

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?

Week 2

JUDGES 2:1-3:6

LIVING AMONG IDOLS

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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 3

JUDGES 3:7-31

EHUD: THE UNEXPECTED LEADER

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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

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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 5

JUDGES 6:1-40

GIDEON MEETS GOD

SOSL 3/98-99

- 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 6

JUDGES 7:1-25

GIDEON LEADS TO VICTORY

SOSL 3/98-99

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 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 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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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

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.

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

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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?

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)

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?

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)?

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?

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?

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)?

Week 10

JUDGES 14:1-15:20

THE RISE OF SAMSON

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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)?

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?

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?

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)?

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?

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?

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

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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?

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?

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

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?

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?

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

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?

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

Week 12

JUDGES 17:1-18:25 MEN WITHOUT CHESTS

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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?

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?

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?

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)

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)?

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?

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?

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

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 14

Ps.137; Jer. 28-29

Daniel 1:1-2

EXILES IN A FOREIGN LAND

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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 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)?

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 16

Daniel 2:1-49

THE DREAM OF THE KINGDOM

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- 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 17
Daniel 3:1-30

THE FIERY FURNACE

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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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

6. vv.28-30. Compare what Nebuchadnezzar knows about God now with what he knew in 2:46-49.

Week 18

Daniel 4:1-37

THE MAD KING

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- 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) Nebuchadnezzar is both insecure and abusive. How would the lesson of v.17—that God “gives kingdoms to anyone he wishes, and sets over them the lowliest of men”—practically change those two aspects of his character? b) How will this principle—that success is always an unmerited gift—affect the way a successful man or woman 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?*

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 6:1-28

THE LION'S DEN

- 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)?*
- 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.)*
- 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 be persecuted for instead of godliness?*
- 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?*
- 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? (cf.vv.5,10; 2 Chron.6:38-39; Ps.55:17)*
- 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?*
- 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'?*
- 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?*
- 9. What do we learn about Darius' a) character, b) regard of Daniel and his God, c) spiritual condition before and after the incident.*

Week 20

Daniel 6:1-28

THE LION'S DEN

SOSL 3/98-99

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- 9. v.25-27. Does Daniel's 'resurrection' actually bring about what Darius calls for? Whose resurrection did?*

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 22

Genesis 39:1-23-41:57

JOSEPH'S FALL AND RISE

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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 23

Genesis 42:1-44:34

JOSEPH'S AND HIS BROTHERS

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1. *42:1-5. Jacob fears to send Benjamin with his brothers. Why is he afraid?*
2. *42:6-38. At first sight Joseph's handling of his brothers seems vengeful. a) What are his motives? cf. 42:16-19, 24; 43:30.*
3. *42:6-38. a) What parallels are there between chapters 37 and 42? b) How did his treatment of them arise from his memory of his dreams (42:9)? c) What are Joseph's goals? d) What evidence is there that his strategy is working?*
4. *Does God do the same thing in our lives as Joseph is doing? How God done anything like this with you?*
5. *42:36-43:14. a) How does Jacob's reaction in 42:36-38 reveal his spiritual weaknesses? b) What does Jacob finally realize about what he must do with Benjamin with Judah's help (43:8b)? How is that a principle for all of us? How have you seen this worked out in your own life? c) Where does Jacob finally put his hope (43:14)?*
6. *43:32-44:34. We have seen what Joseph had to sacrifice (his revenge) and what Jacob had to sacrifice (his idol). a) What is the final sacrifice that has to be made before reconciliation can be complete? How does Joseph 'set up' the opportunity for this sacrifice? b) Why is the particular brother who makes the sacrifice significant to Joseph? Why is it significant to us?*
7. *Consider how reconciliation in relationships only happens through these same kinds of sacrifices (made by Joseph, Jacob, and Judah). Is there some relationship in your life that will be strengthened or healed if you practiced one or more of them?*
8. *Remember the dreams of Joseph. How does this history illustrate the principle of Acts 4:27-28? How can this lead to confidence in our own lives?*

Week 23

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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?

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 Colossans 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.