



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 7 - 14

Judges 7

7:1-3 - "Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod. And the camp of Midian was north of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley. The LORD said to Gideon, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.' Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead.'" Then 22,000 of the people returned, and 10,000 remained."

It was the purpose of the Lord for Israel to rise up against the Midian invaders and defeat them and drive them out of the land. The Lord stirred Gideon in the previous chapter to take the lead among the people and gather the people as an army for the battle ahead. The people responded to the call of Gideon in this time of crisis and 32,000 men gathered near the spring of Harod. This was an army of significant size. We would expect that Israel would need this many warriors, and perhaps more than this number to face the horde of Midianites. In this chapter the descriptions of the size of the Midianite army are poetic. They are compared to innumerable locusts and as the sand on the seashore in abundance. We discover in the next chapter that the army of Midian was huge, and numbered 135,000 swordsmen. Even with an army of 32,000, Israel would be greatly outnumbered in the battle to come. Midian had more than a four to one advantage in numbers.

The Lord chose this moment before the battle to speak to Gideon and give him what must have been challenging instructions. The Lord does not tell Gideon that he needs to keep recruiting more warriors because Israel does not yet have enough men for the fight. He tells Gideon exactly the opposite. The Lord declares that the army of Israel is too numerous. What we are meant to catch in the word of the Lord to Gideon is that the Lord's concern is not in whether Israel will win the battle against the 135,000 Midianites. That is where Israel's concern is. The uncertainty of surviving a battle against such a great army, let alone the possibility of defeating them had to be daunting for the men of Israel. The Lord does not share their concern however. The outcome of the battle is under His sovereign control. The Lord's concern is for the heart perspective of Israel and the temptation they would face if the Lord gave the 32,000 man army of Israel victory over Midian. The Lord anticipates that rather than Israel praising God for His grace in the victory, that they would instead praise themselves by giving credit for the victory to their own strength.

The Lord will not allow Israel to ruin the coming victory in that way, and so He gives Gideon a way to sift the assembled army and reduce the number from 32,000 down to 10,000. A victory with only 10,000 with a ratio of 13-1 of Midianites to Israelites could only be recognized as the hand of God. The sifting

process is based upon a key quality of heart among the assembled warriors. The Lord instructs Gideon to proclaim that any who is fearful and trembling may leave and return to the safety of their homes. It would be natural to expect many to be trembling in fear at the prospect of attacking a force so much greater than their own, but the Lord did not want men in His army who were natural. He wanted an army of courageous men who trusted in Him as they entered the battle. There is an interesting detail in the location of the Israelite camp. The name of the spring of Harod translates from the Hebrew as the spring of trembling.

This principle applies to our identification as the army of the Lord. We are engaged in a life long spiritual warfare, and must learn to trust in the Lord for every battle we face, and not tremble at the might of the enemy. This development is also an application of the standard established in the Law for service in the army of the Lord. "And the officers shall speak further to the people, and say, 'Is there any man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own.'" (Deuteronomy 20:8). The Lord wants all of His army to be strong and courageous in heart. We have an affect upon one another in our battles. As we trust in the Lord together as we fight side by side, we strengthen one another's heart. If I lose heart in my own battle, I may influence you to cause your heart to melt in fear for your own battle.

7:4-7 - "And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people are still too many. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there, and anyone of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' shall go with you, and anyone of whom I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' shall not go." So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, "Every one who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise, every one who kneels down to drink." And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was 300 men, but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. And the LORD said to Gideon, "With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home."

Once the Lord sifts the army of Israel from 32,000 down to 10,000, leaving only courageous men ready to fight, we might think that everything is now set for the battle to come. The Lord is not done refining His army for the battle, however. He speaks again to Gideon and His concern about their size remains. 10,000 soldiers is still a large enough number that would lead Israel to think it was them that won the battle rather than the Lord. The Lord plans one more test for the army that will further reduce their number to an impossibly small 300 men for the battle. The Lord gives Gideon the famous, but somewhat confusing command to take the 10,000 down to the river and to carefully observe how the various warriors satisfy their own thirst. The Lord designed the test in such a way that the manner in which they drank would indicate two different qualities in the men. Those who knelt down with their face to the river to drink were to be sent home

like the previously fearful 22,000 had been. 9,700 of the men knelt down in this way. Their kneeling indicated that for these brief moments, they were only concerned with their own needs.

The remaining 300 also drank to quench their thirst but they did so in a completely different manner. The 300 scooped water with their hands and brought it up to their mouths. They drank from their hands while remaining alert and vigilantly watchful of their surroundings, as they peered out over their hands with their faces up rather than facing the water. Those who passed this second test displayed the quality of vigilance in addition to the quality of courage from the first test. God's chosen army would be men of courage and vigilance. This characteristic can also be described as watchfulness. It is an alert readiness at all times which is able to identify the danger in battle even before it begins. This warning from the Lord Jesus to His disciples identifies His concern for their growth in spiritual vigilance. "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41). Paul addresses this same concern in this passage focused on our response to spiritual warfare. "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints," (Ephesians 6:18).

7:9-15 - "That same night the LORD said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant. And you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp." Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp. And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance. When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his comrade. And he said, "Behold, I dreamed a dream, and behold, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian and came to the tent and struck it so that it fell and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat." And his comrade answered, "This is no other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp." As soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped. And he returned to the camp of Israel and said, "Arise, for the LORD has given the host of Midian into your hand."

Later that same night the Lord spoke once more to Gideon. The Lord gave Gideon a simple and direct order as the Commander of the army of Israel. The command of the Lord was that he was to go down against the camp of Midian. This was a simple and bare command to attack the 135,000 Midianites with the small band of 300 warriors who had passed both of the tests of the Lord. The Lord gave no special strategy for their attack, but He did give Gideon a strong

word of encouragement. He declared to Gideon, "for I have given it into your hand." In other words, the Lord had declared the certain outcome of the battle even before it began. If Gideon would simply get up and lead the 300 men to attack Midian, the Lord would insure their victory. At this point Gideon does not know how the Lord will cause them to be victorious. The issue is whether the Lord's promise alone is sufficient. Can Gideon trust the Lord when all natural indicators are screaming at him that they are about to be crushed by the overwhelming army of Midian?

We also see the Lord's gracious accommodation of Gideon's weakness. The Lord knows that Gideon has a weak but growing faith. The exchange with him with Gideon's fleece in the last chapter was a clear indication that Gideon needed the assurance of remarkable circumstances to bolster his faith for the task ahead. The Lord graciously provides another assurance for Gideon's heart, and allows him to delay his response to the Lord's command to attack until he receives this assurance. The Lord tells Gideon that if he is still afraid that he can take his personal servant and sneak down to the camp of Midian while it was still night. The Lord tells him that he will overhear a conversation there that will strengthen his heart for the challenge ahead. Gideon's decision to sneak down to the camp is his admission of a continuing struggle with fear.

When Gideon and his servant (who was there to be a second confirming witness of what was heard) arrived at the camp, they heard a Midianite telling a dream to his comrade. As it develops it becomes clear to Gideon that this man had been given this dream by the Lord as a prophetic indicator of what would soon take place. The awesome sovereignty of God is displayed in this circumstance. The Lord brought Gideon to the exact right person out of a camp of 135,000, at the exact moment he was telling his comrade of this dream, at the exact time that he had this dream. The symbolism of the dream contributed to the encouragement factor. A single loaf of barley tumbled into the Midianite camp and struck a tent causing it to be flattened. Barley was the grain of the poor and was what the poor Israelites ate due to the economic oppression of Midian. The loaf symbolized Gideon in the dream. There is nothing intimidating about a loaf of bread rolling into camp, but this loaf was much stronger than it seemed in its impact on their camp. The Midianite not only was given the dream by the Lord, but was also given a right interpretation of the dream by the Lord. He recognized it as a message of their impending defeat by the sword of Gideon. This was all Gideon needed to hear. He was now convinced of the degree of the Lord's involvement in this whole situation with Midian. He was fully assured that the victory the Lord had promised, He was committed to bring to pass. Gideon appropriately stopped to worship the Lord for His goodness, and returned to the camp of Israel ready to lead the 300 to the victory promised by the Lord.

The Lord is also gracious to us in our challenges. He has given us the full assurance of His presence and His promises. Then, like with Gideon, the Lord anticipates our weaknesses, and moments of doubt and fear. He finds ways to

encourage our hearts through various circumstances He brings across our path to demonstrate to us beyond question the depth of His commitment to us.

Questions from Judges 6:

Question: 6:25 - how does this apply to our lives today "and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of the stronghold here", and what is the significance of, "with stones laid in due order"?

Answer: The Lord's assignment to Gideon to build an altar to Him on top of the stronghold does apply to us today. In that culture it was common for pagan worship locations to be fortified. The fortification was a visible display of the power and authority of the god being worshipped there. By having Gideon tear down the altar to Baal and then construct an altar to the Lord on top of the stronghold of Baal was a dramatic way to display to the entire town that the authority and power of Yahweh were greater than Baal. The application for our own lives follows Paul's exhortation. "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ," (II Corinthians 10:3-5). We, like Gideon, are engaged in spiritual warfare. When we promote the true worship of the Lord in the places in our lives, and the culture around us, where false concepts previously dominated, then we are building altars on top of strongholds.

The "stones laid in due order" are the Lord's instructions for the building of the altar acceptable in His sight. Ultimately, all valid Old Testament altars point forward as types to the cross of Christ. This instruction emphasizes that the altar of the Lord must be established according to His plan and order. God will not accept an approach to Him that disregards His ordained plan. We saw this same principle in the instructions the Lord gave to Moses to construct the tabernacle and the altar according to the plan which was revealed to him on the mountain.

Judges 8

8:1-3 - "Then the men of Ephraim said to him, "What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight with Midian?" And they accused him fiercely. And he said to them, "What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer? God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. What have I been able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger against him subsided when he said this."

Gideon has just led the 300 in an amazing victory over Midian, and he now encounters a completely unexpected challenge in the midst of the battle. The challenge was not from greater resistance by Midian, but in the unanticipated anger of the men of Ephraim. The tribe of Ephraim had not participated in this battle, but rather than express profound gratitude to Gideon for liberating them from the oppression of Midian, they interpret this development as a cause for offence. They accuse Gideon of intentionally leaving them out of the battle. They believe Gideon had dishonored them by not calling them to the battle. In their view, Gideon and his tribe would receive all the glory from the victory and they would have none. Rather than celebrating the work of the Lord through Gideon and appreciating all that it would mean for their lives, they react with jealousy for a perceived, but unintended sleight. Ephraim's concern for themselves blinds them from seeing the bigger picture of the Lord's work in this battle.

Ephraim fiercely accused Gideon over something that he did not control. It was not Gideon's decision to leave out the men of Ephraim from the battle. Most likely, if it were Gideon's choice, he would have preferred to have as many soldiers go to battle with him as possible. It was the Lord's sovereign choice to pare the warriors for the battle down from 32,000 to 10,000, and then down to the 300. Remember that the Lord gave Gideon His reason for reducing the size of the army so dramatically. The Lord told Gideon that Israel would claim the credit for the victory for themselves if they fought with a large army. They would take the glory for the victory rather than give the glory to the Lord for His role in the battle. This response of the men of Ephraim confirms the wisdom of the Lord. Even though they did not fight, their only concern about the battle was that they could not take any of the credit for themselves. The lesson here for us should be obvious. Any success or victory we ever experience in the challenges and battles of our lives is not the story of how great we were in that situation, but how great the grace of God on our behalf is.

Gideon's response to the men of Ephraim is interesting. He certainly could have told them the account of how the Lord had called him to lead in this battle. He could have described for them the command of the Lord to make the army smaller, rather than larger. He could have attempted to help them understand the spiritual concern of the Lord and why He had limited the size of the army of Israel

as He did. However, their accusation toward Gideon had exposed their hearts. Ephraim was in no frame of mind or heart to hear a reasonable explanation from Gideon. Any attempt to explain how it was God's decision, not his own, could easily be interpreted as an excuse by Gideon, or even worse, a rebuke of their spiritual condition. So, in wisdom, Gideon gives what is described elsewhere in Scripture as a soft answer. "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." (Proverbs 15:1). Gideon's response refers honorably to Ephraim's accomplishments compared to his own, and points out that the Lord had honored them by bringing the princes of Midian into their hands. His non-confrontational, peace-making answer deflates their building anger and cements the peace between the tribes.

8:4-7 - "And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing. So he said to the men of Succoth, "Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian." And the officials of Succoth said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?" So Gideon said, "Well then, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briars."

As Gideon and the 300 pursued the fleeing remainder of the army of Midian, they stopped at Succoth to ask for bread to eat so that they could regain their strength. Simple rules of hospitality in that day and culture required a generous response by the men of Succoth to provide food for Gideon's men. In addition to hospitality concerns, they should have been motivated by their loyalty to the cause of the Lord and Israel to support the work that Gideon and his men were doing on their behalf in this battle. Instead of opening their homes and providing for the needs of Gideon's 300, the men of Succoth answer which reveals that they had no real loyalty to the Lord or to Israel. Their only loyalty was to their own self interest. Their question back to Gideon about the hands of the kings of Midian was based upon a common practice in warfare. When one nation conquered another, the hands of the fallen king were often cut off as a demonstration of the absolute dominance of the victorious nation. By asking Gideon this question, they were challenging the certainty of his victory. It was as though they were saying to him, "Sure, you are doing well in this battle, but what proof do you have that you will finish the battle as the victor?" They were covering all their bases in case Midian came back and blamed them for helping Gideon. Years of oppression by Midian had affected their faith to the extent that unless they saw tangible proof, they would not go out on a limb to do the right thing in supporting the work of the Lord.

Gideon does not handle their refusal well. In both this case, and the similar refusal by the men of Penuel to follow, Gideon takes their refusal, not as a weakness of character and faith, but as a personal offence. Gideon later returns

and punishes the men of these cities with an escalating anger. He has the men of Succoth flogged with thorns and briars in a punishment that must have left their flesh shredded. Then, he attacked the city of Penuel, destroyed their tower, and executed the men of the city. Their refusal to feed his men was at best rude, and was a sin of serious proportions, but it did not call for their mass execution. What is noticeably missing from this portion of the account is any hint of Gideon stopping before punishing Succoth and Penuel and seeking the Lord for His direction and wisdom. The Lord has been forgotten by Gideon when he most needed to remember Him. Personal revenge has a way of causing us to forget the Lord until our thirst for revenge is satisfied. Gideon's name means hacker. He was called by the Lord to be a hacker in leading the 300 to throw off the oppression of Midian. Gideon did so, but he did not stop there. He has now become a hacker of his fellow Israelites by killing all the men of Penuel.

8:22-27 - "Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian." Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you." And Gideon said to them, "Let me make a request of you: every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil." (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) And they answered, "We will willingly give them." And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil. And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were around the necks of their camels. And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family."

Once the battle ended, the men of Israel look to Gideon with new respect and fear. They approach Gideon with a grand request. They want to make Gideon king of Israel and for his family to begin a dynastic line of kings into the generations to come. The Lord does have a plan to establish a King over Israel Who will rule throughout the generations to follow, but this is not the time for that plan, and Gideon is not the Lord's choice to be king. God's choice as King is to be the Lord Jesus, Who will come from the tribe of Judah in the Lord's perfect time. Gideon responds to their tempting offer with a mixed answer. Gideon's words in response are nearly perfect. He refuses their offer to make himself and his son king, and insists as he should have that the Lord would rule over them as King. If Gideon had stopped there, and gone home, his story might have ended in a much better way.

While Gideon spoke the right words in response, his actions demonstrated that his heart was torn by their offer. He made a special request to be given the earrings of the Midianites taken after the battle. The men of Israel gladly grant his request and they gave Gideon 1,700 shekels of gold (over 40 pounds), the

crescent ornaments, pendants and royal clothing of the kings of Midian. This was what were call a king's ransom. It was tribute money that a king ordinarily would receive from his subjects after a great victory such as this. Gideon did not even mention anything about an offering being taken for the Lord and His tabernacle. Gideon said all the right things about not being king, but his actions showed that he wanted to be treated like a king by Israel. The Lord had not given Gideon either instruction or permission to take such an offering for himself. He simply took what he wanted.

The long-term fruit of this unhealthy development had disastrous impact on Gideon's character, and on all of Israel. This marked the disconnection between Gideon and the Lord. Gideon made from the offering an ephod which he placed in his own city. In Israel, the ephod was the entire outfit including both clothing and precious ornaments that the high priest of Israel was to wear into the tabernacle of the Lord while serving in the presence of the Lord. In the surrounding cultures, ephods were the special outfits used to clothe the pagan idols worshipped in their temples. Gideon violated the Law of God in making this ephod, and rather than being an encouragement to true worship, it became the equivalent of an idol for Israel. The hearts of Gideon, his family, and all Israel turned from the Lord and His tabernacle to this false idol. The description of their devotion to it as "whoring" emphasizes that the hearts of Israel, which properly belonged only to the Lord, were turned away to the ephod in spiritual adultery.

Questions from Judges 7:

Question: Christians are called God's Army or soldiers in the Bible. There are Christians who are fearful to witness and share the gospel, fearful to many things... if they have these attitude, can we still call them army?

Answer: Yes, the Lord compares us to an army, and each of us has been enlisted by the Lord in His army. It's also true that one of our great responsibilities as soldiers in the Lord's army is to proclaim the gospel of salvation whenever the Lord gives us opportunity to do so. When a believer struggles with fear in sharing the gospel, it does not mean that they are not truly part of His army. The Lord knows that this can often be intimidating for us, and He has given us words and examples of encouragement to strengthen our hearts. Paul asked the church to pray for him so that he would proclaim the gospel with boldness as he should (Ephesians 6:19). Paul also encouraged Timothy to overcome his own fears in representing the Lord (II Timothy 1:7-8). Remember the example of Gideon also, which we are currently studying. Gideon was hiding from the Midianites in the winepress when the Lord called him. Our story is not one of fearlessness, but of learning to trust the Lord and find courage in His commitment to us while we obey Him.

Judges 9

9:1-5 - "Now Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's relatives and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family, "Say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?' Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh." And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." And they gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, who followed him. And he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself."

This chapter records a dark period in the early history of Israel. The events of this chapter are not accidental or coincidental, but purposeful in that they are intended to teach lessons about the consequences for God's people when His words and ways are ignored. The chapter opens with one of Gideon's sons, Abimelech in focus. He craved to be made king over Israel like the Canaanites who were ruled by kings. Until this moment in Israel's history, the only king Israel knew was the Lord, and He ruled over His holy nation through the ministry of the prophets and judges whom He raised up to represent His concerns to the people. We did see in chapter 8 that following Gideon's great victory over Midian that the people sought to make Gideon their king. Gideon refused with this excellent response.

"Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you." (Judges 8:23). Gideon said the right words, but his actions demonstrated that he harbored a secret desire to be treated as a king. We saw that his demand for tribute from all Israel was following a custom common to ancient kings of their subjects after a victory in battle. Another subtle, but significant choice by Gideon revealing his heart regarding being king is seen in his son Abimelech. The name Abimelech literally translates as "My father is king." Why would any man name his son, My Father Is King, unless he viewed himself from that perspective. While we never see Gideon become king, we do see his desire imprinted upon the heart of his son Abimelech. Gideon's son is not restrained by the concerns of his father to take upon himself the role of king in Israel. Abimelech convinces himself that it is his birthright to rule as king and he sets about to make it happen by any means necessary. The lesson here is one of parenting influence. If we allow unaddressed issues of rebellion toward the Lord to fester in our hearts as parents, we should expect our children to pick them up and to carry those same issues further than we ever did.

Abimelech approaches his relatives in Shechem to build a base of support for his bid to become the first king over Israel. He appeals to their self interest and natural fears and desires like all effective politicians do. The difference between a politician and a true preacher is that politicians tell the people what they want to hear and preachers are called to tell the people what they need to hear whether they like it or not. Having enlisted the support of his family in the tangible form of a campaign fund; Abimelech uses the funds to hire a goon squad of amoral men to insure his ascent to power. Abimelech identifies the most immediate threat to his bid to become king. That threat just happens to be his own brothers. The number of his brothers is abnormally large at seventy men. This is another indication of the spiritual condition of Gideon. God often blessed faithful men with large families of many children, but 70 sons is by any measurement a number beyond wisdom because it points to the serial relationships with women that became the mothers of his many children.

Abimelech led his band of worthless men to his father Gideon's house where he found his 70 brothers. There Abimelech killed all of his brothers with the lone exception of Jotham, who escaped and hid himself. The method of the execution of his brothers is important to notice. He slew them "on one stone." This stone was a special stone used in ritual sacrifice of animals to the gods. It's presence in the house of Gideon was another example of the spiritual compromise of Gideon along with the ephod which we saw him construct in the previous chapter. That the 70 were all slain on that one stone tells us that they were killed one by one in a ritualistic manner. Abimelech was offering his own brothers as a blood sacrifice, not toward Baal or one of the Canaanite gods, but toward himself. In other words, this murderous sacrifice of his brothers indicates that Abimelech had taken the place of god in his own eyes.

9:6-8 - "And all the leaders of Shechem came together, and all Beth-millo, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem. When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and cried aloud and said to them, "Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.'"

Abimelech was convincing in his appeal to be made king and the leaders of Shechem chose a symbolic location for the ceremony. They chose the pillar at Shechem which was from the days of Joshua. This passage describes why the significant moment in the history of Israel when this pillar was established and its spiritual purpose. "He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel." And the people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey." So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the LORD. And Joshua said to all the people, "Behold,

this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God." (Joshua 24:23-27). The pillar was a symbolic witness that the people of Israel had heard and accepted responsibility to remain faithful to the Lord. Now, at this same location, Israel chooses to honor a covenant breaking murderer as their king in place of the Lord Himself. They could not have chosen a worse location to make Abimelech king. By doing so, the leaders of Shechem were rejecting the covenant with the Lord and guaranteed imminent judgment for themselves.

When Jotham, the only other surviving son of Gideon from Abimelech's slaughter, learned that Abimelech had been made king following his treacherous betrayal, he went and stood on Mount Gerazim. The city of Shechem was situated in a valley between the mountains of Gerazim and Ebal. This was the location to which the Lord had directed Israel when they first entered the Promised Land. Remember, the Lord had split the people of Israel into two groups. One group stood on the slopes of Ebal and the other group stood on Gerazim (Deuteronomy 27). There they listened to the blessings and cursings of the Law of God. The blessings which would be poured out by the Lord upon Israel if they remained faithful and obedient to Him were symbolized by Gerazim. Jotham standing on Gerazim to pronounce his message of cursing regarding Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem indicated that the blessing that would otherwise have been theirs had now become a curse upon their lives because of their betrayal.

Jotham delivered his word of rebuke and curse to the leaders of Shechem, not in direct language, but using the indirect form of symbolism. Jotham spoke of trees which desired a king to rule over them. The trees symbolized the people of Israel. They sought out different trees to become their ruler, but were rebuffed by each. This points back to the appropriate refusal of Gideon to become king over Israel. Then, when no tree would become their king, the other trees finally turned to a bramble. The bramble accepted their offer to be king, but with its acceptance, it gave a warning of coming judgment in the form of fire. The bramble represents Abimelech. The bramble was a thorn bush which produced no fruit, only made life more difficult by its thorns and had been used as a symbol of the curse produced by the sin of man since the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:18). The king which the leaders of Shechem believed would be a great blessing for their lives would only be a curse for them because they chose him in their own rebellion toward the Lord.

One thing we should recognize from Jotham's message is the use of symbolism and imagery in spiritual communication. We tend to use a more direct form of communication in our culture today, and many people today are not familiar or comfortable with the heavy use of symbolism. Keep in mind when interpreting the use of symbols and imagery in the Bible that the symbols are not designed to function as a mysterious code known only to the speaker. We are meant to

understand what is spoken. The Lord speaks in images and symbols to help us remember the concepts due to the vivid picture painted by the words. Our starting point for interpretation is to refer to earlier uses of the same images in Scripture. For instance, in this case the image of Abimelech as a thorn bush connects with the curse judgment upon the sin of man from the Garden of Eden. In other words, this pattern of sin-curse-judgment is as old as history.

9:50-57 - "Then Abimelech went to Thebez and encamped against Thebez and captured it. But there was a strong tower within the city, and all the men and women and all the leaders of the city fled to it and shut themselves in, and they went up to the roof of the tower. And Abimelech came to the tower and fought against it and drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. Then he called quickly to the young man his armor-bearer and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, lest they say of me, 'A woman killed him.'" And his young man thrust him through, and he died. And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home. Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal."

Abimelech won a great victory over the leaders of Shechem and destroyed their strong tower to which they had fled for safety. Next he turned his attention to Thebez, and when the people of the city fled to their own tower for safety, Abimelech presumed that he would do the same to them as he had done at Shechem. What he did not realize is that the only reason he won the battle of Shechem was that the Lord had chosen to use one wicked man (Abimelech) to be His instrument of judgment upon other wicked men (the people of Shechem). Now, instead of another victory, Abimelech's attack on Thebez would result in his own destruction as God chose this circumstance to return what he deserved upon his own head. As Abimelech approached the tower of Thebez with the intention of setting it on fire as he had done to the tower of Shechem, the Lord sovereignly directed one of the women of Thebez. From within the tower, she threw down an upper millstone. The upper millstone was the smaller of the two millstones. She threw it down, not necessarily aiming for Abimelech, but directed by the hand of God right to Abimelech's head. The millstone crushed his skull leaving him lying helpless and dying at the foot of the tower.

The story serves to illustrate an important spiritual principle regarding the judgment of God. People may convince themselves that they can avoid the consequences of answering for their sins, or may view themselves as strong and invulnerable to danger in their pride, but there is no avoiding the hand of God in judgment. The Lord in His gracious mercy does not immediately give us what we all deserve to receive because of our sins. It is easy to misinterpret the delay in

His grace as a signal that we have effectively escaped the consequences that are coming. We should always keep in mind that whatever a man sows, that he will also reap (Galatians 6:7).

It is a ironic testimony of Abimelech's character that in his dying minutes, his primary concern was not for his spiritual condition and his relationship to the Lord. Instead his first and last thought was for his own image in the community. Laying there helpless, Abimelech only did not want to be remembered as the king who was slain by a woman. He ordered his personal armor bearer to draw his sword and kill him with the intention of saving his reputation in his death. Of course, the Lord, knowing that this was Abimelech's concern was careful to have the story written to highlight the true role of the woman that killed him; effectively spoiling even Abimelech's last rebellious plan to preserve his proud reputation. For all history to follow, he is forever known as the king who was slain by a woman.

Judges 10

Judges 10:6-9 - "The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. And the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed."

This pattern is a familiar one. How many times have we seen (in their relatively short history up until this point) Israel turn away from the Lord and drift into forbidden relationships with the false gods of the people of the world around them? One would think that they would have learned by now that no possible good could come from leaving the one true God, breaking their covenant vows to Him, and seeking satisfaction from the gods of the nations around them. Not only does Israel repeat the deadly pattern of apostasy, this time they take it farther than ever before. There are seven spiritual connections listed here which Israel made with the gods of the nations. The number seven is symbolic and significant. It indicates that Israel's apostasy and backsliding was complete. In other words they had become perfect failures.

Not only did Israel turn to any and every other god that was available to them, they also turned from the Lord. They forsook Him. This is relational language. It

paints a word picture of an unfaithful wife leaving her faithful husband and pursuing any other relationship other than the one relationship to which she belongs. The Lord did not take Israel's unfaithfulness lightly. He did not shrug it off and choose to overlook it. Their disaffection produced an emotional response from the Lord. We tend to think of the Lord as above emotions. He is not above emotions. God is an emotional being. The difference between Him and us is that we are often controlled by our emotions in sinful ways. However, the Lord's heart was stirred by Israel's willingness to forsake their covenant relationship with Him and turn to any and every god except Him. The emotion in the Lord their betrayal stirred was anger. It is described as a kindled anger. The word picture is of a fire which is started and grows in intensity.

In His burning anger against Israel the Lord once again turned them over to nations around them. The Lord "sold" them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites. This describes them as slaves. The reality was that their idolatry with the gods of the nations had enslaved their hearts to sin. By selling them into the hands of these nations the Lord was insuring that Israel would eat the fruit of their own rebellion in their national circumstances. It meant that the Lord was giving these nations control over Israel like a master has control over a slave. If Israel refused to follow the Lord as their master then they would learn again what life under another, less merciful and gracious master was like. This is the first time in Israel's history that the Lord gave control of Israel to two Gentile nations at once. It indicates a double portion of the Lord's discipline had been earned by Israel.

Judges 10:10-14 - "And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, "We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals." And the LORD said to the people of Israel, "Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? The Sidonians also, and the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, and you cried out to me, and I saved you out of their hand. Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress."

Following eighteen years of crushing oppression by the Philistines and Ammonites, Israel finally begins to wake up to the recognition that the devastation they were experiencing in their lives was not accidental or coincidental, but purposeful and connected to their broken relationship to the Lord. The people then respond with an apparent spiritual breakthrough. They cried out to the Lord with an open acknowledgement that they had forsaken the Lord. Does the Lord respond to the admission of their sin against Him by rushing to forgive and forget their unfaithfulness toward Him? No, the Lord in somewhat of a surprise, responds to their admission with words of rebuke. The surprise is that this seems out of character for the Lord. We are so accustomed as Christians to the concept that if we will only acknowledge our sins, that the Lord

is in some sense bound to immediately and fully forgive us, and rush to restore our life circumstances. That is not the case here.

The Lord does not forgive and forget Israel's unfaithfulness here, because Israel's repentance is not authentic. There is such a thing as genuine repentance, and there is also such a thing as insincere repentance. Israel is crying what we call crocodile tears here. Their "repentance" is more about them going through the motions of repairing the breach between themselves and the Lord out of concern for their own great discomfort than out of genuine concern for how they have dishonored and grieved the Lord in their eighteen years of rebellion. Their repentance is a surface level change, and not a deep heart change of attitude and intention toward the Lord and their own sin. Their admission is aimed at telling the Lord what they know He wants to hear from them. Their empty repentance reveals how low their view of the Lord really is. He knows their hearts even better than they know themselves. The Lord knows when we make an effort to repent of sin whether we are serious and really heart concerned to change our behavior with His help. He also knows when we have no real intention of changing. He knows when we are only trying to avoid the inevitable pain of the discipline of the Lord for our rebellion against Him.

The Lord is gracious, merciful, and always willing to forgive when His people approach Him with genuine repentance. However, the Lord will not be mocked by fake attempts to escape His requirement of real and lasting change in our relationship to sin. If a spanking by His hand is the only thing that will reach our hearts, then He will spank us in spite of our protests that we asked Him to forgive us and therefore we should not be disciplined. If a believer commits adultery, and asks the Lord to forgive them, but they have no intention in their heart to end the adulterous relationship, will the Lord forgive that believer? If a believer asks the Lord to forgive them for cheating on their taxes, but has every intention to cheat on their taxes next year as well, will the Lord forgive them and withhold discipline from them? Real repentance always meets the mercy of a gracious Lord. Insincere repentance always meets the much needed hand of the Lord's discipline.

The Lord responds to Israel's insincere repentance with a startling declaration. "Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more." What a shock it must have been to Israel to hear the words, "I will save you no more!" As a prelude to this strong word of covenant judgment, the Lord recounted for Israel seven previous rescues when He delivered them from the continuing consequences of their rebellion. He saved them seven times from the oppression of seven different nations. Each oppression was due to their turning from the Lord, and each deliverance was a gracious response of the Lord to them turning back to Him. This list is the counterpoint to the list of the seven times Israel had turned from the Lord in unfaithfulness in 10:6. Israel had been perfectly unfaithful to the Lord, yet the Lord had remained perfectly faithful and merciful toward Israel. Now, the Lord declared to them that He would not

continue to save them. This does not mean that the Lord would never again be gracious to Israel, but that unless a real authentic repentance from Israel was forthcoming, they should only expect the judgment of the Lord upon their lives.

Judges 10:15-16 - "And the people of Israel said to the LORD, "We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day." So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel."

The Lord's severe judgment upon Israel leading to eighteen years of oppression under the harsh Philistines and Ammonites finally produces the long overdue appropriate response from Israel. Years earlier (10:10) Israel had cried out to the Lord with an insincere "repentance". The Lord was not impressed with their half hearted repentance. Now, Israel has been taught real humility by the eighteen years of affliction. They have learned an important lesson. They again cry out to the Lord, but this time without the measured words aimed at convincing the Lord of their good intentions. This time they simply acknowledge their sin and proclaim their acceptance from the Lord's hand of whatever they deserve. When they tell the Lord to do whatever seems good to Him, it is an appropriate recognition that He is in charge not them, that they deserve only punishment from Him, and that they cannot avoid His hand of discipline. But, they end their cry with a heartfelt appeal for Him to please deliver them in spite of what they deserve.

This kind of prayer honors the Lord. This kind of prayer is honest and full of real repentance and faith. It is the kind of prayer to which the Lord responds. They also did not just pray. They made a new decision as a nation and collectively put away the foreign gods from among them. In other words they cleaned out their own spiritual house. They matched their words of repentance in their prayer with necessary actions of repentance. This combination of authentic repentance in words and actions is exactly what the Lord was after for them. The response of the Lord is interesting. It is described as Him becoming "impatient over the misery of Israel." This means that the Lord grew suddenly tired of Israel continuing to suffer under the oppression of the Philistines and Ammonites.

The Lord had declared that He would not save them anymore, but this was not an absolute intention of the Lord, but a conditional one. The condition was the repentance of Israel. As long as Israel remained unfaithful to Him He would continue to cause their oppression. Yet, as soon as they turned in real repentance back toward the Lord, the Lord turned His heart back to toward Israel. This teaches us that the Lord does not want His people to suffer under the consequences of our own sins any longer than is necessary to teach our hearts. His first inclination is to be merciful and gracious, and as quickly as their hard hearts were turned in the right direction, His heart softened toward them again. The next development in the story will be the Lord raising up another judge to deliver Israel from their misery.

Judges 11

Judges 11:5-12 - "And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. And they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites." But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?" And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the Ammonites and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your head." And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD will be witness between us, if we do not do as you say." So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them. And Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah. Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What do you have against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?"

Jephthah is one of the more interesting characters in the Bible. He is neither a bad guy as some have portrayed him, nor a model to be followed in every respect. He is a fitting judge for Israel during this troubled period of their history because he represents a mixture of true faith and worldly influence in his character and actions. Jephthah rises to a position of leadership in Israel in a manner which reflects this mixture. The story of the emergence of the next judge in Israel should start with a description of the activity of the Lord in calling and commissioning the new judge to their leadership role. However, we do not see or hear from the Lord in Jephthah's story at this point. The Lord is seemingly absent, or at the least silent. We know that the Lord is involved in this development, but His role is yet undefined and behind the scenes. In the story of Gideon, by way of contrast, we saw the Lord send an angel to inform Gideon that he had been chosen to be the next judge in Israel.

Here, Jephthah is recruited to lead Israel, not directly by the Lord, but by the leaders of Gilead. The background of this development is the threat posed by the Ammonites, as well as the previous rejection of Jephthah due to his community status as an illegitimate son. The elders of Gilead seek Jephthah to become their leader and deliverer, not out of respect for his character, but out of desperation. His reputation as a leader of a band of worthless fellows has convinced them that he would be the most effective leader in a war with Ammon. By approaching Jephthah with this offer, the elders of Gilead expose their own hypocrisy in their readiness to compromise their principles and standards for the sake of expediency. Jephthah is seen as a man who can get the job done. At this point

that is all they care about. It is bad enough when the world chooses its political leaders for no greater reason than what they can do for the people they lead, but when the covenant people of God choose their leaders using the same criteria it is a shameful compromise. We see modeled in the clear qualifications for eldership given in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 that the Lord instructs His people to value character above all else when evaluating candidates for leadership.

Jephthah accepts their offer to become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead. His decision contains some mixed elements we should notice. The Lord was involved in bringing Jephthah into a position of leadership and influence in Gilead, and he will ultimately serve the Lord's purpose in the events that unfold from here. However, we should not mistake the sovereign hand of God in bringing Jephthah into this position with the Lord's approval for everything going on in Jephthah's own heart and mind in this decision. We see Jephthah accepting the offer of the Gilead elders to become their leader without ever stopping to first check with the Lord. Jephthah does not pray and seek the Lord's confirmation in his decision, but leaps at the opportunity presented to him. This hints at an issue in his heart which colors his decision. Jephthah's status as an outcast from the community of Gilead has made him vulnerable to any opportunity to be vindicated in the eyes of the community. We see his heart's perspective revealed, not just in his response to the elders, but in his first official communication to the king of the Ammonites. Jephthah's message does not even mention Gilead by name, but frames everything in terms of "me." "What do you have against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?"

This teaches us an important principle regarding enduring hardships in our lives. If, by faith in the sovereign purpose and plan of God, we are able to trust that God appointed our life's hardships for His own good reasons, then our hearts and character will actually benefit and grow from our experience of hardship. The testimony of Joseph from an earlier generation is a wonderful example of this principle. Joseph endured undeserved hardship in the betrayal of his brothers leading to years of slavery and imprisonment in Egypt. Joseph never lost his focus on the Lord in his circumstances, and when the Lord eventually delivered him into a much more favorable situation Joseph declared that the meaning of his whole experience was that God meant it for a greater good. If, we leave God out of the consideration of our hardships, our hearts will be adversely affected by the experience of the hardship and we will be tempted to become more me-centered. Our life then becomes defined by our self made goal of rescuing and vindicating ourselves.

Judges 11:23-24 - "So then the LORD, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the LORD our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess."

The king of the Ammonites responded to Jephthah's request for a peaceful resolution with a demand that Gilead be turned over to them as their rightful possession. Jephthah responded with an eloquent counterargument in which he answered the claims of Ammon in a multi-point rebuttal. Jephthah's crowning point of his case presented to the king of Ammon gives us our first glimpse at Jephthah's spiritual understanding. These verses are actually a sarcastic response set in terms of an official negotiation. His sarcasm does not diminish the truth and power of his answer. Jephthah answers the claim of Ammon to rightful ownership of the land of Gilead with the best possible response he could have given. The land no longer rightfully belonged to Ammon because the Lord had dispossessed the previous inhabitants and had given it to Israel.

The implication of Jephthah's declaration is huge and still an applicable principle for the nations of the world today. The principle is this: the property rights of nations are not determined by the nations themselves, but by the Lord over the nations. All nations, like the Ammonites are naturally inclined to think that possession establishes the right of continued possession. It does not. The Lord is in rightful authority over history and geography for all the nations of the world. This declaration by Paul identifies this principle. "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him." (Acts 17:24-27). The Lord has determined the allotted period of time for every nation to exist as a nation, and He has also determined the geographic boundaries for each nation.

It is in the Lord's determination when nations rise and when nations fall. It is the Lord's authority that determines the extent of the land given to each nation to possess. He alone can change their possession. Jephthah's pointed sarcasm is in him bringing Chemosh into the discussion. Jephthah declared his faith to the king of the Ammonites when he asserted that it was the Lord who dispossessed the previous occupants. He mentions Chemosh in an obviously derogatory way. His point was that Israel was content to dwell in the land given to them by their God. Why isn't Ammon content to dwell in the land given to them by their god? If they have issues with their national circumstance why not bring them up with their god to fix for them? It was a subtle, but potent way to display the truth that

Yahweh is the one true God, and that by placing their hope in Chemosh, they really have no hope at all.

We can learn from this approach is some of our interactions with the world. Today people place misguided faith in all sorts of false gods. They hope that in money, success, meditation, yoga, self-help books, visualization, positive thinking, spirit guides, etc. that they will find the answers to the issues of their lives. One of the kindest things we can do for a self-deluded world is to challenge them to find their security and safety in these things when they encounter real personal crisis. In their hearts they already know that these things provide no real answer for troubles let alone their critical needs. Jephthah's response portrays a dramatic competition. It's the ability of Chemosh to provide for Ammon vs. the Lord's ability to provide for His people Israel. It's no contest.

Judges 11:29-36 - "Then the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering." So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the LORD gave them into his hand. And he struck them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a great blow. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel. Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow." And she said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the LORD; do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites."

This story is one of the most troubling in the entire Bible for many believers. The troubling aspect is the indication that Jephthah, who is a judge in Israel, would sacrifice his own daughter to pay a vow to the Lord. Many commentators on the Bible interpret the account in this way and see it as evidence of the degree of the spiritual corruption in Israel during this period of history. The wording of the account allows for this possibility as a viable interpretation of what happened. The questionable wording is in this phrase, "then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering." Jephthah's daughter was the one who first came out of his house to greet him, and he did honor his vow to the Lord. However, I am convinced that Jephthah did not kill his daughter by

offering her as a human sacrifice to pay his vow to the Lord. I believe what is described here is that Jephthah dedicated his daughter to the Lord's service for the rest of her life.

The first issue to tackle in considering whether Jephthah killed his daughter as a sacrificial burnt offering is what the Lord had revealed to Israel about human sacrifices. In several places in the Law of God, the Lord had clearly declared that human sacrifice was an abomination to Him. This is the strongest possible wording to describe the Lord's attitude toward human sacrifice. This is a key in arriving at the correct interpretation because of the Lord's evaluation of Jephthah's life. In Hebrews chapter 11 we find a Biblical record of the great examples of faith found in the Old Testament from the Lord's evaluation. These verses mention Jephthah favorably. "And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-- who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions," (Hebrews 11:32-33). The Lord honors the memory of Jephthah in this passage and names him as a model of faith for all future generations to learn from and follow. While none of the names on this list were perfect men, they were also not men whose last mentioned act in their life story was one of committing what the Lord identifies as an abomination.

The second issue is found in the context of the story itself. Jephthah's vow is usually identified as a rash vow by those who believe he continued on to kill his daughter by offering her as a human sacrifice to the Lord. A rash vow is one which should never have been made. It is a vow of foolishness. Jephthah did not make a foolish rash vow unto the Lord. The verse immediately before the vow that he makes indicates the Lord's involvement in this situation. It tells us that the Spirit of God was upon Jephthah...and he made a vow to the Lord. The indication is that he made the vow while the Spirit of God was upon him. The Lord stirred his heart to make this vow and the Lord would not have stirred Jephthah to vow a human sacrifice unto Him. Instead, the Lord stirred Jephthah to vow to offer his daughter via burnt offering to Him. This did not require that the daughter become the burnt offering, but that her life was the focus of that offering. Jephthah would have offered a lamb or a goat at the tabernacle of the Lord and in doing so devoted his daughter to a life of serving the Lord at His tabernacle as other select women in Israel did. The reason that this remained a huge sacrifice for Jephthah involved his hopes and dreams for his own future.

The men of Gilead had negotiated with Jephthah to in effect make him their king, though that title was not specifically used. Jephthah's heart was only too ready to accept their offer and become their leader. His wording in his negotiation with the king of Ammon revealed that he quickly began to identify the land of Gilead as his land, with him as the master of it all. The Lord had made it clear to Israel from the beginning of their covenant relationship (Exodus 19:5-6) that He alone was their King. The Lord stirred Jephthah's heart to dedicate his own daughter to the Lord as a hard learned lesson to both Jephthah and Israel that the Lord would

not allow anyone except Himself to rule as king in Israel. This was Jephthah's only child and his only hope for an heir, to carry on his family name into the next generation. By dedicating her to the Lord, Jephthah was committing his daughter to perpetual virginity. She would never bear children and the family line of Jephthah would die.

Judges 11:37-39 - "So she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions." So he said, "Go." Then he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and wept for her virginity on the mountains. And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow that he had made. She had never known a man, and it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year."

The response of the daughter to the news of the vow her father had made concerning her is an amazing example of godly faith and submission. She did not protest with a single word the dramatic change in her life's direction. She goes away to weep, not for her life (like we would expect if she was going to be killed in a human sacrifice), but for her virginity. Her request for two months to mourn before beginning her service to the Lord tells us that her own hearts desire had been to marry and bear children. It also reminds us of the cultural difference between ancient Israel and modern America. Becoming a wife and mother was the appropriate and godly goal for all women in Israel. The loss of those roles was something worth mourning. Yet, her life would not be without significance. As a wholly dedicated maid servant of the Lord she would become an early example of those that Paul mentions in the New Testament.

"This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord." (I Corinthians 7:29-35).

Judges 12

Judges 12:1-4 - "The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house over you with fire." And Jephthah said to them, "I and my people had a great dispute with the Ammonites, and when I called you, you did not save me from their hand. And when I saw that you would not save me, I took my life in my hand and crossed over against the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?" Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim. And the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, because they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh."

As soon as the crisis with the king of the Ammonites was resolved by a great victory, another crisis arose to take its place and this new development was even more problematic for Israel. The tribe of Ephraim was called to arms, meaning that they assembled the men of the tribe as an army ready for battle. They were not preparing for war with some new foreign invader, but preparing for war with Jephthah. The motive of Ephraim was a familiar one. They were convinced that Jephthah had slighted them as a tribe by not calling them to come participate in the battle against the Ammonites. Their pride was wounded and they envied the glory that Jephthah and the men of Gilead exclusively received from the victory over the Ammonites. Their concern was not a righteous one. This confrontation between the men of Ephraim and Jephthah should remind us of an almost identical confrontation of a recent generation between Ephraim and Gideon. "Then the men of Ephraim said to him, "What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?" And they accused him fiercely." (Judges 8:1).

Ephraim had rebuked Gideon in anger when the Lord had directed him to fight with only 300 men in the battle against Midian. Their concern then, as now was for themselves only. In that earlier confrontation, Gideon's soft answer effectively turned away the wrath of the men of Ephraim and preserved peace between the tribes of Israel. This confrontation with Jephthah would not be resolved so peacefully. Jephthah made a legitimate effort to resolve this dispute peacefully, but Ephraim was already too stirred up to be persuaded by Jephthah's words. Jephthah's declaration that the Lord had given him victory over the Ammonites should have been sufficient to persuade Ephraim. If Jephthah had sinned by excluding Ephraim from the battle, surely the Lord would not have blessed him with such a great victory.

Jephthah also objected that he had indeed made a call for the men of Ephraim to come help in the battle with the Ammonites, but that Ephraim had not responded to his call. We do not know whether Ephraim was lying about this, Jephthah was

lying, or it was somehow a huge missed communication between Jephthah and Ephraim. Considering the way this dispute played out, it is doubtful that Jephthah lied, which leaves us with the other two possibilities. Either way, Jephthah's effort to settle the offence of the men of Ephraim was met with stubborn resolve by Ephraim. At this point it was clear to Jephthah that Ephraim would not return to their land in peace. The Biblical principle that applies here is this. "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." (Romans 12:18). It was no longer possible for Jephthah to maintain peace in Israel, and so he led Gilead into battle against Ephraim.

The question is whether Jephthah was in the right in this decision to fight Ephraim, or whether he sinned to lead Israel against Israel in battle. This was like a civil war within God's holy nation, and was not reflective of God's ideal for His covenant people. Yet, even the people of God are not impervious to the fleshly influences that lead to brother fighting against brother, and in their worst moments such conflicts are unavoidable. When a serious conflict erupts between the people of God, it is possible for both sides to be in the wrong. However, in this case, the indication is that Ephraim was in sin, while Jephthah was not. Ephraim's threat toward Jephthah when they first confronted him reveals how far their hearts attitude had deteriorated. "We will burn your house over you with fire." Even if Jephthah had sinned in leaving them out of the battle, their threat was way out of line.

The threat to burn him and his house was evil, but considering Jephthah's special role in Israel as a judge raised up by the Lord, Ephraim's threat called for the judgment of the Lord. In the Law of God, the Lord had warned Israel to not reject His authority as represented by the judges which He had appointed. "The man who acts presumptuously by not obeying the priest who stands to minister there before the LORD your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall purge the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear and fear and not act presumptuously again." (Deuteronomy 17:12-13). The Lord required a death penalty for those who rebelled against His judges. This was necessary or else their rebellious influence would spread throughout the rest of the nation. By judging those who rebelled with the death penalty, the intention was to "purge the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear and fear and not act presumptuously again."

Judges 12:5-6 - "And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me go over," the men of Gilead said to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" When he said, "No," they said to him, "Then say Shibboleth," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time 42,000 of the Ephraimites fell."

In the battle that followed, the Lord blessed the Gileadites against Ephraim. Jephthah and Gilead struck Ephraim and the army of Ephraim sought to flee to safety back to their own land across the Jordan river. The Gileadites wisely captured the key points along the Jordan that were used to cross the river. As the fleeing soldiers of Ephraim arrived at these crossing points, they attempted to pass as non-combatants. They knew if they were identified as Ephraimites they would be killed by the Gileadites controlling the fords. The Gileadites devised a way of discerning the identity of the men of Ephraim by having them pronounce a single word. The accent of the Ephraimites exposed their tribal identity. In today's world this would be called racial profiling, and political correctness would have prohibited this test from being applied. The Lord was in this development because of His purpose to carry out His judgment upon rebellious Ephraim. A total of 42,000 men of Ephraim were slain at the fords of the Jordan river. We do not know the total number of the men of Ephraim, but it is probable that the tribe was devastated by this judgment. The cost of their wicked rebellion against the Lord and His judge was high.

Judges 12:8-10 - "After him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. He had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he gave in marriage outside his clan, and thirty daughters he brought in from outside for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years. Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem."

Jephthah judged Israel for six years until his death. Between Jephthah and Samson, the next famous judge of Israel there was a series of three lesser known judges of Israel. Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon are not household Bible names. I have read the book of Judges many times and do not remember their names between readings. Before reading this chapter if you were asked to name the three judges between Jephthah and Samson, it is probable that you would not have been able to identify them. The reason that their names remain somewhat obscure to us is that there are no great events of Israel's history associated with their names. We remember Adam as the first man and the fall in the Garden of Eden. We remember Abraham because of his role in the covenant. We remember Moses due to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the giving of the Law.

Ibzan, Elon and Abdon accomplished no great works, and participated in no significant events in Israel. There is no hint in the text that the relative quietness of their lives was due to any sin or failure on their part. There is something

encouraging for the average believer from their lives. We read of the great heroes of the faith through church history; names like Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Whitefield, Spurgeon and many others. We should praise God for His amazing grace to have accomplished such great works through their lives. Yet, we may never accomplish in our own lives anything as significant as they did. The Lord does have a special purpose in the lives of a Joshua, a Gideon, and a Samson. He also has a purpose in the lives of an Ibzan, Elon and Abdon. If we live faithful, obedient, yet relatively quiet lives as these three men did, there is still reason to praise God. Israel enjoyed peace under the influence of these three judges.

Judges 13

Judges 13:1-2 - "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. And his wife was barren and had no children."

In the previous chapter we saw that the Lord had provided Israel with a series of judges in Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon. As long as the judges were present, Israel remained for the most part faithful to the Lord. Following the death of the last judge in this series, Israel returned once again to the idolatry which had led to their previous oppression. They benefited from the presence of the judges, but they had failed to learn the lesson the Lord was teaching them through this repeating cycle of circumstances. The cycle should have been obvious by this point in Israel's history. When Israel remained true to the Lord and His ways they were blessed by Him. When Israel turned from the Lord to the false gods of the nations around them they were judged by the oppression of one or more of those nations. Nevertheless, Israel once more turned away from the Lord. The result this time was a forty year long oppression. The number is not insignificant. Forty years is the number of a full generation in the Bible. This indicates that an entire generation passed with Israel under the judgment of the Lord due to their unfaithfulness to the covenant.

In previous cycles of unfaithfulness leading to the Lord's judgment by the oppression of one of the nations over Israel, the cycle had ended with Israel finally becoming so burdened in their oppression that they turned back to the Lord and cried out to Him for mercy and deliverance. Because the Lord is gracious, He always responded to their cries by raising up a deliverer for Israel. However, this cycle would be different. Forty years of oppression under the hand of the Philistines had passed, yet we do not hear a peep from Israel toward the Lord. They do not cry out to the Lord for mercy and deliverance. Israel remains silent toward the Lord even after a generation of time under God's judgment

passes. This indicates that Israel has drifted farther away from the Lord than ever before. They have drifted so far from the Lord that they do not even think to cry out to Him regarding their oppressive circumstance. Israel has become so paganized that they are in effect no better spiritually than the Philistines that rule over them.

Since Israel fails to cry out to the Lord when they most desperately need to do so, we might think that all hope for Israel to ever be restored is lost. From a human perspective this is true. Once the nation reaches the point that they won't even bother to pray to the Lord, there is no way for their lives to ever be recovered from the pit into which they have fallen. Yet, at the point where the circumstance was darkest, the Lord intervened with His plan to restore Israel in spite of them, not because of them. The Samson story is interesting from several different perspectives; his special birth circumstances, his amazing strength, and his character flaws, but we should recognize one of the greatest elements in the life of Samson. His life and calling as judge of Israel reveals a new dimension to the depth of God's mercy and grace. Israel was so far gone at this point that they would not even ask the Lord to help them, and yet the Lord provided a deliverer for them in Samson.

The Lord emphasized that this was an expression of undeserved mercy and grace toward Israel in His sovereign choice of the family through which He would bring the deliverer. The Lord chose to tribe of Dan for the birth of Samson. All the tribes of Israel had fallen away from the Lord, but Dan had fallen first and farthest. They were the worst tribe in Israel in terms of spiritual faithfulness to the Lord. Their movement away from the Lord spiritually was reflected in their tribe's decision to move away from the portion of the Promised Land that the Lord had assigned to them in the south, and move to the farthest north location of any of the tribes. Their location situated them farthest away from the tabernacle of the Lord. It was through this spiritually disconnected tribe that the Lord brought the next deliverer. The Lord chose to save through the least likely and most unexpected.

Judges 13:3-6 - "And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines." Then the woman came and told her husband, "A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome. I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name,"

The introduction of the next deliverer is different than the introductions of previous judges in the book. We meet them as adults at the point in their lives in

which the Lord first calls them to their assignment as a judge. The story of Samson starts before his conception. This tells us that the Lord had marked him out for a special purpose even among the other judges. The angel of the Lord appeared to Samson's mother to announce the Lord's plan for her to conceive and bear a son. This identifies Samson as a child of promise, which is an ongoing theme in special Bible births. The angel of the Lord had given a similar message to Abraham and Sarah before the birth of Isaac. The births of both Isaac and Samson point forward as foreshadows to the birth of Jesus, which was also preceded by an angelic announcement.

The angel gave Samson's mother special instructions that were to guide both her and her son's behavior. She was to abstain from drinking wine and eating any unclean foods. Once he was born, she was not to ever cut his hair. The explanation given was that the Lord had called Samson to be a Nazirite to God from birth. A Nazirite was a person that lived under a vow to the Lord. The vow set them apart from certain behaviors that symbolically indicated that they belonged completely to the Lord. The guidelines for the vow were given in the Law of God. "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins. "All the days of his vow of separation, no razor shall touch his head. Until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. He shall let the locks of hair of his head grow long." (Numbers 6:2-5).

There were three requirements of the Nazirite law. The person under the vow was to abstain from wine, and consuming any part of the grapevine. They were to not cut their hair. They were to also avoid contact with a dead body. For more details on the Nazirite vow please see my comments on Numbers chapter six. The point of the requirement to abstain from all products of the grapevine is that the grapevine was a chosen symbol of the Lord for Israel as His covenant nation. The person under this vow was a reminder to Israel that the nation belonged exclusively to the Lord. The Lord set Samson apart from the womb as a lifelong Nazirite during a period in Israel's history when the nation had almost entirely forgotten that they belonged to the Lord. Samson's was intended to be a living breathing reminder or their obligation to be set apart from the world unto the Lord in covenant.

In order to be effective as such a significant spiritual symbol to Israel, Samson would need to remain faithful and true to his Nazirite vow and maintain his own purity before the Lord. As we will see from his story, Samson's purity fluctuated wildly. As a result, he imperfectly represented to Israel what the Lord intended. In this way, Samson inadvertently points forward again to Christ. Samson's failures to consistently maintain his separation from the world in service to the Lord is

itself a strong reminder of our need for Christ. None of us are able to consistently, let alone perfectly maintain our commitment to holiness unto the Lord. Only Jesus has ever lived a perfect and consistent holy and separated life. Jesus then is the fulfillment, the substance of what the Nazirite law portrayed in type and shadow.

Judges 13:15-20 - "Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "Please let us detain you and prepare a young goat for you." And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "If you detain me, I will not eat of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the LORD." (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the LORD.) And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you?" And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?" So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the LORD, to the one who works wonders, and Manoah and his wife were watching. And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD went up in the flame of the altar. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they fell on their faces to the ground."

Manoah makes the necessary offer of hospitality to the angel to prepare a meal for him to eat. Manoah still did not recognize that he was speaking with an angel at this point and probably thought that he was a man of God sent to them with a message from the Lord. The angel refuses to eat the food that Manoah offered him. This refusal was not because he was an angel and incapable of eating. Angels do not need to eat like we do, but they are capable of eating food. Remember the time when the Lord and two angels visited Abraham and they ate the food that he prepared for them (Genesis 18:1-8). The angel's refusal of Manoah's food was based not on the condition of the angel, but the condition of Manoah and the nation of Israel which he represented.

To sit and eat a meal together was a sign of covenant fellowship. The angel was under instructions from the Lord to not eat Manoah's offered food because of the condition of the fellowship between the Lord and Israel at this time. Israel had been living in broken fellowship with the Lord for the entire last generation due to their unfaithfulness toward the Lord. Because of their spiritual condition of defilement, the Lord would not allow His angel to eat of Manoah's food which would signify that everything was fine between the Lord and Israel. It would have been a symbol of the Lord's approval of Israel while they remained in rebellion against Him. Rather than accepting the offering of a fellowship meal, the angel redirected Manoah to make the necessary offering. The angel suggested that he instead make a burnt offering to the Lord. A burn offering was commanded by the Lord in the Law to address the issue of sin which separated the Lord from His people.

When believers wonder about the sense of loss in their personal fellowship with the Lord, the first thing to consider is what sin on our part may have affected our fellowship with Him. A return to the cross and a fresh recognition of the provision the Lord has made for our sins is the necessary first step before we can expect to enjoy the fullness of the Lord's fellowship. If the Lord withholds the fullness of His fellowship from us, it is not because He does not want to be close to us, but because He will not be close to us while we are compromising and disobeying His standards. When Manoah followed the angel's advice and offered the burnt offering, the Lord provided a visible confirmation for them that He had accepted their offering and restored them to full fellowship with Him.

The angel ascended in the flame of the offering to portray that the Lord was pleased with their offering. In the same way, the Lord has provided us with a tangible and visible confirmation that He has accepted the sacrifice of Christ on the cross as the full payment for our sins. Without this confirmation, we would have no way to know for certain that the cross was actually effective in providing the answer for our sins. God's visible confirmation of His acceptance of the cross was the resurrection and ascension of Christ. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we can be 100% certain that God the Father was pleased with the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins on the cross. After appearing for forty days to His disciples to establish the certainty of His physical resurrection, Jesus then ascended to heaven in their sight. His ascension is the fulfillment of what the ascension of the angel in the fire of Manoah's burnt offering pictured.

Judges 14

14:1-4 - "Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw one of the daughters of the Philistines. Then he came up and told his father and mother, "I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife." But his father and mother said to him, "Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes." His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel."

Samson's story is one of the most interesting in the Bible, and not just for the obvious fascination with his feats of extraordinary strength. Samson is study in spiritual contradictions. He is called by God to a special role in God's purpose as a judge in Israel and deliverer of the people of God. At the same time, Samson is a man of great character flaws and spiritual compromises. This chapter opens with our introduction to the adult Samson. The previous chapter told the story of circumstances of his birth with an emphasis on the Nazirite vow which was

intended by the Lord to be the main theme running throughout his life. Now, in this first account from Samson's life we meet him in the process of compromising the standards of God for his life.

Samson traveled to Timnah, a town originally allotted to Judah, but which was under Philistine control. There he saw one of the young Philistine women and became infatuated with her. There is no indication that he had even spoken with her, but that he was attracted to her because of her beauty. Samson's compromise in this circumstance is that he chose a woman of the Philistines as the object of his affections rather than one of the daughters of Israel. When Israel had first entered the Promised Land the Lord had warned them to not take the daughters of the nations around them to marry their sons, nor give their daughters in marriage to the men of those nations. The Lord's concern in this command was to maintain the spiritual purity and integrity of Israel. He warned Israel that such intermarriages would lead to spiritual compromises with the gods worshipped by the people of the nations.

Samson showed no concern for that command of God's Law when he saw the Philistine woman in Timnah. His only consideration was that she appealed to his eyes and he wanted her for himself. He displayed the lack of discernment and judgment of a man ruled by the concerns of the flesh, not a man of God. To his credit, Samson did not attempt to take the woman as his wife on his own. Following the cultural custom of the day, Samson returned home and expressed his desire to his parents. The normal pattern would be for a young man interested in marriage to seek parental approval for a possible marriage, and then rely upon the father of the family to formally approach the father of the woman to negotiate a marriage arrangement. Samson followed that pattern but his desire immediately hit a big snag. His parents were not thrilled with his choice for a wife. His parents expressed appropriate concern. They asked Samson the necessary question regarding what he had overlooked in his selection of a potential bride. They wanted him to consider whether there was no woman in all of Israel for him to marry. Their point was that covenant loyalty should take priority over natural preference in marriage candidates. In other words, any single woman in Israel would have been a better, wiser, more faithful choice for Samson to make than the most beautiful woman in the world if she also happened to be a Philistine.

His parent's mention of her as one of the uncircumcised Philistines is a pointed reminder to him that covenant faithfulness to the Lord was an issue in this decision. There was much more at stake here than Samson's wants and desires. Yet, Samson's response to his parent's appeal reveals another of his character flaws. Samson had a golden opportunity here to heed the godly concerns of his parents and honor them in this important life shaping decision. The Lord had commanded him to honor his father and mother. Samson failed to do so here. Instead, he ignored their concern and with a tone of demand in his answer he insisted that his father get the Philistine woman for him to marry. Samson failed

this test, but his demand now puts his father, Manoah to the test. The issue for Manoah was whether he would hold to the standards of the Lord for his son in spite of his selfish insistence, or whether, to please him, he would compromise the Lord's standards and negotiate a marriage for Samson with the father of the Philistine woman. Manoah fails his test as Samson had his. The text does not draw this connection for us, but the implication is that Samson had learned to compromise from his father's example growing up.

There is also a mysterious comment in 14:4 that we need to consider. "His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines." The passage tells us that Samson's interest in this Philistine woman was from the Lord and that his parents did not know it. Does this mean that Samson was right to desire marriage with her in violation of the Law of God? The answer is no, the Law of God does not change, and Samson was wrong to choose to marry her. What it does mean is that the Lord was carrying out His sovereign plan for Israel and the Philistines in spite of Israel's long standing rebellion and compromise. The Lord stirred Samson's interest in this particular woman to drive him into a circumstance that would lead to Samson beginning to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Philistines. The implication is that Israel, including Samson and his family had grown accustomed in the last forty years to their uneasy but comfortable arrangement as the subjects of the Philistines. Unless the Lord intervened, Israel would remain in this situation, and Samson would never have fulfilled his assignment to deliver Israel.

Samson's natural desires actually were a fitting symbol for the pattern in Israel throughout the last generation. So, the Lord sovereignly directed Samson's steps using his own desires to move him forward. It was the Lord's plan for Samson to never consummate this relationship with the Philistine woman, and for that to be the frustration that would drive Samson to attack the Philistines and begin to deliver Israel from their oppression. Samson was still wrong for following his desire for her. His parents were also still wrong for relenting and negotiating the marriage for him in violation of the standards of God. Nevertheless, the Lord worked even through their weaknesses and accomplished his greater plan for everyone involved.

14:5-6 - "Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done."

This is the first of the mighty physical acts of Samson that is recorded in Scripture. On the way to Timnah, Samson encountered a young lion which attacked him. It is described as a young lion, not to portray it as easy to defeat, but as a lion in its strength. Samson was unarmed. He had no armor, sword, or

spear, and fought the lion with his bare hands. He tore the lion and killed it. What is described is Samson grabbing the lion and literally ripping its body apart with his hands. The only explanation offered for how Samson accomplished such an amazing deed was that, just before the roaring lion reached him, the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him. The meaning of the Spirit rushing upon him is that the Spirit of God moved instantly and powerfully on Samson. The result was not that Samson enjoyed constant and permanent superhuman strength, but that for as long as the Spirit was upon him, he was able to do things beyond human ability.

This is a critical element in Samson's story. There is a common misunderstanding about Samson. His story is not of a mythological hero like Hercules from the Greek myths. Samson was not a giant, and there is no indication that he was able to do feats of strength because his muscles were more developed than the average man. We don't see any passages identifying the special Samson workout which produced an amazing physical specimen in Israel. Samson's strength did not originate in his muscles. His strength was a special expression of the grace of God as the Spirit of God rushed upon him. In essence, it was God working through him in the tearing of the lion, and the other amazing deeds that follow. This is no different than the ability the Lord grants to each of His people to serve Him according to His assignment for each of them. The Lord appoints for each of His people to have certain things to accomplish in this world in serving Him. With each assignment, the Lord gives grace to accomplish it. Samson's grace was of the more spectacular kind, and because of that we tend to view it as something completely different. But, the truth is, that without the grace of God poured out upon our lives by the Spirit of God, none of us would be able to serve God and accomplish the assignments the Lord has appointed for us.

14:8-9 - "After some days he returned to take her. And he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. He scraped it out into his hands and went on, eating as he went. And he came to his father and mother and gave some to them, and they ate. But he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of the lion."

Returning to Timnah to take his bride, Samson noticed an unusual development with the carcass of the lion he had killed. A swarm of bees had made their hive in its carcass. Bees do not normally use an animal carcass to build a hive. This was also from the Lord because it provided Samson with the inspiration for a riddle to pose in his wedding celebration. The riddle would lead to the fulfillment of the Lord's plan for Samson to be stirred against the Philistines. There is another detail connected to the lion and the honey that exposes another character flaw in Samson. Remember Samson was a Nazirite and was commanded by the Lord to honor the restrictions that his vow required of him. One of the core responsibilities of the Nazirite vow was to avoid all contact with dead bodies. When Samson discovered the carcass of the lion held honey produced by the

bees, he did not hesitate to scrape out the honey with his hands and eat it on his way to Timnah.

The honey was sweet and certainly appealing to Samson, but it was forbidden to him. Other honey was acceptable, but this honey was off limits because it was in a carcass and spiritually associated with death. Samson should have considered and honored his Nazirite vow and left the honey without even tasting it. The attraction of the honey overwhelmed his judgment and he not only ate it without remorse himself, but he brought some and shared it with his parents. There is no indication that he mentioned to them where he found the honey. Had he done so, they would likely have raised an objection like they had done with his desire to marry the Philistine. In this way, the honey represented the same principle the Philistine woman did to Samson. In each situation in life our first concern should be for what the Lord has said about that situation. It's not that our own preferences and desires do not matter at all, but that we must not place our desires above His will. Samson had not yet learned that critical lesson of walking with the Lord.

14:16-20 - "And Samson's wife wept over him and said, "You only hate me; you do not love me. You have put a riddle to my people, and you have not told me what it is." And he said to her, "Behold, I have not told my father nor my mother, and shall I tell you?" She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted, and on the seventh day he told her, because she pressed him hard. Then she told the riddle to her people. And the men of the city said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down, "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?" And he said to them, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle." And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck down thirty men of the town and took their spoil and gave the garments to those who had told the riddle. In hot anger he went back to his father's house. And Samson's wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man."

As part of the marriage feast celebration for Samson and his Philistine bride, he posed a clever riddle based upon the lion and the honey to the thirty men there at the feast. The men were given a generous seven days to solve the riddle and they were allowed to work together to come up with the correct answer. After three days of straining to solve it they correctly concluded that they would not be able to figure it out. They then chose to undermine the spirit of the wager and approached Samson's bride. They threatened her and her family with burning unless she discovered the answer for her. Rather than informing Samson of the threat against her life, in her fear, she agreed to cooperate with them against her husband. She chose a ages old strategy to gain the secret of the riddle from Samson; she nagged him. She did not nag him in an aggressive, mean spirited way, which would probably have been ineffective to convince him. Instead, she chose to nag him as an emotional victim. She claimed to be deeply hurt that

Samson had not shared the answer with her. Rather than using anger and insult, she used her tears to wear away at him. She wept as a victim of his hard heart toward her until he could not bear it any longer and told her the answer to the riddle.

As soon as the men revealed through their own mocking riddle answering Samson's riddle, he knew that they had gained the secret from his wife. It was his outrage at having been deceived and manipulated by the men using his own wife as their accomplice that moved Samson to finally begin his greater work of delivering Israel from the Philistines. To pay his debt to the guests he went down to Ashkelon, a city of the Philistines, and slew thirty men there. He gave the clothing of those men to his guests as an ominous and ironic payment of his debt for the riddle. Samson acted in hot anger in this, but we are not meant to conclude this was a case of Samson just losing his temper. The Lord was in Samson's attack on Ashkelon. The Spirit of God rushed upon him like in the fight with the lion. This was the beginning of the Lord's judgment upon the Philistines. In a final development setting up the continuing judgment of the Lord, Samson's new wife was given instead to one of the thirty men at the feast. Apparently Samson left the feast for Ashkelon as soon as the men answered his riddle. The father of the bride concluded that he was rejecting her as his wife. Since their marriage had not yet been consummated he gave her hand in marriage to one of the other men.