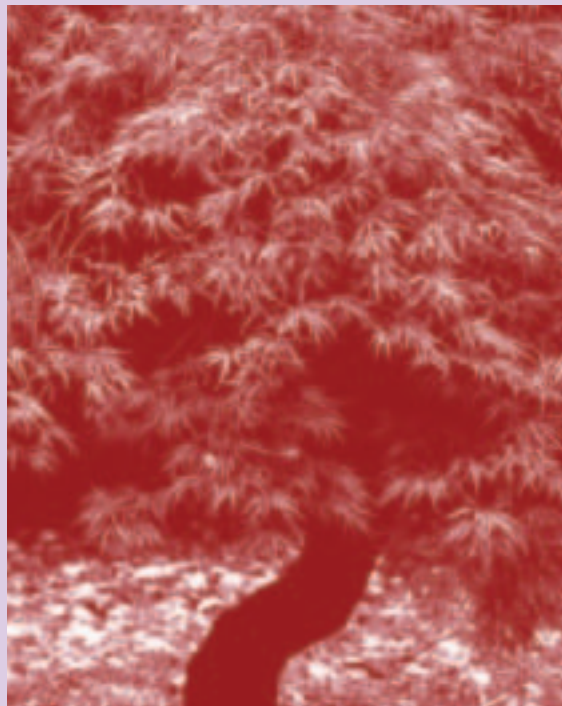


JUDGES

THE CYCLE
OF HUMAN
UNFAITHFULNESS



AND
DIVINE
RESTORATION

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by Steven P. Eason

JUDGES

The Cycle of Human Unfaithfulness and Divine Restoration

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Judges

CONTENTS

Introduction to the Men's Bible Study	4
Introduction to Judges	6
<i>session one</i> <i>An Overview of Judges</i>	10
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>*What Do You Know?</i>	
<i>Review the General Introduction</i>	
<i>Identify the Cycle</i>	
<i>*What Do You Think?</i>	
<i>session two</i> <i>Othniel and Ehud</i>	13
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>Twenty Questions</i>	
<i>*What Do You Think?</i>	
<i>A Time To Kill?</i>	
<i>*So What?</i>	
<i>session three</i> <i>Deborah and Barak</i>	17
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>Strange Names and Places!</i>	
<i>*What Do You Think?</i>	
<i>True or False?</i>	
<i>*The Song of Deborah</i>	
<i>session four</i> <i>Gideon: The Call</i>	19
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>Call: A Movement from Mystery to Clarity</i>	
<i>Call: A Movement from the Present to the Future</i>	
<i>Call: A Movement from Inadequacy to Adequacy</i>	
<i>Call: A Movement from Safety to Risk</i>	
<i>session five</i> <i>Gideon: The Battle</i>	22
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>*Who? What? When? and Why?</i>	
<i>Weakness in Strength?</i>	
<i>*What Do You Think?</i>	
<i>Strength in Weakness?</i>	

session six	<i>Jephthah</i>	25
	<i>Introduction</i>	
	<i>Who's on First?</i>	
	<i>Jephthah's Call</i>	
	<i>*What Do You Think?</i>	
	<i>Jephthah's Vow</i>	
	<i>*Sacrifice</i>	
session seven	<i>Samson</i>	28
	<i>Introduction</i>	
	<i>Samson's Biographical Information</i>	
	<i>*What Do You Think?</i>	
	<i>Samson's Sacrifice</i>	
	<i>My Most Significant Learning</i>	
the writer	<i>Biography</i>	32
order information	32

introduction

Men's BIBLE Study

The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life. . . .*

*The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture . . .*

These words from “A Brief Statement of Faith,” adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God’s Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word” to each of us (*Book of Order*, PC(U.S.A.), G-14.0516e(2)).

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says, yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men’s breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study cells in homes, and many others. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion, it assumes a small group of men (no more than twelve), one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective.

1. We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The group has gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas are.

3. We will regard the leader(s) as “first among equals.” Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit that spoke to the biblical writers now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. We will listen for “the question behind the question.” Sometimes a man’s gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and from time to time sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the “right” answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the foregoing seven “rules.”

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes to has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. The leaders might also alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of worksheets. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis for this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. If a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word, in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study you will find Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each study to suggest where it might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

Judges

INTRODUCTION

Leader(s): Prior to the first meeting, distribute the workbook and ask each man to read all of Judges and this Introduction to the study.

Not many people read Judges for devotional material. You probably have not heard a sermon lately about Judges, and glitzy church school classes stay away from deadly titles such as “A Study of Judges.” Who’s going to attend a class like that?

Well, you’re attending a study of the book of Judges. How did you get here? Now that you are here, what can you expect?

Judges is a collection of old stories that have a contemporary theme: the cycle of human unfaithfulness and divine restoration. That cycle is timeless. You’ll see it over and over again in Judges, and you’ll see it time and again in the modern church. You may even see it in yourself.

Why is it that we cannot remain faithful to God? Why do we run hot and cold? Why does it take a crisis to awaken our faith?

If you have felt like a failure in your Christian walk, read Judges. Every time Israel was bailed out of a crisis, the kingdom eventually fell again. It didn’t just happen once—it happened throughout the Old Testament.

Why does God tolerate such fickleness? Why does God continually restore us when it’s practically a “given” that we will soon fall again?

Covenant. God is serious about the covenant that was made with Israel (and the “new” covenant that God made with us through Jesus Christ). God’s love binds God to humanity. God chooses to bind Godself to us, and that love is far more powerful than our unfaithfulness.

That’s what you can expect from this study. You will see God’s love at work. You will see love in action. You will see the cycle of human unfaithfulness and divine restoration!

Where Are We?

Judges begins with the words, “After the death of Joshua . . .” Where are we in our Bible history? Let’s review the highlights.

- Creation (a good place to start!) (Gen. 1–2)
- Noah and the Ark (Gen. 6:9–9:29)
- The covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3)

- Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac (Gen. 21)
- Isaac’s sons—Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom) (Gen. 25:19)
- Jacob’s children—sons constitute the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 35:23–26).
- Joseph (one of Jacob’s sons)—a leader in Egypt (Gen. 41:37–57)
- Jacob’s sons (Israel)—slaves in Egypt during a famine (Gen. 42:6–17)
- Moses—called to deliver Israel from Egypt (Ex. 3)
- The wilderness experience (Ex. 15–19)
- The Ten Commandments (Ex. 20–34)
- Joshua—replaces Moses; takes Israel into the Promised Land (Josh. 1–4)
- Conquest—Jericho, Ai, and so on (Josh. 6–12)
- The newly conquered Promised Land—divided among the twelve tribes of Israel (Josh. 13–22)
- Joshua’s death (Josh. 24:29–30)
- The period of the Judges (Judg. 1–21)

Here we are! Israel is organized into a tribal federation without a capital, without an army, without a king, or without anything else attributed to most nations. The Israelites are fresh out of the wilderness where they were basically nomads. Israel’s identity as a nation is being shaped, and the Israelites’ possession of the land will be challenged.

What Is a Judge?

The major judges, except Deborah, are not judges at all in the judicial sense. The term “charismatic” is often used to describe their leadership; for the most part they are divinely inspired by the “spirit of the Lord” to lead individual Israelite tribes against their enemies and their leadership is limited to a particular crisis.¹

The period of the judges was a new period of leadership for Israel. The Israelites were accustomed to a single leadership figure (Moses, Joshua) along with the seventy elders (see Num. 11:16). The period of the judges fell between the leadership of Moses and Joshua (ca. 1200 B.C.) and that of the kings (ca. 1020 B.C.). Each judge was called forth by God to lead a segment of tribal Israel through a particular crisis. No judge ever seems to have led a united Israel into battle.

1. J. Cheryl Exum, *Judges*, Harper’s Bible Commentary, gen. ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), p. 245.

Walther Zimmerli notes three features common to each of the judges:

1. There is no line of succession among the judges. Each appears anew as a helper sent by Yahweh. . . .
2. The appearance of the judges is not the consequence of any human excellence; they are sent solely on Yahweh's initiative. . . .
3. A judge appears when the people repent and return to Yahweh. And during their lifetime they "judge" his nation, in other words, they see that the people are obedient to the righteous will of Yahweh. Only when the judge is dead does the nation fall back into disobedience.²

2. Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), pp. 83–84.

Where Is the Promised Land?

The following map depicts the Promised Land, or the land of Canaan, as it was divided among the twelve tribes. Throughout our study of Judges, refer to this map to get the lay of the land.



Figure 1. Distribution of the land among the twelve tribes. [From Kenneth Barker, gen. ed., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985), map no. 3.]

What Is the Theological Significance?

The last verse of Judges summarizes this period of Israel's history:

In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes (Judg. 21:25).

William Ramsay summarizes Judges well: "Judges is not edifying reading. It tells quite frankly stories of mass murder, seduction, idolatry, civil war, deceit, and rape. It describes two hundred years of near anarchy."³

A repetitive pattern characterizes Israel during the period of the judges. "The main elements of the pattern are: the Israelites do what is evil in the eyes of the Lord by turning to other gods; as a result the Lord gives them into the hands of oppressors for a stated period of time; the people cry out in their distress; and the Lord raises up judges who deliver them. After the story of deliverance, the land is said to "have rest" for periods of forty or eighty years."⁴

As you read Judges you will see a clear pattern of apostasy, oppression, penitence, and deliverance. After a period of rest, the cycle repeats itself. From a theological perspective, the problems of the tribes were traced to the Israelites' disloyalty to Yahweh. The enemy was used as an instrument of God's grace to awaken Israel to their need to repent. When the people cried out, the Lord responded by raising up a judge.

Judges 2:10 says, "and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel." With each successive generation, the memory of God and of God's laws had faded, and the Israelites began to worship the gods of other cultures. William Ramsay outlines a few reasons why Israel repeatedly turned to other gods:

1. The Israelites were surrounded by neighbors who worshiped baals. Modern church-growth experts tell us that most Americans looking for a church select a congregation where their friends and neighbors go, and sociologists tell us that the religion and ethics of most people are likely to be similar to the beliefs of others of their race and class. For Israel, as for us, conformity proved a powerful force in determining religious values.

2. Israel's pagan neighbors were far more wealthy and sophisticated than these former slaves. Archaeology reveals that Canaanites lived in finer houses. Even serfs of Canaanite city lords owned imported artworks. Moreover, the economy of Canaan was based on agriculture. In the wilderness and in slavery in Egypt, Israel had not been a nation of farmers. Now the Israelites were to raise crops, and Baal was the god of agriculture and fertility. Thus Baal was the god of economic security.

3. Baalism did not have the same kind of moral restrictions that were so essential to Mosaic religion. If a farmer wanted good crops, he might go to the neighborhood shrine. There he could have sexual intercourse with a priestess-prostitute. Canaanite religion promised that as he did so, Baal would mate in heaven with his divine consort and the farmer's crops would also germinate. Baal had no Ten Commandments.⁵

The historical framework of Judges is presented in light of a particular theological interpretation. An underlying message to the story exists that remains the same throughout: Unfaithfulness is the door to destruction—repentance brings forth deliverance. We are weak—God is strong.

How Will We Read Judges?

A total of thirteen judges are listed in this book:

Othniel	Jair
Ehud	Jephthah
Shamgar	Ibzan
Deborah	Elon
Gideon	Abdon
Abimelech	Samson
Tola	

Our study, however, will focus on the six major judges: Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson.

It is a shame that not many people attend Bible studies on the book of Judges, or use this book for their personal devotions, because the wealth of these stories is the consistent message of God's commitment to us even in our unfaithfulness. The following chart shows the outline of the book of Judges.

3. William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 75.

4. Exum, *Judges*, p. 246.

5. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*, p. 77.

JUDGES

Stories of Spirit-filled deliverers in a Cycle of Apostasy and Renewal

"The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. . . But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the Israelites" (3:7–9). "In those days there was no king in Israel" (21:25).

1

Introduction

The incompleteness of the conquest, 1

The cyclic pattern of Israel's history:

- sin,
- oppression,
- repentance,
- divine deliverance,
- and sin again, 2

3

Stories of the Judges

When the oppressed tribes turn to the Lord, God raises up a Spirit-filled deliverer:

Othniel against Mesopotamia, 3:7–11

Ehud against Moab, 3:12–30

Shamgar against the Philistines, 3:31

Deborah against the Canaanites, 4–5

Gideon against Midian, 6–8

(Abimelech unsuccessfully tries to become king), 9

A series of judges, 10

Jephthah against the Ammonites, 11–12

Samson against the Philistines, 13–16

17

Stories of Chaotic Times

The Danites set up an idolatrous shrine in the north, 17–18

The tribe of Benjamin is almost exterminated in genocidal civil war, 19–21

Author: "The Deuteronomist," that is, a historian—or probably a group of historians—who collected and edited those stories, using the philosophy of history described in Deuteronomy.

Purpose: To show how the pattern of history foretold in Deuteronomy worked out in chaotic times

Figure 2. Outline of the book of Judges. [From William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 76].

session

An Overview

OF JUDGES

Judges 1—21

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

The Introduction to each session will draw from the game of golf. I'm doing this just for fun—I realize that not everyone plays the game of golf, but my illustrations are generic enough for the golfer or the nongolfer.

Golf is an illusive game. Just when you think you have it mastered—you lose it. No one, not even the pros, stay “on” their game.

Tiger Woods won the Master's in 1997 by a twelve-stroke lead. That's an incredible victory for a twenty-one-year-old. Consequently, everyone expected Tiger to dominate the game and go on to win golf's Grand Slam; the Master's, the U.S. Open, the PGA, and the British Open. This kid has it all!

But Tiger didn't win the U.S. Open. In fact, he wasn't on the leader's board. Golf analysts said that Tiger tried too hard. He made poor decisions, and he never got into his game. Tiger agreed. Golf is an illusive game.

In that sense, the game of golf is an accurate reflection of life: It rarely runs smoothly! Life moves in cycles. We go through periods of crisis, which are followed by a period of healing and rest, more crisis, and another period of healing and rest. No one stays on their game all the time.

As you look over Judges during this session, you will see a clear cycle: (1) Israel is faithful and then unfaithful; (2) Her enemies overtake her in her period of unfaithfulness; (3) Israel cries to God and repents; (4) God sends a judge, and Israel is delivered; and (5) Israel is in a period of healing and rest. Don't get too comfortable because the cycle begins all over again. You'd think they had learned their lesson.

Golf is a frivolous game compared to God's sovereign love. There is a limit to our analogy. Even so, we know about the cycle of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. We all go through it. By God's grace, we all come out of it.

This session will give you an overview of Judges. Here come the Judges! Here come the Judges!



WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

Leader(s): Ask each man to quickly write down everything he knows about Judges before the study begins. Have the group share the highlights of their knowledge base before you get into the study. Encourage the group not to be embarrassed by a lack of knowledge. Judges is not a well-known book of the Bible.

Review the General Introduction

Leader(s): Ask the group to turn to the general Introduction to Judges. Ask the men to cluster their chairs together in five small groups. Assign each group one of the subheadings listed below. (If you have a small group, assign one or two men to each of the following subheadings.) Ask each member to read their assigned subheading and be prepared to report their findings to the large group.

1. Where Are We?

Notes:

2. What Is a Judge?

Notes:

3. Where Is the Promised Land?

Notes:

4. What Is the Theological Significance?

Notes:

5. How Will We Read Judges?

Notes:

After each group studies their assigned section, write a quick summary on the chalkboard or newsprint for the larger group.

Identify the Cycle

As previously mentioned, a cycle to Israel's life is clearly revealed in Judges. Read the following texts and make summary notes. Write down the various stages of the cycle. Note similarities and differences.

Judg. 2:8-9

Judg. 2:11-23

Judg. 3:7-11

Judg. 3:12-15

Judg. 4:1-4

Judg. 6:1-2, 7-12

Judg. 8:33-35

Judg. 10:6-18

Judg. 13:1

Judg. 21:25



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

You may want to discuss the following questions:

1. Why do you think Israel has a cycle in their relationship with God? Do you see similar cycles in Christians today? in yourself?

2. What is God's initial response to Israel's unfaithfulness?

3. What is God's response to Israel's cry for help?

4. Why does God continue to tolerate Israel?

5. Does God allow our enemies to overtake us in our unfaithful times? If yes, explain. If no, what happens to us in our unfaithfulness?

6. How do you perceive that God delivers people today?

Time To Go

Pray the following prayer as a group:

Gracious God, like Israel, we have sinned against you. We are unfaithful, yet we want to be protected. We often turn to you only in crisis and forget you in our prosperity. Open our minds and hearts during this study to what you have to say to us. Bind us together as a group as we care for one another. This we ask in Christ's name. Amen.

Afterword

Man is made to image God, and if he is not doing this, he is defaulting in his responsibility as a man and jarring the conditions upon which life may be well led.¹

Alcoholics Anonymous bases its treatment plan on a twelve-step program. Our spiritual cycle of ups and downs with God and neighbor is similar to the struggle faced by an alcoholic. Imagine Israel using the following steps. Just replace the word *alcohol* with *other gods*.

Step One. “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.”

Step Two. “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”

Step Three. “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”

Step Four. “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.”

Step Five. “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”

Step Six. “Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.”

Step Seven. “Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.”

Step Eight. “Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.”

Step Nine. “Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”

Step Ten. “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.”

Step Eleven. “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.”

Step Twelve. “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.”²

Looking Ahead

The next session looks at the judges Othniel and Ehud. Please read Judges 3 in preparation.

1. Carl Michalson, *Faith for Personal Crises* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 11.

2. Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1981), pp. 5–8.

session *two*

Othniel and EHUD

Judges 3

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

It's very easy to forget what we know in golf. The purpose of practicing is to go through the repetitive motions until a good swing is in our muscle memory. Otherwise, every swing, chip, or putt is different from the last, and we get lost.

Nothing is worse than getting lost in your golf swing. You search and search, but you just can't find it. You try changing your grip, your stance, your backswing, ball placement—anything. You've lost it.

It is also very easy to get lost in our relationship with God, and Israel is a prime example. The Chosen People kept forgetting what they knew. Somehow their relationship with God did not become part of their "muscle memory."

Israel's failure is described in the prologue of each of the judge's stories. Israel has blown it and cannot keep their covenant with God. This failure is repeated over and over: "The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, forgetting the LORD their God" (Judg. 3:7).

There it is! When we forget what we know to be true, we get lost. One of the primary reasons that Israel kept forgetting the Lord was because they were chasing after other gods. They were searching in the wrong places; consequently, they kept ending up in the wrong relationship with God.

This session combines the stories of two major judges, Othniel and Ehud. Othniel's story is extremely brief, and Ehud's story is strange. The common thread throughout these stories is the providence of God. We may forget, but God doesn't forget us. Hallelujah!

Twenty Questions

Twenty questions is one way to learn more about Othniel and Ehud. Check your Bible and discuss these questions as a group.

1. Why did God sell Israel into the hands of King Cushan-rishathaim (hereafter referred to as "King C")?

2. Over what country did King C rule?

3. Where is that country? (check a Bible map)

4. How long did Israel serve under King C?

5. Prior to God sending a judge, what did Israel do that began to turn things around?

6. How did God respond to Israel's cry for help?

7. By what method did Othniel overcome “King C”?

8. How long did Israel rest after Othniel’s victory?

9. Who was the opposition during Ehud’s term as judge?

10. Why was Israel’s enemy allowed to overtake them?

11. Does God use bad things for good purposes (see 3:12–14)?

12. Where is Moab? (map)

13. From which of the twelve tribes of Israel did Ehud come?

14. Why is it important to know that Ehud was left-handed (see 3:15–22)?

15. Which of the Ten Commandments did Ehud break? (see Ex. 20)

16. What is “the dirt” in 3:22?

17. Who found the body of King Eglon?

18. How many Moabites did Ehud and the Israelites kill?

19. Where was King Eglon’s body and what did they think he was doing?

20. How many years was Israel at rest after Ehud’s victory?

You should now have a better understanding of the stories of Othniel and Ehud.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The following are some discussion questions that attempt to tie the ancient story of the judges to our modern experience of God. Time may only allow for the discussion of one or two.

1. Do you think that God delivered Israel from their enemies, or did they just happen to win and attribute the victory to God?

2. Do you think God continues to use “bad things” (like our enemies) for “good purposes”? Explain.

3. Do you think God hears our cries for help? If so, how does God respond today?

4. Do you think that God continues to call special leadership forward to lead the church today? Can you identify such a leader?

5. Do you think modern descendants of the Moabites would hate God if they were to read this story?

A Time To Kill?

In each of the judge’s stories, killing is commonplace. Holy wars appear to be acceptable as long as they are for the right reasons. Discuss the following questions:

1. Is there a time when killing is justified or even righteous? (see Eccles. 3:3)

2. Is it fair that God used “King C” and King Eglon as pawns to discipline Israel? Explain.

3. Why did God allow so many innocent people to die simply because Israel had been unfaithful?

4. Does the Bible present different pictures of the God in the Old Testament from the God in the New Testament?

If you had to tell the stories of Othniel and Ehud



SO WHAT?

to a non-Christian or someone who was not a religious person, how would you go about trying to make sense out of the stories? How would you communicate their significance? Try this as a group. Brainstorm ideas.

Time To Go

Join together in the following prayer of confession:

Heavenly Father, we forget that we belong to you and we chase after other gods. We believe that lesser things can bring us greater happiness. We are quick to abandon our love of God and our love for each other.

Gracious Lord, forgive us our sins and help us to repent, lest we perish. This we pray for the sake of your glory and realm, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Afterword

Repentance was the prerequisite to God sending a judge for Israel's deliverance. Thomas Langford writes, "Our confession of sin is within the context of grace. We could not confess if there were no grace. In truth, of course, our penance begins because we already know that forgiveness exists. . . . Penance which does not know that it is a confession of violation of love is uninstructed. Penance which does not expect the renewal of life is pointless."¹

Looking Ahead

The next session looks at the story of Deborah and Barak. Please read Judges 4 and 5 in preparation.

1. Thomas A. Langford, *Christian Wholeness* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1978), p. 49.

session *three*

Deborah and

BARAK

Judges 4—5

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Fact: More people watch the PGA (Professional Golf Association) tournaments than watch the LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Association) tournaments.

Fact: The PGA (all male golfers) has more corporate sponsors than does the LPGA.

Fact: The prize money on the PGA Tour is a lot more than the prize money on the LPGA Tour.

Fact: Many women golfers can clean the clock of many male golfers!

Today's session is about two powerful women, Deborah and Jael. Jael gets second billing under Barak, but what Deborah said to Barak is true: "the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (4:9). That woman was Jael.

Deborah is the only female judge in our lineup. She was a powerful woman, but her story hinges on the grace of God, who heard Israel's cry and responded with grace. That is also a fact!

Strange Names and Places!

Make a list of all the names and places in Deborah's story with which you are not familiar (see ch. 4). Then share your list with the group.

Leader(s): It will be helpful to refer to the map on page 7 and point out the places named in Deborah's story.

Names	Places
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Discuss the following questions:

1. God seemed to play favorites in the Old Testament. The Canaanites didn't get the same VIP treatment as Israel. What do you make of this? Weren't Canaanites also created in the image of God?

2. The story of Deborah is ancient. Because it is in the Scriptures, must it have meaning for us or can we simply read it as history?

True or False?

Leader(s): Present to the group the following true/false statements. Encourage members to find the answers in their Bibles and fire them when ready.

- ___ The Lord called Deborah to be a judge after Israel repented of their sin.
- ___ Deborah was a prophetess.
- ___ Sisera was the king of Canaan.
- ___ Sisera had nine hundred chariots of iron.
- ___ Deborah's husband was Barak.
- ___ God called Barak to help Deborah against the Canaanites.
- ___ Barak was from the tribe of Naphtali.
- ___ Barak's battle with Sisera was held at Mount Tabor.
- ___ The tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun fought Jabin's army.
- ___ Wadi Kishon is a city near Kedesh.
- ___ The number of men in Barak's army was nine hundred.
- ___ Barak would not go to battle unless Deborah went also.

- ___ All twelve tribes of Israel fought against Sisera.
- ___ The Lord threw Sisera into a panic.
- ___ Jael was the wife of King Jabin.
- ___ Jael killed King Jabin.
- ___ Sisera died in the temple.
- ___ The Israelites destroyed King Jabin.
- ___ Deborah sang a song to Sisera and King Jabin.
- ___ The land rested for sixty-five years after Deborah and Barak defeated King Jabin's army.

Afterword

Jael

A Canaanite war-lord named Sisera had recently been trounced by an Israelite strong-man named Barak and was heading for the border to save his skin. On the way, he was invited to hide out with a Kenite woman named Jael, who belonged to a tribe which had not been involved in the skirmish at all. This was his second bad break that day.

Jael was all smiles as she issued her invitation and gave him the red carpet treatment. She fixed him a drink and suggested he stretch out for a while on the couch. While he was asleep, she crept in and disposed of him by the ingenious if cumbersome technique of hammering a tentpeg in one temple and out the other.

The female judge Deborah (q.v.) wrote a song in her honor in which she referred to her as "most blessed among women" for the job she had done, and Jael has been remembered as a great hero and patriot ever since.

In view of the fact that her victim was (a) her guest and (b) asleep and (c) had never harmed a hair of either her head or her people's, it would seem that to call her deed heroic is to stretch the term to the breaking point. As for calling it patriotic, if she had done it for love of country—maybe. But (a) her country had no quarrel with Sisera and (b) if she killed him for anything but kicks, it was out of love for nothing more exalted than the idea of maybe getting a pay-off from the Israelites the next time they hit town. It is not the only instance, of course, of how people in wartime get medals for doing what in peacetime would get them the chair.¹

None of us will have any difficulty in believing that something has gone wrong with our enemies. That something is wrong with the Communists is so plain that it needs no argument. Certainly something has gone wrong with the man who is suing us in the courts. That neighbor who is so quarrelsome illustrates the proposition clearly enough. But that we too are a part of that universal sin is not so easy to believe. Yet there are no exceptions. "All we like sheep have gone astray" (Isa. 53:6). Until every nation, every class, and every man is willing to include himself in the gone-wrongness of the world, there is no salvation.²

Looking Ahead

The next session is "Gideon: The Call." Please read Judges 6 in preparation.

1. Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), pp. 58–59.

2. Gerald Kennedy, *The Lion and The Lamb: Paradoxes of the Christian Faith* (Madison, WI: Adult Christian Education Foundation, 1977), p. 37.



THE SONG OF DEBORAH

Judges 5 is one of the oldest poems in the Old Testament. The song of Deborah is a second account of Israel's victory over King Jabin's army. A few discrepancies are evident between the account in ch. 4 and the one told in the song of Deborah. What are they? (Hint: At least four discrepancies may be found.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Answers:
 1. No mention of King Jabin in ch. 5. 2. Chapter 5 identifies at least six tribes that participated in the battle. Chapter 4 lists only two. 3. Chapter 5 does not mention Mount Tabor. 4. Chapter 5 gives a slightly different account of Sisera's death—he was killed while standing up (5:27).

Time To Go

God used a variety of instruments to accomplish God's purpose (e.g., King Jabin, Deborah, Barak, Jael). Close in prayer asking God to use us to accomplish God's will and purpose:

Dear Lord, use us as your instruments of peace and justice. Guide us to those places of victory where love overcomes hate, humility overcomes pride, forgiveness overcomes sin. We pray through the one who conquered all for our sakes, Jesus Christ. Amen.

session *four*

Gideon:

THE CALL

Judges 6

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

The story of Gideon is a favorite of many people! It has everything in it: confusion, clarity, overcompensation, trust, sin, grace, inadequacy, and victory. It's all there.

Leader(s): Please note that no options for omission or summarization exist in this lesson. If the session runs too long, carry it over to the next meeting.

Only a fool would try to relate the game of golf to the story of Gideon. But this is just for fun, and it's a way to introduce an ancient story.

The golf swing has two dimensions: mechanics and feel. Some people try to build a swing on mechanics and some attempt to build a swing on feel. A third school recommends the combination of the two. In that case, we work on the technique of the swing on the practice range and then go out on the course and trust the swing. If you think too much about the mechanics, you will lose the feel of the swing and become rigid, with no rhythm. Trust the swing!

Gideon had to learn to trust the swing. He worked overtime to build the mechanics of his call. He overbuilt his army, and God reduced Gideon to trust.

It's a great story, which you'll never forget. We will have two sessions focusing on Gideon so we can savor the great truths in his story. The writer of Judges also gives Gideon the most coverage as the following illustrates.

Othniel: 5 verses
Ehud: 19 verses
Deborah: 54 verses
Gideon: **100 verses**
Jephthah: 47 verses
Samson: 96 verses

It is an awesome thing to be called by God. We still say that people are "called to the ministry," but we aren't always sure what that means or how it happens. Elders, deacons, and pastors are called to their office of ministry, but all Christians, by virtue of their baptism, are called into ministry with Christ.

This entire session is devoted to Gideon's call. We will find that many other calls in the Bible share the same movements discussed below. Hopefully, we'll see not only the similarities, but also learn something about our own call.

Call: A Movement from Mystery to Clarity

Almost every call from God begins with mystery. We aren't always sure that it is God speaking to us. The calls in the Bible are also shrouded with mystery. However, every call eventually moves to clarity. God eventually makes it clear what God wants.

Think about the calls of Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Each began in a mysterious way. Whenever God reveals Godself, there is always a moment of confusion—a moment of otherworldliness or mystery. We've never experienced anything like this. A strangeness is evident in God's presence.

But in each of the biblical calls there is a movement from a place of mystery to a place of clarity. We don't stay in those places of fog and thunder for long, because God wants to move us to a place of understanding. God explains the plan.

Every call may not have smoke and angels in it, but it seems reasonable to conclude that every call has its moments of confusion and uncertainty. God speaks in ways we can understand, if we will but listen.

So goes the lesson of Gideon. It took him a while, but he finally got it.

Look up the following passages and find the mystery and the clarity in each of the calls. Make a note of what was mysterious or confusing and then state the clarity that comes from each of these calls.

Noah (Gen. 6:11–22; 9:8–17)

Mystery

Clarity

Abraham (Gen. 12:1–6; 15:1–6)

Mystery

Clarity

Moses (Ex. 3:1–12; 4:1–17)

Mystery

Clarity

Gideon (Judg. 6:11–40)

Mystery

Clarity

Leader(s): Have the group share their findings with one another.

Call: A Movement from the Present to the Future

In every case, God called the biblical characters to a future. God calls us to what will be. In that sense, the call of God contains a vision—a picture of what is to come. There is hope in a call from God because things are going to change.

God calls us not to simply maintain what is but to move to what will be. God gives us the gift of a vision for the future when God calls us. Thank God for that.

To what future were the following leaders called? Please be specific.

Noah (Gen. 9:8–17)

Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3)

Moses (Ex. 3:7–12)

Gideon (Judg. 6:11–18)

Leader(s): Have the group share their findings with one another.

Call: A Movement from Inadequacy to Adequacy

It seems that every call from God is met with human inadequacy. “I can’t do this. I don’t know how to do this.” No one feels qualified to do what God wants—no one is. That should be comforting to those of us who feel the same way. God has never called anyone who felt adequate for the job.

Look at our list of biblical calls again. Choose and list a quote from the one being called that reveals their sense of inadequacy.

Noah (Gen. 6:9–9:29)

Note: There is no evidence that Noah ever felt inadequate or confused. The Bible simply states, “Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him” (6:22). Way to go Noah! (A slight blemish on Noah’s character is revealed in Gen. 9:20–29.)

Abraham (Gen. 15:1–5; 16:1–6)

Moses (Ex. 4:10–17)

Gideon (Judg. 6:11–18, 36–40)

Leader(s): Have the group share their findings with one another.

Call: A Movement from Safety to Risk

Every call from God appears as a call from safety to risk. We leave what we know to do what we do not know. In that sense, every call from God can move us to a position of trust.

Although God clarifies the call, God doesn't provide all the details up front. We may be given a vision of the future, but we are not given the complete experience of pursuing that vision. There are many maybes and what-ifs in following the Lord.

It is difficult to think of a call, ancient or modern-day, that doesn't involve moving from safety to risk. That's the way God deals with us. Comfort is found in knowing that risk is OK. Not only is risk OK, but it is the will of God at times. Not to risk would be not to trust. Our relationships with God are all about trust.

Take a final look at the calls we have explored and note how each one is a call from safety to risk.

Noah

Abraham

Moses

Gideon

Leader(s): Have the group share their findings with one another.

Time To Go

The call of God is not restricted to a few individuals. Each call may differ, but all are called by God to be "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20). God is in us, through Christ, working out the ministry of reconciliation. What a privilege. What an awesome responsibility!

Close this session by praying together the following prayer:

Holy God, you are the one who made us. You are the one who redeems us. You are the one who sustains us. You are the one who calls us into service. We thank you for the privilege of sharing ministry with you. We thank you for always providing that which we need in order to do that which seems impossible.

Remind us of this great lesson when we face our own inadequacies and when we are afraid to take the risk to be faithful. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Afterword

The pastoral vocation in America is embarrassingly banal. It is banal because it is pursued under the canons of job efficiency and career management. It is banal because it is reduced to the dimensions of a job description. It is banal because it is an idol—a call from God exchanged for an offer by the devil for work that can be measured and manipulated at the convenience of the worker. Holiness is not banal. Holiness is blazing.¹

Looking Ahead

The next session focuses on Gideon's battle. Please read Judges 7–8 in preparation.

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), p. 5.

session *five*

Gideon:

THE BATTLE

Judges 7—8

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Sticking to golf analogies to introduce these lessons is testing my creativity! What can be used from the game of golf to introduce Gideon's battle?

"You're swinging too hard!" Every golfer has heard that simple critique more than once. Sometimes the harder you try to hit the ball the shorter its flight. In golf, a fast, hard swing is not always the best swing.

That concept is likely true in any sport. Raw power is not always productive. Controlled power is better. It's true in tennis, swimming, basketball, soccer, jogging, and baseball.

Gideon had to learn something about weakness-in-strength and strength-in-weakness. Raw power was not enough for him to secure a victory. He needed something else.

One of the most difficult lessons to learn as a Christian is that of getting out of the way. It seems paradoxical. How can we get out of the way and be the best we can be at the same time? How can we remove ourselves and offer our best to God? Which is it?

The Reformers struggled with "works righteousness." Their concern was the opinion in the church that one could "work" one's way into a right relationship with God. The Bible taught otherwise. Salvation is a gift! We don't earn it or achieve it. God gives it.

In that sense, we have to get out of the way. Sometimes we have to step aside to depend on God. Sometimes in our frantic attempts to succeed, we rob ourselves of the joy of knowing God's love. We're too busy trying to keep everything going.

God deals with this problem of ours by reducing us. God finds a way to bring us to a place of dependency and trust, as you'll see in Gideon's story. You may even see it in your own story!



WHO? WHAT? WHEN? AND WHY?

Leader(s): Do this as a group exercise.

Overkill. You know about that. We do it when we're not sure we have what it takes to do the job. It's easy to recognize overkill because we've all done it.

God's strength doesn't always appear in powerful armies or slick presentations. Think about Jesus for a moment. That's God's power. No overkill there. No slick presentation. No symbols of power and might. Jesus was just a carpenter's son from Nazareth—or so they thought!

It always appears that way in the Scriptures. God's power shows up in the humble. God's power shows up in "the least of these." God's power shows up in the unexpected—where we're not looking for it. That's really good news!

A good portion of our study of Judges is simply learning the details of these great stories. The more familiar you are with the story, the more often you will refer to it to glean messages for modern life.

Find the answers to the following questions in your Bible. You'll know the story better when you finish.

1. Why is Gideon going to battle?
(Judg. 6:1–10)

2. Who is the enemy? (Judg. 6:1–10)

3. What was Gideon doing before God called him? (Judg. 6:11)

4. To what tribe did Gideon belong (Judg. 6:15)? (See the map, p. 7.)

5. What was the name of the god Israel was worshiping when Gideon was called? What was Gideon told to do concerning that god (Judg. 6:25–32)?

6. What tribes did Gideon call together to form his original army (Judg. 6:34–35)? (See the map again, p. 7.)

5. Read Judg. 7:4–8. How did the Lord reduce the army the second time?

6. After the army was reduced the second time, how many soldiers were left in Gideon’s army?

7. What percentage is that number of his original army?

Weakness in Strength

Is it possible to be too strong? Is it possible to be too prepared? Is it possible to actually be weak in one’s strength? Let’s ask Gideon.

Leader(s): Give the group time to look up the following questions. Have them share their findings with one another.

Read Judg. 7:2–3.

1. How many soldiers were in Gideon’s original army?

2. Why was this army too large? (quote the Lord)

3. How did God reduce this army?

4. How large was the army after it was reduced?



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Can you think of ways that Christians are too strong and take the credit for our accomplishments? *Discuss as a group.*

Can you think of ways that your church comes across as too strong and may therefore miss the power of God? *Discuss as a group.*

Strength in Weakness?

We are much more comfortable talking about how we can be made strong in our weakness. Stories of David facing Goliath, Jesus healing lepers, and the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost all comfort us with the reassurance that we are made strong in our weakness.

We certainly read that this is true in our Bibles over and over again. We are made strong in our weakness. Gideon’s story is a prime example of this great truth.

Spend a few minutes familiarizing yourself with God’s battle plan for Gideon. It’s a bit comical at times. While reading his story, think of the comical times in your life when God has reduced you to trust.

Read Judg. 7:15–25. As a group, lay out Gideon’s battle strategy.

Step 1

Step 2

Step 3

Step 4

Step 5

Why do you think this strategy worked?

What did the Midianites likely think?

Can you think of any modern illustrations of someone being made strong in weakness? Share your response with the group.

Time To Go

Pray the following prayer together:

Gracious Lord, like Gideon, we need to learn something about depending on you. We need to learn how to use our strength and when to wait upon you. We are not wise enough to know the difference.

Teach us to seek your battle plans for the challenges that face us. Reduce us to that place of trust and assurance. May all our victories bring glory and honor to your holy name. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

Afterword

From my grandmother’s library I gained a copy of *The Prayers of Peter Marshall*. The following prayer seems apropos to today’s lesson.

For God’s Grace in Our Helplessness

May Thy wisdom and Thy power come upon the President of these United States, the Senators and Congressmen, to whom have been entrusted leadership. May the responsibility lie heavily on their hearts, until they are ready to acknowledge their helplessness and turn to Thee. Give to them the honesty, the courage, and the moral integrity to confess that they don’t know what to do. Only then can they lead us as a nation beyond human wisdom to Thee, who alone hast the answer.

Lead us to this high adventure. Remind us that a “mighty fortress is our God”—not a hiding place where we can escape for an easy life, but rather an arsenal of courage and strength—the mightiest of all, who will march beside us into the battle for righteousness and world brotherhood.

O our God, may we never recover from our feeling of helplessness and our need of Thee! In the strong name of Jesus, our Lord, we pray. Amen.¹

Looking Ahead

The next lesson is on Jephthah. Please read Judg. 10:6—12:7 in preparation.

1. Peter Marshall, *The Prayers of Peter Marshall*, edited by Catherine Marshall (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1954), p. 97.

session

SIX

JEPHTHAH

Judg. 10:6—12:7

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

There are many written and unwritten rules of etiquette in the game of golf. Observing golf etiquette is almost as important as the mechanics of the game—almost.

A few examples of golf etiquette are as follows (some of which have been declared religious behavior in parts of the U.S.):

- Remain quiet during another player’s swing or putt.
- Do not hit the ball out of turn.
- Repair your ball marks and rake your traps.
- Let faster players pass you.
- The winner of the last hole tees off first on the next hole.
- Carry no more than fourteen clubs in your bag.

You have to know these rules and take them seriously or you will be playing by yourself!

One thing to remember about the judge Jephthah is that he strongly believed in playing by the rules. He made a vow to God that cost him his daughter, but he kept it.

It is a strange story for Christians to read. How could a loving God accept such a vow and follow through with it? We must remember to read the Old Testament with the eyes and ears of that culture—not ours. It was a different day. It makes you wonder if people two thousand years from now will look back on our beliefs and shake their heads in disbelief.

Jephthah went beyond mere etiquette. He went beyond being polite. This was no game. See what you think about Jephthah’s vow.

Who’s on First?

The first reading of Jephthah’s story is somewhat confusing. The modern reader can easily get lost in all the foreign geography and political history.

Read through Judg. 10:6—12:7 and list all the geographical locations in one column and all the political leaders in the other column.

Geographical Locations

Political Leaders

Leader(s): Ask several members to look up some of these places and figures in Bible dictionaries and read the definitions. Refer to a Bible map and find some of the locations.

Take a few minutes and chart Israel’s progress into the land of Canaan. Refer to Judg. 11:12–22. This passage is Jephthah’s account of Israel’s movement into possession of the land. Follow their progression on a map.

Jephthah’s Call

Presbyterians are big on call. We believe that God calls people to office. We believe that the divine call must be confirmed by the community of faith and responded to by the individual.

Our *Book of Order* states, “Those duties which all Christians are bound to perform by the law of love are especially incumbent upon elders because of their calling to office and are to be fulfilled by them as official responsibilities.”¹

Jephthah’s call to be a judge was a bit different from the call of some of the previous judges. Read Judg. 10:6—11:11. Compare Jephthah’s call to those listed below. Make a note of the most significant differences.

Leader(s): Allow time for the group to look up the following and make notes. Have the group share their responses with one another.

How was Jephthah’s call different from each of the following?

Othniel (3:9–10)

Ehud (3:15)

Deborah (4:1–7)

Gideon (6:11–18, 36–40)



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The group may want to have a discussion on how God *calls* us. Consider the following:

1. *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1996), G–6.0304.

1. Does God still *call* forth leadership today? Explain your answer. How do you know?

2. What makes you most suspicious about the call of God?

3. How do the various calls of the judges inform you about modern-day calls? Are there any similarities? Are there any differences?

Jephthah’s Vow

“God, if you’ll just get me out of this mess, I promise I’ll go to church and change my ways. I’ll never drink, smoke, cuss or play poker again!” Have you heard something similar to that desperate prayer?

Sometimes we try to manipulate God. “I’ll do this, if you’ll do that.” We try to strike a deal, usually in desperation.

Jephthah’s deal with God is one of the strangest in the Bible. It’s not so strange that Jephthah made the vow as it is strange that God honored it.

Read Judg. 11:29–40.

1. What was Jephthah’s vow to the Lord? (quote it)

2. Why did he make such a vow?

3. Was Jephthah’s vow a form of manipulation in

his dealings with God? Explain your answer.

4. Do you admire Jephthah’s commitment or abhor his fear and distrust of God’s providence? Explain.

5. Why do you think Jephthah made his vow to sacrifice someone other than himself?

6. How do you explain God honoring such a vow, especially when Abraham was spared having to sacrifice his son Isaac?



SACRIFICE

The group may want to discuss sacrifice. What does it mean for us? What is the New Testament understanding of sacrifice? How are we called to sacrifice? Why does Jephthah’s sacrifice seem wrong to us?

Time To Go

Pray this prayer together:

Holy Lord, you call each of us to be your children. You have sacrificed your Son for us that we might live. We give ourselves to you, that in everything we say and in everything we do, our lives will bring glory and honor to your name. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Afterword

Jephthah’s story begins in the same manner as that of the other judges. Israel sins against God by worshiping the gods of the neighborhood.

The following excerpt from John Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament*, sheds some light on Israel’s temptation to jump ship.

The editor of the book of Judges makes it quite plain that the religion of Canaan was a more formidable force than its armies, and when Israel was tempted to adopt it, disaster was the inevitable outcome. . . .

So who were these gods and goddesses—“the Baals and the Astartes”? . . .

One story tells how Baal was attacked by Mut, the god of barrenness and sterility. As in many ancient fertility myths, he overcomes Baal and his powers of life and fertility, and scatters his body to the four corners of the earth. While El, the father-god, leads the heavenly mourning for his lost son, Anat, the goddess of fertility, goes out to take her revenge. . . . Baal’s power is brought back as he renews his sexual relationship with Anat—and that in turn ensures the fertility of the earth and its inhabitants for another season. This was the main point of Canaanite religion. Without the rains that fall from October to April, agriculture would have been impossible. And so when the rains stopped in May, it seemed as if Baal was dead, and needed to be revived. Some experts believe that the story of Baal’s revival by Anat was the central feature of an annual New Year Festival in ancient Canaan. On this occasion, held every autumn, the king and a temple prostitute would act out the story of Baal and Anat, to make sure that all would be well for another year. No doubt the same kind of rites went on in every local shrine throughout the land. Temple prostitutes feature prominently in the Old Testament descriptions of Canaanite worship, and sexual intercourse with them was considered to be as much a part of the job of a farmer as were the actual operations of agriculture.

This is why the challenge of Canaanite religion often proved irresistible to the Israelites. For though they knew their God Yahweh was all-powerful in the desert, and in war, they doubted his ability to control the weather and the fertility of fields and flocks. . . .

It is not surprising that the Israelites were tempted to adopt Canaanite ways of belief and worship. After all, the Canaanite city-states were successful in getting the best from the land, and if they claimed this was due to their religion, then at least it would seem to be worth consideration.²

Looking Ahead

The last session is on the famous judge Samson. Please read Judges 13–16 in preparation.

2. John Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), pp. 74–76.

session

seven

SAMSON

Judges 13—16

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Golf giants: Hogan, Snead, Palmer, Nicholas, Watson, Player, and now perhaps, Tiger Woods. These guys are bigger than life. Throngs of people surround them on a golf course. Billions of pictures have been taken of them. Volumes have been written about their success. They are huge!

A story is told that Arnold Palmer, Michael Jordan, and Bill Clinton all died on the same day. When they arrived at the pearly gates, Peter put them in a carriage and took them to their dwellings.

The first stop was a gorgeous mansion on a beautiful lake with a tremendous mountain view. Peter turned to Arnold Palmer and said, “Arnie, here’s your mansion, prepared for you!” Mr. Palmer quickly got out and gratefully walked to his new home.

Peter drove a little farther into the inner city and stopped at a small, quaint bungalow. He turned to Michael Jordan and said, “Michael, here’s your mansion, prepared for you!” Michael reluctantly got out and walked, somewhat disappointed, to his new home.

Then Peter took Bill Clinton into the ghettos of the city and stopped at an old, beat-up apartment building. They both got out and walked up sixteen flights of stairs to a nasty one-room apartment with a light bulb swinging from a collapsing ceiling.

Bill Clinton indignantly said, “Hey, what is this? I was the president of the United States of America. Why do I get a dump like this? Why did the great Michael Jordan get that nice little bungalow? And the real question is why did Arnold Palmer get that beautiful mansion?”

Peter said, “Oh, that’s easy. We have lots of presidents, kings, and prime ministers here. We have a fair amount of basketball players, but that’s the first golfer we’ve ever gotten!”

Golf giants are big—I don’t know if they are *that* big, but many are bigger than life.

* * *

Today’s lesson is about a judge who is also bigger than life. Parts of his story sound as though they have been distorted or enlarged. Samson is huge. He was obviously one of Israel’s central leaders and became something of a legend or a myth.

Samson’s Biographical Information

What most people remember about Samson’s story is that he allowed Delilah to cut off his hair and therefore lost all his strength. (Some people draw the erroneous conclusion that all women eventually do that to all men, but remember that Delilah had another man steal Samson’s strength!)

There is much more to Samson’s story than the loss of his hair or strength. Take a history on Samson by using your Bible to fill in Samson’s biographical information (see Judges 13—16).

Leader(s): Allow the group time to research and record the following data on Samson. Then have the group share their findings about each item with one another.

Parent’s name:

Place of birth:

Tribe:

Angel appeared to:

First marriage was to:

Reason marriage failed:

Samson’s reaction to losing his wife:

Cause of death on Samson’s wife’s death certificate:

Extra-sexual activities (Samson):

Samson's second relationship was with:

Loss of strength due to:

Loss of eyesight due to:

Samson's enemy (Israel's enemy):

Cause of Samson's death:



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

As a group, discuss the parts of Samson's story that are unbelievable or do not seem realistic. Allow time for each man to jot down one aspect of the story that seems distorted or fabricated.

What do we do with those parts of the Bible that seem to us to be too otherworldly? How do we juxtapose those stories with the ways in which we encounter God? *Discuss as a group.*

Samson's Sacrifice

The call of God comes with all the assurances of God's strength and power, but it also comes with personal sacrifice. Scan Samson's story and make a list of the personal sacrifices he made in response to God's call (you will find at least nine).

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____

Answers: 1. Thirty linen garments and festal garments (a fortune) 2. Wife given to his companion 3. Wife killed 4. Father-in-law killed 5. Delilah 6. Physical strength 7. Eyes 8. Imprisoned 9. Death



MY MOST SIGNIFICANT LEARNING

We have come to the close of our study of Judges. Hopefully, you now know each of the major judges a little better. You should also have a better understanding of Israel's history.

The cycle of human unfaithfulness gave rise to the need of a judge for Israel. The judge was a gift from God to restore Israel to a right relationship.

As a final thought, discuss as a group your most significant learning during this study.

Notes:

or

Share with the group how an understanding of Judges has strengthened you as a Christian.

Notes:

Time To Go

Close the study by standing and praying together the Lord's Prayer. Imagine that you are Israel as you pray it. The words will take on new meaning!

Afterword

Delilah

She knew from the start that all she had to do to ruin Samson was cut off his gorgeous mop. It wasn't for nothing that she'd lain in bed watching him brush it in the mirror like a girl, the self-conscious way he tossed it out of his eyes on the dance floor, the silk bandana he tied it back with when he went gunning for Philistines. It was only to give them a few more days together that she pretended to swallow his clumsy fibs about how the way to get the better of him was with new rope, bowstrings, and so on.

But Philistine Headquarters got tough with her finally, so one night when he was asleep with his head in her lap, she slipped out her scissors, and by the time she was through with him, he looked like Mr. Clean. Even the Philistine goon squad had some qualms about jumping a man who was crying like a baby when they came in to get him, and after the look she saw him give his reflection in the dresser mirror as they dragged him out, she had the feeling that it was almost a relief to him when they put out his eyes.¹

1. Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), p. 26.

Samson was a *Nazirite*.

The following definition helps shed some light on what that means.

Nazirite—one consecrated, devoted, separated. . . . One who marks his status of special sanctity or his vow of self-dedication by letting his hair grow and abstaining from wine and strong drink. . . .

The law of the Nazirite—All the prescriptions in the Pentateuch concerning the Nazirite are found in Num. 6. . . . It [the law] assumes that a man or woman became a Nazirite by a voluntary vow for a specified term. . . .

In the law of his consecration the Nazirite was bound by three provisions that became marks of his sanctity: (1) he must avoid wine, strong drink, and all “that is produced by the grapevine” (Num. 6:4); (2) for the duration of his separation his hair might not be cut; and (3) he must avoid the presence of the dead, even of his parents. . . .

. . . Like blood, hair symbolized the life of a person. Hair offerings as a form of self-dedication were common in the ancient Semitic cults and elsewhere.²

While writing this study, I reflected on my own call process. It was helpful to see the diversity of ways in which God deals with us. Each story is different.

It also was helpful to see how the hand of God moves among us in spite of our unfaithfulness. God does not abandon us. I have been comforted by that truth.

Finally, I was reminded in my study of Judges that God is working God’s purpose out. Israel interpreted their history in that light—and so do I.

As for me, the call came, and I agonized over my decision. Crazy things happened, and I accepted. Sounds like calls in the Bible to me. I hope so!

2. *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), s.v. “Nazirite.”

THE WRITER

Steven P. Eason was once the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in the tribe of Morganton, North Carolina. God called him from that tribe to journey south to the tribe of South Carolina to become the pastor of the Mount Pleasant Presbyterian Church. Like Gideon, he is not always sure that it is God talking to him. Like Deborah, his wife Catherine seems to always know when it is the Lord and exactly what needs to be done. Thank God for that!

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