



JUDGES DEVOTIONAL

By Pastor Phil Emerson

NAME: _____

OUR DISCIPLESHIP FLOW

At Emmanuel Church, we are passionate about living out the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and make it our goal to see His Kingdom come in our lives and the world in which we live. We recognise that in Biblical times, a disciple was someone who followed a teacher or rabbi, not simply to gain head knowledge to pass an examination, but to be fully immersed in the life of the rabbi, and *learn his ways*, so that they in turn could replicate this to the world around them. As Christians, we are now those who have been invited to ‘follow’ Jesus and all of His ways, and we therefore call ourselves His disciples.

“This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” 1 John 2:5,6

We therefore want to take seriously the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 to make disciples and also commit to an ongoing journey of teaching and discipleship together.

We all have differing personalities and learning styles. At Emmanuel, we recognise this diversity within the church body and therefore desire to support and journey together as we relate with God and each other in some of the following environments:

- **Public (20+)**

In the Bible, we see Jesus seeking to make disciples as He engaged with larger numbers of people, e.g., His interaction with the crowds (Matthew 4:25; Luke 14:25), and the 72 (Luke 10:1-24).

At Emmanuel, we want to use each of our **larger gathered environments** as an opportunity to make disciples, e.g., **Sunday services, Friday Youth/Kids’** environments, **men’s/women’s** gatherings.

- **Social (10-15)**

Jesus demonstrated the necessity for **smaller accountable relationships** as an essential part of the life of a disciple. He did this by teaching and doing life with his twelve disciples (e.g., Matthew 10).

At Emmanuel, small accountable relationships are offered through:

Lifegroup 12s

These are **gatherings of 10-15 people** who meet bi-weekly in homes or around specific interests, e.g., crafts, football.

- **Personal (2-5)**

As well as having smaller accountable relationships amongst His twelve friends, Jesus also seemed to go to even deeper levels of trust with three in particular – Peter, James and John (Matthew 17; Mark 9). At Emmanuel, we seek to do this through:

Lifegroup 3s

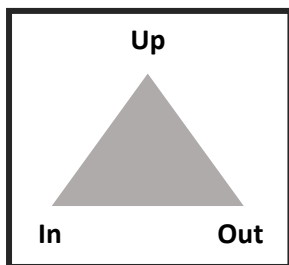
These are smaller **gatherings of 2-5 people** who are committed to transparent and accountable relationships in order to grow together in following Jesus. The aim for these groups is that after 1-2 years, each person in the group would be able to lead a smaller number of people themselves and replicate the process... **disciples making disciples!**

- **Intimate (1-1)**

Jesus regularly withdrew to spend time alone with the Father. This is the ultimate goal of discipleship, that each member of our church family would increasingly spend time alone with the Father and grow in devotion and desire to see the Kingdom come.

A TOOL TO USE

As stated previously, 1 John 2:6 makes it clear that for those of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus, our goal should be to daily walk in the ways of Jesus, our Rabbi. As we examine the New Testament we see that Jesus lived His life based on three relationships: **Up** – with His Father; **In** – with His chosen followers; **Out** – with the hurting world around Him. This is illustrated in the following triangle:



Jesus taught and modelled out to His disciples how to live into each of these areas in life.

Up

Jesus frequently left the disciples to spend personal time with the Father (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). He taught them the significance of prayer, and how to pray and communicate with the Father (Luke 11:1-13). When comparisons with one another or insecurities presented themselves, He spoke into it in love and challenged them into a greater depth of living (Mark 9:33-37; Matthew 18:1-5).

In

Jesus had significant relationships with others in which He intentionally invested (12s and 3s). When He went to engage with the Father He brought the three with Him (Matthew 17:1). He taught them and modelled out the significance of Sabbath and rhythms of rest (Mark 6:31). He demonstrated with His life the significance of generosity and sacrificial love for others (John 13:1-17).

Out

Jesus personally lived a life that engaged with the crowds and the broken world around Him. He healed the sick (Matthew 8:1-4), fed the poor (Mark 6:30-44), and cast out demons (Matthew 8:28-34). But with the people who were closest to Him, He challenged them to do the same (Mark 6:37), and when they took risks themselves He critiqued and gave honest feedback to call out more for them (Luke 10:17-20).

As we spend time alone or together in this devotional, we want to help and encourage you to engage in each of these ways – UP, IN, and OUT.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

First

If you haven't already done so, please take a second to fill in your name on the inside of the front cover. There'll be a lot of identical books floating around, and we don't want yours to get lost.

Prepare

Get ready for each session by spending some time to invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you. The Bible is a written word (logos), which becomes a living word (rhema) as the Holy Spirit breathes upon it and speaks directly to our lives through it.

Commit

Commit to the journey. Discipleship is not a commitment to a moment, but to a lifetime journey. As you personally commit to journeying with God daily, commit to others by sharing what you are learning (possibly in Lifegroup 12s or 3s), and in this way encouraging one another in what God is saying.

Reflect & Respond

Each day, as you spend personal time with God, we encourage you to ask the following two questions:

- 1) What is God saying to me?
- 2) What am I going to do about it?

This is how we become doers and not just hearers of what God is saying.

INTRODUCTION TO JUDGES

The book of Judges, believed to have been written by the prophet Samuel around 1050-1000 BC, presents us with a sad and turbulent period in Israel's history. Contrasting greatly with the victorious book of Joshua that precedes it, Judges shows the failure of Israel to conquer their enemies and claim their inheritance, and the huge effect that this had on their life and relationship with God. Throughout this entire book we see a repeated cycle, the cycle of sin. Over and over again we will read, "*... then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD.*"

The book of Judges shows us a time that can be confusing, difficult, and dark. For this reason, many have not read it. This period is known as 'the dark ages' of Israel's history. But if we neglect this book, we neglect a wonderful account of the love and graciousness of God, and how He lovingly corrects His people.

So, let's get stuck in and read this book with a fresh challenge to live for Jesus, having clean hands, a pure heart, and not lifting our allegiance to another. Bibles and journals out ... oh yes, and don't forget the coffee!

Phil

Live

As we start in today, the first five words set a pretty important picture of the events that will follow: *“After the death of Joshua...”* Israel have just lost a massive link between them and their God. My first little thought in this book is this, did Joshua do what his predecessor Moses had done so powerfully, raise up a generation to follow God after he was gone? This next period of what is known as ‘the judges’ lasted 340 years and during that time there was no single leader, no office of national leadership. Israel had no king, only God (who was more than enough). In due time God would re-ordain a leader but at this moment, I wonder had Joshua let the ball drop? Just a thought to ponder.

I love the fact that the people knew to ask God what to do next. With Joshua gone, they are not left without a leader; they are simply called to a new trust in God. This is full of truth for us today. When we enquire of God, we can expect Him to respond. Luke 11:9 reminds us of this, *“So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”* After the people of Israel enquired of the Lord, He directs that the tribe of Judah, the tribe that Jesus the Messiah would come from, would lead the way. Under the leadership of Joshua, Israel had moved into the land, and, in many ways, broken the back of the Canaanite's military strength. Yet there was still much to be done to conquer and subdue the land and they would need God now more than ever.

The big lesson that we learn from the rest of this chapter is gained from watching a people who were satisfied with far less than what God wanted them to have, and far less than what God had provided for them. Once we satisfy ourselves with less than God's best for us, we will never be what God wants us to be.

Pray

Father, thank You for Your Word that invites me into conversation with You. To read it without responding would be like walking away from You after You have spoken. I don't want to walk away. I want to listen to You, and then speak to You, and then hear You speak again. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Just like in chapter 1, the first few words hold a dramatic and powerful key to not only the chapter but to the whole narrative we are in: “*Now the Angel of the LORD...*” This is none other than the pre-incarnate Jesus. The word ‘incarnate’ means ‘having a bodily form’, so this is Jesus before the gospel story. We know this to be Jesus as He reveals His hand as the One Who led them out of Egypt.

Always remember, before Jesus can lead us into victory, He must convict us of our sin. Israel's real problem was not lack of military power, rather, it was a spiritual problem. They continually failed to listen to the voice and direction of God, choosing to look only to their own limitations and weakness. When the Angel of the LORD brings His rebuke, the people wept aloud. One would think that now Jehovah has turned up in angelic form and spoken to them, it would be a massive turnaround and everything would be plain sailing. Would you believe it, things got worse! The people became even more disobedient.

The first mention of Gilgal is found in Deuteronomy 11:28. It is the place the Israelites came to when they crossed the Jordan. It is the very first place they possessed in the land that God had given them. In fact, before they had any victories at all, Joshua and his people camped at Gilgal. Gilgal is the first stop for us in possessing all that God has given us. Where is your Gilgal? When busyness takes over our lives, let's have a place we can retreat to where we rest in Christ.

Verse 10 is a sad verse, and it shows the importance of legacy and inheritance. A generation grew up that had lost the presence and were just living with the stories of old, which soon grew stale, and even those died. What are you passing on to the next generation, my friend?

Pray

Father, there's no God like You. The broken-hearted don't need to spruce up and be brave when they see You coming. The crushed in spirit don't need to pull themselves together, as though You would be disappointed to find them less than conquerors. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

I find it very interesting that God could have blotted out these pagan nations with a thought and without any help from Israel, rather, God allowed them to remain for a reason and that was to test Israel. To test means 'to prove'. These nations would remain because God wanted to prove the faithfulness of Israel to Himself. In our own situations, if we have so called pagan nations in our lives, we should understand that while God could instantly eradicate them, oftentimes He doesn't. Why? Why does it have to be so hard? Maybe the answer is that God wants us to depend on Him more fully in the midst of hardship and adversity so that our relationship with Him can be proved and improved, so that we will live a life of true partnership with God.

Over and over again we read how Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. They disobeyed the true God in several ways. One of the big ways was intermarrying with their enemies, something they were not allowed to do. This compromise led them into sin and here is why: there is nothing wrong with falling in love and being romantic, but we have a terrible habit of falling in love with people that we have no real business falling in love with. Sin always brings bondage. But it comes to us deceptively. The fish never contemplates the horrors of the hook when it goes after the bait, just like Satan snares us by making the bait attractive and hiding the hook. This downward cycle begins with compromise to the commands of God that He has declared for our own good.

How about you? Have you made compromises with the enemy that draw you away from the living God? If so, then do you know that even now, the Lord will use that situation to test your commitment to Him? Turn again to Him. There is no situation too hopeless for the Lord where He can't bring victory, but it must be on His terms.

Pray

Father, You are the Father who loves His kids. You're not just committed to me, You're not just faithful to me, You're not just a great provider, You actually love and enjoy me. You're glad to be my Father and You have no doubts or regrets. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we are introduced to Deborah, a woman who wasn't the widow or daughter of a male ruler, but rose up as the national chief of a nation in a pre-modern society. The book of Judges regards Deborah as the greatest of Israel's leaders during this period. She is the only judge who is called a prophet or prophetess. I love this; she heard directly from God, just like Moses and Joshua before her. It would seem by the reading that neither males nor females had any concerns about having a female leader. This is a great passage to endorse women in leadership, which has been a bone of contention to many. It would also seem that her husband Lappidoth and her wee family had no trouble running the home, giving her time to *"sit under the palm of Deborah"* to judge Israel at this important time. It is also really clear that Barak recognised the presence of the Holy Spirit in Deborah which is the reason he requested that she accompany him into battle.

This is a pretty strong passage for all you ladies today as we have another woman more direct in battle involvement. In the incident of the killing of Sisera, Jael the wife of Heber drove a tent stake through his head while he slept. *"So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the children of Israel."*

We see betrayal by so-called friends in today's story. I'm reminded of the Latin phrase "Et tu, Brute?" from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. "Even you, Brutus?" summing up the shock and pain of betrayal as he dies from the wounds inflicted by his friend. But it isn't only our friends who betray us. I know of someone who lost hours of computer input because his battery died with his work unsaved, and he said he felt betrayed by technology. If friends, nature, knowledge and things all have the potential to turn against us, then where can we turn in a time of crisis?

Pray

Father, I awoke today a grateful person, and I want to live that way all day long. I'm sure that attitude will be challenged by life in this broken world and by the heart that beats in this broken person, but I choose to focus on You today. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

I recently went to see André Rieu and his orchestra live in concert. It was incredible and such a wonderful musical experience. I love how he interacts with his team, reminding me of course how leadership is important in everything we do, especially in the work of God. God expects the leaders among His people to actually stand up and lead. One of the reasons I love this passage, and Deborah in particular, is that she didn't only care for her job of leadership. She also had a heart for other leaders and their work. Her vision was bigger than just getting her job done; she wanted to see the Kingdom of God advanced. As Deborah remembered God's help, she knew that His help came from the tribes of Israel who were stirred to join the battle, so she names and praises those tribes.

The last verse of this chapter is particularly meaningful to me. Deborah and Barak sing, *"So may all Your enemies perish, LORD! But may all who love You be like the sun when it rises in its strength."* I will tell you a little secret ... I used to sail a sand barge and I daily watched the sun rise over the Antrim hills from the middle of Lough Neagh. It never lost its splendour, actually, the opposite is true, it seemed to become greater in beauty each time. It was so beautiful that I would video it on my phone and time it. From it peeped over the hill, it became a golden globe in just under four minutes. As I observed the sunrise, I couldn't help but glorify God for His beauty and I would feel especially close to God. Sunrises remind me of His great love for me and also of the great love that I need to have for my Creator. As I love Jesus, I become like the rising of the sun in its might. Go on, set your alarm and go somewhere and watch the sun rise, then worship God for His great love towards you.

Pray

Father, You know my failures, foolishness, and faithlessness, and yet You totally accept me. When I confess my sins, I don't inform You of anything You don't already know. It's absolutely overwhelming to be this known, this accepted, and this loved. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Think today of a weak time in your life when God showed up and redeemed what seemed lost. Take it a step further and think of a place of impossibility, a place where only a miracle could redeem and buy back. Well, you're in a great chapter today as we are introduced to the hero Gideon. He didn't think he was a hero, but let's learn a little about this man who God chose to deliver Israel. I love how God takes weak, humble, and sometimes fearful people and uses them to do wonderful things. He actually loves doing it, and the story of Gideon has been repeated (in each person's own way) through the lives of millions throughout history.

When the angel of the Lord appears to Gideon, he is treading corn in a winepress. A quick read would miss the significance of this. One would commonly tread corn on an exposed place like a hilltop, so that when the corn was cast into the air, the wind would come and blow the chaff away. Winepresses, on the other hand, were situated at the bottom of a hill, usually in a dugout area, so that when the grapes were trodden, the juice would run into the hole. These two tasks were as far apart as chalk and cheese. One can only imagine throwing up corn in a winepress protected from the wind, and it all comes landing down the back of your shirt.

Isn't it interesting that in this place of discomfort where we are told Gideon was hiding, God turns up and calls his name and announces his destiny? I love this. God turns up in the weirdest of places at the weirdest of times to the weirdest of people ... hence He called me! Is it any wonder Gideon asked for a confirming sign (which, by the way, was not wrong for him to ask for)? It made sense to ask God to confirm some area of direction that was not specifically detailed in His Word, in regard to something as life-or-death as leading Israel into battle against an enemy.

Pray

Father, open the eyes of my heart wider to recognise Your call on my life as I consider Gideon and his bleak situation. In the frustrations of life, let me savour Your salvation. Rather than being weighed down by present sufferings, I want to be hope-filled by future liberation. In Jesus' name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

We have been introduced to Gideon and seen how God makes power out of weakness. We continually see in Scripture, and of course in our own lives, how God delights in using weak vessels to display His strength and faithfulness. We need to also remember that this can often come about in the times when Midian (strife and trouble) is around. Like Gideon experienced, it is daunting and scary when faced with overwhelming odds. Trials are never nice when you are in them, otherwise they wouldn't be called trials! But we can take heart that God has a purpose for them. It is for the strengthening of your faith and the displaying of His life through you!

I recently came across the Kintsugi technique introduced by the Japanese. Basically, what they do is mix gold dust in the super glue when gluing together a broken pot. Whereas we would try to hide the cracks, they actually highlight them to show forth the beauty in the brokenness. Each crack in the clay vessel brings forth a little more light! The Apostle Paul relates the words of God in 2 Corinthians 12:9 *“My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.”*

God thins Gideon's army from 32,000 to 10,000 to 300 and assured him that victory was certain, even through a smaller number of men. Now the army was less than 1% of its original size, and the ratio of Midianite to Israeli soldiers was 400 to 1. That's what I call a significant reduction in size. I think I'd have been looking a flight out of there, and quick. Gideon could only trust in God because there was nothing else to trust. To be honest, I can't say that I 'delight' in weaknesses and in hardships, but whether you are currently faced with strife or can look back and recall such a time, always remember that God's power is made perfect in weakness and that's what God loves to do, even when things look at their worst!

Pray

Father, I long for a joy fuelled by making much of You, a joy that would free me from needing people to make anything of me. Such joy would slay the beast of approval in my life – giving people too much power over my heart, either to make me or break me. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

In 2001, Jim Collins wrote one of the best business books to date, 'Good to Great'. I had the privilege of hearing him speak about the book in 2006. Collins and his team thoroughly researched hundreds of businesses and came up with a list of characteristics that distinguish great companies from good or mediocre ones. One of his points is that just because a company succeeds, it doesn't mean that their success will continue. This is true not only of businesses, it is also true of churches, families, and individuals.

Gideon was a man of mediocrity, meaning he battled fear, discouragement, and disbelief, yet God slowly but surely moved him from good to great. When Gideon finally believed God's promises and acted upon them, the Lord used him to conquer the Midianites and save Israel. Oh, if only the story ended there, Gideon would forever be remembered as a man of greatness. Unfortunately, today's chapter teaches us an important truth: greatness does not guarantee permanence. This chapter and the next chronicles the personal demise of Gideon and the spoiling of what could, and should, have been an amazing legacy.

In this passage, we will find one of the greatest examples of the New Testament principle what a person sows they will reap. Not just a good lesson, but a great lesson I think! For all Gideon's exploits, he had gained popularity, and in verse 22, Gideon declares that he doesn't want to rule over the people. This was a good response from Gideon. He understood that it was not his place to take the throne over Israel, and that God was King. Funny how we say things with our lips but our hearts are somewhere else! Though Gideon *said* he didn't want to be a king, in the rest of the chapter he acted like one. His words sounded humble, but his actions were not. It is easier to talk about humility and service to God than it is to actually live it.

Pray

Father, You're the only one who can make me holy, for You are my wisdom, my righteousness, my holiness, and my redemption. What peace, what brilliant and everlasting peace this brings to my heart. It's all of grace from beginning to end. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Legacy is such a powerful thing to think about. The older I become, the more I think about who and what is coming behind. What will I leave that will bless and continue to grow? The story of Gideon's legacy continues into chapter 9. His son, Abimelech, wanted to become ruler over all Israel. If only Gideon hadn't had a mistress in Shechem (see verse 31 of the previous chapter), then the murderer Abimelech would never have been born! Gideon no doubt assumed that with his vast wealth and great national reputation, his children would be well provided for, but the opposite proved true. Sixty-nine of his seventy sons were killed by their half-brother. As parents, the most important thing we can do for our children is pray for them and personally seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness. If Gideon had done this, his legacy might have been radically different.

It is hard to tell who is worse, Abimelech or the men of Shechem. This was an ungodly leader given to an ungodly people who rejected God's leadership over the nation and then embraced a cruel man. How ironic that Abimelech's coronation took place at the same tree where Joshua had solemnly placed a copy of the Law of God. After this ceremony, Abimelech then turned against the people of Shechem and killed as many of them as he could, demolishing their city. The problem with following a man who comes to power through violence is that it is only a matter of time until he turns the same violence against you. The sole survivors in the city of Shechem took refuge in a tower, but Abimelech burned them out and killed them all, about a thousand men and women. After his ruthless victory at the tower of Shechem, he went to Thebez and attacked the city and the tower there. But God was waiting and watching. At Thebez, a woman dropped a millstone on Abimelech's head and mortally wounded him. Justice was done!

Pray

Father, thank You for doing everything necessary to deal with the ways we've been both agents and victims of sin, sin that has led to multiple layers of shame. You took all the guilt and all the shame of my sin on the Cross. This is my story. Please help me to walk uprightly before You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

With Abimelech dead, a new judge was nominated, Tola. Little is told about him, although he seems to have been a steady Eddie; he judged for 23 years. After him came Jair, who ruled for 22 years. Again, little is told about him, only that he had 30 sons who rode about on 30 donkeys and owned 30 towns; this makes me laugh a little, but it must be noted for a reason.

The Israelites had suffered at the hands of the Ammonites, and it finally occurs to them that their Canaanite gods were doing them no good. They remembered that their only true deliverer was the God of Israel. So they cried out to God, confessing that they had sinned against Him, and assuring Him that they had forsaken their idol worship. The Lord was not impressed with their repentance. He had seen it many times before. It had no sincerity. He reminded them of all the times He had delivered them, only for Him to be forgotten and forsaken when their suffering ended. So God threatens to leave them to their gods in whom they had trusted. The little line, *“Then the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD,”* is repeated seven times in the book of Judges. I never thought of the significance of this line before, but it shows that the evil of Israel was done before the eyes of God, making it even worse. It was like committing adultery, which is awful, but doing it in full view and knowledge of your spouse. It’s unthinkable.

One wonders what attracted Israel to these other gods. Baal, the weather god, was associated with financial success. Ashtoreth, the goddess of fertility, was associated with love, sex, and romance. We need to be very careful that we don’t worship what the world worships. Maybe Israel’s evil was a steady, unconscious drifting to what was common. It seems that they were willing to worship just about anything except the true God. When a person stops believing in God, he does not believe in nothing, he believes in anything.

Pray

Father, send Your Spirit with fresh convicting and invigorating power. Wake me from my slumber. Rekindle the fire and passion I experienced when it first dawned upon me that You chose me, redeemed me, and betrothed me to Yourself. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

I must confess that I have struggled a great deal with this text. I am more than willing to point out the weaknesses and failures of other men in the book of Judges, but I find it very difficult to think the worst of Jephthah because I like him ... except what I read about his vow about his daughter. As a father of five, I can hardly believe what I am reading. How is it that the first thing Jephthah does after the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him is to make a vow, a vow that he will later regret? The first thing we should know is that vows like Jephthah's were not uncommon in Israel. Oh how careful we must be with our mouths. Life and death are in the power of the tongue, Scripture reminds us. Even a Spirit-filled person can do foolish things. The Holy Spirit does not overwhelm and control us, He guides us and that guidance can be resisted or ignored.

The little section in verses 36-40 seems to indicate that Jephthah gave his daughter to tabernacle service, according to the principle of Levitical law in which persons were set apart to God in a vow and not required to be sacrificed like animals. There are several passages showing us women who were set apart for tabernacle service. It is likely that Jephthah's daughter became one of these women. Most of the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle were likely to be older widows, hence we are told of her and her friends' sorrow. Sending his unmarried only daughter to the service of the tabernacle for the rest of her life shows how seriously they both took his promise to God. This seems like the best explanation of what happened to this girl because Jephthah is listed as a hero of the faith in Hebrews 11:32. It is hard to think of him doing something so contrary to God's ways as offering his daughter as a human sacrifice. Just my thoughts, and the only way I could get my head around this passage!

Pray

Father, I can't imagine how storms can be navigated and hardships handled without You and also the company of a few good friends. I praise You today for the gift of friendship, for the joy, encouragement, and refreshment You give me through good friends. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we see how the tribe of Ephraim are not happy chappies and it all has to do with their big fat egos. They were angry that they didn't have the limelight in the victorious battle over the Ammonites. Now before you judge them, think long and hard because I suggest there is a tendency within all of us to crave approval and affirmation. There is no doubt that the people of Ephraim were more concerned with getting the credit than seeing a job done. This seems to be a consistent problem with the tribe of Ephraim. Being a real servant of Jesus Christ means that we serve without worrying about who is going to get the credit, knowing that it is up to Jesus to give any reward. Now that's a difficult task!

We can see a couple of things from the claims of this tribe of Ephraim. The first is that their accusations were simply untrue. They accused Jephthah of failing to give them the opportunity to join the battle against the Ammonites, which by the way, had already been won. Jephthah sets the record straight. This is why I like this man. He states that he *did* summon the Ephraimites. The problem wasn't his failure to call them to battle, but their failure to answer the call. Have you ever known someone who talks big, but does little? They want you to build the platform, and then they want to walk all over it. When Jephthah realised that they weren't coming, he went to battle without them.

There was something else these Ephraimites needed to know: the battle was the Lord's. Had the Ephraimites engaged in this battle, the glory for victory would not have been theirs to claim. It was God who won the battle, and it was God alone who should receive the glory. Another thing we should note about the words of the Ephraimites is the violence they threatened. They just seemed to be an angry people.

Pray

Father, today I am reminded of Matthew 6:18 that says when You see what we do in secret, You will reward us openly. Help me, Father, to seek You first. Deliver me from the demon of approval. Let it be enough to know that You see all and due time will reward accordingly. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

The story of Samson is a beautiful example of how God's sovereignty and man's responsibility intermingle. Over the centuries, Calvinists and Armenians have wrestled with this and there are many who feel it necessary to embrace one or the other, either God's sovereignty or human responsibility, but not both. Why I love this story in Judges so much is that it demonstrates both principles at work at the same time. Samson is a man who must make choices and the choices he makes are almost always sinful and self-serving. It shows how we dare not think that God's sovereignty removes all freedom of choice from men, or accountability for those choices. God's sovereignty is so complete that He can give men freedom and yet still be in complete control of His world, so we are assured that His purposes will be realised. That is illustrated by God's use of Samson even though he was so self-indulgent. We must take responsibility for our actions and realise that even though we may have a strong call and anointing to serve God, we are quite capable of destroying that by our flesh. I often pray that God would deliver me from myself, deliver me from my crazy obsession to be self-made.

This chapter begins with the desperate line, *"Again the Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord"*. I mentioned previously that 7 times it is recorded in the book of Judges. Actually, this line is repeated 36 times in the Old Testament, but what alarms me is that it begins in the book of Judges and continues through the period of kings. It would seem that 'doing evil in the sight of the Lord' all began when they forsook God's plans and started wanting to rule their own roost. This shows what happens to a nation when it forgets God! I can't help but be drawn in my thoughts to modern day society, a people who call abortion 'a right'. No, no, no. It's 'a wrong'. Conservative estimates set the figure of world-wide abortions between 1980 and 2010 at 1,200,000 billion. Unbelievable, yet sadly true.

Pray

Father, today I am blessed to know that You are in complete control. The world is not spiralling out of Your grasp, nor is my life, even though it may seem that way at times. You are in full control. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Samson finally goes down to Timnah, a Philistine-controlled area. And what does he do there? It would have been great for him to fight and begin the deliverance of Israel, as he was called to do, but alas that isn't the case. He eyes up a Philistine woman and so begins a sad tale where Samson spirals down. He goes down in morals, purity, and separation to God as a Nazirite. Concerning Samson, Charles Swindoll wrote, *"Just as Superman was vulnerable to kryptonite, so Samson had a chink in his armour through which his greatness was sapped. He was king of the hill when it came to physical prowess, but when it came to women (sexuality), he was a pawn of his own passions."* Your kryptonite may not be Philistine women, but you may be tempted by something else. Whatever it is, take extra care in that area and stay true to the Scripture that says, *"But put on the Lord Jesus, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfil its lusts."* (Romans 13:14). I could weep right now thinking about the far too many times I've had to sit with a friend who stepped too far in the arena of their lusts. Sin and all of its allures just go down and down, and the web of entanglement gets tighter and tighter.

Samson had no real regard for this Philistine woman; he simply saw her and wanted her. There was no recognition that she was a person with needs, someone of worth and value. This is impulse buying at its worst! Samson was well aware of God's prohibition of intermarriage between Israelites and surrounding pagan nations. This command stemmed from God's love. He knew that if they married into these idolatrous peoples, the nation of Israel itself would become idolatrous. God knew that wives chosen out of these nations would themselves be miserable as well. To be unequally yoked in this way would result in hurting both parties. Because He loved His people, God commanded that they were not to intermarry with unbelievers.

Pray

Father, today I am reminded of just how weak my own flesh is. Help me to keep short accounts with You. May I always seek You first, and when temptation arrives at my door (as it will), I will come running to You, my Abba Father. Help me to return to my first love, You. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

I often think that the reason we love the story of Samson is that we can all relate to him so well. When we read of great heroes of faith, we can feel inadequate, but with Samson, we feel a glimmer of hope for ourselves. After his slaughter of 1,000 men, Samson praises himself, with no mention of God or the Spirit who empowered him.

A few years ago, I had the incredible privilege of driving down the Oregon coast. To see seals, whales, sea otters, and other animals in their natural habitat day and daily was wonderful. I came on one beach where some whales were beached. They had come in too far and when the tide went out, the whales were stuck on the sand. The locals had moved in to rescue them, and I was told about something that happened a few years previously when at this very place, some 300 whales beached at the same time. Sadly, before they could get the whales moved, all 300 died. The marine biologists were obviously hugely interested in how this could have happened. They discovered that the 300 whales had come to the beach and met their death because they were chasing sardines. Yes, that's right, sardines. Have you ever seen sardines? Do you know how small sardines are and how big a whale is? But even a little sardine can bring a whale to its death if the whale keeps chasing it for long enough. Poor Samson, a man of enormous resources who wasted his life chasing small goals. He was a whale chasing sardines.

There are four things that make Samson's life interesting: Love, Sex, Revenge, and Violence. I often wondered why the last verse of this chapter was placed here in the story, telling us he reigned for 20 years. Samson never really dealt with the problems that plagued him as a young man. Now, at the end of twenty years, those same problems are about to come out of hibernation and trip him up again.

Pray

Father, there are three massive things that come to me in this passage today: firstly, my attitude; secondly, my anger; and thirdly, my prayer life. Oh how I need help with all three, Lord. Sometimes I feel like I am imploding inside while I smile on the outside. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Poor Samson. He got worn down by the constant going on of his would-be lover, Delilah. He wasn't deceived, he wasn't tricked, he walked right into this with eyes wide open (and ones that would soon be taken out). He didn't only tell her about the hair, he told her about his devotion to God and the meaning of the Nazarite vow. He told her everything. What a huge mistake. If only Samson had chosen to die to his own selfish desires and allowed God to work through his life earlier, then it wouldn't have come to this.

How tragic. Yet this is how the Lord deals with rebellion in our life. He will warn us through His Word; He will entice us through His Spirit; He will intervene supernaturally to keep us from destruction; He will counsel us through other people who love us. But, at this last hour, at least Samson came to the end of himself and died obeying the Lord instead of his own selfish lusts. William Newell, in his *Old Testament Studies*, applies this to our lives, writing, *"Yes, at last he chooses death to self, and thus disaster to the hosts of Philistia! And God says, 'So the dead that he slew at his death were more than he slew in his life.'"*

Samson is a wakeup call for all of us, it is a call to be alert to the ways of the enemy, a call against compromise and worldliness. It has been prophesied that in the last days difficult times will come. It has been prophesied that many will fall away from the faith and follow after their own lusts. It has been prophesied that the time will come when people will no longer put up with sound teaching. Against these things, the Apostle Paul exhorts us to run the race with endurance, fixing our eyes on Jesus. Let us remain true to His Word even if others turn away, and upon His return, hear those words, *"Well done, good and faithful servant."* It is the King of kings that you serve.

Pray

Father, I don't want to give in to sin, but at times I'm so weak and feeble. Make me strong in You, Lord. Help me to stand, having done all to stand. I dress myself again today in Your armour which Paul endorsed us to do in Ephesians 6. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

I often think of the line in this chapter: *“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* There was, in fact, a king in Israel; they were just too blind to see Him. Israel should have recognised God as King, but since they rejected Him, they were without any effective leadership. Modern culture regards ‘doing what is right in your own eyes’ as the ideal state of society. But the Bible, and common sense, tells us that this kind of moral, spiritual, and social anarchy brings nothing but destruction.

The last five chapters of Judges seem to stand out on their own. Rather than focus on the sins of Israel or their judges, these chapters look closely at the lives of two Levites. Levites were the priestly tribe in Israel and the religious leadership of the nation. Unfortunately, this particular leadership didn’t hold the nation accountable for its sin. Actually, the Levites were as messed up as the people they were supposed to lead! With the combined moral failures of all, Judges concludes with a finger pointing in the face of the Levites. The overriding message is this: when God goes, everything and anything goes.

When our fellowship with God gets broken, we are capable of acting in very harmful ways. We lose perspective and love poorly. Our expectations of God and of others become more connected to ‘la-la land’ than to reality. We start throwing pity parties and indulge our envious, irritated, discontented attitude. That God tolerates us in those times of disconnect is extraordinary. When we shake our fist at Him, His grasp of grace is all the tighter. When we complain about a stony silent heaven, God is quietly guiding our every step. Such love should melt our icy hearts and make our prayer, ‘Continue the thaw, Lord.’ When we pitch our tent in the land of disconnected heart, we lose out, and we are also thieves, robbing those who are dear to us. Have you ever seen a family more spiritually confused than the one in this chapter?

Pray

Father, there is much in today’s chapter that is so relevant to my story. Forgive me for pointing out the speck in someone else’s eye when I’m struggling with a log in my own. Rescue me from my self-centeredness. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

In the book of Joshua, the tribes received their promised allotment. Dan was no exception, but because of rebellion and disobedience, they had been driven out of their land by the Amorites. Now, as it turns out, instead of fighting for it, they looked for new land with little resistance. This seems a bit weird. They assembled an army of 600 men to fight for the city of Laish in the land of Ephraim, yet they could not fight for the land back home that they were allotted! Why is it that a distant battle seemed easier? Could this be said about us today? That the things at home are taken much for granted?

Corruption in the home will eventually spread to society; in this case, it spread to a whole tribe. False doctrine is like yeast, it grows quietly in secret and affects everything it touches. Most of the other tribes were able to conquer the enemies, chase them out and claim their land, but the Danites coveted somebody else's land. The Danites' failure to defeat and dispossess the Amorites was not a matter of poor strength in numbers (Numbers 26 tells us they had 64,000 men). Their biggest issue wasn't lack of strength, rather, it was lack of faith in their covenant-keeping God. God's sovereign promises always demand man's responsible choice to trust and obey. The Danites could have taken the proper road and repented of their sin, laying hold of God's promise that He would go before them and drive out their enemies. Instead, they chose to reject God and seek their own land, looking for a new territory where the occupants would be unprepared and vulnerable to attack.

The Amorites prevented the Danites from taking possession of what was rightfully theirs. Ask yourself today, is there some "Amorite" in my life that is preventing me from taking hold of my blessings in Christ? The Apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians 1:3 that our heavenly Father has *"blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ."* Let's take hold of those blessings.

Pray

Father, it would be easy for me to judge Micah and these people today, even though Your Word tells me not to judge. Help me look inward to name any sin and disallow it to have any more sway in my life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

The opening statement, *“In those days, when there was no king in Israel,”* sets the stage for this terrible story. No king in Israel meant more than the absence of a political monarch; it also meant that they refused to recognise God's leadership over them. I find this chapter rather daunting and disturbing reading. F.B. Meyer in his commentary said this, *“In those days Israel had no king’*. It will be sufficient to ponder these words, which occur four times in this book, without reading further in this terrible chapter, which shows the depths of depravity to which man may sink apart from the grace of God.”

This unnamed Levite was nothing short of a beast, a promiscuous partygoer who gave his concubine over to rape, abuse and death, then mutilated her body in such a way that it started a civil war. Sin always has a knock-on effect and always has desperate consequences, *always!* This particular concubine was unfaithful to her husband and had fled to her father's house. The longer she was gone, the more the Levite missed her. So he travelled to Bethlehem where he and his father-in-law spent five days eating, drinking, and making merry. News of a visitor in town soon spread and men came seeking him. The desire of these chaps is clear. Homosexuality was common among the Canaanites, but these are not Canaanites, they are Benjaminites, a tribe of Israel. God's chosen people had become as wicked as Sodom and Gomorrah! The girl is offered in his stead. Who would betray a defenceless woman to be brutally violated for a whole night? Where God does not rule, life becomes cheap. On finding her dead body, the Levite cut her into twelve pieces, dispersing a piece to each of the tribes. This travesty would be remembered down through the ages, and hundreds of years later, Hosea would refer to it twice in his book, using it as an example of wickedness: *“They are deeply corrupted, as in the days of Gibeah”*. (Hosea 9:9).

Pray

Father, as I read today about how low people stoop from Your ways, again I am convicted of sin in my own life. I desperately work hard to keep my eyes on You as You alone are my peace. Help me to realise that sin always has consequences. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

This little phrase jumps to mind, 'The nation strikes back.' It is usually used today when a nation is fighting its way out of a financial slump, but in this chapter, we see a nation responding to a moral issue. It was a positive sign to see Israel's response and show their true colours after all. This showed that they were willing to deal with the problem of sin in their midst. It would seem that the Levite in the previous chapter got the response he wanted to the abuse of his concubine. This hideous crime of Gibeah shocked the conscience of Israel. It makes me really sad that today's madness and violence from around the world makes the front-page news, chat shows and television coverage, but governments stay silent instead of repenting of such atrocities.

The sincerity and quickness with which Israel dealt with and put away this evil deed is noteworthy. They gathered together from Gilead beyond the Jordan and from all the land. They were knit together in a perfect unity of feeling and action. In the early Church, we have the record of God taking Ananias and Sapphira out of the infant Church. Like them (and like many today, even in the church), the Benjaminites were unable to accept reproof and so they would have to learn the hard way. Their refusal to cooperate with the other tribes was an act of rebellion against the Lord. By coming to the aid of Gibeah rather than joining in the punishment of that city, Benjamin identified with the wicked men and merited their punishment.

When sin isn't exposed, confessed, and punished, it pollutes society and defiles the land. The wicked men of Gibeah were like a cancerous tumour in the body that had to be cut out. Israel decided to go to war with Benjamin and we can see the journey of how they suffered defeat, being driven back into the arms of a God Who was waiting and ready. It was a massive learning curve and certainly a case of tough love but in the end, they came through.

Pray

Father, create in me a pure heart and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Read

Judges 21

Live

So this ends the book of Judges. It is a sad chapter. In verse 25, for the fourth time, the writer tells us, *“there was no king in Israel.”* And for the second time, he adds, *“Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”* I find it strange that the book actually ends with these words. This is certainly the spirit of the age we live in today, a spirit that says, ‘Nothing is out of bounds; break all the rules; find your own road; no boundaries; if it feels good, just do it; you are the one that matters, and the universe revolves around you.’ But Proverbs 14:12 says, *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”* When man follows his own instincts, it leads to ruin. We must follow God's way, not our own.

Carnage and destruction broke out because one Levite didn't have the courage to stand up for what was right and treat his wife honourably. Once again, as with Jonathan, Micah, and the Danites, the problem started in the home, among God's people. When God goes, everything and anything goes. The truth is that Israel had lost its living relation to its one and only King. Without the intervention of the true King, even their well-intended zeal led them astray. Israel is suddenly filled with pity for the tribe that they nearly wiped out. They realise that the unity and completeness of the family of Jacob had been threatened by their action. The sad part of the story is that to remedy the threatened evil, they resorted to means that were utterly unrighteous, and they make another error in judgement by making a foolish oath. Wives for the men of Benjamin were provided by further unholy slaughter at Jabesh-Gilead. It is impossible to read these last five chapters without realising how perilous is the condition of any people who act without some clearly defined principle.

Pray

Father, I am convicted about my home life in today's reading as we see when it all went wrong in the home, it soon escalated into affecting a nation. Help me to be a guardian in my home. The person behind the closed door is indeed the real person. I pray that my home would be a home where You rest and abide, Father. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

