and did their best.”

Why did the officials try to find corruption in him?

As we will discuss below, the officials wanted to bring Daniel down out of power. They immediately began by looking for corruption in his administration. They never would have wasted their time on an investigation unless they figured that he operated pretty much like the rest of them. But they quickly found out that he was not only perfectly honest but tremendously effective. How surprised they must have been to have discovered that Daniel was completely ‘clean’ (v.4b).

But it is not surprising that the administrators and satraps, among whom corruption was rife, would think that the easiest way to bring Daniel down was to expose him. If you are a thief,

you will always think others are stealing from you; if you are a liar, you will never believe what anyone tells you. One of the natural ways our sinful hearts justify themselves is to believe “though this may not be right, everybody does it!” Thus sin always distorts one’s view of reality. People who are deeply cynical about others are so often hiding something from themselves.

2. vv.1-12 Why were the officials so hostile to Daniel that they were willing to hunt him down to the death? (Notice that the race-issue does not seem to be as important here. Cf. 3:12 and 6:13.)

The first possible answer is racial animosity. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were accused by the officials before Nebuchadnezzar, racial resentment was very overt. *“There are some Jews who you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon...”* (3:12). The resentment is clear--the idea that Jews were over Babylonians was repugnant. But in Daniel’s case, the jealousy and resentment is much more personal. They refer to him as *“one of the exiles from Judah”* (6:12), that seems almost in passing. While the officials in chapter 3 saw the opportunity in the king’s decree of worship to rid themselves of some Jews, the officials in chapter 6 are far more cool and determined in their hatred of Daniel as a person. Through politics they trick the king into a decree that very specifically will catch him.

A second answer is professional jealousy. The upper levels of success in any field are filled with hard-driving, ambitious people who are extremely jealous of anyone who gets too much publicity, acclaim, and glory. That probably would certainly be a factor in their hostility here. Yet, again, the persistence of their hate seems to point to reasons beyond this.

A third answer is that their own hearts and lives were being exposed. It is typical even in our day for government officials to sell their favor to the highest bidders through bribes (or campaign donations), and then to see to it that their power was at the disposal of those who had paid them. If the incorruptible Daniel is about to become the highest official in the land (v.1-3), then the official’s entire way of life was under threat. Daniel would certainly have stopped the series of bribes that denied justice from those with lesser means. But the officials’ entire lives and fortunes were based on the old system. Daniel was an enormous danger to them.

Even further, Daniel’s uprightness would have exposed the mediocrity and dishonesty of the official’s very hearts. At this point, Daniel is becoming the object of the very deep, irrational hostility that pure goodness evokes from sin. Sin hates being shown its true colors.

“There was no reason whatever why this man should be persecuted and hounded to death, except that he was good, and stood...as a sign of the existence and grace of a good God... We can only call it, to use a New Testament phrase, the ‘mystery of lawlessness’....The story of Daniel--hated by his contemporaries, plotted against and condemned to die simply because he stood for the truth--is one of a long series of stories in the Bible of such irrational hatred directed...by those who are against God. There is the hatred of Cain against Abel...of Saul for David, the hatred of the people against a long series of prophets, and it culminates in the hatred shown to Jesus in his crucifixion...” Ronald Wallace, *The Lord is King: The Message of Daniel*, p.104-105

So we see by the vicious response that there is something much more going on than the normal professional jealousy here. When we meet an incorruptible, virtuous, humble, and great person, it exposes the selfishness and sin of our hearts. If you are dirty, you don’t feel loathsome and long as you are surrounded by people like you. A clean person makes you feel

foul. So a morally beautiful person makes us feel morally ugly, and we hate it. Romans 8:7 says that the natural mind is not indifferent to God, but “*the natural mind is hostile to God. It cannot submit to the will of God.*” We don’t like to be reminded that there is something disordered and abnormal about the way we are.

It is amazing, that the officials could devise a decree that would only trap Daniel because he was a man of such integrity. The decree they propose was unenforceable, and any ordinary man would have simply closed his windows and prayed privately for 30 days and kept out of trouble. But they must have known that he was such a man of principle that he would not change his prayer practice at all--even under the threat of death. So they knew he was a man of *that* kind of integrity yet they hated him for it. This is ‘the mystery of ungodliness’. Cancer will fear the surgeon; sin hates exposure.

A fourth possible reason was the very public nature of Daniel’s piety.

We are told that Daniel always: a) opened his windows toward Jerusalem, and b) prayed daily. This was a very public act and generally known--that is why they were able to “target” this practice in their legislative decree.

This could have very easily been the reason that Daniel was hated. He let it be publicly known that “*the future of mankind was bound up not with the great city Nebuchadnezzar had built but the [small] city Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed....Daniel was certain that one day all people somehow would find their unity by going up to the mountain of the Lord God of Israel (Is.2:2,3; Zech.8:20ff.) There they would worship God who would speak from his new temple (Zech.6:12-15) They would learn to know his law and to walk in his paths, and then they would beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and learn war no more (Is.2:3,4).*” (Wallace, p.106).

Daniel’s high-level achievements and enormous respect was giving credence to his (to the elites of Babylon) appalling world-view. “*They hated him not merely because he was a foreigner and stranger, and not merely because they were jealous of his extraordinary ability, but mainly because, in spite of the fact that he was so impeccably loyal and helpful to Babylon, the whole orientation of his life tended to point not to Babylon but to Zion....Too clearly his talk and way of life bore witness to his strange belief that salvation for humankind could come only from the God who chose Zion as his dwelling place.*” (Wallace, p.106)

Nothing is more offensive to people than the idea that one religion, one revelation of God is *the* true one. His facing Jerusalem and loyalty to that place showed that he did not believe that all religions are equally valid, that every nation’s gods were the right one for them. Had Daniel stayed closeted in a Jewish ghetto, dressing and living totally separate, they would have been able to dismiss the exclusiveness of Judaism as the idiosyncratic views of a strange minority. But his standing in their culture, yet his adherence to this exclusive religion, was repugnant.

3. Read 2 Timothy 3:12. Have you ever attracted hostility for your character or your faith? Why don’t we experience more opposition? What could be persecuted for instead of godliness?

Have you ever attracted hostility for your character?

There will be many personal answers. Here are two examples that I have known of personally.

A new Christian who was a waiter was approached by his restaurant manager, who said, “You are reporting too much tip income. Nobody ever reports how much tip money they get--they just put down a nominal amount. If you keep reporting seven times more tips than

anyone else, somebody from IRS might come looking for us.” The man refused to change his report. He lost his job soon on a trumped up charge.

A new Christian who was a big-city cop was in a precinct in which pimps routinely brought money to all the police, once a week. It was simply handed out--a few hundred dollars every month--and it was understood that the police did not trouble the prostitution on a particular street corner. The cops felt that prostitution was a ‘victimless crime’ and that there were plenty of other more important things to do and they were happy for the extra take-home cash just to avoid doing what they probably would have avoided anyway. However, the Christian cop did not protest or complain, but he merely stopped taking the money when it was handed to him. When he was asked why, he simply, quietly said that he didn’t want to. He did not say, “this is wrong!” or “I’m a Christian!” He made no effort to make anyone else feel bad for taking the cash. But soon he was told that everyone was extremely nervous that he was not taking the money, that everyone was afraid he might begin to inform on their various ‘corner-cutting’ practices. When he continued to refuse the money, he was told to transfer, because some cops were suggesting to others to be slow the next time the Christian guy called for back up. He left.

Why don’t we experience more persecution?

Daniel experienced persecution because of the combination of two factors: a) he was extremely accomplished and successful and well-regarded, and b) yet he was openly committed to the exclusive faith of Biblical religion. If he had either been a) *or* b), he would have been left alone, but he was both. Therefore, if we are never opposed, it is either because, a) our lives are not very remarkably different than anyone else’s, or b) we are somewhat cowardly and secretive about our faith. On the one hand, our lives often are not characterized by any more wisdom, honesty, generosity, love, kindness, or joy than anyone else’s. We are as grumpy, materialistic, selfish as the next person. On the other hand, we often are afraid to let it be known we are committed believers.

We should be grateful that we live in a country in which religious freedom is entrenched in our Constitution and cultural soil. Thus the hostility and exclusion that committed Christians experience will be more subtle, but still very painful. It might take the form of being passed over for promotions (as C.S. Lewis was passed over for a professorship for many years by offended secular professors at Oxford), or by being excluded from social circles or made fun of.

What could we be persecuted for instead of godliness?

Often believers are outspoken about ‘controversial issues’ and attract a certain amount of hostility from the secular people around for having such ‘regressive’ views. This should not be mistaken for the full-blown ‘persecution for righteousness sake’ that the Bible speaks of or that Daniel experiences here. If we take a view (even for spiritual/moral reasons) that is considered ‘political’, then we will get opposition and maybe hostility that is politically motivated. We cannot complain that we are being persecuted for Christ’s sake. That is not what Daniel faced. Daniel is not ‘speaking out’ on issues, but simply living his life as a man of integrity who believed in the God of Israel. It was his life and his faith that attracted hostility, not his ‘stands’.

Often Christians are indiscreet, abrasive and even obnoxious in their general expressions of faith, and they don’t back up their views with lives of beauty and attractiveness. Often Christians unnecessarily press points on peripheral issues (ethical issues such as sex and family and evolution) rather than central issues (theological issues such as the deity of Jesus). Jesus did not say, “blessed are you who are persecuted for abrasiveness’ sake.”

4. How is Daniel's career and faith a good embodiment of Jeremiah's exhortation (Jer.29:4-7) and a good example for Christians in a pluralistic society?

First, Daniel has truly 'sought the peace of Babylon', and 'settled down' into it. He is completely conversant with its language and culture and customs. On the outside, in the area of his dress and speech and day-to-day customs, he was clearly assimilated to Babylonian culture. There is no indication that he was in appearance or outward circumstances any different than anyone else.

Second, Daniel was not mediocre, but he excelled in his work and rose on his own merits to a place of great influence. (This may be partly what Jeremiah meant when he said, 'Increase...there, do not decrease' v.6.)

Third, Daniel had a reputation for character. He was well-known for being incorruptible, unbribe-able, for being fair and just in all his dealings.

Fourth, Daniel was willing to let people know that he served man's city so diligently and well because of his higher loyalty to God's city. He did this by opening his windows toward Jerusalem. This was, in the world's eyes, very startling. Why would a defeated, second-rate city be the focus of Daniel's devotion over the most powerful city in the world, a city that was now Daniel's 'oyster'? But Daniel was bearing witness in both his prayer life and in his ethical life that worldly power and status were not the important things.

Fifth, Daniel suffered hostility for the combination of the previous four factors! Because he was 1) deeply involved in society, 2) exceptionally competent, 3) a man of character and integrity, 4) openly committed to the exclusive Lord of the Bible--he was hounded. This means that we will likely experience something of the same if we achieve these things.

In short, Daniel was fair and broad in his sympathies and in his work for the common good of all, but he was exclusive in his devotion to the one true Lord of the world. The world is used to people with exclusive views of God being devoted narrowly just to the concerns of believers. Or it is used to people with broad concerns and who treat of all fairly being given to more general views of God. They are surprised that someone with such a 'narrow' view of God would be so 'broad' in his concerns. We understand that only an 'exclusive' God could be a God of free grace, who provides salvation not by works but through a substitutionary offering. That experience of grace then propels us into the world to live a life of humble service. The world does not 'get' this!

"One still encounters people who seem to think that the only way to serve God in a really acceptable fashion is by being a pastor or a missionary. Anything less than 'full-time service' is spiritual second best. That is nonsense. Daniel, one of the greatest heroes of the Bible, held office in pagan Babylon, and that was God's calling to him, prophet though he was." (Clements, Faithful Living in a Faithless World p.99)

5. vv.6-15. How is 'the law of the Medes and the Persians' an improvement over jurisprudence under Nebuchadnezzar? But how is it still inadequate? What approach to law does the narrative hint would be better? (vv.5)

The issue of "the law" is a very important part of this story.

"The law of the Medes and the Persians" is different and (arguably) an advance over the very arbitrary jurisprudence under Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. Under the Medo-Persian empire, a law, once it was decreed, could not be repealed by any judge nor even by the king himself. It was irrevocable. There were plenty of good reasons for this approach. First, this was a way to engender great respect for the law. It was to say, "look, even the king himself can't change the law--we must respect it." It could be said that truly now 'there was one law

for everybody.' Second, it was also a way to unify the kingdom. It meant that judges and other officials could not modify or disregard or re-interpret the law. So, in a sense, the Medo-Persian jurisprudence was a 'law and order' administration.

However, the inadequacy of this approach to the law is seen in how it resulted in a huge contradiction to its very purpose. Daniel, the man who was the greatest upholder of the law and of justice is now the victim of injustice--because of the law. The king is also trapped and cannot do justice--because of the law. This shows that the way to justice is not to simply have weak and unbinding human law (as under Nebuchadnezzar) nor to make human law absolute. Rather, we should, as Daniel (see v.5 "*the law of his God*") we should base human law on divine law, and uphold them because they are based on divine law. But when human laws deviate from divine law, we can identify them as unjust and can overturn them or even (when they *demand* that we sin, as in the case of Daniel)--disobey them.

"The devil can flourish as effectively under the guise of law and order as he does under the guise of permissiveness. When Jesus was crucified his main opponents were...parties strong on the law-and-order issue. The devil can put on a conservative mask as easily as he can put on a revolutionary mask." (Wallace, p.115)

In short, it will not do to ground the law 1) in the will and wisdom of human kings and judges, nor 2) in the absolute power of law itself. Ultimately, human law should be based on the law of God. When a society has consensus about, for example, the divine authority of the 10 Commandments, then we have a standard by which we can determine the justice of human laws (unlike the Medo-Persian way) yet still avoid arbitrariness and tyranny (in the Nebuchadnezzar way).

"Down through the centuries it is possible to trace two quite distinct strands of...thought...on jurisprudence. On the one hand there are advocates of what is called positive law. For them, law is a branch of science, a system of statutes resting on the absolute legislative authority of the state...Under the pressure of pluralism, law has to step into the gap left by the disappearance of the disappearance of moral consensus. In the absence of any unifying concept of what the moral law requires, statutory legislation is having to define what we may and may not do. We evaluate a course of action, we don't ask: "is it [wrong]?" but "is it illegal?"....On the other hand, there are the advocates of natural law, for whom law is a branch of ethics. They emphasize the principle of equity rather than the strict letter of the law....

*Underlying Daniel's story of moral heroism is the implication that this sort of thin happens because human beings in their proud autonomy think they have the right to make laws in the first place. The fact is that true law is never made but found." (Roy Clements, *Faithful Living in a Faithless World*, p.97-98*

There are sincere arguments that people use today against the concept of 'natural law'. They fear that any such concept is inherently un-democratic, that people in power will be able to simply invoke 'divine law' for their positions instead of listening to the will of the people. But ultimately, there is nothing *more* democratic than the natural law position. Hitler's Germany, in which a majority democratically consented to the death of minorities, is perfectly valid according to "positive" law, but is forbidden by natural law. Martin Luther King, Jr. constantly appealed to divine law as his reason for resisting unjust human laws. And international diplomacy can not possibly be done without a belief in 'natural law'. Our beliefs in 'higher' or 'divine-natural' law must guide us when we decide how to treat dictators, like Hitler for example. There are no 'positive' laws that can guide us then.

Daniel's way is right. We must be as strong as he in upholding justice and the law, but also willing to bring human law under the scrutiny of God's revealed will.

6. vv.10-12. What do we learn about Daniel's prayer life from these verses? Read Daniel 9:1-19 for a sample of his prayer. What do you learn about his prayer life from these verses? What from his example do you personally need to practice?

There is much more that we can learn from Daniel's prayer life than I will set out here.

First, his prayer life was habitual--three times a day (*"as his custom was"* v.11-AV version). There is no place in the Bible that prescribes how often we should pray. But Daniel had developed a routine that worked very well for him. One great advantage of a firm routine is that it helps you during times of trouble and crisis, as it did Daniel. *"There is no doubt that what kept Daniel when his trial came was this rigid uninterrupted habit. He had disciplined himself to it day by day for years, and at the hour of crisis the very momentum of the custom itself would have been enough to keep him faithful to it, even if there had been at the moment no living inspirational incentive"* (Wallace, p.112) It is almost impossible to begin or even resume a regular prayer life when you are buffeted by fears and troubles. We desperately need *regular habits* of prayer, worship, and communion with God. Note: Jesus prays day and night. See Luke 5:16-*"Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed"*; 6:12-*"he went to a mountainside and prayed all night"*; 9:18,28; 11:1; 22:39-40-*"he prayed as usual"*. We often forget that some of the great moments in his life happened when he was praying. For example, Lk.3:21-*"as he was praying, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended and a voice said--you are my Son"*

Second, his prayer life was varied. He not only did intercession and petition for himself, his people, and his city (v.11-*asking God for help*), but he also did adoration and thanksgiving (v.10-*giving thanks to his God*). The opening of the windows toward Jerusalem means at least that he was constantly thinking of the needs of his people and true city. In short, Daniel's prayer is not a self-centered effort to get 'peace of mind'. He is there to do business with God and give God honor.

Third, his prayer life was humble. He got down on his knees (v.10). As we said before, the Bible does not prescribe any particular posture for prayer. But it is interesting to remember how much more significant posture and position was in ancient times. Juniors and lowers continually bowed to seniors and 'betters'. It would have been normal for Daniel, as a high official, to have people continually kneeling and falling prostrate before him. *"Clearly, Daniel felt it important when he approached God consciously to abandon any trace of pride that his secular vocation might have engendered in him, and to adopt the body language toward God that others had to adopt before him...It is probably true that the richer, cleverer, and more powerful we are in worldly terms, the more important it is for us to get down on our knees when we pray--and the less congenial it may feel!"* (Clements, p.104).

Fourth, his prayer life was probably "through the temple". As we saw in Psalm 137, it was difficult for the Jews to imagine how they could worship God in a foreign land away from the temple and the sacrificial system. How could they go before a holy God without atonement for their sins? It is possible that Daniel's open window was his version of a solution. He looked toward Jerusalem and the temple (see his prayer in chapter 9). He realized that he could continue to come before God in a foreign land with an acknowledgment that he was a sinner in need of mercy and atonement. We see more clearly why we can pray any time and anywhere. Jesus in John 4 explained that the temple was nothing but a picture of his work of sacrifice. Now, when we pray in Jesus' name, we 'open our windows toward Jesus' in a sense. We come to God because of our Great High Priest, our sacrifice, our final temple.

7. What parallels do you see between Daniel's betrayal (vv.3-18) and Jesus'? What parallels do you see between Daniel's triumph (vv.19-28) and Jesus'?

Daniel's betrayal

1) As Jesus, Daniel was hated 'without cause' (Luke 23:22; John 15:25). He was hated simply because he was light, and the darkness hates exposure (John 1:5). 2) As Jesus, Daniel was attacked by high officials, people in power, who are often the most offended by goodness and godliness. As Jesus, a religious leader, was envied and resented by the other religious leader, so Daniel, a civic leader, was hated by other civic leaders. 3) As Jesus, Daniel was condemned by law in a miscarriage of justice (John 19:7-*"we have a lawaccording to which he must die."*) 4) As Jesus, Daniel did not protest and accuse his accusers or in any way 'raise a ruckus'.

Daniel's vindication

1) As Jesus, Daniel is sealed to his death and a stone rolled over top of him (v.17). 2) As with Jesus, his enemies thought that that would be the last they would ever have to see of him! 3) As with Jesus, the stone over Daniel's 'grave' is rolled away and he comes forth.

It is most interesting to notice Daniel telling us *"my God sent his angel"* to close the lion's mouth. We have seen that *the* Angel of the Lord is God himself, come to earth in corporal form. Many believe the "Angel" is the pre-incarnate Christ. Imagine Jesus coming down to effect an apparent death and resurrection, knowing one day he would experience a real one.

8. Compare Isaiah 11:6-7. Miracles in the Bible are not just naked displays of power, but they usually teach something about God's coming salvation. What does the lion's den teach us?

"In the Old Testament, the destructive power of lions metaphorically expressed the disharmony and chaos of the universe. [Deliverance from troubles are often described as being 'being among lions' (Ps.91:13; 57:4-6).] In the promised age, the chaos of creation will be restored to order and harmony so that all creatures of nature will live together in peace (Is.11:6-7). Thus Daniel's deliverance...is a foretaste of that promised universal renovation." (Sinclair Ferguson, *Daniel*, p. 141).

Just as the resurrection of Christ is a 'first-fruits' (1 Cor.15:20-24) of the coming restoration of the whole world, so is the taming of the lions. Daniel is the godly man who is temporarily granted the dominion over nature that Adam should have had (Gen.1:28) but which we have lost (Gen.3:17ff) through sin. But nature will be put right again, no longer subject to decay, when we are put right as God's children (Rom.8:18ff.) God's salvation is not just forgiveness of sin and paradise in the after life. He is going to 'rehab' and restore the heavens and the earth, and all things will be put back as they should be. Daniel is a sign of all this.

9. v.25-27. Does Daniel's 'resurrection' actually bring about what Darius calls for? Whose resurrection did?

Darius calls all peoples in all parts of his realm to believe in the Lord God of Israel. It never happened. It took a real resurrection by a greater Daniel to create a truly multi-racial and multi-cultural faith and people.

Week 21

Genesis 37:1-36

JOSEPH AND THE DREAM

SOSL 3/98-99

- 1. vv.1-11. Trace the stages of development of the attitude of Joseph's brothers and father toward him in these verses.*
- 2. What sin(s) did a) Joseph, b) his brothers, and c) Jacob each contribute to create the terrible family situation? How do the brothers illustrate James 3:14-16? Why should Jacob have known better? How does v.11 illustrate greater spiritual maturity in Jacob than his sons?*
- 3. Have you seen certain sins 'passed down' in families? Have you received any? To what extent are you responsible for the effect in your life of other's sins against you?*
- 4. vv.5-11. a) Are the dreams an expression of Joseph's heart or an expression of God's revealed plans? (This is a trick question.) b) See Gen. 50:18. How do the dreams shed light on the meaning of the whole history of Joseph and his brothers?*
- 5. vv.12-30. Count how many events and 'accidents' had to happen in order for Joseph to become a slave in Egypt. What does this teach us?*
- 6. Read 42:21 and 2 Kings 6:13-23. a) Compare how God answered Joseph's cries for help at Dothan with how he answered Elisha's need for help at Dothan. b) Have you had a Joseph-cistern experience? An Elisha-chariots experience? How did you respond? c) What does this teach us about how to face our own difficulties?*
- 7. vv.31-35. a) Where else did deception happen through a goat? What does that teach us? b) What had the brothers probably hoped for from the father, now that his favorite was gone? Did they get it? What does that teach us?*
- 8. vv.28. Who else was rejected by his own and sold for silver? In what way does Joseph's story point to the way God always does his salvation (remember the Judges)? In what way does Joseph point us to Christ? (If time, read Acts 7 for help on answering the question.)*

Week 21

Genesis 37:1-36

JOSEPH AND THE DREAM

SOSL 3/98-99

Introduction: The story of Joseph stretches from chapter 37 through 50 of the book of Genesis. It gives us another example of a believer who lives with integrity in a pagan society. Like Daniel and Esther, Joseph is 'exiled' in a non-believing society against his will, and overcomes odds to become both an influential and redemptive agent there. This is quite important for the purposes of our study. God told Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to the nations of the world (Gen.12:2-3). But the very first of his descendants who *was* a blessing to multiple nations, was not a prophet, preacher, or priest, but rather a civil magistrate--in a 'secular' job--who ran a massive hunger relief program. We will study how Joseph got into this position and what he did with it.

1. vv.1-11. Trace the stages of development of the attitude of Joseph's brothers and father toward him in these verses.

Three things are mentioned as factors in the increasing alienation between Joseph and his brothers. First, Joseph brings a bad report to his father about the conduct of some of his brothers (v.2). If the report was a lie, the narrator would have almost certainly commented on it. But though it was likely true, the rest of the narrative would lead us to believe that Joseph brought the report with an eagerness and motive that was infuriating. This began the alienation. Second, Joseph's father Jacob made him a 'richly ornamented' robe for him (v.3). (The Hebrew here is hard to translate, and it may mean 'many-colored' or 'beautifully embroidered' or 'long-sleeved'. But the same word in 2 Sam.13:18-19 to refer to a royal garment. So it meant an unusually beautiful and expensive garment.) This was the second stage into deeper animosity of the brother's toward Joseph. The third step was Joseph's dreams in v.5 and v.9. Both dreams were blatantly transparent parables depicting the entire family bowing down to Joseph. This led to a deeper level of anger and isolation, since it led his brothers to "*hate him all the more*" (v.8). So this passage is depicting a steady deterioration of Jacob's family into literally murderous resentment.

2. What sin(s) did a) Joseph, b) his brothers, and c) Jacob each contribute to create the terrible family situation? How do the brothers illustrate James 3:14-16? Why should Jacob have known better? How does v.11 illustrate greater spiritual maturity in Jacob than his sons?

Joseph

Joseph's attitude is almost surely one of pride and superiority. The narrator does not comment directly on this, but he gives us an insight into Joseph's behavior when he points out that, despite the brother's hostile reaction to the first dream (v.8), Joseph immediately reported his second dream to them as well (v.10). If he knew how angry and offended they were by the first 'bow down' dream, his only motive for reporting the next dream would have been to deliberately rile them.

This sheds light on all of his behavior, back to the bad report of v.2. It is very likely (as we said) that the brothers *were* doing something wrong, and a decent person has the obligation to testify (see Lev.5:1). But though Joseph was not being a liar nor even a 'stool pigeon', he was almost certainly being self-righteous, happy to demonstrate his own virtue by pointing out the lack in his brothers.

In summary, Joseph's treatment by Jacob has distorted Joseph's life. He was a prima-donna, a brat, happily taunting his brothers, his self-righteousness, was leading him on a path to being at best a terribly unattractive person, and at the worst a cruel person too proud to really love anyone.

Joseph's brothers

Joseph's brothers, as we said, probably did lack virtue. It is very possible that, living among the Canaanites, they had fallen into same practices of their surroundings. Their moral lives might have been coarsening, and Joseph may have reported on their sexual practices, or dishonest economic practices, or use of violence. As Joseph's sin was the sin of Phariseical moral pride, the brothers may have been becoming less faithful to the moral standards of God's people. That may be the nature of 'bad reports'.

But clearly, the brothers fell into the powerful sins of envy, jealousy (v.11a), and bitterness, hate (v.4,8). James says, *"But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart...there you will find...every evil practice."* (3:14-16) That means that hurt pride and envy can lead to the most heinous sins, like mass murder. The narrative shows that hurt pride and stored up bitter jealousy did lead to an overt effort to kill Joseph.

Jacob

Jacob's sin is in many ways the fountain of all the rest, and thus he bears much responsibility. First, it is obvious that Jacob's heart had fixed itself on Joseph in an idolatrous way. This was partially because Joseph was the son of the special love of his life, Rachel, and partly because he was *'born to him in his old age'* (v.3). Jacob's possessive love of Joseph reveals that he made the youngster the center of his life. Second, this possessive love expressed itself in blatant favoritism. Jesus' saying--"where your treasure is, there is your heart"--explains why Jacob likely spent a fortune on Joseph's wardrobe.

Jacob surely should have known better, since he himself was the victim of the same kind of favoritism in his own youth. His father Isaac loved Esau more. On the one hand, we would think that the memory of this pain would have kept Jacob from doing the same thing to his sons that his father did to him. On the other hand, we know by both divine revelation, scientific observation, and personal experience that sin tends to run in families and repeat itself in each generation, blinding the perpetrators to the consequences of their own behavior. Children abused often become child abusers, for example. Thus we see that sin 'crouches down' and hides itself from us (Gen.4:7).

However, though Jacob is doing wrong, verse 11 illustrates that Jacob has grown spiritually in a way that his sons have not.

"The two attitudes in this verse are those that always divide people in their reactions to news from God. The brothers' skepticism was emotional and hasty; the father's open mind was the product of some humility. [Jacob] had learnt by now, as his sons had not, to allow for God's hand in affairs, and for His right of choice among [people]."
(Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Intro and Commentary*, p.181)

3. Have you seen certain sins 'passed down' in families? Have you received any? To what extent are you responsible for the effect in your life of other's sins against you?

The main purpose of thinking about ‘family sins’ is to help you understand better what things you need to work on, and what you may need to help your own children with. The purpose is not to angrily blame your parents or wallow in guilt yourself.

This ‘question-set’ will certainly stimulate a lot of discussion. The Bible pretty clearly teaches that both faith and sin tend to run in families. Our flaws and sins tend to affect our children and are ‘passed down’. Yet it is just as obvious throughout the Bible that God holds individuals completely responsible for their sinful actions. How can these both be true? The answer is that while the particular shape of our sin may be largely due by our family background, the basic self-centeredness and desire to be our own Lords is all our own. Though we may inherit a predilection to aggression or to fearfulness, etc. etc., we do not have to go along with it. But we do.

The Bible says that our character is a very complex result of nature, nurture, and choice. An example of this is how Jesus analyzes what it means to be ‘lost in sin’ in the three parables of Luke 15. The sheep is lost through foolishness, the coin is lost through carelessness, and son is lost through willfulness. (A flawed nature, a failure of nurture, and a rebellious choice.) All three factors effect us. We are born in sin, we are sinned against, and we ourselves sin in response to everything else. Thus we can’t claim that it is all our genes, or our upbringing, or our ‘life-choice’.

So be careful as you share your own experience. You can’t fall into the extremes of ‘dumping’ completely on your inherited nature, or on your parents, or even on yourself. (People who blame their faults on their parents are stuck in a blatant contradiction. If your flaws are their fault, then their flaws must be the fault of the ones who raised them, and so on.) We must admit responsibility all around, and recognize God’s restraining and helping grace all around.

4. vv.5-11. a) Are the dreams an expression of Joseph’s heart or an expression of God’s revealed plans? (This is a trick question.) b) See Gen. 50:18. How do the dreams shed light on the meaning of the whole history of Joseph and his brothers?

a) Are the dreams an expression of Joseph’s heart or an expression of God’s revealed plans? On the one hand, it is obvious that the dreams foretell the future and of Joseph’s rise. Jacob shows by his “*keeping the matter in mind*” (v.11c) that this may be God’s revelation, and subsequent events make it clear that it is. But on the other hand, you don’t have to be a Freudian to know that we tend to dream about things that are obsessing us. Often a dream makes concrete and vivid a thought that we have been harboring secretly, semi-consciously. Joseph’s eager announcement of the dream shows that they are *both* an expression of his sinful heart and the vehicle for God’s telling the family the truth about the future. (This is a trick question, because we don’t have to choose one alternative or the other. The dream is both an expression of Joseph’s proud little heart and God’s great and good will.)

This points to a very ‘nuanced’ truth. God can write straight with crooked pencils. Just as he did with Jacob, he can take very flawed characters and in his wisdom can even weave their lives so that their sins only move them forward into greater usefulness. However (see below #), God still has to purify, humble, and cleanse a person from their flaws.

Another aspect of this truth is that we must remember the “Balaam’s Ass” principle. There is a tendency to discount anything someone says, if that someone is foolish or immature or flawed. “Consider the source” is a way of dismissing criticism from someone who is easily criticized him or herself. But here we see a boy who is very flawed and proud, who has very

bad motives for what he is saying, but he is nonetheless is telling the truth. (In Numbers 22, God even tells the truth through a literal ass.) Jacob, despite being offended and recognizing the boy's impudence, did 'keep the matter in mind' as possibly a message from God. We too should always be willing to listen to criticism or advice, even from people we don't respect. It is simply an act of humility to recognize that all good advice and wisdom is a result of God's grace and wisdom always appears in unworthy people. We are all unworthy of God's gifts.

b) Read Gen.50:18. How do the dreams shed light on the meaning of the whole history?

We will be able to answer this question better when we have actually read the whole story. But if you know how the story ends at all, these matters are clear:

a) Just as the dream depicts his family deferring to him, God is going to eventually lift Joseph up to a place of prominence and lead everyone to literally bow down to him. But

b) Just as the dream is an expression of Joseph's sin, God is going to his will in such a way that actually redeems everyone of the very sins that are blocking the grace of God in their lives. He will literally save their lives in a famine. He will humble Joseph and save him from being the awful person his father was making him. He will liberate Jacob from his bondage to Joseph. He will bring the brothers eventually to offer their lives to save one another.

As the dream is God working through a sinful human heart, so God will sovereignly work out his will through sinful human hearts.

5. vv.12-30. Count how many events and 'accidents' had to happen in order for Joseph to become a slave in Egypt. What does this teach us?

Count the 'just so happens' and 'accidents'.

First, Jacob had to decide to send Joseph to see how his sons were doing, grazing their sheep (v.13). Knowing their antipathy for Joseph, this was not very wise. It was an 'ill-conceived errand'.

Second, Jacob had to believe that his sons were grazing at Shechem (v.12). If he had known that they were in Dothan (v.17b), which was further away and much less populated, he would likely not have sent him.

Third, when Joseph comes to Shechem, he had to 'accidentally' run into a stranger who knew where his brothers had gone and who was friendly enough to initiate a conversation (v.15).

Fourth, the stranger only knew about the brothers' whereabouts because he had just 'happened' to overhear a conversation by men in a field (v.17a).

Fifth, it is only because they were in such a remote place that they would have been able to get away with Joseph's 'disposal'. The lack of population made it possible for shepherds to let their flocks roam the hills (Kidner, p. 181). But it also meant that a) no one could see what they did, and b) the concept of an animal attack in that region was plausible (v.19-20).

Sixth, Reuben had to be present yet absent at the right time. Reuben alone keeps them from killing Joseph, now that he has fallen into their hands. Yet, it is only because he happened to away (v.29) that Judah and the others were able to sell him into slavery (v.26-28).

Note: Why was Reuben the most sympathetic to Joseph? It is hard to tell. It may have been his natural temperament (see 34:25 to the end). It may have been that, since he was out of favor with his father (35:22) he meant to do this in order to re-establish his relationship with him. But also, he may have simply felt that, if it were found out, he would be held the most liable and responsible, since he was the eldest. But whatever the reason, it was one more factor that 'had' to have happened for Reuben to have been so disposed and for Joseph to have been sold into slavery.

What does this teach us?

Unless every one of the six or seven ‘coincidences’ or ‘accidents’ had happened all at once, Joseph would have been either never been delivered into his brothers’ hands or else would have been killed. But if Joseph had either been killed *or* saved, every member of that family would have a) physically died in the famine which was to come, and b) spiritually would have sunk under their pride (Joseph), hate (brothers), or idolatry (Jacob). This means:

- 1) None of these things were ‘accidents’. God was present at every point, and was working even in the smallest details of the daily lives and schedules and choices of everyone. So this shows that ‘all things work according to the counsel of his will’ (Eph.1:10-11; Rom.8:28). Yet,
- 2) It was great suffering that God arranged through these coincidences. The terrible years of crushing slavery for Joseph, the terrible years of crushing guilt for the brothers, and the terrible crushing years of grief and depression for Jacob--were all brought about by God. Yet how else could they have been saved physically and spiritually? So this shows us that God ‘disciplines us for our good’. (Heb.12:1-14)

6. Read 42:21 and 2 Kings 6:13-23. a) Compare how God answered Joseph’s cries for help at Dothan with how he answered Elisha’s need for help at Dothan. b) Have you had a Joseph-cistern experience? An Elisha-chariots experience? How did your respond? c) What does this teach us about how to face our own difficulties?

a) Compare the differences.

The difference yet similarity in God’s responses is very striking and very instructive.

In this first incident at Dothan, Joseph is put in an empty cistern (v.24-23) and there cries out to his brothers (42:21) and to God for deliverance and rescue. But instead, God appears to do nothing at all. There is only silence in response to his cries. Joseph is, contrary to his prayers and calls, sold into a life of slavery in Egypt. In the second incident at Dothan, Elisha the prophet was in the city surrounded by an army of enemies. But God answers his prayer for deliverance with a massive miracle. He strikes the enemy, and surrounds the city with angelic ‘chariots of fire’ (2 Kings 6:17).

On the surface, it appears that God hides from Joseph and lets him down, but reveals himself to Elisha and comes through. But that is not so. *“It would turn out that God had been as watchful in his hiddenness as in any miracle. The two extremes of His methods meet in fact in Dothan, for it was here, where Joseph cried in vain (42:21), that Elisha would find himself visibly encircled by God’s chariots.”* (Kidner, p.181). God was answering Joseph’s calls for rescue as surely as he was answering Elisha’s! But his answer to Joseph’s immediate agenda was ‘no’ while his answer to Elisha’s immediate request and agenda was ‘yes’. God was delivering Joseph and all his brothers, but not in the way that Joseph could have ever envisioned.

What does this teach us about how to face our own difficulties?

First, we must never assume that we know enough to mistrust God’s ways or be bitter against what he has allowed. If God had answered Joseph’s immediate prayer, a) tens of thousands of people would have died in a famine, b) his own family, the bearer of the Messianic seed, would have likely died, and c) the whole family would have spiritually sunk under the spiritual poison that was running in their veins. Joseph and Elisha asked to be saved, and they both were--one through no immediate action by God, one through major

immediate action by God. So if bad things are happening to you, and God is not answering your requests, don't assume you know enough to be mad at him.

Second, we must never think we have really 'blown' our lives, or have ruined God's good purposes for us. The brothers surely must have felt, at one point, that they had permanently ruined their standing with God and their father's life and their family. But God worked through it. This is, it should go without saying, no inducement to sin! The pain and misery that resulted in their lives from this action were very great. Yet God used it redemptively. You can't destroy his good purposes for us. He is too great, and will weave even great sins into a fabric that makes us into something useful and valuable.

7. vv.31-35. a) Where else did deception happen through a goat? What does that teach us? b) What had the brothers probably hoped for from the father, now that his favorite was gone? Did they get it? What does that teach us?

Where else does deception happen through a goat?

In Genesis 27:8 and 16, Jacob deceives his father Isaac into thinking that he is his brother Esau. He does this by taking two young goats and (having his mother) prepare goat's meat for his father the way Esau cooks it. Then he puts the goat skin on his arms so that when his blind old father feels him, he will think it is hairy Esau, not smooth Jacob.

The key here is that Jacob, embittered because of favoritism, deceives his old father. Now here the deceiver is deceived, by his own sons, embittered by his favoritism. This pattern of being deceived started further back, when Jacob the cheater runs into a bigger cheat than he is in his Uncle Laban (Gen.27-31).

What does this teach us? There is a double lesson. On the one hand, we cannot simply 'do' sin and be done with it. Your sins lie in wait to destroy you (Gen.4:7); your sins will hunt you down and find you out (Num.32:23); your sins are seeds that are sown and bear poison fruit you will have to eat (Gal.6:7); your sins give birth to death and brokenness in your life (James 1:14-15). Thus sin always comes back. In this case, my guess is that Jacob's sinful behavior led him feel isolated and alienated from his family. He fell in love with Rachel and idolatrously sought to use her to fill up his emptiness. His idolatry of her laid the foundation for favoritism in the family, which profoundly distorted all his children. They in turn deceived him. Sin always comes back.

The second lesson, however, is that God *will* work on his own to humble and purify his own people. Is it an accident that the cheater keeps on getting cheated? No. It is part of a life-long process by which God is 'disciplining' Jacob, until he finally confesses on his death bed that the Lord has been his shepherd, feeding him and guiding him every step of the way, every day of his life (Gen.48:15). That is a remarkable confession. It means that he finally saw that in all these difficulties, it was the Lord's loving shepherd's hand that was at work.

What had the brothers probably hoped for? Did they get it?

It is likely that the brothers expected, now that they had gotten rid of the idolatrous favorite, that they would eventually be getting more of their father's attention, affection, and heart. Instead, they got less. It would be natural to think that a father would turn to his other children for consolation and to make up for the loss of his son. Instead, despite their efforts to console him (v.35a), he announces that he will not be going through the normal mourning and grieving period. Instead, he will stay in mourning until the day he dies (v.35).

What is the lesson? It is only slightly different than the one we noted immediately above. Sin never works. Any sinful way of solving a problem *always* creates a bigger one. Any sinful

'cure' is always worse than the original disease. One ounce of sin will hurt more than ten tons of suffering. When you mix sin in with the suffering, it all goes bad and destroys you in the ways mentioned above. So sin never works because it always comes back.

8. vv.28. *In what way does Joseph's story point to the way God always does his salvation (remember the Judges)? In what way does Joseph point us to Christ? (If time, read Acts 7 for help on answering the question.)*

Joseph is rejected by his own (John 1:11) and sold for silver coins (Matt.26:14-16). And why? Joseph is banished from his community so that he will be able to save that community through his banishment. In Acts 7, Stephen speaks at length about Joseph (vv.9-16) as part of his thesis that the prophets, deliverers, and messengers of God have always done their work through rejection and suffering (v.51-52).

Numerous occasions in the book of Judges we saw that God chose unlikely people who were weak (in the world's eyes) to be the deliverer. In Jephthah's case, it was only because he had been banished from the community that he became strong and skillful enough to save it. In Samson's case, his final defeat was the method to his greatest victory.

Again and again, God shows that he is going to get his salvation done through weakness, not strength, because Jesus will triumph through defeat, will win by losing, will come down in order to go up. In the same way, we only get God's power in our life through the weakness of repentance. And so often, the grace of God grows more through our difficulties than our triumphs.

What a faith! Who would have ever thought it up?

This Series:

Genesis 37:1-36 -	Joseph and the Dream
Genesis 39:1-23 -	Joseph and the Mistress
Genesis 40:1-41:57 -	Joseph's Rise to Power
Genesis 42:1-44:34 -	Joseph and his Brothers
Genesis 45:1-50:26 -	Joseph Redeems his Family

Week 22

Genesis 39:1-23-41:57

JOSEPH'S FALL AND RISE

SOSL 3/98-99

1. 39:1-6, 20-23. a) What phrase is central? What do you think the phrase means? b) What are the parallels between vv.1-6 and vv.20-23? What are the parallels designed to teach? Cf. the principle of Gen.28:15.

2. 39:1-6 and 20-23. It is easy to miss the most obvious point. God is 'with' Joseph and is 'using' Joseph by giving him success in administration and business. a) Does the church today think of God's blessing in this way? b) What does this tell us about the relative merits of 'Christian ministry' versus 'secular work'?

3. 39:5-7. a) How does Joseph's success lead to temptation? b) What are some other ways that happens? c) Have you ever been tempted as the result of a success?

4. 39:7-12. a) Trace the progression of the woman's temptation of Joseph. b) How has your own experience confirmed that temptation is progressive? c) Read Hebrews 3:13; 10:23-25. How is Potiphar's wife an 'evil twin' of the kind of relationship Christians should have with each other? How can we practically carry out this ideal of Hebrews?

5. 39:7-12. a) Make a list of all the ways that Joseph uses to resist temptation at each level. b) How has your own experience confirmed the principles that Joseph uses?

6. 39: 13-20. a) How does Potiphar's wife get Joseph imprisoned? b) Scholars note that the ordinary penalty for such an offense would have been death. Why do you think he didn't get it?

7. a) What one difference do we see between 39:3-4 and 39:21-22. What is the significance of that difference? b) Read chapters 40-41. What does this tell us about how we should look at delayed hope? at our own tragedies?

8. Read 39:20-21 and Hebrews 5:8-10. Read 41:39-43 and Phillipians 2:8-11. How does the pattern in Joseph's life of suffering and redemption parallel the pattern in Jesus' life and in our lives?

Week 22

Genesis 39:1-23-41:57

JOSEPH'S FALL AND RISE

SOSL 3/98-99

1. 39:1-6, 20-23. a) What phrase is central? What do you think the phrase means? b) What are the parallels between vv.1-6 and vv.20-23? What are the parallels designed to teach? Cf. the principle of Gen.28:15.

a) What phrase is central? What does it mean?

The key phrase is “*The Lord was with Joseph*”. This phrase occurs in v.2, 3, 21 and 23. We can infer the meaning of the word both from the phrase itself and its context. First, the phrase “*with*” means fellowship or closeness. Joseph lived “close” to God. That certainly implies prayer and obedience to God, and a dependent heart. Joseph did not turn to God when he was in trouble, but habitually looked to him, thought of him, prayed to him, leaned on him. He ‘practiced his presence’. Second, the context indicates that Joseph was effective. The English phrase--“*the Lord gave him success*” (v.3) doesn’t completely get across the word behind it. The word does not refer so much to acclaim and status as to practical effectiveness. When we read that “*the blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field*” (v.5), it means that, under Joseph’s supervision, people got along and were productive and happy, the flocks and crops increased, and so on. In other words, the Lord blessed Joseph with wisdom, honesty, discipline, love, and self-control which ordinarily have wonderful effects on everyone around.

So when the Lord is “with” someone, it means that first, the person is dependent on God, and secondly that God’s character grows in him or her and has healthy effects on all around.

b) What are the parallels between vv.1-6 and vv.20-23.

The parallels are almost point by point and thus this is very deliberate and significant for the meaning of the narrative. In v.4a and v.21 Joseph “*found favor*” in the eyes of his superior. In v.4b and v.22, the superior, as a result, gave him more responsibility and authority. In v.6 and v.23 we see that Joseph responded to this new responsibility with such high achievement, that his superior did not have to think or worry anymore about anything under Joseph’s care.

The reason for the parallel, despite the terrible injustice between the two sections, is to show us this: that God’s good purposes will stand, despite all the terrible things that may occur to us. Gen.28:15 is a promise from God to Jacob: “*I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go...I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.*” See the effect of the narrative form? God is with Joseph, helping and prospering and moving him ahead. Then Potiphar’s wife attacks him and lies about him. But despite all this terrible opposition, God is *still* with Joseph, *still* helping and prospering him, *still* moving him ahead. Potiphar’s wife did not derail Joseph’s life, no matter what it looked like.

“The symmetry of this chapter, in which the serene opening (1-6) is matched, point for point, at a new level at the close (19-23) despite all that intervenes, perfectly expresses God’s quiet control and the man of faith’s quiet victory.” (D.Kidner, Genesis, p.189)

So the lesson is that nothing can derail God's plan for you. Joseph went right on doing exactly what he was doing before--walking with God, trusting God, being wise, honest, disciplined, self-controlled and loving. And God went right on moving him ahead.

2. 39:1-6 and 20-23. It is easy to miss the most obvious point. God is 'with' Joseph and is 'using' Joseph by giving him success in administration and business. a) Does the church today think of God's blessing in this way? b) What does this tell us about the relative merits of 'Christian ministry' versus 'secular work'?

a) How does the church think of God's blessing in this way?

A pastor, Dick Lucas, gives a good answer to this question when he comments on Genesis 39:1-6 in a sermon.

"Supposing you went to a Christian booktable and saw a biography with the title 'The Man God Uses', you would immediately think it was the story of a preacher or missionary. The church has lead us to believe that anyone who could claim that title would be a specialist in spiritual work. But instead, here in Joseph we have a business man--not a preacher, not a missionary, not leading Bible study groups, not distributing tracts. I don't fault those who spend all their time or part of their time doing those things. But I think it is in many ways easier to serve God in those ways than in the 'real' world. This is the great 'short-fall' today. It is difficult to get Christians to see that God is willing to use men and women in every sphere of life--in medicine, law, business, the arts. Christians have many resources that can bring 'success'. They have integrity, conscientiousness, a willingness to serve other. Christians, though, are not willing to 'take the charge' of secular work as was Joseph. So many Christians are ducking that today. God uses Joseph mightily in so many ways through his effectiveness." -- Dick Lucas, Tape "Tragedy is Not Outside God's Plan" Gen.39-40

This is a very fair assessment. The church in many quarters either implicitly or explicitly tells its members that "real" service to God is church work--evangelism, church programs, Bible study, worship. Therefore, God is only using you when you are doing such things. The example of Joseph contradicts that idea. He is even more of a secular businessman than Daniel. Daniel was often in a position to prophetically speak to kings about the greatness and reality of God, but Joseph does very little of this. Instead, he is used not just for his own people, but for the common good. God uses him to prosper and protect the lives of all sorts of non-believers. God told Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to the nations of the world (Gen.12:2-3). But the very first of his descendants who *was* a blessing to multiple nations, was not a prophet, preacher, or priest, but rather a civic administrator--in a 'secular' job--who ran a massive hunger relief program. Of course, Joseph also was a redemptive agent in the lives of his family and certainly would have been a great witness for the reality of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But he is primarily used in his 'secular' work.

b) What does this tell us about the relative merits of secular work and ministry?

This confirms the Reformers insistence on the sacredness of all work, and their view that all work is 'vocation' or calling. We should therefore not lift one kind of work up as 'higher' than another. If you are called to ministry, then that is the way God will use you and be with you; if you are called to some other work, then that is the way God will use you and be with you. (We can't go here into how God 'calls' people into work, but (in a nutshell) it is through a combination of personal desire, proven ability, and circumstantial opportunity.

Currently in our society, we have two opposite errors with regard to this issue. Today the church and ministry no longer has the respect of the society as a whole. Society also encourages people to consider work that will give them the most individual status and affluence, rather than the work that will do the most for the common good through their gifts and talents. As a result, the most qualified and talented young men and women are not encouraged to even consider working for the church. On the other hand, as we noted, the church goes to the opposite extreme and denigrates 'secular' work. It encourages any of its most active Christian members to consider missions or ministry as a 'higher' calling. Neither of these attitudes shows the Biblically balanced view of all work as God's calling.

3. 39:5-7. a) How does Joseph's success lead to temptation? b) What are some other ways that happens? c) Have you ever been tempted as the result of a success?

a) How does Joseph's success lead to temptation?

As the lord of a great estate, Joseph would have just been one of the many slaves who worked in fields or who waited on tables. But his success would have meant that: 1) he was not wearing humble or dirty slave clothes, but would have likely been living in the better quarters and dressing in a way more fitting with 'polite society'. 2) In addition, he would have been constantly in contact with Potiphar and his wife, eating with them, perhaps and having much more social interaction. It was because of his success that Potiphar's wife "took notice" of Joseph (v.7).

There are many answers to the question--"how does success lead to temptation", and it is an important exercise to reflect on this. No one will have any problem generating plenty of responses. Here are a few examples. 1) Success breeds an over-confidence in one's opinions. Successful people have had their hunches pay off very well. As a result, they now over-trust their hunches in almost every category of thought and life. Though they may have been successful in one area, they tend to feel that they are experts in other areas as well. Sum: temptation to pride. 2) Success breeds spiritual sluggishness. We feel secure in our money or our acclaim and this masks our need for God. As we get older, we may learn that success does not make you immune from heartache, disease, death, broken relationships--and you are as helpless and in need of God as anyone else. But at first, success makes you feel you don't need God. Sum: temptation to spiritual indifference. 3) Success attracts envy and resentment on the part of others, who will try to use you and manipulate you or bring you down. Often you will find that success has brought you into strategems that you did not have the wisdom to handle. Successful people can become extremely mistrustful of people as a result. Sum: temptation to cynicism and isolation. 4) Success makes you completely unprepared for inevitable failures. It lures you into thinking that life will be a bowl of cherries. Sum: temptation to naivete. 5) Success in money or fame inevitably leads to sexual temptation. Many people are attracted to power and success and will throw themselves sexually at you if you have it.

In general, Christians know that since there is an Enemy, since there are forces of darkness, success for believers may simply attract his attention. When Jesus was given the great experience of God's Spirit and Sonship at his baptism, he was immediately set upon by the devil.

4. 39:7-12. a) Trace the progression of the woman's temptation of Joseph. b) How has your own experience confirmed that temptation is progressive? c) Read Hebrews 3:13; 10:23-25. How is Potiphar's wife an 'evil twin' of the kind of relationship Christians should have with each other? How can we practically carry out this ideal of Hebrews?

a) The progression of temptation.

First, in v.7, she directly asks him to sleep with her. There isn't anything subtle about this-- it is the strategy of surprising flattery. That can often give one a rush and break down the defenses quickly because you haven't seen it coming and you aren't prepared. But Joseph was prepared, in general (see below) and turns her down.

Second, she approached him daily with her seductive overtures, hoping to wear him down. If he could not be directly asked, she thought, maybe he could be coaxed. This is the strategy of winning by attrition. She was determined to outlast him, to be the woman "who won't take no for an answer". [In this course, we have seen Samson twice worn down by the persistence of a woman (Judges 14:17 and 16:16)]. But Joseph turns her down.

Finally, in v.12, she literally grabs him and tries to force herself on him. We might think that most women would not have the physical strength to do this (especially if the man was "*well built*" v.6). But we must remember that Joseph was still a slave and she was his owner. He could not have really fought back or done anything to hurt her at all. He was at a real disadvantage when she grabbed him. But he got loose and runs away.

b) How this works out in experience.

One of the main points, then, is that temptation is progressive. This means that usually the Tempter does not come and literally grab us at first. Rather, he tempts us into attitudes of self-pity or spiritual indifference or resentment before eventually coming in with a frontal assault. For example, he may first tempt you into resentment toward your spouse for a long time before he presents you with a wide-open opportunity for an affair. You say, "well, it serves her right." For another example, he may tempt you into self-pity with a whole series of 'bad luck' events before he presents you with a wide-open opportunity for embezzlement. You say, "I've been honest to my hurt for so long, this won't even square things." Sometimes the progression can take years. The Tempter numbs your conscience through 'little' sins and 'little' dishonesties so that eventually you can digest much larger sins/dishonesties without being bothered. For example, a boy took out a treasured watch of his father's and accidentally broke it. Rather than tell the truth and face the consequences, he lied about it. Over the years he continued to hide and 'take the easy way out'. One day as an adult he hit a young boy with his car while driving. Instinctively, in a panic, he sped off rather than stopping. He was later arrested and jailed for being a 'hit and run' driver--a very serious offense. It had begun with the watch. The Tempter can come at us for years, 'softening us up', before he actually grabs us.

c) Hebrews 3:13 and 10:23-25.

These two texts are calls for Christians to do the same kind of coaxing "day after day" that Potiphar's wife did, but with an opposite motive and opposite goal. Our motive is a loving desire to see our brothers and sisters more conformed to the Lord's character. Our goal is to see them more productive in God's service. The writer to the Hebrews insists that this accountability for our lives be carried out in concrete 'assembling' of ourselves for the purpose of stirring each other up and exhorting each other.

There are three ways this can be done practically. a) First you must deliberately cultivate a small number of one-on-one Christian relationships that go deep enough to be able to speak with some ease about personal matters. We need to keep each other accountable in our relationships, our use of money and time, our sexuality, and so on. b) Second, you must be in a good small group that discusses and wrestles with the practical outworking of the Christian life. c) Third, you must regularly go to corporate worship. Each of these brings a kind of 'exhortation' and 'accountability' that the others do not.

5. 39:7-12. a) Make a list of all the ways that Joseph uses to resist temptation at each level. b) How has your own experience confirmed the principles that Joseph uses?

At the first level, Joseph does what some people would call ‘cognitive’ therapy. He is has deliberately chosen a way to think about the proposal that makes it easy to turn down.

- (1) First, she calls it ‘*come to bed*’ (v.7) but he calls it a ‘*wicked thing*’ (v.9).
- (2) Second, he puts it in the context of loyalty and gratitude to his master. In v.9a he says, essentially, “how could I treat your husband this way after all he has given to me? How ungrateful!”
- (3) Third, in v.9b, however, he notes that this sin would be “*against God*”. This is remarkably deep theology. On the surface, it’s hard to see how this sin is against God--isn’t it against Potiphar? But when King David was repenting for his adultery with Bathsheba, he said to God, “*Against you, you only have I sinned*” (Psalm 51:4). How can Joseph and David say this? This assumes that they belong to God, that they are not their own (1 Cor.6:20), that they are not free to do whatever they want. Therefore, all sins are against him first. Joseph kept this firmly in his mind. He didn’t think of sin as breaking some abstract rule, but breaking God’s heart. Had he thought “well, if I do this, I might get caught”, he would never have resisted. But instead he said, “this would be trampling on my Lord”. That was a whole different way to think. Sin will always present itself to your mind under a false guise. It will never admit that it is a stab at the heart of God himself. You will have to unmask it like Joseph did.

This first level of ‘thinking straight’ is extremely crucial. In fact, we can go so far to say that it is not circumstances that tempt you, but it is the thoughts of the heart that tempt you.(cf.James 1:13-15) Kidner says:

“Joseph’s reasons for refusal (8,9) were those that another man might have given for yielding, so neutral is the force of circumstances. His freedom from supervision and rapid promotion [which others have construed as a warrant for indulgence]...and his realization that one realm only (9) was barred to him (which others, from Eve onwards, have construed as a frustration) were all arguments to him for loyalty.
(Kidner, p.190)

Kidner says that “the force of circumstances” is mainly “neutral”. He notes that the very same circumstances that Joseph construed as arguments against the proposal could easily be construed another as warrant to accept the invitation. So it is not the circumstances, but how you think--what you tell yourself about the circumstances. Joseph rooted his loyalty to his master down into his love and debt to God. That anchored it deep enough to survive this blast from his wife.

At the second level, Joseph does what some people might call ‘behavior’ therapy. When she began to badger and try to wear him down, he did not simply rely on his ‘self-talk’ within his heart. That would not have been enough. We are told, “*he refused...to even be with her.*” (v.10). Since we are told that she did talk to him every day, we should probably understand that while he could not avoid her completely, he was extremely careful to never be alone with her. Verse 11 seems to indicate that this was his strategy as well.

So Joseph did not rely simply on his *inner* self-control. He avoided *outward* settings that he knew might be tempting. This is simply being humble and realistic. Working on changing

one's outward environment is as necessary as working to 'unmask' the sin and change one's inner thinking. We need to do both.

At the third level, Joseph simply uses a force of will to 'flee lust' (cf. 2 Tim. 2:22; 2 Pet. 1:4). There are times in which you know intellectually what the right thing to do is, and yet you don't have time to summons up the "right thinking" or the right feeling. You just simply run. He literally did. As we noted above, there was probably no way that he could extricate himself from her grip without either a) pushing, hitting, or wrestling with her (which was unacceptable), or b) actually slipping out of his cloak. Kidner says, "*Joseph's flight, unlike a coward's, saved his honor at the cost of his prospects.*" (p.191) This is the opposite of cowardice. By running away, he did the brave thing.

Joseph does not sit around and try to reason with temptation. He does not entertain it. He doesn't, like Eve, sit and look at how nice the fruit looks (Gen. 3:6). No wonder she eventually ate it? Martin Luther famously said, "you can't stop birds from flying around your head, but you can stop them from making nests in your hair." In other words, you can't prevent a temptation from being proposed to you, but you can prevent any dialogue with it. You must not sit and weigh up, "should I do this or not? What are the pros and cons?" You should run from it. Leaving anything behind, even an eye or a hand (Mark 9:43). One ounce of sin can hurt you more than 10 tons of suffering.

6. 39: 13-20. a) How does Potiphar's wife get Joseph imprisoned? b) Scholars note that the ordinary penalty for such an offense would have been death. Why do you think he didn't get it?

a) How does Potiphar's wife get Joseph imprisoned?

Potiphar's wife has "shot her wad" with Joseph, and he has resisted everything she had. The final flight out of her literal hands must have been both humiliating and infuriating. Now she turns on him. She does three things: 1) First, of course, she makes a credible lie. Lies are only as powerful as the truth in them. She tells that one of them wanted to sleep with the other but was resisted. However, she reverses the roles. She says that he had taken off his garment--and what better explanation than that he was trying to sleep with her? 2) Second, she 'plays the race card'. She does not name him, but repeatedly calls him "*this Hebrew*" (v.14, 17). She plays on the racist sentiments of the Egyptians to tar him and to make her charge more credible. Third, however, she blames Potiphar. She refers to Joseph as the one "*you brought us*" (v.17). By reminding him that he is ultimately to blame for having such a dangerous person in the house, he pressures her husband to act out of embarrassment and perhaps guilt.

b) Why didn't he get the death penalty?

"His reprieve presumably owed much to the respect he had won; and Potiphar's mingled wrath and restraint may reflect a faint misgiving about the full accuracy of the charge." (Kidner, p.191). It is very likely that Joseph's character and record had produced in Potiphar such an enormous reserve of respect that this accusation could not completely exhaust it. Remember that the alleged crime was utterly unlike anything that anyone had ever seen Joseph do before. Potiphar and the rest of his household must have seen scores of concrete examples of Joseph's incorrigibility and fairness and unassailable honesty. That is why he was so successful. This is the reason that, despite his anger and embarrassment, Potiphar had some residual doubts or even a residual sense of obligation to Joseph. The lesson is that an honest life has a power that is very hard to overcome, even by the best-laid conspiracy.

7. a) What one difference do we see between 39:3-4 and 39:21-22. What is the significance of that difference? b) Read chapters 40-41. What does this tell us about how we should look at delayed hope? at our own tragedies?

a) The difference between 39:3-4 and 39:21-22.

Both verses, as we have seen, are virtually copies of one another. In each one we read: 1) God is with him, 2) he found favor in the eyes of his superior, 3) he was put in charge of everything. But there is one difference. It is only in the prison that we are told Joseph also experiences the “*kindness*” of God (v.21). This Hebrew word is one of the most significant in the Bible. It is the word Chesed, and it is often translated “steadfast love”. It is a word that means not just love in general, but covenant love--insistent, gracious, unconditional, relentless love. Why would the word only come up here in prison? It is only when we experience the depths that we can truly see how relentless his love is. It is only when we have failed and find he still loves us, and only when we have been the victim of terrible injustice and find he still uses us--that we see that his love is truly unmerited and unconditional. There is nothing at all in either our hearts or anyone else's heart that will thwart God's love for us. Summary: we don't really experience God's kindness and love much in success--we mainly experience it in adversity.

b) Chapter 40-41.

These two chapters are filled with fascinating references that are evidence of their antiquity and accuracy. (For example, we know that the Egyptian court put enormous stock in bread, that Pharaoh had 50 or 60 kinds of bread made for him. For another example, 41:14 indicates that Joseph had to shave in order to go before Pharaoh. The Egyptians considered it courteous and respectful to remove your beard to go before a superior. This was not the custom of Palestine or the Hebrews.)

The teaching that becomes evident in these two chapters is pretty striking.

(1) First of all, we see that God seems to have forgotten Joseph along with the cupbearer. It was *two full years* (41:1) before anything happened to release Joseph. Why? Evidently Joseph was not ready to get out until then. But it must have seemed like a terribly long time to such a young man. Surely he felt as forgotten and un-listened to as he had in the cistern back in chapter 39. But, as we saw then, God *was* listening--he was just not answering in the time or the way that Joseph wanted.

(2) Second of all, we see that God does not simply help, grow, and prosper Joseph despite tragedy and injustice but through it. If Potipher's wife had not been so evil and had not done her terrible deed, Joseph would have only risen up to be the head of Potipher's house, rather than the head of all of Egypt. Derek Kidner expresses this principle in a vivid way. He says that we see in this terrible tragedy-- “*The good seed is buried deeper, [only] to push upward.*” (p.189). In other words, the deeper into the ground the seed is pushed, the deeper the roots and the taller the tree. In many ways, Joseph's tragedy helps him. 1) It helps in circumstantially, because it connects him to people from Pharaoh's court, but 2) it helps him spiritually, since he has to learn to cling to God and trust in him more fervently and desperately than he would have otherwise. Paul found this out much later, in Phillipians 1:12--“*I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.*”

This means that, no matter what stupid and wicked things we have done (as in chapter 37) or what stupid and wicked things have been done to us by others (as in chapter 37 and 39) we are always on the ‘main road’ to the purpose God has for us (Rom.8:28; Eph.1:10). The people of the world considers every disappointment to be a terrible blow to their hopes, and

an evidence that there is no meaning in life or that God is cruel and callous. The history of Joseph, however is one more illustration of Romans 8:28, which was paraphrased perfectly by John Newton many years ago--*"Everything is needful that he sends; nothing can be needful that he withholds"*. (Note: "Needful" = "Necessary")

8. Read 39:20-21 and Hebrews 5:8-10. Read 41:39-43 and Phillipians 2:8-11. How does the pattern in Joseph's life of suffering and redemption parallel the pattern in Jesus' life and in our lives?

Joseph is prepared to be a deliverer through suffering. This is how it is always done. It is not through strength, but through weakness that Jesus brought us salvation. As the innocent Joseph was put in prison, but through the injustice came to save the country and his people, so Jesus was *"numbered with the transgressors"* (Is.53:12). As Joseph was only raised so high--to the right hand of the throne--only because he fell so low, so Jesus was highly exalted to the right hand of God, only because he emptied himself and humbled himself unto death. As Joseph had to be the victim of injustice if he was ever going to mete out justice for the whole kingdom, so Jesus had to bear our judgment and eternal justice before he could rule and reign to save us.

"Within these walls of guilt we find a guiltless man. The blameless Joseph is here interred. Without offense, he is wronged as an offender--without transgression, he is numbered with the transgressors. Reader, the pure delight, the sanctifying feast of Scripture consists in this. In every page the voice of Jesus is heard--at almost every turn the image of Jesus is discerned." (Henry Law, *The Gospel in Genesis*)

It is not through performance, but by repentance that we unite with God. It is not through success but through sacrifice that we spread the kingdom to others. It is not so much through prosperity but through adversity that we become like him so as to represent him to others. This is always because God's salvation is by grace alone.

Genesis 37:1-36 - Joseph and the Dream
Genesis 39:1-23-41:57 Joseph's Fall and Rise
Genesis 42:1-44:34 - Joseph and his Brothers
Genesis 45:1-50:26 - Joseph Redeems his Family

Week 23

Genesis 45:1-50:26

JOSEPH'S REDEEMS HIS FAMILY

SOS 3/98-99

Introduction: We have been following Joseph's story. Jacob's family was to be the bearer of the true faith and the Messianic seed. But, spiritually speaking, it was heading toward shipwreck because of sin. Jacob's emotional rejection of Leah and idolization of Rachel had sown terrible seeds in the lives of his children. Jacob built his life around Rachel's child--Joseph--and was cold and uncaring to his other children. As a result, Joseph was on his way to becoming cruel, shallow, and arrogant, while his other sons were embittered and hateful. But God intervened. He sent word through a dream that he would save them through Joseph. Then he arranged historical circumstances and used the brother's own venomous intentions in order to have Joseph sold into slavery in Egypt. There he suffered a great deal, but through his suffering was raised up the right hand of the throne. There he used his secular power to save the region from physical starvation. Finally, when his own brothers came to Egypt, looking for food, Joseph has the opportunity to become the instrument for their spiritual regeneration. He becomes the savior of those who rejected him.

He begins by hiding his true identity from them, and by making them re-live their past betrayal (chapter 42). Once again, they have to return without a brother, with their hands filled with silver, watching their father cry out in anguish. Yet under the harsh veneer, Joseph shows signs of a merciful heart--often weeping 'offstage', returning their money, showing them hospitality, freeing them from prison. Finally, in chapter 44, he re-creates the situation of chapter 37 and essentially gives them a 'second chance'. He takes Benjamin, Rachel's other child and a hated favorite of the father, into custody, and says, "you may all go free if you abandon this one to slavery". It is exactly the same situation as before. They have the opportunity to be rid of Rachel's son. They have an even more tempting reason to do the betrayal this time than they have before--they are offered their freedom. But instead, the brothers refuse to sacrifice Benjamin to save their own skins. Judah steps forward and offers to pay Benjamin's debt as a substitute. That is how the chapter 44 ended.

Chapter 45 begins with Joseph revealing his true identity to his brothers. He sees the change in their heart is profound, and so he says: "*I am Joseph*" (v.3). The rest of the story proceeds in the aftermath of this thunderbolt. **Note:** Joseph's question: "*is my father still living?*" seems confusing, because they had told him repeatedly that their father was still alive. But the Hebrew word for "lived" also included the idea of 'well-being' and health. Thus 45:27 literally said, "*so the spirit of Jacob lived*", when the sense is "revived". Thus Joseph is asking, "*is our father well--is he allright?*"

Chapter 45.

1. 45:4-8. a) What do we learn in Joseph's speech about how God works in human history? Cf. this to Acts 2:23. b) What do we learn in Joseph's speech about why God works in human history? Cf. this to Rom. 11:2-6.

a) How does God work in history?

First, Joseph teaches us about the sovereignty of God. Notice how he twice says, "*you sold me*" (v.4 and v.5) and twice he says, "*God sent me*" (v.6 and v.7). He sets these against one another. Now which is it? Is Joseph in Egypt because they sold him or because God sent him.

The answer is in v.8, where he says, *“so then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.”* This is a very rich and sophisticated view of how God relates to historical events.

On the one hand, he does not say, “you didn’t do anything wrong--you couldn’t help it--God made you do it.” If it was the case that they had only been God’s puppets, he would not have worked so hard to convict them of sin and humble their hearts. He would have said, “you didn’t sell me, God made you do it”. On the other hand, he does not say, “you did it--and God only allowed it.” If it was the case that God had only been a bystander, he would probably not been able to forgive them. He would have said, “*you* sent me to Egypt! It turned out OK, but no thanks to you! Now you’re going to pay.”

Instead, Joseph says that the brothers most definitely chose to betray him, and they are responsible for that action. Yet, God all along arranged to work through their sin to further his good purposes. Thus the ultimate reason for human history is the sovereign will of God--nothing out of his control. Yet the immediate reason for human events is the free choice of human subjects.

Joseph’s understanding of human history is remarkably like that of Peter’s in Acts 2:23 and Acts 4:27-28. There he says, “[Jesus] was handed over to you by God’s set purpose...and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death.” (2:23). Notice that the betrayal of Jesus (like the betrayal of Joseph) was completely, actively planned and accomplished by God. It had to happen--it was set. Yet the people who did the betrayal were nonetheless “wicked”. The choice was freely chosen. This is neither “fatalism” which says God determines all things in spite of our choices, nor is it a “humanism” which says that we determine all things through our choices, but it is a nuanced Biblical view which says that God determines all things through our free choices. Consider also Jesus’ own view of his betrayal as a cup from God’s hand (Jn.18:11)

b) Why does God work in history?

Second, Joseph teaches us about gracious, saving purposes of God. He says that the ultimate goal of God’s sovereign arrangement of circumstances is salvation of lives through a people. He says, *“God sent me...to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives through a great deliverance.”* (v.7). This is very crucial. First, it tells us that God is always preserving a community of believers, a “remnant” of faithful people on the earth. His salvation is not individualistic. He does not simply forgive individuals for their sins and bless and help them. He wants there to be a community of believers. Second, we recognize that this remnant of believers are only believers by grace alone. The redemption of the brothers was engineered by God wholly apart from their merits or intentions. They were preserved and saved only by grace.

Paul connects the idea of a “remnant” with God’s grace in Romans 11:2-6. He recalls the time (1 Kings 19) when Elijah thought he was the only believer left. God, however, answers that, *“I have reserved for myself seven thousand that have not bowed the knee to Baal”* (Rom.11:3). That language is very close to Joseph’s, for a remnant is ‘reserved’ or ‘preserved’ by God. Paul concludes, *“so too, at the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace than it is no longer by works.”* (Rom.11:5-6).

So Joseph is saying that God’s grace is the reason and goal for his arrangement of the circumstances of history. He is waking us up, shaking us up, opening our eyes, in order to by grace reserve a people for himself.

2. 45:4-8. a) How has Joseph's understanding of God's attributes practically affected how he treats others and faces life? b) Where specifically could you use this same understanding of God to face issues in your life now?

a) How does this understanding of God work practically in Joseph?

Joseph *"do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves, for it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you."* (42:5). Here Joseph seeks to "use" his theology of God on them to two effects. First, he tries to deal with their fear (*"distress"*), and second with their anger. He says, "there is no need to be afraid, or to be bitter against your selves, because God was at work to carry out his gracious purposes." When he says, "don't be angry at yourselves", he is not saying, "you weren't responsible for what you did, you couldn't help it". After all, he does say, "you *sold* me", and worked to help them repent. Rather, he is saying, "The only way you are going to be able to 'forgive yourselves' is to realize that we have a God of grace, whose loving plan you never thwarted. He did it all to save *you*, so clearly you can be forgiven. You have not ruined things. He was working all along. Be at peace." The gracious, sovereign power of God will certainly humble us (since it is sovereign) but also encourage us (because it is gracious). Only this view of God will help us repent, but also help us get over our guilt. A loving God who is not sovereign would only encourage us to sin more; a sovereign God who was not gracious would only make us hate ourselves.

Joseph, then is using rich theology to do "spiritual surgery" on his brothers. It is hard to soften our heart out of self-justification and denial into repentance. Then, once we repent, it is hard to avoid going into long guilt and despair. Only the holy-but-gracious view of God will see us all the way through.

What is implied, though, is the Joseph has already used this theology on himself. This does not come out clearly until chapter 50 (see below). But it is obvious that he his theology of God is the reason why *he* is not angry and bitter with his brother. In other words, the secret of a forgiving heart (vs. anger) and a peaceful life (vs. fear) is a deep knowledge that God is both sovereign and gracious.

b) How can we use this in our own lives?

This is a personal question and the answers will be specific. But here are a couple of categories of things that Joseph's theology will be able to address.

First, this will help us to forgive others. Part of our bitterness comes from an often semi-conscious belief that people have irretrievably damaged our lives. But, though people may hurt us deeply, they cannot 'ruin' God's gracious plan for our lives. When we resent someone we are, in effect, giving him or her too much credit and importance! We are positing to them more power than they have.

Second, this will help us to face both anticipated suffering or actual suffering. In a famous letter to a woman whose sister was dying, John Newton uses this same theology on her heart:

"I wish you may be enabled to leave her, and yourself, and all your concerns, in his hands. He has a sovereign right to do with us as he pleases...[but] to those who seek him, his sovereignty is exercised in a way of grace. All shall work together for good: everything is needful that he sends; nothing can be needful that he withholds....Yield to his prescriptions, and fight against every thought that would represent it as desirable to be permitted to choose for yourself." (Letters of Newton, Letter XXXV)

3. In 45:5 and 50:20 Joseph says that God's purpose for him was that he "save many lives". a) How did he do this? What does this teach us about a) what our attitude should be toward 'secular work' and b) what our own response should be to hunger and other 'social' problems? cf. Eph.4:28; Luke 12:32-33; Matt.25:31-46. c) How can you practically be more responsive to such issues?

How did he do this?

Joseph was not called to be a preacher or minister or evangelist or missionary. He was given unusual administrative and organizational gifts, which he first used with great success in business and commerce (Potiphar's household) and then in government. It was through this 'secular' calling that God used him to 'save lives'. It was his ability to shape public policy in order to effectively address the problem of hunger. That was how God used him. That was his main job in the world.

a) What should our attitude be toward 'secular' work?

It is very interesting, then, to notice that Joseph was "sent" to Egypt for two reasons. First, he went to "save a remnant" (45:7), but second to "save many lives" (45:5 and 50:20). Notice that he does not think of his 'secular' job as inconsequential. He does not say, "I only got into this position of power so I could be here to preserve the people of God. That's what my life was really about." His work to help the people of God and his work for the common good of all the citizens of the world are both considered God's "calling". God "sent" him to do both. In fact, in 45:7, the two works 'secular' and 'sacred' come together. When he says that he was sent "to save your lives by a great deliverance" he seems to be speaking both of how he led them to repentance and how he saved them physically from starvation.

So we have here a strong confirmation of the Protestant Reformation's belief that both secular and ministry jobs are 'vocations' or 'callings' by God. We should choose our work and career so that we are producing and supporting the quality of life of the people of the world. We should always be out to "save lives".

b) What should our attitude be toward hunger and 'social' problems?

The account of Joseph's life shows that God does not want 'the best and brightest' to only go into 'ministry', as important as this is. He does not only want us to spread his love in 'word', but in deed. We read in 1 John 3:17ff- *If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with in word only, but in deed and in truth.* When we tell people the gospel, or teach the Bible, or lead people to repentance and faith, we are loving "in word". But that is not the only way to love. In fact, John is saying that loving in word "only" is probably not love at all. If we are not addressing people's physical-material needs with loving deeds, we are clearly not motivated by love. To minister in word only betrays an unloving motive. Even Jesus was "mighty in word and deed" (Luke 24:19), he did not only preach, but he healed the sick, fed the hungry, and raised the dead.

The New Testament is filled with admonitions for Christians to be as concerned about 'social' problems as 'spiritual' problems. In Eph.4:28, we are told that everyone who works should do so at least partially so he or she can share their income with the poor. In Luke 12:33-34 we have a very strong call by Jesus to be sure that our giving to people in need is significant. In Matthew 25 we see a famous parable that shows us the kind of work Jesus wants us to be involved in--caring for the hungry, the homeless, the sick, and the imprisoned. The reason for this balance of 'word' and 'deed' is even seen in Easter itself. Jesus did not simply die for our sins--he was raised physically. That means he is not only going to save us spiritually, but save us physically. He is concerned to heal dying souls and dying bodies. We should be concerned with both, just as Joseph was concerned with both (45:7-8).

One minister once said, “Wherever lives are being lost, Satan is present and working. Wherever lives are being saved, God is present and working. We should be present wherever lives are being saved.”

Chapter 48

4. 48:1-20. Hebrews 11:21 selects Jacob’s blessing of Joseph’s sons to be the premier act of faith in his life. Why does Joseph bring them to Jacob? How does both his blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh (v.14), and his summary of his life (v.15) express great faith? (cf. Jacob’s statement of 42:36 and 48:15-16.)

Why does Joseph bring his sons to Jacob?

Joseph brings his two sons to Jacob--the elder, Manasseh, and the younger, Ephraim, for his blessing. They were born in Egypt to an Egyptian woman, and it would be possible therefore to say that Joseph’s children did not belong as the legal heirs of Jacob. But Jacob says here otherwise and puts the matter beyond doubt. First, he recalls the covenant of God who promised to give Jacob’s descendants a land and a blessing (v.3-4). Then Jacob says that thought Manasseh and Ephraim were born in Egypt, they shall be numbered among his descendants and receive a portion of Jacob’s inheritance (v.5-7).

How does his blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh express great faith?

When Joseph approaches his father, he leads Manasseh toward Jacob’s right hand and Ephraim toward his left. The right hand was considered the place of greater honor. Joseph expected the older child to get the greater blessing and the headship of the family. To everyone’s surprise, Jacob deliberately crossed his arms to put his right hand on Ephraim’s head. (48:14). This displeased Joseph, who seems to say, “Father, you are being confused--*this* one is the right son to give the bigger blessing to--and *that* one is the wrong son.” (v.18) But Jacob retorts, “I know *exactly* what I am doing, Joseph. The wrong son is the right son.” (v.19) Why does Jacob resist family pressure and contradict human tradition--both of which dictated that he bless the older over the younger?

Of course, he has received prophetic insight from God when he says, “*nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations*” (48:19). But it seems (especially in light of Heb.11:21) that he is doing more than just conveying a prophecy of the future. When he refuses to bless the father’s favorite, pride and joy, Jacob is pointing to God’s method of grace and salvation, which always contradicts the world’s economy. In the world’s economy, the first shall be first and the last shall be last; in the gospel’s economy, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. That is the secret to understanding the ways of God in the world, and it is utterly foolish to human thinking. Over and over again, God chooses to work in the world through what the world thinks of as weaker.

Take a moment of retrospection over what we learned this year in the book of Judges. Nearly every time he raises up a deliverer, it is always a “cross-eyed” choice (by the world’s standards), it is always the “wrong son”:

Ehud is disabled and has a crippled right hand. In that ancient time, this condition totally disqualified him as warrior thus leader.

Deborah was a woman, and women weren’t considered by the world to be leaders.

Gideon was the ‘least’ member of the ‘least’ family in the ‘least’ tribe. He was the equivalent what we would call today a ‘loser’.

Jephthah was a underworld figure in organized crime, a brigand and bandit.

Samson was a playboy-sex addict, emotionally immature to a remarkable degree.

But the pattern is not only in the book of Judges. God chooses little David, not the big strapping Jesse's sons, to go against Goliath. God insists Gideon whittle down his army from 10,000 to 300 before go up against the Midianites, because *"you have too many for me to deliver"* (7:2). God chooses Israel, one of smallest and weakest of all nations, to be the vessel of the chosen seed and true faith to the world. In the gospels, when Jesus the Messiah comes, he is born in manger to poor parents. He has no political party and no military might. Over and over again, Jesus chooses the marginal, the prostitute, the tax collector, the pagan, the women and children to be his disciples and rejects the social insider, the moral, the religious, the upstanding. And finally, in his greatest act of salvation, he gives himself to be beaten and to die. In every case, salvation is accomplished in exactly the opposite way to the world's logic. God is always acting 'cross-eyed', putting his hands on the 'wrong son', bucking the world's system. Jacob's faith is seen this:

"There is gentle irony in the fact that this is just such a situation as the one on which he had exercised his guile in his youth. Once more the firstborn's blessing is destined for the younger brother, but now there is no faithless scheming or bitter after taste. It is an object-lesson in quiet responsiveness and faith." (Kidner, p. 212)

Jacob had felt the need to 'help' God in his purposes by scheming and lying to get the blessing from his brother Esau. Now Jacob sees that this has always been God's way. He gently instructs Joseph to accept God's ways of free grace and counter-intuitive salvation. It really is a lesson in "quiet responsiveness and faith".

How does the summary of his life express faith?

Here we see Jacob viewing his life from a very different perspective than that of Gen.42:36. There he said, *"everything is against me!"* which is tantamount to saying, "all things are working together for evil". Every thing he set his heart on--Rachel, then Joseph, now Benjamin--was being taken away from him. It seemed that God was behind the scenes, working at every point to hurt him and make him miserable. Now, he says that God had been his shepherd *"all my life to this day"* (48:15) and he even says that the Angel of the Lord *"delivered me from all harm"* (48:16). This is the complete opposite of his previous statement. Now, as he remembers his sufferings (the flight from his homeland, the deception of Laban, the early death of Rachel, the loss of Joseph) he has the audacity to say that he was being "shepherded" and "kept from all harm" in every one of them. He sees that God was working behind the scenes for his good, out of love. This is a remarkable expression of faith.

5. What difficult incidents in your life can you look back on with the perspective of faith and see God being your 'shepherd' and your 'guardian'?

This John Newton hymn can be of help when reflecting on your life:

A. *I asked the Lord, that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of his salvation know,
And seek more earnestly his face.*

C. *Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.*

E. *'Lord, why is this?' I trembling cried,
'Wilt thou pursue Thy worm to death?'*

B. *I hoped that in some favoured hour
At once He'd answer my request,
And by His love's constraining power
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.*

D. *Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted by gourds, and laid me low.*

F. *These inward trials I employ
From self and pride to set thee free;*

*'Tis in this way,' the Lord replied,
I answer prayers for grace and faith.*

*And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st seek thy all in me.'*

Chapter 50

6. 50:15-20. a) Why is the brothers' message in v.17 so disappointing to Joseph? b) What three things can we learn from Joseph's response which will help us in living anger-free lives? c) Is there anyone in your life that you need to 'use' these factors with—in order to forgive them?

a) Why so disappointing?

There is much evidence that the brothers' message was false and made up. It is rather unlikely that Jacob, who obviously had spent much time with Joseph before he died, would have needed to give such a message to Joseph through his brothers. Surely he would have told such a thing to Joseph himself, directly. And Joseph knew this. Thus he wept, because they did not seem to understand his heart yet. They didn't understand the reasons why he had forgiven them.

b) Three factors in forgiveness.

Joseph exhibits three factors that are critical if we are going to forgive wrongs toward us and live without bitterness.

First, he says, "*Am I in the place of God?*" (v.19). He remembers that he does not have the *right* to judge others. Why not? 1) We don't have sufficient knowledge to know what others deserve. We don't know their hearts, or what else they've faced, and so on. But also, 2) we don't have sufficient goodness to sentence others. We may not have sinned against Mr.X, but we have sinned against others, so we have no warrant to decide what people deserve. Therefore, if we walk around hoping for someone to 'get their come-uppance' or to root for their embarrassment, failure, or downfall, we have put ourselves in the place of God. We have decided what another person deserves and are pulling to see it happen. But how dare we? We have neither the insight or the goodness to do that--we don't have the right. (By the way, this is also an argument against worry. We don't have the right to assume we know what should be happening! Thus worry as well as bitterness is 'putting ourselves in the place of God'.)

Second, he says, "*you intended it for harm, but God intended it for good*"(v.20). He remembers that he does not have the *need* to judge others. God is working all things out for good and for justice. He has a gracious God 1) whose good purposes for his people cannot be thwarted by evil actions (see question #1), and 2) whose justice toward the violent and the wicked cannot be ultimately be held off. He *will* work all things for good and for justice. If a person does not repent by the end, there will be justice. Joseph's confidence in both God's justice and grace makes it unnecessary for him to retaliate. If he takes matters in his own hands, he may wreak vengeance on someone who God is bringing to faith. If on the other hand he forgives, he doesn't have to worry that someone will 'get away' with it. No one, in the end, will get away with anything, because we have not only a gracious God, but a Judge of all the earth.

Third, he promises kind behavior, "*I will provide for you and your children*" (v.21). The third factor in forgiveness is action. He does not simply work on his heart, he does loving deeds toward them. He does not simply refrain from repaying evil for evil, but he repays evil with positive good (cf. Rom.12:18ff). It is not enough, when forgiving someone, to simply refrain from vengeance. You must positively rebuild the relationship and serve the person.

This is powerful stuff. Only if we believe in a gracious yet just God will we be able to avoid taking up the sword and getting swept up in the endless cycle of wrong-retaliation-new wrong-new retaliation. Miroslav Volf, a Croation who has seen great suffering in his homeland, writes:

My thesis, that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance, will be unpopular with many...especially in the West. My thesis is: we should not retaliate against violence with violence. Why not?.....*the only means of prohibiting violence by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God....violence thrives today, secretly nourished by belief that God refuses to take the sword....*It takes the quiet of a suburb for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence is a result of the idea of a God who refuses to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, that idea will invariably die, like other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind...In a world of violence it would not be worthy of God not to wield the sword; if God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end of violence, that God would not be worthy of our worship.” (Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*)

7. Compare Joseph with Daniel. What lessons have you learned from them about how to live as a believer with integrity in a pagan, non-Christian environment?

- a) Excellence in their work. No excuses for poor work. Everything they accomplished for the Lord was premised on the fact that their work itself was so well-done.
- b) Neither unnecessarily outspoken nor cowardly about their faith. Neither of them felt the need to push their faith on everyone. In many ways they were very low-key. But when they got to critical places where compromise would have been convenient, they refused.
- c) Adapted to the culture externally, not internally. They were not separatists. They got the learning of the society they were in and were completely ‘at home’ in its customs, education, literature, art. But they maintained the moral, spiritual, and theological world-view of the true faith. Their faith consisted less in external customs (dress, food, style) and more in intellectual world-view and moral character.
- d) They worked for the common good, not just their own people. Though both Joseph and Daniel had a special burden for the people of God, they showed justice for all. They worked with the ‘people of the world’ as co-citizens, saving lives and working for justice in society.
- e) They had a hope for the future. See Joseph’s words in Genesis 5) 22-26. Both he and Daniel understood that God’s kingdom would win out in the end. The kingdoms of this world were temporary. This means that, though they won great honor in the earthly kingdoms, they looked beyond them. They were not therefore too caught up in desire for earthly power and acclaim. They were neither afraid of it nor desirous for it.

Week 24

Genesis 45:1-50:26

JOSEPH'S REDEEMS HIS FAMILY

SOS 3/98-99

Introduction: We have been following Joseph's story. Jacob's family was to be the bearer of the true faith and the Messianic seed. But, spiritually speaking, it was heading toward shipwreck because of sin. Jacob's emotional rejection of Leah and idolization of Rachel had sown terrible seeds in the lives of his children. Jacob built his life around Rachel's child--Joseph--and was cold and uncaring to his other children. As a result, Joseph was on his way to becoming cruel, shallow, and arrogant, while his other sons were embittered and hateful. But God intervened. He sent word through a dream that he would save them through Joseph. Then he arranged historical circumstances and used the brother's own venomous intentions in order to have Joseph sold into slavery in Egypt. There he suffered a great deal, but through his suffering was raised up the right hand of the throne. There he used his secular power to save the region from physical starvation. Finally, when his own brothers came to Egypt, looking for food, Joseph has the opportunity to become the instrument for their spiritual regeneration. He becomes the savior of those who rejected him.

He begins by hiding his true identity from them, and by making them re-live their past betrayal (chapter 42). Once again, they have to return without a brother, with their hands filled with silver, watching their father cry out in anguish. Yet under the harsh veneer, Joseph shows signs of a merciful heart--often weeping 'offstage', returning their money, showing them hospitality, freeing them from prison. Finally, in chapter 44, he re-creates the situation of chapter 37 and essentially gives them a 'second chance'. He takes Benjamin, Rachel's other child and a hated favorite of the father, into custody, and says, "you may all go free if you abandon this one to slavery". It is exactly the same situation as before. They have the opportunity to be rid of Rachel's son. They have an even more tempting reason to do the betrayal this time than they have before--they are offered their freedom. But instead, the brothers refuse to sacrifice Benjamin to save their own skins. Judah steps forward and offers to pay Benjamin's debt as a substitute. That is how the chapter 44 ended.

Chapter 45 begins with Joseph revealing his true identity to his brothers. He sees the change in their heart is profound, and so he says: "*I am Joseph*" (v.3). The rest of the story proceeds in the aftermath of this thunderbolt. **Note:** Joseph's question: "*is my father still living?*" seems confusing, because they had told him repeatedly that their father was still alive. But the Hebrew word for "lived" also included the idea of 'well-being' and health. Thus 45:27 literally said, "*so the spirit of Jacob lived*", when the sense is "revived". Thus Joseph is asking, "*is our father well--is he allright?*"

Chapter 45.

1. 45:4-8. a) What do we learn in Joseph's speech about how God works in human history? Cf. this to Acts 2:23. b) What do we learn in Joseph's speech about why God works in human history? Cf. this to Rom. 11:2-6.

a) How does God work in history?

First, Joseph teaches us about the sovereignty of God. Notice how he twice says, "*you sold me*" (v.4 and v.5) and twice he says, "*God sent me*" (v.6 and v.7). He sets these against one another. Now which is it? Is Joseph in Egypt because they sold him or because God sent him.

The answer is in v.8, where he says, *“so then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.”* This is a very rich and sophisticated view of how God relates to historical events.

On the one hand, he does not say, “you didn’t do anything wrong--you couldn’t help it--God made you do it.” If it was the case that they had only been God’s puppets, he would not have worked so hard to convict them of sin and humble their hearts. He would have said, “you didn’t sell me, God made you do it”. On the other hand, he does not say, “you did it--and God only allowed it.” If it was the case that God had only been a bystander, he would probably not been able to forgive them. He would have said, “*you* sent me to Egypt! It turned out OK, but no thanks to you! Now you’re going to pay.”

Instead, Joseph says that the brothers most definitely chose to betray him, and they are responsible for that action. Yet, God all along arranged to work through their sin to further his good purposes. Thus the ultimate reason for human history is the sovereign will of God--nothing out of his control. Yet the immediate reason for human events is the free choice of human subjects.

Joseph’s understanding of human history is remarkably like that of Peter’s in Acts 2:23 and Acts 4:27-28. There he says, “[Jesus] was handed over to you by God’s set purpose...and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death.” (2:23). Notice that the betrayal of Jesus (like the betrayal of Joseph) was completely, actively planned and accomplished by God. It had to happen--it was set. Yet the people who did the betrayal were nonetheless “wicked”. The choice was freely chosen. This is neither “fatalism” which says God determines all things in spite of our choices, nor is it a “humanism” which says that we determine all things through our choices, but it is a nuanced Biblical view which says that God determines all things through our free choices. Consider also Jesus’ own view of his betrayal as a cup from God’s hand (Jn.18:11)

b) Why does God work in history?

Second, Joseph teaches us about gracious, saving purposes of God. He says that the ultimate goal of God’s sovereign arrangement of circumstances is salvation of lives through a people. He says, *“God sent me...to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives through a great deliverance.”* (v.7). This is very crucial. First, it tells us that God is always preserving a community of believers, a “remnant” of faithful people on the earth. His salvation is not individualistic. He does not simply forgive individuals for their sins and bless and help them. He wants there to be a community of believers. Second, we recognize that this remnant of believers are only believers by grace alone. The redemption of the brothers was engineered by God wholly apart from their merits or intentions. They were preserved and saved only by grace.

Paul connects the idea of a “remnant” with God’s grace in Romans 11:2-6. He recalls the time (1 Kings 19) when Elijah thought he was the only believer left. God, however, answers that, *“I have reserved for myself seven thousand that have not bowed the knee to Baal”* (Rom.11:3). That language is very close to Joseph’s, for a remnant is ‘reserved’ or ‘preserved’ by God. Paul concludes, *“so too, at the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace than it is no longer by works.”* (Rom.11:5-6).

So Joseph is saying that God’s grace is the reason and goal for his arrangement of the circumstances of history. He is waking us up, shaking us up, opening our eyes, in order to by grace reserve a people for himself.

2. 45:4-8. a) How has Joseph's understanding of God's attributes practically affected how he treats others and faces life? b) Where specifically could you use this same understanding of God to face issues in your life now?

a) How does this understanding of God work practically in Joseph?

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b) How can we use this in our own lives?

This is a personal question and the answers will be specific. But here are a couple of categories of things that Joseph's theology will be able to address.

First, this will help us to forgive others. Part of our bitterness comes from an often semi-conscious belief that people have irretrievably damaged our lives. But, though people may hurt us deeply, they cannot 'ruin' God's gracious plan for our lives. When we resent someone we are, in effect, giving him or her too much credit and importance! We are positing to them more power than they have.

Second, this will help us to face both anticipated suffering or actual suffering. In a famous letter to a woman whose sister was dying, John Newton uses this same theology on her heart:

"I wish you may be enabled to leave her, and yourself, and all your concerns, in his hands. He has a sovereign right to do with us as he pleases...[but] to those who seek him, his sovereignty is exercised in a way of grace. All shall work together for good: everything is needful that he sends; nothing can be needful that he withholds....Yield to his prescriptions, and fight against every thought that would represent it as desirable to be permitted to choose for yourself." (Letters of Newton, Letter XXXV)

3. In 45:5 and 50:20 Joseph says that God's purpose for him was that he "save many lives". a) How did he do this? What does this teach us about a) what our attitude should be toward 'secular work' and b) what our own response should be to hunger and other 'social' problems? cf. Eph.4:28; Luke 12:32-33; Matt.25:31-46. c) How can you practically be more responsive to such issues?

How did he do this?

Joseph was not called to be a preacher or minister or evangelist or missionary. He was given unusual administrative and organizational gifts, which he first used with great success in business and commerce (Potiphar's household) and then in government. It was through this 'secular' calling that God used him to 'save lives'. It was his ability to shape public policy in order to effectively address the problem of hunger. That was how God used him. That was his main job in the world.

a) What should our attitude be toward 'secular' work?

It is very interesting, then, to notice that Joseph was "sent" to Egypt for two reasons. First, he went to "save a remnant" (45:7), but second to "save many lives" (45:5 and 50:20). Notice that he does not think of his 'secular' job as inconsequential. He does not say, "I only got into this position of power so I could be here to preserve the people of God. That's what my life was really about." His work to help the people of God and his work for the common good of all the citizens of the world are both considered God's "calling". God "sent" him to do both. In fact, in 45:7, the two works 'secular' and 'sacred' come together. When he says that he was sent "to save your lives by a great deliverance" he seems to be speaking both of how he led them to repentance and how he saved them physically from starvation.

So we have here a strong confirmation of the Protestant Reformation's belief that both secular and ministry jobs are 'vocations' or 'callings' by God. We should choose our work and career so that we are producing and supporting the quality of life of the people of the world. We should always be out to "save lives".

b) What should our attitude be toward hunger and 'social' problems?

The account of Joseph's life shows that God does not want 'the best and brightest' to only go into 'ministry', as important as this is. He does not only want us to spread his love in 'word', but in deed. We read in 1 John 3:17ff- *If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with in word only, but in deed and in truth.* When we tell people the gospel, or teach the Bible, or lead people to repentance and faith, we are loving "in word". But that is not the only way to love. In fact, John is saying that loving in word "only" is probably not love at all. If we are not addressing people's physical-material needs with loving deeds, we are clearly not motivated by love. To minister in word only betrays an unloving motive. Even Jesus was "mighty in word and deed" (Luke 24:19), he did not only preach, but he healed the sick, fed the hungry, and raised the dead.

The New Testament is filled with admonitions for Christians to be as concerned about 'social' problems as 'spiritual' problems. In Eph.4:28, we are told that everyone who works should do so at least partially so he or she can share their income with the poor. In Luke 12:33-34 we have a very strong call by Jesus to be sure that our giving to people in need is significant. In Matthew 25 we see a famous parable that shows us the kind of work Jesus wants us to be involved in--caring for the hungry, the homeless, the sick, and the imprisoned. The reason for this balance of 'word' and 'deed' is even seen in Easter itself. Jesus did not simply die for our sins--he was raised physically. That means he is not only going to save us spiritually, but save us physically. He is concerned to heal dying souls and dying bodies. We should be concerned with both, just as Joseph was concerned with both (45:7-8).

One minister once said, “Wherever lives are being lost, Satan is present and working. Wherever lives are being saved, God is present and working. We should be present wherever lives are being saved.”

Chapter 48

4. 48:1-20. Hebrews 11:21 selects Jacob’s blessing of Joseph’s sons to be the premier act of faith in his life. Why does Joseph bring them to Jacob? How does both his blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh (v.14), and his summary of his life (v.15) express great faith? (cf. Jacob’s statement of 42:36 and 48:15-16.)

Why does Joseph bring his sons to Jacob?

Joseph brings his two sons to Jacob--the elder, Manasseh, and the younger, Ephraim, for his blessing. They were born in Egypt to an Egyptian woman, and it would be possible therefore to say that Joseph’s children did not belong as the legal heirs of Jacob. But Jacob says here otherwise and puts the matter beyond doubt. First, he recalls the covenant of God who promised to give Jacob’s descendants a land and a blessing (v.3-4). Then Jacob says that thought Manasseh and Ephraim were born in Egypt, they shall be numbered among his descendants and receive a portion of Jacob’s inheritance (v.5-7).

How does his blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh express great faith?

When Joseph approaches his father, he leads Manasseh toward Jacob’s right hand and Ephraim toward his left. The right hand was considered the place of greater honor. Joseph expected the older child to get the greater blessing and the headship of the family. To everyone’s surprise, Jacob deliberately crossed his arms to put his right hand on Ephraim’s head. (48:14). This displeased Joseph, who seems to say, “Father, you are being confused--*this* one is the right son to give the bigger blessing to--and *that* one is the wrong son.” (v.18) But Jacob retorts, “I know *exactly* what I am doing, Joseph. The wrong son is the right son.” (v.19) Why does Jacob resist family pressure and contradict human tradition--both of which dictated that he bless the older over the younger?

Of course, he has received prophetic insight from God when he says, “*nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations*” (48:19). But it seems (especially in light of Heb.11:21) that he is doing more than just conveying a prophecy of the future. When he refuses to bless the father’s favorite, pride and joy, Jacob is pointing to God’s method of grace and salvation, which always contradicts the world’s economy. In the world’s economy, the first shall be first and the last shall be last; in the gospel’s economy, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. That is the secret to understanding the ways of God in the world, and it is utterly foolish to human thinking. Over and over again, God chooses to work in the world through what the world thinks of as weaker.

Take a moment of retrospection over what we learned this year in the book of Judges. Nearly every time he raises up a deliverer, it is always a “cross-eyed” choice (by the world’s standards), it is always the “wrong son”:

Ehud is disabled and has a crippled right hand. In that ancient time, this condition totally disqualified him as warrior thus leader.

Deborah was a woman, and women weren’t considered by the world to be leaders.

Gideon was the ‘least’ member of the ‘least’ family in the ‘least’ tribe. He was the equivalent what we would call today a ‘loser’.

Jephthah was a underworld figure in organized crime, a brigand and bandit.

Samson was a playboy-sex addict, emotionally immature to a remarkable degree.

But the pattern is not only in the book of Judges. God chooses little David, not the big strapping Jesse's sons, to go against Goliath. God insists Gideon whittle down his army from 10,000 to 300 before go up against the Midianites, because *"you have too many for me to deliver"* (7:2). God chooses Israel, one of smallest and weakest of all nations, to be the vessel of the chosen seed and true faith to the world. In the gospels, when Jesus the Messiah comes, he is born in manger to poor parents. He has no political party and no military might. Over and over again, Jesus chooses the marginal, the prostitute, the tax collector, the pagan, the women and children to be his disciples and rejects the social insider, the moral, the religious, the upstanding. And finally, in his greatest act of salvation, he gives himself to be beaten and to die. In every case, salvation is accomplished in exactly the opposite way to the world's logic. God is always acting 'cross-eyed', putting his hands on the 'wrong son', bucking the world's system. Jacob's faith is seen this:

"There is gentle irony in the fact that this is just such a situation as the one on which he had exercised his guile in his youth. Once more the firstborn's blessing is destined for the younger brother, but now there is no faithless scheming or bitter after taste. It is an object-lesson in quiet responsiveness and faith." (Kidner, p. 212)

Jacob had felt the need to 'help' God in his purposes by scheming and lying to get the blessing from his brother Esau. Now Jacob sees that this has always been God's way. He gently instructs Joseph to accept God's ways of free grace and counter-intuitive salvation. It really is a lesson in "quiet responsiveness and faith".

How does the summary of his life express faith?

Here we see Jacob viewing his life from a very different perspective than that of Gen.42:36. There he said, *"everything is against me!"* which is tantamount to saying, "all things are working together for evil". Every thing he set his heart on--Rachel, then Joseph, now Benjamin--was being taken away from him. It seemed that God was behind the scenes, working at every point to hurt him and make him miserable. Now, he says that God had been his shepherd *"all my life to this day"* (48:15) and he even says that the Angel of the Lord *"delivered me from all harm"* (48:16). This is the complete opposite of his previous statement. Now, as he remembers his sufferings (the flight from his homeland, the deception of Laban, the early death of Rachel, the loss of Joseph) he has the audacity to say that he was being "shepherded" and "kept from all harm" in every one of them. He sees that God was working behind the scenes for his good, out of love. This is a remarkable expression of faith.

5. What difficult incidents in your life can you look back on with the perspective of faith and see God being your 'shepherd' and your 'guardian'?

This John Newton hymn can be of help when reflecting on your life:

A. *I asked the Lord, that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of his salvation know,
And seek more earnestly his face.*

B. *I hoped that in some favoured hour
At once He'd answer my request,
And by His love's constraining power
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.*

C. *Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.*

D. *Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted by gourds, and laid me low.*

E. *'Lord, why is this?' I trembling cried,
'Wilt thou pursue Thy worm to death?'*

F. *These inward trials I employ
From self and pride to set thee free;*

*'Tis in this way,' the Lord replied,
I answer prayers for grace and faith.*

*And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st seek thy all in me.'*

Chapter 50

6. 50:15-20. a) Why is the brothers' message in v.17 so disappointing to Joseph? b) What three things can we learn from Joseph's response which will help us in living anger-free lives? c) Is there anyone in your life that you need to 'use' these factors with—in order to forgive them?

a) Why so disappointing?

There is much evidence that the brothers' message was false and made up. It is rather unlikely that Jacob, who obviously had spent much time with Joseph before he died, would have needed to give such a message to Joseph through his brothers. Surely he would have told such a thing to Joseph himself, directly. And Joseph knew this. Thus he wept, because they did not seem to understand his heart yet. They didn't understand the reasons why he had forgiven them.

b) Three factors in forgiveness.

Joseph exhibits three factors that are critical if we are going to forgive wrongs toward us and live without bitterness.

First, he says, "*Am I in the place of God?*" (v.19). He remembers that he does not have the *right* to judge others. Why not? 1) We don't have sufficient knowledge to know what others deserve. We don't know their hearts, or what else they've faced, and so on. But also, 2) we don't have sufficient goodness to sentence others. We may not have sinned against Mr.X, but we have sinned against others, so we have no warrant to decide what people deserve. Therefore, if we walk around hoping for someone to 'get their come-uppance' or to root for their embarrassment, failure, or downfall, we have put ourselves in the place of God. We have decided what another person deserves and are pulling to see it happen. But how dare we? We have neither the insight or the goodness to do that--we don't have the right. (By the way, this is also an argument against worry. We don't have the right to assume we know what should be happening! Thus worry as well as bitterness is 'putting ourselves in the place of God'.)

Second, he says, "*you intended it for harm, but God intended it for good*"(v.20). He remembers that he does not have the *need* to judge others. God is working all things out for good and for justice. He has a gracious God 1) whose good purposes for his people cannot be thwarted by evil actions (see question #1), and 2) whose justice toward the violent and the wicked cannot be ultimately be held off. He *will* work all things for good and for justice. If a person does not repent by the end, there will be justice. Joseph's confidence in both God's justice and grace makes it unnecessary for him to retaliate. If he takes matters in his own hands, he may wreak vengeance on someone who God is bringing to faith. If on the other hand he forgives, he doesn't have to worry that someone will 'get away' with it. No one, in the end, will get away with anything, because we have not only a gracious God, but a Judge of all the earth.

Third, he promises kind behavior, "*I will provide for you and your children*" (v.21). The third factor in forgiveness is action. He does not simply work on his heart, he does loving deeds toward them. He does not simply refrain from repaying evil for evil, but he repays evil with positive good (cf. Rom.12:18ff). It is not enough, when forgiving someone, to simply refrain from vengeance. You must positively rebuild the relationship and serve the person.

This is powerful stuff. Only if we believe in a gracious yet just God will we be able to avoid taking up the sword and getting swept up in the endless cycle of wrong-retaliation-new wrong-new retaliation. Miroslav Volf, a Croation who has seen great suffering in his homeland, writes:

My thesis, that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance, will be unpopular with many...especially in the West. My thesis is: we should not retaliate against violence with violence. Why not?.....*the only means of prohibiting violence by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God....violence thrives today, secretly nourished by belief that God refuses to take the sword....*It takes the quiet of a suburb for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence is a result of the idea of a God who refuses to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, that idea will invariably die, like other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind...In a world of violence it would not be worthy of God not to wield the sword; if God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end of violence, that God would not be worthy of our worship.” (Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*)

7. Compare Joseph with Daniel. What lessons have you learned from them about how to live as a believer with integrity in a pagan, non-Christian environment?

- a) Excellence in their work. No excuses for poor work. Everything they accomplished for the Lord was premised on the fact that their work itself was so well-done.
- b) Neither unnecessarily outspoken nor cowardly about their faith. Neither of them felt the need to push their faith on everyone. In many ways they were very low-key. But when they got to critical places where compromise would have been convenient, they refused.
- c) Adapted to the culture externally, not internally. They were not separatists. They got the learning of the society they were in and were completely ‘at home’ in its customs, education, literature, art. But they maintained the moral, spiritual, and theological world-view of the true faith. Their faith consisted less in external customs (dress, food, style) and more in intellectual world-view and moral character.
- d) They worked for the common good, not just their own people. Though both Joseph and Daniel had a special burden for the people of God, they showed justice for all. They worked with the ‘people of the world’ as co-citizens, saving lives and working for justice in society.
- e) They had a hope for the future. See Joseph’s words in Genesis 5) 22-26. Both he and Daniel understood that God’s kingdom would win out in the end. The kingdoms of this world were temporary. This means that, though they won great honor in the earthly kingdoms, they looked beyond them. They were not therefore too caught up in desire for earthly power and acclaim. They were neither afraid of it nor desirous for it.

Week 25

Esther 1:1-2:18

THE FEASTS OF THE KING

SOS 3/98-99

Resources:

--“Esther” in R.Dillard and T.Longman, *An Intro to the Old Testament* (Zondervan, 1994)

--JoyceG.Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1984)

INTRODUCTION:

The book of Esther has had many critics. Martin Luther was particularly unhappy with it. A great number have questioned whether it should be in the Bible at all. Why?

Perhaps the most notable facts about the book is that God is not mentioned by name at all. Even during the repeated description of the Jews’ fasting “in sackcloth and ashes” does not directly say that it entailed prayer (although it certainly did). The author seems, therefore, to be deliberately avoiding any reference to God. There is no depiction of anyone worshipping anywhere in the narrative. Not only that, the Jews we meet in this story have chosen to remain living in the pagan Persian society and to not return to Jerusalem and identify with the restoration community of Israel being re-established there. The events of this account take place in Persia in the reign of Xerxes (486-465 B.C.), after the return of the exiles to their homeland. In short, this appears to be an almost ‘secular’ story about a group of non-religious Jews.

But that if that is all that it was, the ancient Hebrews would never have recognized it and received it as part of Scripture. Rather than being a theological weakness or ‘lapse’, the hiddenness of God is a powerful literary device to bring home its message about the absolute sovereignty and grace of God.

It is noteworthy that in the oldest Hebrew Bibles, Esther was not grouped with the historical books (Judges, Kings, Chronicles) but with the wisdom literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes). This doesn’t mean that the account is fictional--the author clearly claims to be recording historical events (2:23; 10:2-3). As we will see later, it is very right and helpful that Esther is placed alongside of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Bible we have today. But this association of Esther with wisdom literature is instructive. It reflects an awareness that the book is about practical principles for living wisely in a pluralistic, pagan society like ancient Persia. Just as we saw in the case of Joseph, and Daniel, the Bible addresses the question: *can we live a life of faith and integrity in a faithless culture and society?* Its answer is a resounding “yes”. Then a second question is addressed: “how can we live faithfully in such a society?” The narrative itself yields answers to that question as we study and reflect on it.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE:

***The Feasts of the King.* (1:1-4:17)**

1:1-22 - The King’s Power revealed

(1-8) *The King’s first feast*

(10-12) *The defiance of the Queen*

(13-22) *The revenge of the King*

2:1-18 - The Ascent of Esther

(1-4) *The King’s regrets*

(5-11) *Esther, the beautiful orphan*

- (12-18) *How the orphan became a queen*
- 2:19-3:15 - The King's weakness revealed
- (19-23) *The plot against the King*
- (1-15) *The plot against the Jews*
- 4:1-17 - The Choices of Esther
- (1-8) *The challenge of Mordecai*
- (9-17) *Esther takes the lead*

***The Feasts of the Queen.* (5:1-7:10)**

- 5:1-14 - Esther risks her life
- (1-5) *Esther finds favor*
- (6-8) *Esther's first feast*
- (9-14) *Haman digs his own pit*
- 6:1-14 - The sleepless night
- (1-3) *The king's book*
- (4-14) *The first reversal of destinies*
- 7:1-10 - Esther intercedes for her people
- (1-6) *Esther's second feast and her petition*
- (7-10) *Haman's falls in his own pit*

***The Feasts of the Lord.* (8:1-10:3)**

- 8:1-17 - The King's new edict
- (1-6) *Esther's second petition*
- (7-13) *The salvation reversal*
- (14-17) *The people feast and rejoice*
- 9:1-17 - Rest from enemies
- (1-16) *The execution of justice*
- (17-32) *The annual feast established*
- 10:1-3 - The peace of Mordecai

Read Esther 1:1-2:4.

1. Why do you think the description of the feast is so lengthy? Why do you think Vashti refused the request, though she probably knew of the danger? Summarize what can you learn about the characters of Xerxes, Vashti, and Memucan from this chapter.

2. Why did Xerxes (and his counsellors) decide to order all husbands to rule their wives? How do you think this looked to the rest of the country? What indication is there that the king had regrets?

Read Esther 2:5-23.

3. How would a young girl feel who was being taken to the King's harem? What factors in Esther's life are out of her control? What factors are under her control? Why does Mordecai tell Esther to be silent about her Jewish faith?

4. Who is conspicuously absent from this Biblical narrative so far? Where do you see God's hand at work?

Read Esther 3:1-18.

5. What do we learn about Haman's character? What do we learn about Mordecai from this chapter?

Read Esther 4:1-17.

6. How does Mordecai handle Haman's threat (vv.1-4, 7-8, 12-14, 17)? What understanding of God is assumed? How do you handle times of crisis and difficulty?

7. What is Esther's first response to Mordecai's request (vv.6-11). What do you think Esther is feeling?

8. What three arguments does Mordecai use to persuade Esther to act (v.13-14)? What is Esther's response? How is it a model for us? Where do you next need to apply it?

9. Read "THEMES of Esther". Which of these themes do you see reflected in the story so far?

THEMES:

1) God calls us to serve him in intensely secular settings.

This message is similar (but stronger!) as that of the accounts of Joseph and Daniel. We learn here how a believer can be effectively used by God in the heart of secular and pluralistic culture, even in the centers of its power. In all three accounts, we learn of Jewish figures who rise to power in an unbelieving society through their skills and talents--and then use their places to save their people.

This is a threatening message to many Christians today. There has always been a strong tendency among orthodox believers toward separation from the polluted, unclean, and morally/spiritually 'messy' arenas of politics, business, government, and so on. But Esther is a concubine, a member of a harem!

"Let Esther's harem represent every unclean political or commercial institution or structure where evil reigns and must be confronted. Believers are needed there....Our cities are full of dens of iniquity. Our culture is described as essentially post-Christian, secular, and often antithetical to biblical values and hostile to biblical virtues....[But] Esther gives us permission to reflect on our call to serve God within the matrix of a modern secular....system....How could God call Esther to be the interracial replacement spouse of a polygamous, pagan Persian king?....This book is off the screen for many evangelicals....We urban people need Esther now more than ever. Never allow it to be trivialized or spiritualized away, as it has been so often...." (Ray Bakke, A Theology as Big and the City (IVP, 1997).

2) God calls us not only to change individuals, but change society and culture.

In each case we've looked at in this course--Joseph, Daniel, and Esther--God called someone to work for just laws and policies in a secular society. It is common for modern Christians to insist that the only way to change society is to convert and disciple individuals. If that is all there is to be done, then the 'higher' calling would be to go into Christian ministry. But the Bible shows us people who God also calls to work for social and "systemic" justice and peace in society. Esther used her position to have an unjust law repealed.

Ray Bakke (*A Theology as Big as the City*, p.106) reminds us that we must read Esther 'synoptically' with Ezra and Nehemiah. These three Jewish 'heroes' had three very different callings. Ezra was a clergyman, who taught the Bible to the restored community in Jerusalem. Nehemiah was a lay person who used his skills to literally rebuild the wall and infra-structure of Jerusalem to insure safe streets and a decent economy. Esther, meanwhile, used her position to work for just laws in the secular realm. Only all three people, working together, were able to rebuild Jerusalem into a viable city. One did evangelism/discipleship (working on the spiritual welfare), one did community development (working on the social and economic welfare), and one did social justice (creating laws that were just and allowed the community to grow). This was not only a lay-clergy leadership team, but a male-female leadership team.

This means that we will never see God's kingdom move forward with only evangelism and discipleship. We must also do 'wholistic' ministry that works on behalf of the poor and at-risk neighborhoods, and we must also have Christians in 'secular' jobs working with excellence, integrity, and distinctiveness. We need Ezra ministry, Nehemiah ministry, and Esther ministry--all together--if we are going to 'win' our society for Christ.

3) In our life in secular society, believers will sometimes have to choose between conflicting authorities. Mordecai and Esther have to face very difficult choices between obeying illegitimate human authority and obeying the ultimate authority of God. Though it is

not completely clear why, Mordecai refused to prostrate himself before Haman. Esther had to risk her standing and resist the natural desire to conform and obey. Believers in a secular society have to be careful to not 'stand up' and resist too often or too seldom. At one point Esther says, "I would not have protested x but I feel I must speak up about y." (See 7:4). Wise living in a pluralistic society includes the ability to know when to speak up and when to keep silent.

But the message is very clear. God has a plan (see #4 below), and in order to be part of it (4:14) there ordinarily comes a time when we must stand up for our beliefs regardless of the potential cost.

4) God is the only real King.

We have noted that God's name is never directly mentioned why? The teaching is: *God is sovereignly in control, even when he appears to be completely absent.* The dramatic tension in the book revolves around a threat to the very existence of the Jews. If we put the book in its total Biblical context, we know that this is really a threat to the whole plan of God to redeem the world by grace. Genesis 12:1-3 tells us that God planned to bring salvation into the world through a family and a people, descended from Abraham. Abraham's people were to be guardians of both the true faith and the "Messianic seed" which would one day produce a savior who would redeem the world. A threat to the Jewish nation was, therefore, an attack by the world on God's redemptive plan. However, largely through a set of "coincidences", the Jews are saved. God's plan to save the world through grace is intact.

"What the writer of Esther has done is to give us a story in which the main actor is not so much as mentioned--the presence of God is implied and understood throughout the story, so that these mounting coincidences are but the by-product of his rule over history and his providential care for his people. It is an extraordinary piece of literary genius that this author wrote a book that is about the actions and rule of God from beginning to end, and yet that God is not named on a single page of the story."
(Dillard, p.196).

What a vivid way to teach us that God is always present, even when he seems most absent and his purposes most 'opaque'! The message of the book is that God's plan of grace/salvation cannot fail, and though he may appear to be completely absent, he is really behind everything, working out his plan.

Because of this theme, the writer contrasts *two conflicting world-views*--that of Haman and that of Mordecai. Haman believes in chance-fate. He casts lots to determine the best time to annihilate the Jews (3:7-11). He thinks he can control history by the exercise of his power. The other world-view is that of Mordecai. He believes that there is a divine presence overruling history (4:14) who can use us if we make ourselves available to him, but whose plan is not dependent on nor thwarted by human power. *"The book sets the two world-views in contrast and shows by the outcome which is to be preferred."* (Baldwin, p.38)

Nevertheless, we are taught that *God's sovereignty is not determinism.* When the story is over, it will be possible to look back and see that so much of what happened was due to a divine power behind even the most mundane 'accidents'. Yet the narrator does not depict a kind of fatalistic determinism. Our choices are not determined apart from the responsible exercise of our will. Esther will have to risk her life and act courageously if the salvation of her people will be realized. We are not just passive pawns in God's plan.

5) Human strength is weakness and weakness is strength.

Recent commentators have noticed the weakness of men and the power of women in the book. In contrast to the huge show of power in his great feast, the drunken Xerxes tries to humiliate his wife who in turn humiliates him. In response, he decrees that all men should control their wives when he can't control his own. The decree, evidently made when he was still drunk, only makes him look foolish. Later he appears to regret it on several fronts.

Not only is he 'bested' by his first queen, the rest of the book shows him being 'bested' by his next queen. While the king is revealed to be ill-informed, forgetful, impulsive, unjust, and unwise, his queen Esther is seen to be brave, take-charge, focused, wise, and just. Not only Vashti and Esther, but Haman's wife Zareh appear as 'strong and shrewd' while all the men (except Mordecai) appear vain and foolish. Eventually, even Mordecai takes orders from Esther (see the end of chapter 4).

Esther, of course, is the person who most of all stands the world's expectations on their head. First, she was an orphan, without father or mother (2:7). Orphans are one of the oppressed, powerless groups (cf. James 1:27). Second, she was a woman, and not a powerful or wealthy woman, but a concubine, the member of a harem. In the process of the narrative, however, she ascends from being an orphan and Mordecai's protege to being a queen of great power, who makes plans and takes decisive leadership and who in the end is her uncle's guardian. Originally, her physical beauty won the king's heart, but 2:15 indicates that her character and behavior had won the attraction of the rest of the court as well.

Esther comes from the outside margins of society and is used by God to do redemption. So again we see a very prominent theme in the Bible. God does not work through the channels that the world considers strong and powerful. Instead, he works through groups (women, racial minorities) who seem powerless. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

In a related theme, we learn that 'the one who would lose himself will find himself'. We learn that evil sets up strains in the fabric of life and backfires on the perpetrator, while faithfulness to God is also wise. Haman, who intends to destroy Mordecai and his kin, ultimately destroys only himself and *his* kin. This theme is especially achieved through the literary device of *irony*. The gallows that Haman builds for Mordecai becomes his own place of execution. Haman seeks to plunder the wealth of the Jews, but it is his wealth that fall into their hands. The reversal of role and of fortune that occurs so often in the Bible eventually finds its fullest expression in Jesus, who was exalted because he stooped so low. At the same time Satan is brought low because he sought exaltation.

6) Salvation "rest" comes by the sacrifice and intercession of another.

Many modern readers are uncomfortable with how the Jews in chapter 8-9 turn on their enemies and kill many of them. It seems vindictive. However, the intriguing note that they did not take any of the money of their victims (9:10,15) indicates that this event is part of a larger and longer story.

The writer tells us that Mordecai is a descendent of Kish, the father of Saul (2:5) while Haman is a descendent of Agag (3:5) the Amalekite king who fought against Saul (1 Sam.15). From the time of the Exodus (Exod 17:14-16) through the time of the Judges (Judges 3:13; 5:14; 6:3,33; 7:12; 10:12), the Amalekites had been aggressors and oppressors of the Israelites, and they represented the hostility of the world against God and his people. It is very interesting that the Jews do not take any of the wealth of their victims (9:10,15)--they did not want to make the same mistake that Saul did with the Amalekites (1 Sam.15:9-19). They did not take their wealth because their destruction of their enemies was a simply act of justice--it was not an imperialistic action of self-interest or exploitation. They were seeking to claim the "rest" that God promised some day to give them. Deuteronomy 25:19 promised

that some day, “Amalek” will be destroyed, and the people of God will experience “rest” from their enemies. The end of the book of Esther shows that this “rest” was partially fulfilled in the ministry of Esther (see 9:22).

But the book of Hebrews tells us the “rest” of the Sabbath day and the “rest” of military triumph over enemies is only a dim hint of a greater “rest” to come (Heb.3:7-4:16). *“There still remains a rest for the people of God, for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”* (Heb.4:10). That rest is the resting from our good works through the grace of the “gospel” (Heb.4:6).

What this means is that Esther’s ministry is a pattern of Christ’s.

Esther’s great temptation, once she comes into a place of luxury, comfort, and privilege, is to hold on to that position to the detriment of her people. When by God’s grace we come into such a standing, we may be seduced by it. Mordecai had to challenge Esther and force her to see her choices. Salvation comes through Esther only when she is willing to give up her place in the palace and take her life into her own hands and risk it all in order to intercede before the throne of power. Again we see that redemption comes not by gaining but by losing, not by filling oneself, but by emptying oneself.

We also see, over and over, that we need a deliverer who identifies with us and that stands as our representative--as in the career of Joseph in Egypt, David before Goliath. So in this story we are led to see Jesus, who did not need a challenge to leave his place of power, who saved us not at the risk of his glory but at the cost of his glory, who did not say, “*if* I perish, I perish” but “*when* I perish, I perish”, who had to die in order to stand before the throne as our intercessor (Heb.7:24-25).

But the “rest” that Jesus brings is not one that gives us rest from enemies by killing them, but by winning them. After the cross, we pray for our enemies. Jesus has brought the barrier down between Jew and Gentile, Saul and Amalek.

IDOLATRY and Modern Society

IDOLATRY- A topical Bible study

Idolatry is one of the main themes of the Bible.

Idolatry as the story of the Bible.

The entire story of the Bible can be seen as a struggle between true faith and idolatry.

Idolatry in the beginning

In the beginning, human beings were made to worship and serve God, and to rule over all created things in God's name (Gen.1:26-28). Instead, we "fell into sin". When Paul sums up the "fall" of humanity into sin, he does so by describing it in terms of idolatry. We refused to give God glory (i.e. to make him the most important thing) and instead chose parts of creation to glorify in his place. *"They exchanged the glory of the immortal God...and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator."* (Rom.1:21-25) In short, we totally reversed the original intended order. Human beings came to worship and serve created things, and therefore the created things came to rule over them. Death itself is the ultimate emblem of this, since we toil in the dust until finally we become just dust (Gen.3:17-19).

The Law against Idols

The great sin of the Mosaic period is the making of a golden calf (Exod.32), and the Mosaic law most emphatically forbid the use of any concrete "form" for the worship of God--whether it was meant to represent the Lord or not (Exod.20:4; Deut.4:12-19). When God made a covenant with Israel, he gave them a code of covenant behavior in Exodus 20-23, and it ended with a warning not to make *"a covenant with...their gods"* (v.32) lest they *"snare you"* (v.33).

Just like in Romans 1, this passage does not envision any "third" option. We will either worship the uncreated God, or we will worship some created thing (an idol). There is no possibility of our worshipping nothing. We will *"worship and serve"* (Rom.1:25) something. Whatever we worship we serve, for it "snare" us. Therefore every human personality, every human community, and every human thought-form will be based on some ultimate concern or some ultimate allegiance to something.

The Polemic against Idols.

The prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, leveled an enormous polemic against the worship of idols. Some of the key elements in their teaching:

1. First, an idol is empty, nothing, powerless.

The idol is nothing but what we ourselves have made, the work of our own hands (Is.2:8; Jer.1:16). Thus an idol is something we make in *our* image. It is only, in a sense, worshipping ourselves, or a reflection of our own sensibility (Is.44:10-13). It has no ability or power of its own (Is.41:6,7); it will eventually rot (Is.40:20); it cannot tell the future nor control it (Is.41:22-24). Even within its own claims, each idol or god is only part of a pluralistic world. No idol is all-powerful and lord over every area of life. Every god is simply the god of this or that city, this or that vocation, this or that arena, this or that person. Everyone has his or her own gods. No god demands exclusive superiority over all of life and over all people.

Idols, then, contrast with the true God, who makes us in *his* image, who is not a reflection of our experience but one who shows himself through authoritative self-revelation. He is the only true God, the Lord of heaven and earth.

2. Second, (paradoxically) an idol is all and only about getting power.

Idolatry is so often associated by the prophets with social injustice (Amos 2:6-8). Why? Because the dynamic of idol worship was to achieve power and security by appeasing the god through rituals and good works. All systems of idolatry were always centered on localized dieties that were mediated by royal and priestly elites. This is why when Naaman went to Israel's God to get healed of leprosy, he went to the King of Israel with loads of money (2 Kings 5:6,7). The idols helped people "at the top" maintain the status quo. Idolatry is a way to perform and appease a god so it will give you security, influence, comfort, and power.

Idols, then contrast with the true God, who saves us completely by grace. Idols are manipulated by religion and performance, while God can only be responded to by repentance--a loss of power. While idolatry is the attempt to manipulate God to obtain power and security/salvation for oneself or one's group, the gospel is that we are saved by sheer grace, and thus we surrender ourselves in grateful love and become willing, sacrificial servants of everyone. We now become agents in God's kingdom which comes full of justice and mercy to all who are suffering.

3. Third, an idol is a spiritually dangerous power which saps you of all power.

Paradoxically, idols are seen by the Bible as terribly dangerous evil powers.

First, the idol brings about terrible spiritual blindness of heart and mind (Is.44:9,18). The idolater is self-deluded through a web of lies (Is.44:20). When we set our 'worship apparatus' in our hearts upon something smaller than the true God, it produces a 'delusional field' which causes us to live in deep denial of the truth and reality. This can be the delusion of an idol that makes something into a *psychological* idol--such as power, approval, comfort, or control. This can be the delusion of an idl that makes something into a *social-cultural* idol--such as nationality (fascism), the state (socialism), reason (rationalism), science (empiricism), experience (existentialism), ad inifitum.

Second, the idol brings about slavery. Jeremiah likens our relationship to idols as a love-addicted person to his or her lover (Jer.2:25). We cannot help ourselves--we *must* follow our god. They poison the heart into complete dependence on the idol for salvation and hope (Is.44:17) and yet, when we are in trouble, they cannot save us (Jer.2:28). In Ezekiel 14:1-11, we have the unique term "*idols in their hearts*" which the people "*set before their face*" (v.3, 4). God says that we set up idols in our hearts, but he will seek to "*recapture the hearts of the people*" (v.5) This means that an idol is not primarily a material image, but some thing or relation or person or cause that we make the center of our hope and affection. It is that thing that we "face" with our whole being, that which absorbs our thoughts and imaginations.

The New Testament and Idolatry

" If 'idolatry' is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then 'lust' [*inordinate desires*], **epithumiai** is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for that same drift. (See summary statements by Paul, Peter, John, and James as Gal.5:16ff; Eph.2:3, 4:22; I Pet.2:11, 4:2; I John 2:16; James 1:14ff, where **epithumiai** is the catch-all for what is wrong with us.) The tenth commandment [against 'coveting', which is idolatrous, inordinate desire for something]...also...makes sin 'psychodynamic'. It lays bares the grasping and demanding nature of the human heart, as

Paul powerfully describes in Romans 7....the NT merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires...for lust, demandingness, craving and yearning are specifically termed 'idolatry' (Eph.5:5 and Colossians 3:5).

--David Powlison--"Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair"

Sum: The sin under every sin.

The Ten Commandments begin with two commandments against idolatry. Then comes commandments three to ten. Why this order? It is because the fundamental problem is always idolatry. In other words, **we never break commandments 3-10 without first breaking 1-2.**

"The principle crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry. For although each individual sin retains its own proper feature, although it is destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet they all fall under the general heading of idolatry....[All murder and adultery, for example are idolatry, for they arise because something is loved more than God--yet in turn, all idolatry is murder for it assaults God, and all idolatry is also adultery for it is unfaithfulness to God.] Thus it comes to pass, that in idolatry all crimes are detected, and in all crimes idolatry." -- Tertullian, On Idolatry Chap. I

"There is not one in a thousand who does not set his confidence upon the works, expecting by them to win God's favor and anticipate His grace; and so they make a fair of them, a thing which God cannot endure, since He has promised His grace freely, and wills that we begin by trusting that grace, and in it perform all works, whatever they may be.. Excerpts from Martin Luther, Treatise Concerning Good Works (1520) (Part IX).

"All those who do not at all times trust God and do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments, and in addition had all the prayers, fasting, obedience, patience, chastity, and innocence of all the saints combined. For the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but mere sham, show and pretense, with nothing back of them... If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior]...." (Part X. XI)

"This faith, faithfulness, confidence deep in the heart, is the true fulfilling of the First Commandment. Without this there is no other work that is able to satisfy this Commandment. And as this Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed, in which they exist, and by which they are directed and measured, so also its work, that is, the faith or confidence in God's favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all others must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured....(Part IX)

"Note for yourself, then, how far apart these two are: keeping the First Commandment with outward works only, and keeping it with inward trust. For this last makes true, living children of God, the other only makes worse idolatry and the most mischievous hypocrites on earth..." (Part XII)

Point: All people sin in general because we are sinners, but why do we sin in any particular instance? Luther--any sin is rooted in the inordinate lust for something which comes because we are trusting in that thing rather than in Christ for our righteousness or salvation. Therefore, in sin we are always 'forgetting' what God has done for us in Christ and instead are being moved by some idol. Luther says that to fail to believe God accepts us fully in Christ and to look to something else is a failure to keep the first commandment--love *God* with all the heart. Thus beneath any particular sin is the general sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation.

Belgic Confession Chapter 24

"We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin. Therefore it is so far from being true that his justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary without it they would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation. Therefore, it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man; for we do not speak of a vain faith, but of such a faith which is called in Scripture a 'faith working through love,' which excites man to the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word....We would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be continually vexed if they relied not on the merits of our Savior."

Point: Unless we believe the gospel, we will be driven in all we do--whether obeying or disobeying--by pride ("self-love") or fear ("of damnation") because we are serving God idolatrously. We are manipulating him for power with our good-works. Apart from 'grateful remembering' of the gospel, all good works are done then for sinful motives. Mere moral effort, may restrain the heart, but does not truly change the heart. Moral effort merely 'jury rigs' the evil of the heart to produce moral behavior, out of self-interest. It is only a matter of time before such a thin tissue collapses.

Sum: This means then, that *idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong*. Why do we ever lie, or fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is "because we are weak and sinful", but the specific answer is always that there is something besides Jesus Christ that you feel you must have to be happy, something that is more important to your heart than God, something that is spinning out a delusional field and enslaving the heart through inordinate desires. So the secret to change is always to identify the idols of the heart.