



# *Leaves* From the Tree

*Studies from God's Word*

In 2005, Pastor Tim Bourgeois began a daily bible reading to encourage Tree of Life Christian Church and the larger body of Christ to read the entire Bible cover to cover.

The following series of articles are transcripts of Pastor Tim's original emails.

Please use these articles for meditation, personal devotion, Bible study, or your own daily Bible reading.



JUDGES 1 - 6

## Judges 1

***1:1-4 - "After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the LORD, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?" The LORD said, "Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand." And Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come up with me into the territory allotted to me, that we may fight against the Canaanites. And I likewise will go with you into the territory allotted to you." So Simeon went with him. Then Judah went up and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand, and they defeated 10,000 of them at Bezek."***

This is the second great leadership transition Israel has encountered since leaving Egypt. When Moses died, the Lord appointed Joshua to take his place and lead Israel into the Promised Land. Now, Joshua has died, and there is no leader that succeeds him. It is not that there is no faithful man in Israel to take the lead. There are capable leaders, but in the Lord's purpose, He did not appoint any one man to take Joshua's place as leader. The roles of Moses and Joshua were never intended by the Lord to establish permanent positions in the nation like our president. When one president's term ends, the nation always chooses another to take their place because the presidency is a permanent position within our government structure. The Lord raised up both Moses and Joshua to fulfill a special calling, and when that assignment was completed, their role as leaders of the nation died with them.

Where does that leave Israel in relationship to this new gap in national leadership? It left Israel dependent upon the Lord, which was a good thing. As Joshua dies, the people of Israel responded in the best way possible, They "inquired of the Lord." The details of what they did to inquire of the Lord are not given here, but most likely, the tribal leaders of Israel gathered at Shiloh, at the tabernacle of the Lord and sought His direction from the current high priest. The people also asked the Lord the right question. Their question showed that they were willing and ready to obey the Lord's earlier command to continue the conquest of Canaan until they had finished the job. Their question asked the Lord which of the tribes should lead this next phase of the conquest. The Lord responded with a clear word that Judah was to lead in the coming battle. Judah was given this leadership privilege as the largest tribe, and because they were the tribe prophetically identified with ruler-ship in Israel because of the promise that the Messiah would arise from the tribe of Judah.

Judah invited the tribe of Simeon to join them in the battle because Simeon had been granted a portion in the territory of Judah. The obedience and faith of Judah was rewarded by the Lord with a great victory at Bezek. The description of their victory emphasized again the recurring theme in the conquest that victory was not credited to the superior strength or numbers of Israel, but to the hand of the Lord in the battle. The Lord "gave" the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hand.

Our victory in any battle we face in life is found in this same principle. We do not succeed because we are stronger, smarter, better, or greater than others. We succeed when the Lord gives us success. This principle does not eliminate our part in the battle. Judah did fight but their victory was the Lord's blessing.

***1:5-7 - "They found Adoni-bezek at Bezek and fought against him and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. Adoni-bezek fled, but they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and his big toes. And Adoni-bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to pick up scraps under my table. As I have done, so God has repaid me." And they brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there."***

In Judah's victory they fought against and defeated Adoni-bezek, the leader of Bezek. He fled the battle when he saw the battle was lost, but the men of Judah pursued him and captured him. When they captured him they cut off his thumbs and big toes in an ironic twist because of his own treatment of 70 tribal kings which he had previously defeated over the years of his reign. The cutting off of the thumbs and big toes rendered a man unable to fight as a warrior and effectively humiliated him in a public display of complete dominance by the victor. Adoni-bezek even acknowledged the fitting punishment he had received as he reflected on his own treatment of the 70 kings that he had humiliated in this way.

The passage simply describes what was done in this case without any comment on whether this was a wise choice to handle this Canaanite king in this way. We might wonder what to make of this story if we did not have the benefit of other instructions from the Lord that preceded this event. Was Judah free to deal with this Canaanite king any way they chose? The Lord had given all Israel a clear command in this. They were required to execute this king. Their decision to keep him alive and to cut off his thumbs and big toes is an early indication of the influence of Canaan upon Israel. This is what the Lord had warned Israel would take place if they did not follow His commands in this. Judah compromised the standard of God's command by adopting the ethics of the Canaanites. They did humiliate this king in this, but it was ultimately a humiliation for themselves to adopt the standards of the world around them.

The church always faces this same challenge. We are called by the Lord to live in the midst of a culture whose ethics and morals are dramatically different than the ethical and moral standards of the Lord. Our responsibility is to display the Lord's standards in our lives without compromise. At any point at which we adopt the ethical standard of the world around us and make that our own standard we are compromising the Lord's standard. The challenge comes when some standard of the world seems to make sense to us. We may not even suffer any immediate fallout from adopting the world's standard in a particular case. In the case of Judah's treatment of Adoni-bezek we don't see any immediate response from the Lord correcting their compromise. It is simply the quiet beginning of a

slide toward greater and greater compromise that will trouble Judah and all of Israel in the years ahead.

***1:19-21 - "And the LORD was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron. And Hebron was given to Caleb, as Moses had said. And he drove out from it the three sons of Anak. But the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem, so the Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day."***

This description repeats a development that was described earlier in the book of Joshua. Judah's efforts to conquer the portion of the land assigned to them was successful, but not entirely. Judah effectively captured and settled all of the hill country in their territory. However, they struggled to conquer the flat lowland plain. There was a single factor that explains why they took possession of the hill country but not the plain. The Canaanites in the plain were equipped with iron chariots. This was the most fearsome weapon of war that had yet been developed in history. Judah did not have to deal with the problem of iron chariots in the hill country because the chariots were ineffective in the highlands. On the lowland plain the chariots were a dominant military factor

The writer's description is interesting at this point. It is stated that Judah "could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron." Is the writer implying that it was beyond Judah's capability to defeat these chariot equipped Canaanites? Was it impossible for them to conquer this challenge? Had the Lord made a mistake in commanding them to conquer this territory? Perhaps the Lord should have commanded them to conquer only the hill country and given them permission to avoid the plain because of the insurmountable challenge of the chariots. The truth is that Judah could not drive them out, not because it was impossible, but because they refused to trust and obey the Lord when the challenge in front of them seemed too difficult and costly in their own eyes. They looked at the chariots of iron and decided to stay up in the hill country. In making this decision they disobeyed the Lord to their own detriment and shame.

Judah should have remembered that this was not their first encounter with chariots. The army of Pharaoh had pursued them into the wilderness a generation earlier. When Israel had their backs to the Red Sea which could not be crossed, the Lord opened a path for them in the midst of the sea on dry ground. The Lord then drew the chariots of Egypt to chase Israel across the Red Sea and once Israel was safely across the sea, the Lord brought the waters of the sea crashing down upon the chariots of Egypt. Yes, the iron chariots were a great challenge, but Israel would never learn how the Lord would have worked on their behalf if they had only trusted Him and obeyed Him and gone to battle in the plain against these chariots. The Lord would have been faithful to provide a way for Israel to defeat this challenge, but when they refused to obey the Lord they

lost their opportunity to see the Lord work by His power on their behalf. Now, the Lord would use the continuing presence of the chariots to teach Israel the cost of unbelief and disobedience.

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## Judges 2

***2:1-5 - "Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you." As soon as the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the LORD."***

The book of Judges opens in chapter one with an overview of the disappointing record of Israel's failure to complete the assignment of the Lord to fully drive out the inhabitants of the Promised Land. Now chapter two opens with a fascinating interruption. The angel of the Lord makes an appearance at this critical juncture. Remember, the angel of the Lord is not like any other angel. This is not a created angel, but is a special designation used in the Old Testament to identify the pre-incarnate appearances of the Lord Jesus. This is not the first time in Israel's story that the angel of the Lord has made an appearance. It was the angel of the Lord that spoke to Moses from the burning bush and from Mount Sinai. It was the angel of the Lord that had led them through the wilderness by the pillar of smoke and fire. It was the angel of the Lord of which the Lord spoke when He gave this word of warning. "When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces." (Exodus 23:23-24).

Now the angel of the Lord appears to hold Israel accountable for what the Lord had commanded. The angel's message is delivered to Israel at Bochim, but we are meant to notice that He starts His journey in Gilgal and then He travels to Bochim. Why does the angel come from Gilgal? Gilgal was the place where Israel first crossed over the Jordan River into the Promised Land. It was at Gilgal that a memorial of stones was established testifying to the Lord's faithfulness. It was at Gilgal that the first Passover in the Promised Land was celebrated. It was at Gilgal that Israel was circumcised as a preparation for the conquest of Canaan. The angel of the Lord came from Gilgal as a reminder of where and how

the conquest began. It was the Lord's way of reminding Israel of how they had drifted from their early commitment to follow the Lord fully.

The message the angel delivers is not encouraging. This is no heavenly pep talk from the Lord. This is simply a word of rebuke and well deserved judgment. The Lord had come to visit His people for the purpose of evaluating their faithfulness and obedience to Him. This is the Lord's pattern that continues into the New Covenant. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.'" (Revelation 2:1). In this passage, the Lord reveals that He "walks among" the lampstands which represent His churches. In the seven letters to those churches that follow we see the Lord repeat this pattern of visitation for evaluation. The Lord evaluates each of those seven churches and speaks direct words of rebuke, or encouragement to each as they deserved.

In the case of Israel, they had partially obeyed the Lord by settling Canaan, but partial obedience implies at least some disobedience. In this case, Israel's disobedience just happened to be in the area of the Lord's greatest concern and warning. Israel had disobeyed the Lord by making alliances with the remaining Canaanites and leaving their idolatrous altars intact. This was no threat by the Lord to motivate Israel to further action. This was a pronouncement of judgment without appeal. Now Israel would have to suffer the consequences and hopefully learn from the pain of the consequence that it does not pay to disobey the Lord. The judgment of the Lord was His decision to suspend His work on their behalf to drive out the remaining Canaanites. The conquest of Canaan would never be 100% of what it was meant to be. The remaining Canaanites would become as thorns and snares for Israel on into future generations.

Israel was affected by this strong word of judgment from the angel of the Lord. The people of Israel all lifted their voices and wept together. The place was named Bochim, which means weepers. This indicates that the hearts of Israel were convicted of their sin of disregarding and disobeying the Lord. However, the question is whether their weeping represents a true repentance or not. A true repentance engages the heart and mind in a deep conviction of personal responsibility for violating the ways of the Lord. It leads the repentant person to a new commitment to turn in attitude and behavior toward the right ways of the Lord. Real repentance produces the lasting fruit of a changed pattern of life. Sadly, from this crisis confrontation with the angel of the Lord, we see Israel only go from bad to worse. This tells me that their tears were more of the variety that is stung by the pain of the punishment, but has not produced a deep heart change.

***2:7-12 - "And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110 years. And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger."***

This is a tragically sad testimony of Israel's spiritual deterioration over the course of a generation. As long as Joshua was alive, Israel served the Lord under the influence of his strong godly leadership. Even after Joshua died, Israel continued to follow the Lord under the influence of the elders who outlived him. These elders were the tribal leaders who lived with Joshua through all of the great events of the entrance and conquest of the land. Those elders had personally witnessed the great works of the Lord in the defeat of Jericho, Ai, etc. Once Joshua died, and then the last of the elders who had witnessed those events died, another generation of Israel grew up. This next generation did not know the Lord. How could this have happened? There was a spiritual breakdown which points us back to this passage in the Law.

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." (Deuteronomy 6:5-7). The spiritual breakdown was between the fathers and their children. This passage from Deuteronomy identifies the heart of father's responsibility to pass on to his children a spiritual heritage. That the entire next generation was characterized by not knowing the Lord indicates that this command had been largely ignored by most fathers in Israel. The result was a generation of Israel that turned from the Lord and turned to serve the Baals. The Baals represented the false gods of the Canaanites. Baal was the name for weather god who was credited with the success or failure of the year's harvest. Since this new generation was not filled with truth as they should have been, they became susceptible to soak up any false and foolish notion that they encountered in the cultures around them.



***2:15-19 - "Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress. Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways."***

It is from this passage that we derive the name of the book of Judges. We see a pattern established here that will be repeated over and over again in the generations of history to follow. Israel ignores the Lord, disobeys Him and turns to false gods for comfort. The Lord raises up difficult and painful circumstances against them in judgment. In their great distress, the Lord is moved by their groaning and shows Israel undeserved mercy. The Lord's merciful provision for Israel under judgment was in raising up judges for Israel. It is necessary for us to clarify the use of the word judge because of the different meaning it carries in our own society. These judges were not people in black robes sitting before a court and rendering legal decisions. We could call them deliverers, and it would convey the concept more clearly. These were individuals that the Lord raised up to accomplish some great work which would relieve Israel from the oppression of their enemies for a time.

The ministry of the judges shows the mercy of God even in the midst of their deserved judgment. The judges limited the fallout of the ongoing consequences of the disobedience of Israel. Their ministry is a powerful testimony that even when God's people are at their worst, God has not abandoned His people even though they had mostly abandoned Him. He raises up these judges to shepherd and lead His people through their darkest period yet as a nation. Even so, we might hope that Israel would recognize this gracious work of God and turn back to Him with gratitude and repentance. Yet, throughout the time of the judges, the people continued to spiral downward in spiritual deterioration.

## Questions from Judges 1:

**Question:** 1:12 references Othniel capturing Kiriath-sepher again. Was the reference in Judges when it actually happened and the one in Joshua 15:16 just another mention of it?

**Answer:** The passages in question are two different mentions of the same event. If you are wondering whether the book of Joshua or Judges was written first, no one knows for certain, but most likely, Joshua was written first and then Judges.

**Question:** Judges 1:1 "...Canaanites, to fight against them?" - Back in Joshua 21:44, it says "...for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands" but here in Judges, we are seeing more nations that need to be conquered. Can you explain how Judges 1:1 relates to Joshua 21:44 (did "all their enemies" refer to only specific Canaanite nations at a certain point in time?)?

**Answer:** As I described in our study in Joshua 21, the declaration that the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands emphasized the complete faithfulness of the Lord to His promise. He had promised to bring them into the Land and to cause them to defeat their enemies and possess the land. Joshua 21:44 is a 100% true testimony that the Lord had fulfilled His promise to His people. However, the Lord had also made Israel responsible for the degree of their success in driving out the Canaanites. Israel's failure to finish the job did not invalidate the overall conquest of the land. Also understand that it was not "more nations" yet to be conquered in Judges. There were only seven nations to conquer and all seven of those nations were already conquered. What remains of the war of conquest in Judges is addressing the remaining pockets of resistance in the already conquered nations. It is a way of describing degrees of conquest. Israel was now in charge of the land, but to what extent was the issue.

**Question:** Judges 1:27-33 speaks of the various tribes that "did not drive out" the inhabitants. Joshua 23:4-6 speaks of Joshua telling the leaders that "the Lord your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight" (23:5). Do we assume the tribes of Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher and Naphtali either didn't obey the command in verse 6 that says "be very strong and courageous" or perhaps associated with them, as warned against in Joshua 23:12-13 so that they weren't able to conquer them?

**Answer:** I addressed this issue in the previous study from Judges 1. I'll quote a portion of my comment which applies to this question. "The writer's description is interesting at this point. It is stated that Judah "could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron." Is the writer implying that it was beyond Judah's capability to defeat these chariot equipped Canaanites? Was it impossible for them to conquer this challenge? Had the Lord made a mistake in commanding them to conquer this territory? Perhaps the Lord should have commanded them to conquer only the hill country and given them permission to

avoid the plain because of the insurmountable challenge of the chariots. The truth is that Judah could not drive them out, not because it was impossible, but because they refused to trust and obey the Lord when the challenge in front of them seemed too difficult and costly in their own eyes."

You asked specifically about some of the other tribes and their failure to finish the job in their own territory, but the pattern is the same for all the tribes. None of the tribes fully accomplished the task the Lord had given them and in every case it boiled down to an issue of faith and obedience.

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### Judges 3

***3:1-2 - "Now these are the nations that the LORD left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before."***

The book of Judges is the story of the progressive spiritual deterioration of the nation of Israel. The issue is the condition of the hearts of the people of Israel. The Lord takes an unexpected step here because of their drifting hearts. Previously the Lord had promised to not only lead Israel into the Promised Land, but also to lead them to full victory over all their enemies in the land. Now, the Lord modifies His plan for some of the remaining nations surrounding Israel. The Lord reveals that He is leaving the remaining nations unconquered. Those nations will actually be made to serve the greater purpose of the Lord for Israel. The Lord will test Israel by using these nations. The test will come in the opposition of these nations to Israel. The test will be in battle.

The lesson for Israel is more than simply that they need to learn how to fight. The greater lesson is the sovereignty of God over their lives. The Lord had called Israel His holy nation, His special covenant nation. He had given them awesome promises of blessing if they would only listen to Him, trust Him, and obey Him. However, because they had chosen to disregard Him and drift further and further from His ways, the Lord would use the surrounding nations to teach Israel the high cost of turning from the Lord to other gods.

The reason that Israel must be tested by warfare is that the spiritual life of a follower of the Lord is a life of warfare. We live in a fallen world which is set in its basic orientation against the Lord and His ways. We live every day in a spiritual environment at war. Israel expected that they could turn from the Lord and follow Baal and the gods of Canaan and enjoy lives of peace. The Lord was going to use the nations around Israel to teach them that the only two options were that they could fight with the Lord against His enemies as He had commanded them,

or they would end up fighting against the judgment of God as he used those same enemies to discipline wayward Israel.

***3:7-12 - "And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia. And the people of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years. But when the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. The Spirit of the LORD was upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand. And his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD."***

After all the Lord had done for Israel from their miraculous deliverance from Egypt, through the forty wilderness years in which He sustained them, to the mostly successful conquest of Canaan, it is an amazing testimony of Israel's hardened hearts that they are described here as forgetting the Lord. How could the entire nation forget the Lord? They quickly grew comfortable in the blessing of their new possessions. The daily difficulties of the wilderness years had been a source of constant murmuring and complaint by Israel, but those same difficulties had served to keep the people very aware of their need to remain close and dependant upon the Lord. Now, in the relative ease and comfort of their new possessions, Israel fell into the snare of forgetting the One Who had provided this blessing for them. They foolishly began to attribute their blessings to Baal and Asheroth and worship them in place of the Lord.

The Lord did not shrug off the unfaithfulness of His covenant people. The Lord was deeply stirred by Israel's betrayal and He responded with kindled anger. The phrase describes a fire which begins to burn hotter and hotter. The Biblical doctrine of the anger of the Lord is perhaps one of the most neglected in our current generation. Believers today are generally somewhat uncomfortable to even consider the concept that the Lord can and does get angry by the rebellion of His people. We should know better. When we see Jesus thrashing the money changers and driving them out of the temple, we should not be shocked by reality of God's anger.

The anger of the Lord led Him to a decision that would impact Israel for the next eight years. The Lord sold them into the hand of a Mesopotamian king. The name of the king refers to Cushan the double wicked. The point is that the Lord gave Israel a reminder taste of Egypt. Israel had suffered greatly under the oppressive rule of Pharaoh as they served him as slaves. Since the days of

Moses, Israel had been released from all oppression and instead was responsible to serve their benevolent king, The Lord. The lesson of the Lord in this circumstance is that Israel can either happily serve the Lord, or they will again be made to suffer under the oppressive regime of a doubly wicked king.

When Israel began to suffer under the hand of Cushan, they cried out in their suffering. It is interesting to notice where they turn in their suffering. They don't cry out to Baal or Asheroth for help. Instead they cried out to the Lord. All along the people knew the truth and knew where their only real help would be found, yet it took the present difficulty to force the people to cry out to the Lord as they should have been all along. What is wonderful in this passage is that as soon as the people cried out to the Lord, the Lord heard and answered their cry. Israel did not deserve to be heard by the Lord at this point. Their behavior did not merit the Lord's attention let alone an answer from Him. Yet, the Lord responded by raising up a deliverer for them. This is the undeserved mercy and grace of God. We should also notice the fruit of the Lord's deliverance through Othniel. His ministry produced forty years of rest in the land. All their sin and rebellion earned them eight years of judgment, and one repentant cry to God produced forty years of peace.

God's grace for them is out of proportion greater than His judgment. The Lord was giving them a vivid lesson in how much better their lives would be for all succeeding generations if only their hearts would remain close to Him. Israel did not heed this lesson. As soon as Othniel died, the people again turn from the Lord. This begins the recurring pattern which will repeat again and again through the remainder of Judges. The people will drift from the Lord, the Lord will be forced to raise up an oppressive enemy, the people will suffer under that oppression until they remember the Lord, and then when the people cry out to God in their distress the Lord will raise up another deliverer.

***3:14-15 - "And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years. Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab."***

The entire story of the dominion of Eglon over Israel is an object lesson. Eglon is not portrayed in a favorable light in the story. He is described as what we would today call a morbidly obese man. He is not exactly the sharpest sword in the armory either. He easily falls prey to the plan of Ehud to assassinate him while he is taking his ease in his summer palace. The manner of his death is intentionally ugly and messy. Ehud stabs Eglon so deeply that his sword is swallowed by his belly and he is left to die in the filth of the contents of his own bowels which have spilled out on the floor of his palace. All of this is presented in an almost mocking tone in the story, but the real object of derision is not Eglon, but Israel. The larger point of the back-story is that Israel's sins against the Lord

have left them in such a weakened national condition that they are dominated for eighteen years by such a man as this. In Israel's better days during the conquest phase, they would have never have allowed themselves to be oppressed by Eglon. The shame of his demise is the story of Israel's spiritual decay.

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## Judges 4

***4:1-3 - "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years."***

We saw in chapter three that a pattern in the history of Israel has developed and begun to repeat. Israel drifts from the Lord and His ways, the Lord responds to the continuing rebellion of His people with a national discipline of judgment, the people struggle under the burden of the circumstances of judgment for an extended period of time, the people eventually cry out to the Lord with a repentance birthed from their suffering, and then the Lord mercifully raises up a deliverer to bring His people relief from their oppression. There is lesson to learn from the three most recent occurrences of this repeating pattern. In the first case, Israel was oppressed by Cushan for eight years. In the second case, Eglon oppressed Israel for eighteen years. Now, in this third case, Israel is oppressed by Jabin for twenty years and his control of Israel is described as cruel for that twenty years. What we should notice is that the length and degree of the oppression is growing with each new occurrence of the pattern of their rebellion toward the Lord.

The lesson illustrated by this pattern of increasing oppression in length and severity is that the Lord is behind this judgment and that it is not coincidental that each new judgment is worse than the last. The Lord increases the duration and degree of His punishment for Israel each time they return to their disobedient ways. This is not because the Lord takes any pleasure in punishing His people, but because their hearts are becoming progressively harder with each new rebellion. Since Israel continues to turn from the Lord, they are demonstrating that they have not yet learned the necessary lessons from the previous judgments. The Lord increases the punishment to drive home the point that He will not compromise His standards even though they are willing to compromise theirs. This is not different than a parent who adds additional swats of discipline when their young child continues to break the same household rule. This is similar to the analogy of a criminal proceeding, when a society issues a greater sentence to repeat offenders of the same crime, than it does to first time offenders.

The Lord deals with us according to the same principle of parenting. His goal is our holiness. He disciplines us when we violate His standards (sin). When we fall into a pattern of repeated violations in the same category, He will turn up the heat in subsequent circumstances of discipline until our hearts respond in true repentance. What we can gain from a consideration of this pattern between the Lord and Israel is a realization that the Lord's goal of holiness for us is so important to Him that He will apply all necessary pressure to our lives through various difficult circumstances in order to gain our heart's full attention. We can also respond in repentance more quickly than Israel did in these events. It should not take eight, eighteen, twenty years of cruel oppression to turn our hearts fully back to the Lord when we have turned in the wrong direction.

***4:4-9 - "Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, 'Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand'?" Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go." And she said, "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh."***

Deborah is one of the more interesting people in the Bible. Through no fault of hers she has been at the focal point of a debate that has grown over the last generation in Christianity. The debate concerns the role of women in ministry. On one side of the debate is a group of scholars that can be identified as theologically liberal. On the other side are scholars who are theological conservatives. This is not a political debate, even though it does have implications for our society. Those on the liberal side of the debate identify Deborah as a convincing example of how the Lord intends for there to be no distinction between male and female in spiritual ministry roles. Those on the conservative side of the debate draw a different conclusion from Deborah's story. I agree with the conservative interpretation of Deborah's place in the history of Israel.

Only by ignoring everything else the Lord has revealed in His Word regarding male and female roles in ministry could we conclude that this story is meant to teach us that there should be no gender distinctions in ministry roles. Keep in mind that the Lord has made a clear distinction throughout His Word between male and female spiritual leadership roles not because of an inherent superiority of males or any supposed inferiority of females. There is one reason and only

one reason why the Lord has established this distinction; it points our attention to the spiritual relationship between Christ as bridegroom and the church as His bride (Ephesians 5:22-33). Males were meant to take the spiritual lead in Israel, and in the New Covenant in the church because their role reflects the leadership of Christ to the church. The few exceptions in Scripture to that pattern are intended to highlight the spiritual deterioration of the relationship between the Lord and His people at that time.

Deborah is clearly identified in this passage as a prophetess and one who judged Israel during this period of history. Those two designations of Deborah as prophetess and judge are beyond dispute. Both of those roles are ordinarily filled in Israel's history by males. Deborah then is clearly an exception to the normal pattern we find in such high level leaders of the nation. The debate between Bible scholars and teachers today is not a debate of her role, but a debate regarding what conclusion we are meant to draw from her role. Is Deborah an exception that is meant to forever break the cultural rule of male leadership? This is what the theological liberals would encourage us to take from this story. Or, is Deborah the exception which actually serves to prove and establish the point of the Lord's pattern of male spiritual leadership? This is the point that theological conservatives draw from the same story.

How can an exception to a normal pattern actually prove and support the normal rule? The exception establishes the normal pattern by calling special attention to the rule that is in a sense being broken in this case. The context of the story of Deborah calls attention to the Lord's pattern of male spiritual leadership of Israel by demonstrating that the Lord raised her up and appointed her as a prophetess and judge in Israel because there was no man in Israel at this low point of history that was qualified to bear her responsibilities. This is not a bad reflection on Deborah, but on all the men in Israel at this time. She was faithful and obedient and her appointment to these critical roles of spiritual leadership was in effect a rebuke of the Lord to all the men who were not as faithful and obedient as she was.

We see this developed in the interaction between Deborah and Barak. He was called by the Lord to lead the people of God in battle against their oppressors. Even with a clear word from God through Deborah, Barak refused to obey the Lord unless Deborah agreed to go with him. This should not be interpreted as cowardice on the part of Barak. Once Deborah agrees to go with him, Barak does lead Israel into battle and his courage is never an issue in the victory that ensues. Rather, Barak's hesitation to go into battle without Deborah is an indication of his unwillingness to take the lead as he should based upon the Lord's call alone. Barak defers to Deborah in an unhealthy dependence upon her presence by his side. In a time of national crisis when men most need to be men, Barak (representing all the men of Israel) leans on the strength he draws from Deborah rather than the strength he should have drawn from the Lord. Deborah prophetically calls attention to this issue by pronouncing a partial judgment upon



Barak. The judgment of the Lord is partial because while Barak is hesitant to lead as he should, he is nevertheless willing to obey the Lord on the condition of Deborah's involvement. The partial judgment is in the loss of glory for Barak. Had he trusted the Lord when commanded to take the lead, the Lord would have accomplished the full victory over Jabin by the hand of Barak. Because he did not trust the Lord, and instead leaned on a woman in this, the Lord would have the final victory occur by the hand of a woman as an ironic development. This is not pointing to what Deborah would do, but to the story that follows concerning Jael.

***4:17-22 - "But Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And Jael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord; turn aside to me; do not be afraid." So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. And he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. And he said to her, "Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say, 'No.'" But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died. And behold, as Barak was pursuing Sisera, Jael went out to meet him and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." So he went in to her tent, and there lay Sisera dead, with the tent peg in his temple."***

Jael is the second interesting story in this chapter of a woman that was appointed by the Lord to carry out His will against all expectation. In the battles of the ancient world, final victory was determined by the disposition of the opposing rulers or leaders of the armies at war. Israel had trounced the forces of Jabin in battle under the leadership of Barak. Yet, Israel's victory would not be complete until Sisera, the general leading the army of Jabin was accounted for. During the battle, Sisera abandoned his iron chariot and fled on foot to the nearest safe haven, or so he thought. He sought out the tent of Heber, who should have been faithful to Israel, but had made his own covenant of peace with the enemy of Israel. When Sisera arrived at Heber's tent, he encountered Jael, the wife of Heber. Heber was not at home, but Sisera must have been relieved to receive a warm welcome from Jael. She showed Sisera the hospitality that was normally the husband's responsibility. She encouraged him to come into the tent, hid him under a covering and when he asked for a drink of water gave him a drink of milk. Her decision to provide him milk rather than water was probably strategic. Under the guise of providing sustenance, she fed him a drink that would contribute to his sleepiness.

When Sisera fell into a deep sleep due to his great weariness and influence of the milk, the story takes a dramatic and surprising turn. Jael carefully approached

Sisera as he lay sleeping on the floor of the tent and proceeded to drive a tent peg through his temple, killing him. This shocking development has been interpreted as a horrible act on the part of Jael. She has been accused of sinfully violating the principle of hospitality as well as committing the sin of murder by breaking the sixth of the ten commandments. Should we view Jael in that light? No, on the contrary, Jael is the heroine of this story. Her actions, while admittedly unexpected are nevertheless an expression of the sovereignty of God as the Lord moved her to carry out His judgment upon Sisera and complete the victory of Israel over Jabin. First, we have the prophetic word of Deborah that "the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." This event is the fulfillment of that prophecy. The Lord identifies for us that this was His doing, and that Jael's actions were simply the Lord using her to carry out His purpose.

Second, we have the confirming description of Jael which we find in the next chapter. "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed." (Judges 5:24). The Lord does not condemn what Jael did to Sisera, but rather we find the Lord commending her. How could the Lord praise her actions? What about the concern for hospitality and even more so, for the commandment to not murder? In this case, Jael did not violate either the hospitality principle or the sixth commandment to not murder. The context of the circumstance is critical to inform our interpretation of her actions. This was a time of war between Israel and Canaan. The Lord had already pronounced a death sentence for the Canaanites because of their excessive sin. Even though her husband had made peace with Jabin, Jael was under no righteous obligation to honor his compromising covenant by showing hospitality to the enemies of the Lord. Her actions should be interpreted as those of a warrior of the Lord in time of war. She became the hand of God in carrying out His final judgment against Sisera.

There is one other factor in this story that we should notice. Jael did not kill Sisera with a sword or spear as we might expect. Those were the weapons the male warriors of Israel would have used in the battle. Instead she killed Sisera with a hammer and a tent peg. This is significant in a subtle way. In the nomadic culture of that day, camp responsibilities were divided along lines of gender. It was the women of the camp who were responsible to set up their family tent whenever the camp was moved. This involved using the hammer to set the tent pegs into the ground to anchor their tent in each location. The point of the way Jael killed Sisera is that the Lord had her use for a weapon things that were associated with her role and responsibilities as a woman. This detail of the story adds emphasis to the Lord's point that the victory was accomplished by a woman using the tools belonging to a woman's role. At the same time, all godly women can take great encouragement from this detail of the story. The Lord saw fit to use something very ordinary from Jael's daily life and responsibilities to accomplish a great victory for the kingdom of God.

## Judges 5

***5:1-3 - "Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day: "That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the LORD! Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the LORD I will sing; I will make melody to the LORD, the God of Israel."***

The greatest victory in this generation of Israel's history has just been won. Key contributions to this victory over Sisera and the Canaanite army are all given their proper honor in this chapter. The prophetic role of Deborah, the military leadership of Barak, the response of the people to follow his lead, and the unexpected final blow at the hands of Jael are brought into sharp focus here. Yet, there is one factor in Israel's victory that far outweighs all of those named above. This victory is the handiwork of the Lord, the God of Israel. Once the battle ended, Deborah and Barak stop and give the greatest honor where it is most due. They stop and sing this song. All of chapter five is a song, similar to the psalms in that it tells the story of this great event in the history of Israel, but it is composed by Deborah as she is under the inspiration of the Spirit of God in her role as a prophetess in Israel. While the song does acknowledge the human participation of Deborah, Barak, Jael and others, the substance of the song is an expression of worship to the Lord of the covenant Who has once again demonstrated in this battle His covenant faithfulness to His imperfectly faithful people.

The song should remind us of the song sung by Miriam, the sister of Moses, following the crossing of the Red Sea and the drowning of the armies of Pharaoh as they pursued in chariots the people of God. Once Israel reached the northern shore of the Red Sea, they stopped and appropriately worshipped God in a great celebration for His protection, and destruction of their enemies. Deborah and Barak now lead Israel in worship in the same way. This song recognizes the hand of God in their victory over the 900 iron chariots of Sisera just like God had defeated the chariots of Pharaoh years before. Yes, Deborah, Barak and Jael all played significant roles, but all the credit belongs to the Lord. The Lord raised up Deborah and gave her His prophetic Word in a time when no man in Israel was willing to lead. The Lord stirred the reluctant heart of Barak through Deborah and lead him in throwing off the twenty year long oppression of Jabin. The Lord sovereignly led Sisera to the tent of Jael as he fled the battle, and gave her the wisdom and courage to strike the final blow that liberated Israel.

There is a reason why Deborah and Barak are not singing to draw attention to themselves or take credit for the victory on this day. It takes spiritual discernment to recognize the Lord's role behind the scenes in our life circumstances. There is only one appropriate response to that discerning recognition; worship. The Lord's faithfulness toward us is meant to lead us to worship. His goodness, the many undeserved blessings which He pours out upon us are all reasons for us to stop as Deborah and Barak did that day and worship. In the history of the church,

worship has always been at the center of our hearts' response to the Lord for this same reason. We were all suffering under the oppression of an enemy of our souls greater than Jabin of the Canaanites. We were not capable of freeing ourselves from the oppression of sin and defeating the enemy. The Lord sent us a great deliverer, Who accomplished on the cross and in the resurrection the ultimate victory of history. What should our continuing response be to the recognition of what Jesus accomplished for us? We must worship the Lamb of God and sing His praises! It amazes me when I see some believers respond in silence as the church sings songs of worship to the Lord for His awesome accomplishment in the cross and resurrection. His victory is so great that it will remain the focal point of our worship before the throne of God for all eternity!

***5:7 - "The villagers ceased in Israel; they ceased to be until I arose; I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel."***

Deborah identifies her unique role in Israel in this verse. She was raised up by the Lord to a role of prominence and became like a mother to the nation. This designation is significant because it clarifies for us that Deborah remained fully feminine in her leadership role in Israel. While it was true that no men were taking the lead as they should when she was raised up by the Lord, that vacuum of male leadership did not result in Deborah becoming like a man in her own assignment from the Lord. Instead, in her prophetic ministry she became like a nurturing mother who provided wise counsel and direction for a lost and suffering people. As mentioned in the comments of the previous chapter, Deborah did not take the lead of the army of Israel herself, but prodded and urged the reluctant Barak to take the reins of the leadership role to which the Lord had called him.

This image of Deborah as a mother in Israel also carries with it a note of rebuke for Israel. The truth of the current spiritual condition of Israel was that they desperately needed such a mother figure to show them the way. However, those who need a mother most are not the mature who have reached the full growth of adulthood, but children. Deborah's ministry identifies Israel as spiritual children who need a mom to lean on. This should remind of these comments by Paul in the New Testament. "But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?" (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). This inference that Israel were like children is not meant as a positive (children of God), but in its negative connotation of children as unwise, weak and easily misled.

***5:13-18 - "Then down marched the remnant of the noble; the people of the LORD marched down for me against the mighty. From Ephraim their root they marched down into the valley, following you, Benjamin, with your kinsmen; from Machir marched down the commanders, and from Zebulun those who bear the lieutenant's staff; the princes of Issachar came with Deborah, and Issachar faithful to Barak; into the valley they rushed at his heels. Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds, to hear the whistling for the flocks? Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan; and Dan, why did he stay with the ships? Asher sat still at the coast of the sea, staying by his landings. Zebulun is a people who risked their lives to the death; Naphtali, too, on the heights of the field."***

When the time came for Israel to rise up and fight against the army of Jabin, there was not a consistent response among the tribes of Israel. This section identifies the differing responses of the various tribes. Since this battle took place in northern Israel, the southern most tribes of Judah and Gad were excluded from the responsibility to respond. The tribe of Levi, which was sprinkled throughout the nation as the priestly tribe was also excused. The other tribes were all held accountable to how they responded to the call of the Lord through Deborah and Barak. In this time of national crisis, each tribe should have stepped forward to meet the crisis in faith and obedience. Instead, a remnant of those faithful to the Lord responded and marched with Barak to war.

Reuben is marked out as an example for a stinging word of rebuke. At the moment when a decisive commitment to action was required, Reuben sat still in their familiar and comfortable surroundings. Reuben's lack of necessary response was not due to ignorance of the right thing to do. They went through "great searchings of heart". This indicates that they knew the right thing to do, and their hearts were troubled by the implications of the call that they did not answer. The tribes of Dan and Asher were also marked as those that remained at home when they belonged on the battlefield. Others responded as they should. Zebulun and Naphtali are commended by the Lord for risking their lives in answering the call. This dramatic difference between unfaithful Reuben, Dan and Asher compared to faithful Zebulun and Naphtali is a lesson for the people of God today. We all have our own comfort zone in the familiar surroundings of our daily life. We can expect that when the Lord calls us through His appointed leaders to serve Him in spiritual warfare for His kingdom, that there will be a cost for us in our response to His call. Jesus described this principle in New Covenant terms. "Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25).

***5:24 - "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed."***

Jael's role in the victory of the Lord that day is highlighted in these honoring words in the song of Deborah. There is a noticeable similarity between the Lord's evaluation of Jael through Deborah, and the Lord's evaluation of another woman of God in a future generation. "For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;" (Luke 1:48). These words from Luke describe the Lord's blessing upon the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Jael, like Mary, is blessed among even all the women of Israel. The characteristic that they share at the root of the Lord's greater blessing upon their lives is their faith. The Lord placed both Jael and Mary in an incredibly challenging circumstance. They both responded to the challenge in a similar way. Neither of them complained or grumbled about the challenge. Neither of them shrank back from it, but both saw the challenge as a special opportunity to trust the Lord and serve Him. The Lord honored their faith and rewarded them both by making them the focal point of His victory. Jael trusted the Lord in delivering the death blow to Sisera, and Mary trusted the Lord in delivering the Messiah into the world. Their faith and obedience have carved out a permanent place of honor in God's Book.

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## **Judges 6**

***6:1-7 - "The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number--both they and their camels could not be counted--so that they laid waste the land as they came in. And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to the LORD. When the people of Israel cried out to the LORD on account of the Midianites,"***

The now all too familiar pattern unfolds again in this chapter. We left Israel at the end of chapter five in the great victory over Sisera and the army of Jabin which led to the Lord's blessing of forty years of peace in the land. The Lord gave Israel forty years of peace to lead His into a greater appreciation of His goodness to them and to inspire them to a deeper commitment to walk faithfully in His ways. Instead, at the end of the forty years of peace, Israel once again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. This was not a momentary lapse in judgment

producing a temporary stumbling on the part of Israel. In spite of a generation long blessing from the Lord, Israel turned away from Him and His law. They turned in such a way that only the severe discipline of the Lord would bring them again to repentance. The lesson for us is to learn from this pattern and avoid the pitfall of drifting into a similar attitude and behavior toward the Lord and His standards in our lives. The blessing of the Lord is never a signal for us to relax our heart's vigilance and indulge in the ways of the world around us. "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4). The Lord's kindness to His people is meant to lead us to repentance. His kindness is also meant to stir our hearts to remain faithful to Him as He blesses us.

When Israel again turned away from the Lord by doing evil, the Lord responded with His discipline. The Lord disciplines His people for their own good. The pain of the discipline is designed by the Lord to awaken the heart asleep in sin to its responsibility to repent of sin and return to the Lord. The severity of the discipline of the Lord is never arbitrary, but adjusted in each case to match the severity of the rebellion of His people. In this case the discipline took a familiar form. The Lord raised up a neighboring Gentile nation to afflict Israel. The Lord's use of Midian in this case is not a validation of the spiritual condition of Midian, but is a revelation of the serious spiritual deterioration of Israel. The nation of Israel should have been a shining example of the Lord and His ways to Midian and the other Gentile nations, but instead they only become an example of what not to be and do. The Lord uses Midian to show Israel that they have become worse than Midian by their sin.

During this seven year period, Midian would move into the land of Israel during the harvest season and devour the produce of the land. They are compared to a plague of locusts in the devastating impact on the crops. This comparison of Midian to locusts is not a casual one. Israel was meant to remember when their fathers had witnessed a plague of locusts used by the Lord to afflict the great nation of Egypt in one of the ten plague judgments that led to their deliverance from slavery. The message from the Lord was not subtle. Israel was being judged like the Lord had judged Egypt. Their rebellion and unfaithfulness to the Lord had made them as deserving of judgment as Egypt, their hated captors.

**6:11-16 - "Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor." And Gideon said to him, "Please, sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian." And the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?" And he said to him, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." And the LORD said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man."**

This passage recounts for us the call of Gideon to become the next judge to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Midianites. The Lord sent an angel to call Gideon which indicates that even among the other judges, Gideon will play a significant role in the plan of the Lord. The angel visits Gideon as he is working to complete the harvest of his father's wheat. The normal practice for beating the wheat, which was done to separate the wheat grain from the stalk, was to do so in an open area where the wind could blow away the empty stalks. Instead Gideon is doing this in a most unlikely place, in a winepress. He did so to hide the crop from the Midianites. Gideon beating the wheat in the cramped winepress is a vivid image of the constrained and fearful circumstances of all of Israel under the oppression of Midian. The angel's initial greeting expresses the Lord's grace upon Gideon's life in spite of his circumstances. Gideon also represents Israel in this. Israel's disobedience and unfaithfulness toward the Lord displayed that they did not deserve the Lord's gracious concern, nevertheless the Lord still favored Israel with His special attention among all the nations of the world.

The angel also identifies Gideon with a description of him that seems incongruous with his present activity and situation. The angel calls Gideon a "mighty man of valor." Mighty men of valor are usually engaged with some activity of greater significance than beating wheat. Their story is filled with battles and victories won. Up until this point Gideon has never been in battle, and has no great victory on his personal resume. This is an example of the recurring Biblical pattern of the Lord naming a person He has called according to His purpose for them in the future, more than the history of what they had previously accomplished. The world designates people based upon their personal history as a way of honoring them for what they have accomplished. The Lord often designates those He calls based, not on their accomplishments, but based upon His what He intends to accomplish with and through them by His grace. In the former pattern the person receives the credit and the glory. In the latter pattern the Lord receives the credit and the glory.



Gideon was not yet a mighty man of valor based upon his life until this moment, but the Lord would make him such a man. Calling him a mighty man of valor is a prophetic indication of the Lord's plan for Gideon and His commitment to fulfill that plan through Him. The Lord does a similar thing with each of us in our salvation. The Lord saves us, and from the moment of our salvation He identifies us as saints, or holy ones. This new holiness is not based upon our personal history or accomplishments. Based upon our history we can only properly identify ourselves as sinners, and no saints. Nevertheless, the Lord from the first moment of our salvation describes us as saints to establish in our heart perspective where He is taking us and what He will accomplish in us. He sees it in us before we even see it in ourselves. He also will bring it to pass because He is committed to His plan for us. Gideon would become a mighty man of valor.

***6:25-27 - "That night the LORD said to him, "Take your father's bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it and build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in due order. Then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down." So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night."***

Following his encounter with the angel, and the Lord's word of assurance to him, Gideon was now ready for his first assignment from the Lord in his new role as a judge and deliverer in Israel. The Lord directed him to act in an unexpected direction. Along with Gideon, we might have expected some marching orders from the Lord for Gideon to raise an army and for a great battle with Midian to follow. The Lord does not even mention Midian is His first task for Gideon. What this reveals is that the real problem in Israel was never Midian. Yes, Midian is the current focal point of their troubles, but Midian is not the cause of why Israel has found themselves under the oppression of Midian for these seven years. What is the true source of their problems? Israel is the cause of their own trouble. The only reason Midian has been able to dominate them for this seven year period is because "the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years." Had Israel remained faithful and obedient to the Lord and His ways, He would have protected them from the incursion of Midian. Their own rebellion is the real cause of the Lord's discipline in their lives.

The Lord's first assignment for Gideon directs him to address the true source of the trouble in Israel. Gideon is not sent to a battlefield far away, but to a spiritual battlefield in his own backyard. The Lord commissions Gideon to take his father's team of oxen and to use them to pull down the altar built to worship Baal that belonged to his father. The current source of trouble in Israel was the spiritual compromise led by Gideon's own father. His father Joash was a man of some significant wealth and he had built an altar to Baal which was being used by the

entire town where they lived. Before Gideon could deliver Israel in battle with the Midianites, the Lord commanded him to clean up his own house and the compromise led by his own family. To Gideon's credit, he does not argue with the Lord like he earlier had done with the angel. He responds in an act of challenging obedience to the Lord, in spite of personal fears which influenced him to carry out the Lord's orders at night. He was hoping to keep his role in the destruction of Baal's altar a secret from his father and the other men of the town. The reaction of the townsmen once his participation was discovered show that his concern was valid. The Lord also had Gideon build an altar to the Lord on the spot where previously Baal had been worshipped. The Lord was demonstrating His superiority to Baal and every false god to His people just like He had done in the plagues of Egypt when He showed His superiority to each of the false gods of the Egyptians.

There is a pattern established in the Lord's assignment for Gideon that applies to our own lives. Each of us who belong to the Lord are given our own assignment to serve the Lord in His kingdom. There is a first things first principle in focus here. We cannot be fully effective in the Lord's service to reach and change the world around us if we have not first followed His instructions and cleansed our own house. Compromise in our own home undermines the fruitful impact the Lord intends our lives to have in the world. The foundational principle which paves the way for the greater work of God through our lives is this; "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God." (II Corinthians 7:1).