THE BOOK OF JUDGES

The King Who Never Gives Up

Judges, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Never Gives Up: The Book of Judges, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” You may know a few stories from Judges. Gideon and his fleece. Samson and his hair. Maybe Deborah, if your church was good about telling the stories of women in the Bible. But you probably don’t know how dark and strange this book really is.

Judges is the Bible’s most honest book about what happens when people stop listening to God. It covers about three hundred years after Joshua, and it’s not a pretty picture. Israel turns away from God again and again. Each time, they get crushed by enemies. Each time, they cry out for help. And each time, God sends a rescuer, called a judge. But the rescuers get worse as the book goes on: brave at first, then hesitant, then reckless, then downright scary. By the end, Israel has sunk so low that it looks like the nations God drove out of the land.

So why read it? Because Judges is painfully realistic about human nature, including yours and mine. It shows how easy it is to drift, how quickly one generation can forget God, and what happens when everyone does what seems right to them. But it’s also a book about a God who never gives up on His people. Over and over, when they cry out, He answers. Even when they don’t deserve it. Especially when they don’t deserve it.

Fair warning: some of these stories are hard. We’ll handle them honestly and carefully. Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Judges in nine chapters: the downward cycle (Judges 1–2), Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar (3), Deborah, Barak, and Jael (4–5), Gideon (6–7), Gideon's drift and Abimelech (8–9), Jephthah (10–12), Samson's birth and early life (13–15), Samson and Delilah (16), and Israel's rock bottom (17–21). The darkest stories at the end are summarized briefly and without graphic detail.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Judges is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as what happened to Jephthah's daughter and whether Gideon was right to test God with a fleece, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. Judges includes violence and abuse. When it does, you'll find a box with a safety note. This book quotes Judges in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the seventh book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Judges raises questions teens will ask. I've presented the main views fairly on Gideon's fleece (whether it models seeking guidance or shows weak faith), and on Jephthah's vow, including the view that he literally sacrificed his daughter and the view that he dedicated her to lifelong celibate service at the tabernacle. Either way, the book notes that the text never endorses his vow, and that God's law forbids child sacrifice. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Judges contains some of the most violent and disturbing material in the Bible, including Ehud's assassination of Eglon, Jael's killing of Sisera, and, in chapters 17–21, the abuse and death of the Levite's concubine and the civil war that follows. These are handled carefully and age-appropriately, without graphic detail and without glorifying violence. The final chapter explains that the author included these stories as a warning of how far people fall without

God, and includes a clear safety box on abuse and sexual violence, pointing readers to trusted adults, RAINN (1-800-656-4673), Childhelp (1-800-422-4453), and 911. Other Real Talk boxes address peer pressure, insecurity, anger, revenge, and dating, and point to 988 where relevant.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees the flawed judges, and Israel's longing for a true king, fulfilled in Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers read Judges in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in Judges both the danger of drifting from God and the faithfulness of a God who never gives up on His people.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What's a Judge?

When you hear judge, you probably picture someone in a black robe in a courtroom. Some of Israel's judges, like Deborah, did settle disputes. But most were more like rescuers or military leaders, people God raised up to save Israel from enemies. The Hebrew word shophet can mean ruler, leader, or deliverer. The book calls them saviors too. There are twelve judges in the book, some with long stories and some with only a sentence or two.

Where It Fits

Judges comes right after Joshua. Joshua ends with Israel promising to serve the LORD. Judges opens with Joshua's death and shows how quickly that promise falls apart. The book covers the time between the conquest and the rise of Israel's kings, roughly the 1300s to the 1000s BC on the early dating, or the 1200s to the 1000s BC on the late dating. The book of Ruth takes place during this same period, and 1 Samuel picks up the story at the end of it.

The Cycle

Judges follows a pattern that repeats like a broken record. First, Israel does evil in the LORD's sight and worships other gods. Second, God hands them over to an enemy. Third, they cry out to God. Fourth, God raises up a judge who rescues them. Fifth, the land has rest, until the judge dies, and it starts all over again. But it's not

really a circle. It's a downward spiral. Each time around, things get worse.

Who Wrote Judges?

The book doesn't name its author. Jewish tradition says Samuel wrote it. The repeated phrase in those days there was no king in Israel suggests it was written after Israel had kings, looking back on the days before them. Many scholars think Judges was compiled from older stories and edited as part of a larger history running from Deuteronomy through Kings. Christians with different views agree that Judges is God's Word.

The World of the Judges

Israel in this era wasn't a unified nation. It was a loose group of tribes, each mostly looking after itself, scattered through the hill country. Around them were the Canaanites, who still controlled many cities, and other peoples who attacked them: the Moabites, Midianites, Ammonites, and especially the Philistines, who had iron weapons and powerful cities on the coast. The Canaanite religion, with its worship of Baal and Asherah, promised rain and good harvests, and it pulled at Israel constantly.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

Judges includes violence, war, a terrible vow, and abuse. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of what happens in it. Often the writer is showing us how wrong things have gone. When we come to these stories, you'll find a safety box. Here's what they say: abuse and violence are always wrong, it's never the victim's fault, and if something like it is happening to you or someone you know, tell a trusted adult. In the United States you can

call 911 in an emergency, call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, or call the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Judges 1–2): The downward spiral.

Chapter 2 (Judges 3): Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar.

Chapter 3 (Judges 4–5): Deborah, Barak, and Jael.

Chapter 4 (Judges 6–7): Gideon and the three hundred.

Chapter 5 (Judges 8–9): Gideon's drift and the bramble king.

Chapter 6 (Judges 10–12): Jephthah's vow.

Chapter 7 (Judges 13–15): Samson the strong.

Chapter 8 (Judges 16): Samson and Delilah.

Chapter 9 (Judges 17–21): No king in Israel.

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CHAPTER 1

The Downward Spiral

Judges 1–2

Judges opens with a question that sounds hopeful. "After the death of Joshua, the children of Israel asked of the LORD, saying, 'Who should go up for us first against the Canaanites, to fight against them?'" God answers: Judah. And at first, things go well. Judah wins battles. Caleb, now an old man, offers his daughter Achsah in marriage to whoever captures the town of Debir, and his nephew Othniel takes it. Achsah, by the way, is a great minor character; she boldly asks her father for springs of water to go with her land, and gets them.

But then chapter 1 turns into a long list of failures. Tribe after tribe doesn't finish the job. Benjamin doesn't drive out the people of Jerusalem. Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan all leave Canaanites living among them. "When Israel had grown strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, and didn't utterly drive them out." They made the Canaanites work for them instead. It looked like a good deal. It turned out to be a disaster.

> **REAL TALK** **Halfway Obedience**
>
> Israel didn't completely reject God. They obeyed partway. They took some land, made some compromises, and settled for less than what God had told them to do. Halfway obedience is still disobedience, and it usually leads to bigger problems later. It might look like quitting a bad habit except on

weekends, being honest except when it's inconvenient, or following Jesus except when your friends are around. The things you tolerate today can become the things that trap you tomorrow. Is there an area of your life where you're obeying God halfway?

In chapter 2, the angel of the LORD comes to Israel and confronts them. God had kept His promises. He had told them not to make covenants with the people of the land and to tear down their altars. They didn't listen. So God says He won't drive those nations out; instead, they'll be thorns in Israel's sides, and their gods will be a trap. The people weep, and they name the place Bokim, which means weepers. But their tears don't last.

Then comes one of the saddest verses in the Bible. Joshua's generation had seen God's miracles. "The people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua." But "after all that generation were gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who didn't know the LORD, nor the work which he had done for Israel."

REAL TALK **The Generation That Didn't Know**

How does a whole generation forget God in a single lifetime? Probably the same way it happens today. Parents assume their kids will just pick up their faith. Kids hear the stories but never make them their own. Life gets comfortable, other things crowd in, and nobody notices the drift until it's too late. You might be in the generation right now that decides whether faith continues in your family. That's a big responsibility, but it's also a big opportunity. Ask your parents and grandparents how they came to know God. Ask questions. Make your faith your own. The stories of what God has done aren't just your parents' stories. They can be yours too.

Notice that the problem began with forgetting. The new generation didn't know the LORD, nor the work He had done. They had heard

about the exodus, the wilderness, and Jericho, maybe. But those stories never became their own. Faith that's only borrowed from your parents usually doesn't survive the pressure of the culture around you. It has to be personal. That doesn't mean you have to have a dramatic experience. It means you need to know God for yourself, through His word, through prayer, and through walking with Him day by day.

The rest of chapter 2 is a preview of the whole book. It lays out the cycle that's going to repeat over and over. First, "the children of Israel did that which was evil in the LORD's sight, and served the Baals." They abandoned God and followed the gods of the nations around them. Second, God was angry and handed them over to raiders and enemies. Third, they were in terrible distress. Fourth, "the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them." And God did it out of compassion: "for it grieved the LORD because of their groaning by reason of those who oppressed them and troubled them." Fifth, the judge died, and things got worse. "But when the judge was dead, they turned back, and dealt more corruptly than their fathers."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Baal and Asherah**

Baal was the most important god of the Canaanites, a storm god believed to bring rain and make crops grow. In a land where everything depended on rain, worshiping Baal must have seemed practical, like buying insurance. Asherah was a mother goddess, often worshiped with wooden poles or trees set up near altars. Canaanite worship sometimes included practices the Bible condemns, including ritual prostitution and, in some cases, child sacrifice. Archaeologists have found many small statues of Baal and Asherah throughout ancient Israel, showing just how common it was for Israelites to mix the worship of these gods with the worship of the LORD.

REAL TALK **Modern Baals**

Nobody you know probably bows down to a statue of Baal. But the temptation behind Baal worship is still around. Baal promised what people wanted most: rain, food, security, success. Today, people look for those things in money, popularity, appearance, achievement, relationships, or even their phones. None of those things are evil. But when they become what you trust to make your life work, they become your Baal. The question isn't whether you have idols. It's which ones. What do you look to for security when you're scared? What would you be devastated to lose?

There's one more thing to notice in this chapter. God left some of the nations in the land for a reason. Judges 3 explains that He used them to test Israel, and to teach the new generation, who had never fought, how to trust Him in battle. The enemies weren't just a punishment. They were also a classroom. That's often true of the hard things in your life too. God doesn't cause every difficulty, but He can use the struggles you face, the people who oppose you, and the temptations that pull at you to teach you to depend on Him. The question is whether you'll learn the lesson or repeat the cycle.

So Judges isn't just a collection of hero stories. It's a story about a pattern, and it's one you might recognize. You mess up, things fall apart, you cry out to God, He helps you, and then you slowly drift away again. The good news is that God's patience in Judges is astonishing. The bad news is that the spiral keeps going down. Judges wants you to see where it leads, so you can break the cycle.

KEY VERSE

When the LORD raised up judges for them, then the LORD was with the judge, and saved them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for it grieved the LORD because of their groaning by reason of those who oppressed them and troubled them.

Judges 2:18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Israel settled for halfway obedience?
2. How could a whole generation grow up without knowing God? What could prevent that?
3. Do you recognize the cycle of Judges in your own life? Where?
4. What are the modern Baals that pull at you?

TRY THIS *Ask a parent, grandparent, or older Christian to tell you the story of how they came to know God. Write it down. Then write a paragraph about where you are in your own story.*

CHAPTER 2

The Left-Handed Rescuer

Judges 3

Chapter 3 introduces the first three judges, and they're a great place to start.

The first is Othniel, Caleb's nephew, the one who captured Debir in chapter 1. The cycle begins: Israel does evil, forgets God, and serves the Baals and the Asherahs. God hands them over to a king from Mesopotamia for eight years. "When the children of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a savior to the children of Israel, who saved them, even Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother." Then: "The LORD's Spirit came on him, and he judged Israel." Othniel wins, and the land has rest for forty years. His story is short and clean, a model of what a judge should be. It's the last time anything in Judges is that simple.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Spirit of the LORD**
>
> In Judges, the phrase the LORD's Spirit came on him appears several times, with Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. It describes God's power coming on a person for a specific task, usually a battle or a rescue. It didn't mean the person was perfect or even especially godly; Samson and Jephthah certainly weren't. In the Old Testament, the Spirit usually came on certain people for certain jobs, and could leave. Joel later prophesied a day when God would pour out His Spirit on all His people, young and old, men and women (Joel 2:28–29), and Peter said that happened at Pentecost (Acts 2).

Then Israel does evil again, and God strengthens Eglon, king of Moab, against them. Eglon takes the city of palms, Jericho, and rules Israel for eighteen years. When they cry out, God raises up a surprising rescuer. "Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man." That detail matters. In the ancient world, being left-handed was unusual and often seen as a weakness. Ironically, the name Benjamin means son of the right hand.

Ehud is chosen to bring Israel's tribute payment to Eglon. Before he goes, he makes a short double-edged sword and straps it to his right thigh under his clothes. A guard checking for weapons would search the left side, where a right-handed man would carry a sword. Nobody expected the lefty.

> **REAL TALK** **Different Is Not Less**
>
> Ehud was different. Left-handed people were often viewed with suspicion in the ancient world, and that hasn't completely disappeared; some kids today still get teased for being left-handed, or for anything that makes them stand out. But God used the very thing that made Ehud different. Paul wrote, "God chose the weak things of the world that he might put to shame the things that are strong." Maybe you feel different from everybody else, because of how you look, how you learn, a disability, where your family is from, or what you're into. You're not less. God made you on purpose, and He can use the very things that make you unique.

Ehud presents the tribute, leaves, and then turns back. He tells the king he has a secret message for him, and Eglon sends all his attendants out of the room. Ehud says, I have a message from God for you, and then he kills the king with his hidden sword. The Bible tells the story in a way that's darkly comic in places: Eglon was very fat, the servants think the king is using the toilet and wait outside the locked door until they're embarrassed, and Ehud escapes while they're waiting. Then Ehud rallies Israel, and they defeat Moab. "So

Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. Then the land had rest eighty years."

> **REAL TALK** **Is Ehud's Story Okay?**
>
> Ehud's story is told with gritty humor, the way ancient people told stories about defeating cruel tyrants. Eglon had oppressed Israel for eighteen years, and the original audience would have cheered when he fell, a bit like people celebrating the end of a dictator. But it's important to be clear: the Bible is describing a specific act of war in a violent era, not giving anyone permission to hurt someone they think is evil. Judges records many things it doesn't recommend. Violence is never a way to solve problems at school, at home, or online. If you're being bullied or oppressed, or feel so angry you might hurt someone, talk to a trusted adult right away. If you or anyone else is in danger, call 911.

Notice the pattern in Ehud's story. God raised up a savior when the people cried out. He used an unlikely person with an unexpected weapon. And the victory was followed by eighty years of peace, the longest rest in the whole book. Those eighty years probably meant that two or three generations grew up without war. It's a glimpse of what God wanted for His people all along: not constant crisis, but peace, safety, and rest. Sadly, it didn't last, because the people forgot the God who gave it to them.

The chapter ends with a single verse about the third judge. "After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck six hundred men of the Philistines with an ox goad. He also saved Israel." An ox goad was a long stick with a pointed metal tip, used for driving cattle. Shamgar fought with the tool he had. He's mentioned again in the Song of Deborah, which describes how in his days the roads were empty, because travelers were afraid to use them. Interestingly, his name, son of Anath, may connect him to a Canaanite goddess,

which might mean he wasn't even an Israelite. God used whoever He chose, with whatever was in their hands.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Minor Judges**

Shamgar is the first of several judges who get only a verse or two: Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon also appear briefly, in chapters 10 and 12. We know almost nothing about them except how long they led, and some quirky details, like Jair having thirty sons who rode thirty donkeys, and Abdon having forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode seventy donkeys. Their stories remind us that not every faithful person gets a famous story. Many people serve God quietly, and they still matter to Him.

REAL TALK **Crying Out**

In every story in this chapter, the turning point is the same: the people cried to the LORD. They didn't fix themselves. They didn't come up with a plan. They admitted they were in trouble and asked God for help. That's often the hardest step, especially if you're used to handling things on your own or don't want anyone to know you're struggling. But God responds to honest cries for help. If you're in a hard place right now, you can cry out to Him, in your own words, right now. And it's okay to cry out to people too: a parent, a friend, a counselor. Asking for help is how rescue begins.

KEY VERSE

When the children of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a savior to the children of Israel, who saved them, even Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.

Judges 3:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Othniel's story is so short and simple compared with the later judges?
2. Ehud's difference became his advantage. How could something that makes you different become a strength?
3. How should Christians read violent stories like Ehud's?
4. Shamgar used what was in his hands. What's in your hands that God could use?

TRY THIS *Make a list of five things that make you different from most people you know. Next to each one, write a way God could use it.*

CHAPTER 3

Deborah, Barak, and Jael

Judges 4–5

After Ehud dies, Israel does evil again, and God hands them over to Jabin, a Canaanite king who rules from Hazor. His army commander, Sisera, has nine hundred iron chariots, the ancient equivalent of tanks, and he cruelly oppresses Israel for twenty years.

Then we meet one of the most remarkable leaders in the Old Testament. "Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, judged Israel at that time. She lived under Deborah's palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment." She's a prophet, a judge, and the leader of Israel, settling disputes for the whole nation under a palm tree that's named after her.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Deborah the Leader**
>
> Deborah is the only judge in the book described as settling legal cases, and the only one also called a prophet. She's one of several women in the Old Testament called prophets, along with Miriam, Huldah, and others. Christians today have different views about the roles of women and men in church leadership, and those conversations deserve care and respect. But all agree on this: God called Deborah to lead Israel at a crucial moment, and He used her powerfully. Her story shows that God's calling isn't limited by what people expect.

Deborah summons a man named Barak and gives him God's command: take ten thousand men to Mount Tabor, and God will draw Sisera and his chariots to the Kishon River and hand them over to you. Barak's answer isn't exactly heroic. "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." Deborah agrees, but with a twist. "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the journey that you take won't be for your honor; for the LORD will sell Sisera into a woman's hand." You might assume she means herself. She doesn't.

> **REAL TALK** **Needing Someone With You**
>
> Barak wouldn't go without Deborah. Some readers see that as weak faith. Others see it as wisdom: he knew God was speaking through her, and he wanted the prophet with him. Either way, it's okay to need people. Sometimes you need someone to go with you: to the doctor, to a hard conversation, to youth group for the first time, or to talk to a counselor. Asking for support isn't a sign that you don't trust God. Often it's how He helps you. Notice that Barak still made it into Hebrews 11's list of people of faith.

On the day of battle, Deborah tells Barak, "Go; for this is the day in which the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand. Hasn't the LORD gone out before you?" Barak charges down Mount Tabor with ten thousand men, and God throws Sisera's army into a panic. The song in chapter 5 suggests that a sudden storm turned the river into a flood and the valley into mud, so the iron chariots got stuck. Sisera jumps out of his chariot and runs away on foot.

He runs to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Her clan had made peace with King Jabin, so Sisera thinks he's safe. Jael invites him in, covers him with a blanket, and gives him milk when he asks for water. He tells her to stand at the entrance and say no one is there if anyone asks. Then he falls asleep, exhausted. While

he sleeps, Jael takes a tent peg and a hammer and kills him. When Barak arrives, chasing Sisera, Jael shows him the enemy commander, dead in her tent. Deborah's prophecy has come true: the honor went to a woman.

> **REAL TALK** **Jael and Violence**
>
> Jael's story is hard to read. She broke the ancient rules of hospitality by killing a guest in her tent. Deborah's song praises her as most blessed of women, because she ended the life of a commander who had cruelly oppressed Israel for twenty years, and in that era her act was seen as part of the war. Some readers also point out that Sisera's army had a reputation for taking women as captives (Judges 5:30), so Jael may have been protecting herself and others. But the Bible isn't telling us that deceiving and killing someone is a good way to handle an enemy. It's recording a brutal moment in a brutal war. Jesus calls His followers to a different way: to love enemies and to seek peace. If you're ever afraid of someone, or feel trapped with someone dangerous, get help from a trusted adult or call 911.

It's worth pausing on how many unexpected people God uses in this story. Deborah, a woman, leads the nation. Barak, a hesitant general, wins the battle. Jael, a foreign woman from a clan that had made peace with the enemy, finishes it. Even the weather fights for Israel. Nobody in the story is the kind of hero ancient people expected, a mighty king with a powerful army. That's the point. The victory belongs to God, and He chooses whoever He wants to accomplish it, including the people others overlook.

Chapter 5 is the Song of Deborah, one of the oldest poems in the Bible. Many scholars think it may date to soon after the battle. It retells the story in poetry, full of energy and emotion. "Hear, you kings! Give ear, you princes! I, even I, will sing to the LORD." It describes how bad things were before: roads were empty, villages were abandoned. "The rulers ceased in Israel. They ceased until I,

Deborah, arose; Until I arose a mother in Israel." It praises the tribes that came to fight, and scolds those that stayed home. It describes the battle as if all creation joined in. "From the sky the stars fought. From their courses, they fought against Sisera."

The song ends with a heartbreaking picture: Sisera's mother, looking out her window, wondering why her son's chariot is so late, while her ladies-in-waiting assure her he's just dividing the plunder. It's a reminder that every war leaves grieving families on both sides. Then the final line: "So let all your enemies perish, LORD, but let those who love him be as the sun when it rises in its strength."

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Ancient Song**

The Song of Deborah is written in very old Hebrew, with unusual words and grammar similar to other ancient Near Eastern poetry. Many scholars, even skeptical ones, think it may be one of the oldest texts in the Bible, possibly from the 1100s BC. It's an important source for historians studying early Israel, because it names ten tribes and describes them as a loose alliance, some of which came to help and some of which didn't. Songs like this were probably sung for generations before being written down, the way communities today pass down stories through music.

REAL TALK **Showing Up**

The Song of Deborah calls out the tribes that didn't show up for the battle. Reuben had great discussions but stayed with the sheep. Dan stayed by the ships. Asher sat by the seashore. Meanwhile, Zebulun and Naphtali risked their lives. It's easy to talk about doing the right thing and never actually do it. When a friend needs help, when your church needs volunteers, when someone at school needs someone to stand with them, are you the one who shows up, or the one who has great discussions and stays home?

KEY VERSE

So let all your enemies perish, LORD, but let those who love him be as the sun when it rises in its strength.

Judges 5:31 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What do you admire about Deborah as a leader?
2. Was Barak's request for Deborah to come with him weak faith or wisdom? Why?
3. How should Christians understand the violence in Jael's story?
4. When have you stayed home when you should have shown up?

TRY THIS *Write a short song, poem, or rap about something God has done for you or your family, like Deborah did. Share it with someone, even if it feels awkward.*

CHAPTER 4

Gideon and the Three Hundred

Judges 6–7

The cycle turns again. "The children of Israel did that which was evil in the LORD's sight, so the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years." The Midianites were desert raiders. Every harvest season, they swept in with their camels, so many that they couldn't be counted, like a swarm of locusts. They stripped the fields, took the livestock, and left nothing to eat. Israelites hid in caves and mountain strongholds. "Israel was brought very low because of Midian; and the children of Israel cried to the LORD."

This time, before sending a rescuer, God sends a prophet to remind them why this is happening: I brought you out of Egypt, I told you not to worship the gods of the Amorites, and you didn't listen. Then the angel of the LORD shows up in the most unlikely place. "His son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites." Normally you'd thresh wheat on an open hilltop, where the wind could blow away the chaff. Gideon is doing it in a pit, hiding.

And the angel greets him with words that must have sounded like a joke. "The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!" Gideon's answer is honest and a little bitter. "Oh, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? Where are all his wondrous works which our fathers told us of?"

REAL TALK **Where Is God?**

Gideon asked the question a lot of people ask: if God is real and good, why is life so hard? He'd heard the stories of the exodus, but he'd never seen God do anything like that. Maybe you've felt the same way, especially if you've been through something painful: a divorce, a death, an illness, bullying, or loneliness. Notice that God didn't scold Gideon for asking. He answered by calling him to be part of the solution. Honest questions aren't the opposite of faith. They're often where real faith begins. Bring your hard questions to God, and to people you trust.

God doesn't answer the why question directly. Instead, He says, "Go in this your might, and save Israel from the hand of Midian. Haven't I sent you?" And Gideon says what lots of people say when God calls them. "O Lord, how shall I save Israel? Behold, my family is the poorest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." God's answer is the same one He gave Moses and Joshua. "Surely I will be with you."

REAL TALK **Mighty Man of Valor?**

God called Gideon a mighty man of valor while he was hiding in a winepress. God saw something in Gideon that Gideon couldn't see in himself. You might feel like the least important person in your family, your school, or your friend group. You might think you're the last person God would use. That's exactly the kind of person God loves to choose. He doesn't call the qualified; He qualifies the called. What God says about you is more true than what you feel about yourself.

Gideon asks for a sign, and when the angel touches his offering with a staff, fire springs from the rock and consumes it. Terrified, Gideon builds an altar and calls it "The LORD is Peace." Then God gives him his first assignment, and it's close to home. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and the Asherah pole beside it, and build an altar to the LORD. Gideon obeys, but he does it at night, because he's afraid of

his family and the townspeople. The next morning, the town is furious and wants to kill him. His father, Joash, defends him in a clever way: if Baal is a god, let him defend himself. So Gideon gets a nickname, Jerub-Baal, which means let Baal contend.

Then the Midianites gather in the Valley of Jezreel, and "the LORD's Spirit came on Gideon." He blows a trumpet and summons the tribes. But he's still unsure. So he asks God for a sign. "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have spoken, behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I'll know." The next morning, the fleece is so wet he wrings out a bowl full of water, and the ground is dry. But that's not enough. Gideon asks again. "Don't let your anger be kindled against me, and I will speak but this once. Please let me make a trial just this once with the fleece. Let it now be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew." And "God did so that night."

REAL TALK **Putting Out a Fleece**

Some Christians talk about putting out a fleece, asking God for a sign to help them make a decision. Is that a good idea? Christians see Gideon's fleece in different ways. Some think it shows weak faith; God had already told Gideon clearly what He would do, and Gideon was testing Him rather than trusting Him. Deuteronomy says, "You shall not tempt the LORD your God," and Jesus quoted that when the devil tempted Him. Others see it as a sincere, humble request from a frightened man, and note that God graciously answered without rebuking him. Either way, there's a difference between testing God and seeking wisdom. Testing God is demanding proof before you'll obey what He's already made clear. Seeking wisdom is asking for guidance when you honestly don't know what to do. For that, God gives us better tools than fleeces: Scripture, prayer, the Holy Spirit, and wise counsel from other believers. "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

Gideon gathers thirty-two thousand men. They're facing an army that's like locusts in number. And God says something surprising: you have too many. "The people who are with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel brag against me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'" So Gideon tells anyone who's afraid to go home. Twenty-two thousand leave. Ten thousand remain. Still too many. God has Gideon take the men down to the water to drink. Most kneel down and drink directly from the water. Three hundred scoop up water with their hands and lap it like dogs. "I will save you by the three hundred men who lapped."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why the Lappers?**

Why did God choose the men who lapped water from their hands? Some interpreters think it showed alertness: they could watch for danger while drinking, instead of putting their faces down in the water. Others think it was simply a random way to cut the army down, with no special meaning; the point was that God would win with a tiny force. Either way, the lesson is clear. The victory would belong to God, not to Israel's numbers. Three hundred against an army too big to count.

That night, God tells Gideon to attack. But He knows Gideon is still afraid, so He gives him one more encouragement. Sneak down to the enemy camp with your servant and listen. Gideon overhears a Midianite soldier telling a friend about a dream: a round loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp and knocked a tent flat. His friend says, that's the sword of Gideon! God has given Midian into his hand. Gideon worships right there, then runs back to his men and says, get up!

The battle plan is as strange as Jericho's. Gideon divides the three hundred into three groups and gives each man a trumpet and an empty clay jar with a torch inside. In the middle of the night, they

surround the enemy camp. At Gideon's signal, "The three companies blew the trumpets, broke the pitchers, and held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands with which to blow; and they shouted, 'The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!'" The sudden noise and light throw the camp into panic. In the confusion, the Midianites turn their swords on each other and flee.

REAL TALK **Fewer Is Fine**

God cut Gideon's army from thirty-two thousand to three hundred, so everyone would know the victory was His. Sometimes God works the same way in your life. You might feel like you don't have enough: enough friends, enough talent, enough money, enough confidence. Paul said God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." When you're weak, God's strength shows up more clearly. That doesn't mean you shouldn't prepare or work hard. It means you don't have to wait until you feel strong enough to obey.

KEY VERSE

The LORD said to Gideon, "I will save you by the three hundred men who lapped, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the other people go, each to his own place."

Judges 7:7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Gideon asked, if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened? Have you ever asked a question like that?
2. Why do you think God called Gideon a mighty man of valor when he was hiding?
3. What's the difference between testing God and seeking wisdom? Which have you done?
4. Why do you think God wanted to win with only three hundred men?

TRY THIS *Write down a decision you're facing. Instead of asking for a sign, use James 1:5: pray for wisdom, look for what Scripture says, and ask two wise people for advice. Write down what you learn.*

CHAPTER 5

Gideon's Drift and the Bramble King

Judges 8–9

After the victory, Gideon chases the fleeing Midianite kings across the Jordan. His exhausted men ask the towns of Succoth and Penuel for bread, and the town leaders mock them and refuse. After Gideon captures the kings, he comes back and punishes both towns harshly. The humble farmer from the winepress is starting to change.

Gideon's victory is remembered for centuries. The psalms and prophets refer back to the day of Midian as a picture of God rescuing His people against impossible odds (Psalm 83:9–11; Isaiah 9:4). Isaiah even uses it in his famous prophecy of the coming king: the day of Midian is mentioned just before the words a child is born to us. The God who broke the yoke of Midian through three hundred men would one day break every yoke through one child.

Then the people offer him something huge. "Rule over us, both you, your son, and your son's son also; for you have saved us out of the hand of Midian." They want him to be king and start a dynasty. And Gideon gives the right answer. "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. The LORD shall rule over you."

It's a great moment. But then Gideon asks for something. He asks each man to give him a gold earring from the plunder. They pile up about forty-three pounds of gold, along with other treasures. And Gideon makes an ephod, a priestly garment, and puts it in his hometown. "Then all Israel played the prostitute with it there; and it became a snare to Gideon and to his house."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gideon's Ephod**

An ephod was a special garment worn by the high priest, connected with asking God for guidance. We don't know exactly why Gideon made one. Maybe he wanted a way to keep hearing from God, after his experiences with signs and the fleece. Maybe he meant it as a memorial of the victory. But it wasn't at the tabernacle, it wasn't authorized by God, and the people began worshiping it as an idol. Whatever Gideon intended, it led Israel away from God. It's a sad echo of Aaron's golden calf, which was also made from the people's gold earrings (Exodus 32).

REAL TALK **Drifting After a Win**

Gideon's biggest danger came after his biggest victory. He said the right things about God ruling, but he started living like a king anyway. He took the gold, made the ephod, had many wives, and even named one of his sons Abimelech, which means my father is king. Drifting doesn't usually happen after a failure. It often happens after success. You make the team, get the grades, win the award, get the attention, and slowly start trusting yourself instead of God. The best protection is to stay humble, stay grateful, and keep the people around you who will tell you the truth.

Gideon has seventy sons from his many wives, plus one more son, Abimelech, by a concubine from Shechem. As soon as Gideon dies, Israel goes right back to worshiping Baal. "The children of Israel didn't remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them out of the hand of all their enemies on every side." And Abimelech grabs for the power his father turned down.

Abimelech goes to his mother's relatives in Shechem and asks, which is better: to be ruled by seventy men, or by one? And remember, I'm your relative. They give him money from the temple of Baal, and he hires reckless men to follow him. Then he goes to his father's house and murders his seventy half-brothers. Only the youngest, Jotham, escapes by hiding. The people of Shechem crown Abimelech king.

Then Jotham does something brave. He climbs Mount Gerizim, right above Shechem, and shouts down a fable to the people. It's one of the only fables in the Bible. "The trees set out to anoint a king over themselves. They said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.'" But the olive tree says, should I give up my oil, which honors gods and people, just to sway over the trees? So they ask the fig tree, which says, should I give up my sweet fruit? Then the vine, which says, should I give up my wine, which cheers gods and people? Finally, they ask the bramble, a thornbush. And the bramble says, "If in truth you anoint me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jotham's Fable**

The point of Jotham's fable is sharp. The good trees, the olive, fig, and vine, are too busy being useful to want to rule. The only one who wants the job is the bramble, a worthless thornbush that offers no shade and catches fire easily, spreading destruction. That's Abimelech: useless, dangerous, and hungry for power. Jotham warns that if the people have acted wrongly, fire will come out of Abimelech and destroy them, and fire will come out of them and destroy Abimelech. Then Jotham runs for his life.

REAL TALK **Who Wants Power?**

Jotham's fable has a lesson for any group: be careful about people who want power too badly. The best leaders are often busy serving and aren't grabbing

for position. The worst often want the title more than the work. That's true in student government, sports teams, friend groups, and even churches. It's also a question for you. Why do you want to lead? To serve others, or to be noticed? Jesus said the greatest among His followers would be the servant of all, and He showed it: "even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jotham's warning comes true. After three years, God sends a spirit of conflict between Abimelech and the people of Shechem. They turn on him, and he destroys their city and burns a tower where a thousand people are hiding. Then he attacks the town of Thebez. When he goes up to burn its tower, a woman drops a millstone from the top and cracks his skull. Mortally wounded and embarrassed that a woman has defeated him, he orders his armor-bearer to finish him off. "Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he did to his father in killing his seventy brothers." The bramble king burned out.

SAFETY NOTE **Violence in Families**

Abimelech murdered his own brothers to get power. Violence in families is still real today. If someone in your family is threatening you, hurting you, or making you feel unsafe, it's never your fault, and you don't have to keep it a secret. Tell a trusted adult, like a teacher, school counselor, pastor, or relative. In the United States you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453. If you're in danger right now, call 911.

KEY VERSE

Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. The LORD shall rule over you."

Judges 8:23 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Gideon said the right words but drifted anyway. Why do you think that happened?
2. Why can success be more dangerous to faith than failure?
3. What's the point of Jotham's fable? Can you think of a modern example?
4. Why do you want to lead, or not lead? What would make you a good leader?

TRY THIS *Write your own fable, like Jotham's, about a lesson you've learned. Use animals, plants, or objects as the characters. Share it with a friend or sibling.*

CHAPTER 6

Jephthah's Rash Vow

Judges 10–12

After two minor judges, Tola and Jair, the cycle hits a new low. "The children of Israel again did that which was evil in the LORD's sight, and served the Baals, the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines." They aren't just worshiping one false god anymore. They're collecting them. God hands them over to the Philistines and the Ammonites, who crush them for eighteen years.

When Israel cries out this time, God's response is startling. Didn't I rescue you from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, and more? Yet you've abandoned Me. Go and cry out to the gods you've chosen. Let them save you. The people answer, "We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems good to you; only deliver us, please, today." And they actually throw away their foreign gods. Then comes one of the most moving lines in Judges. "They put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD; and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel."

> **REAL TALK** **God's Grief**
>
> Judges 10:16 shows us God's heart. Even after Israel had abandoned Him over and over, He couldn't bear to watch them suffer. That doesn't mean God is weak or that He doesn't care about sin. It means His love goes deeper than His anger. If you've been running from God, you might think He's just waiting

to punish you. The truth is, He grieves your suffering, and He's waiting for you to come back. You don't have to clean yourself up first. Just turn around.

This exchange between God and Israel is unusual. God's first answer sounds like a refusal: go to your other gods. But it works like a test. Would Israel actually turn from their idols, or just ask for help and keep them? This time, they don't just say sorry. They get rid of the foreign gods and start serving the LORD. Real repentance isn't only saying the right words. It's turning around and changing what you do. And when they do, God's heart is moved.

The Ammonite army gathers to attack the region of Gilead, east of the Jordan, and the leaders of Gilead are desperate for a commander. They think of Jephthah. "Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor. He was the son of a prostitute." His half-brothers had driven him out of the family so he wouldn't share their inheritance. He'd gone to live in the land of Tob, where a gang of rough men gathered around him. Now the same people who rejected him come begging for help. Jephthah asks the obvious question: didn't you hate me and drive me out? Why come to me now that you're in trouble? But he agrees to lead them, on the condition that he becomes their head.

REAL TALK **Rejected by Family**

Jephthah was rejected by his own brothers because of who his mother was. That kind of rejection leaves deep wounds. Maybe you've felt it: left out because of your family situation, treated differently than your siblings, or rejected because of something you couldn't control. God used Jephthah anyway. And the story shows something else: pain from rejection can shape us in ways that aren't healthy, like always needing to prove ourselves. If you're carrying hurt from family rejection, talk to someone you trust. A counselor, pastor, or trusted adult can help you heal. You're not defined by who rejected you.

Jephthah starts with diplomacy. He sends messengers to the Ammonite king with a detailed history lesson, explaining that Israel took this land from the Amorites three hundred years earlier, not from Ammon. The king ignores him. Then "the LORD's Spirit came on Jephthah," and he prepares for battle. And then he does something no one asked him to do. "Jephthah vowed a vow to the LORD, and said, 'If you will indeed deliver the children of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be, that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, it shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.'"

God gives Israel a decisive victory. Jephthah comes home. And the first one out the door to meet him, dancing with tambourines, is his daughter, his only child. "When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, 'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are one of those who trouble me; for I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I can't go back.'"

His daughter responds with remarkable courage. She tells him to do what he promised, but asks for two months to go to the mountains with her friends "and bewail my virginity." She does. Then, "at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed. She was a virgin. It became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went yearly to celebrate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year."

> **REAL TALK** **What Happened to Jephthah's Daughter?**
>
> This is one of the hardest stories in the Bible, and Christians and Jewish readers have understood it in two main ways. The first view is that Jephthah literally sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering, as his vow said. Supporters

note that the vow specifically mentions a burnt offering, that the text says he did according to his vow, and that the story fits the dark direction of Judges, where Israel is becoming like the Canaanites, who practiced child sacrifice. The second view is that Jephthah dedicated his daughter to lifelong service to God at the tabernacle, where she would never marry or have children. Supporters note that the Hebrew can be read as it shall be the LORD's, or I will offer it up, that her mourning focuses on her virginity rather than her death, that the text emphasizes she was a virgin, and that women served at the entrance of the tabernacle (Exodus 38:8; 1 Samuel 2:22). Both views agree on what matters most. The text never says God wanted or approved of Jephthah's vow. God never asked for it. God's law clearly forbids child sacrifice, which He calls detestable (Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:31), and He provided ways to be released from a rash vow (Leviticus 27). Jephthah's vow was a terrible mistake by a man who didn't know God's word well enough. Hebrews 11 commends his faith in fighting for Israel, not this vow.

REAL TALK **Rash Promises**

Jephthah made a promise to God that he didn't need to make, without thinking about what it could cost. Maybe you've made a rash promise too: to God, to a friend, or to yourself, in a moment of fear or excitement. Ecclesiastes says, "It is better that you should not vow, than that you should vow and not pay." God doesn't need you to bargain with Him. He's not a vending machine you have to bribe. If you've made a promise that would require you to do something wrong or harmful, don't keep it. Talk to a pastor or trusted adult. Keeping a promise is never more important than doing what's right.

Jephthah's story ends badly too. The tribe of Ephraim is angry that he didn't invite them to the battle, and they threaten to burn his house down. Jephthah fights them, and his men guard the crossings of the Jordan. When fleeing Ephraimites try to cross, they're told to say the word Shibboleth. Ephraimites pronounced it Sibboleth, and the slip gave them away. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites die. Israel

is now fighting itself. Jephthah judges Israel for six years, then dies. Three more minor judges, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon, follow.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shibboleth**

The word shibboleth means an ear of grain, or a stream. The Ephraimites' accent gave them away when they couldn't pronounce the sh sound. Today, shibboleth has become an English word meaning a password, a custom, or a way of speaking that shows which group someone belongs to. It's a sad origin for a word. It came from a moment when Israelites were using accents to identify and kill other Israelites. Judges is showing how far things have fallen: the tribes of God's people are turning on each other.

KEY VERSE

They put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD; and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.

Judges 10:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What does Judges 10:16 tell you about God's heart?
2. How do you think Jephthah's rejection by his family shaped him?
3. Which view of Jephthah's daughter seems more convincing to you, and why? What do both views agree on?
4. Have you ever made a rash promise? What happened?

TRY THIS *Read Leviticus 27:1–8 and Deuteronomy 12:31. Write a paragraph about what Jephthah could have done differently if he had known God's word better.*

CHAPTER 7

Samson the Strong

Judges 13–15

The cycle turns one more time. Israel does evil, and God hands them over to the Philistines for forty years. But this time, something is different. Israel doesn't even cry out. They seem to have gotten used to being ruled by the Philistines. God sends a rescuer anyway, before anyone asks.

The story begins with a couple from the tribe of Dan, Manoah and his wife, who can't have children. The Bible never tells us her name. The angel of the LORD appears to her with a promise. "See now, you are barren and childless; but you shall conceive and bear a son." But there are special instructions. She must not drink wine or eat anything unclean, "for, behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son. No razor shall come on his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb. He shall begin to save Israel out of the hand of the Philistines."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Nazirite Vow**
>
> A Nazirite was someone set apart to God in a special way, described in Numbers 6. A Nazirite didn't drink wine or eat anything from grapes, didn't cut his hair, and didn't touch dead bodies. Usually it was a voluntary vow for a limited time. Samson was different. He was a Nazirite from birth to death, chosen by God before he was born, like Samuel and possibly John the

Baptist. His uncut hair was the visible sign of his dedication to God. As we'll see, Samson broke almost every part of the vow.

Manoah wants to hear the message for himself, and the angel returns. Manoah asks his name, and the angel answers, "Why do you ask about my name, since it is incomprehensible?" Other translations say it is wonderful, the same word used for the coming king in Isaiah 9:6, whose name would be called Wonderful Counselor. When Manoah offers a sacrifice, the angel rises toward heaven in the flame. Manoah panics, sure they'll die because they've seen God, but his wife calmly points out that if God wanted to kill them, He wouldn't have accepted their offering or told them all this. She's the sensible one.

"The woman bore a son and named him Samson. The child grew, and the LORD blessed him. The LORD's Spirit began to move him." Samson's name probably comes from the Hebrew word for sun, which is interesting, because he'll end his life in darkness.

REAL TALK **Set Apart From the Start**

Samson was set apart for God before he was born. In a sense, every Christian is too. Paul says God chose us before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), and David says God knit him together in his mother's womb (Psalm 139:13). You didn't happen by accident. God made you with a purpose, and He wants your whole life to belong to Him. That's a privilege. It's also a responsibility. Samson's story shows what happens when someone with an amazing calling treats it carelessly.

As a young man, Samson goes down to the Philistine town of Timnah and sees a Philistine woman. He comes home and tells his parents, get her for me as my wife. They're horrified. Isn't there a woman among our own people? Why do you have to marry one of the uncircumcised Philistines? But Samson insists, she looks right to

me. That phrase, right in his eyes, will echo all the way to the end of the book. The narrator adds a surprising note: this was from the LORD, who was looking for an opportunity to confront the Philistines. God was working even through Samson's selfish choices.

On the way to Timnah, a young lion attacks Samson. "The LORD's Spirit came mightily on him, and he tore him as he would have torn a young goat with his bare hands, but he didn't tell his father or his mother what he had done." Later, he finds bees and honey in the lion's carcass, scoops some out, eats it, and gives some to his parents, without telling them where it came from. As a Nazirite, he wasn't supposed to touch a dead body. Samson didn't seem to care.

At the wedding feast, a seven-day party, Samson tells the thirty Philistine groomsmen a riddle about the lion and the honey, with a bet of thirty sets of clothes. They can't solve it, so they threaten to burn his new wife and her family unless she gets the answer. She cries and nags him for days until he tells her, and she tells them. Samson is furious. "The LORD's Spirit came mightily on him, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck thirty men of them." He takes their clothes to pay the bet, and storms home.

REAL TALK **Strength Without Self-Control**

Samson had incredible physical strength, but almost no self-control. He did what he wanted, when he wanted, with whoever he wanted, and he lashed out whenever he was angry. That's a dangerous combination. Strength isn't just about muscles. It's also about how you handle your emotions, your desires, and your anger. Proverbs says someone who controls their temper is better than a mighty warrior (Proverbs 16:32). If anger is a problem for you, if you find yourself exploding, breaking things, or hurting people, that's worth talking to a trusted adult or counselor about. Learning to handle anger is real strength.

The cycle of revenge escalates. When Samson comes back for his wife, her father has given her to someone else. In revenge, Samson catches three hundred foxes, ties torches to their tails, and sets the Philistines' grain fields, vineyards, and olive groves on fire. The Philistines retaliate by burning his wife and her father to death. Samson retaliates by slaughtering many of them. The Philistines come after Judah to capture him. And here's a sad detail: three thousand men of Judah come to tie Samson up and hand him over to the Philistines, saying, don't you know the Philistines rule over us? Israel has become so used to oppression that they'd rather hand over their own rescuer than fight.

Samson lets them tie him up. But when the Philistines come shouting toward him, the Spirit comes on him, and the ropes melt off his arms like burned flax. "He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, put out his hand, took it, and struck a thousand men with it." Then he makes up a little song about it. "With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps on heaps; with the jawbone of a donkey I have struck a thousand men." Notice what's missing: God. Samson takes all the credit. Afterward he's desperately thirsty and cries out to God, and God splits open a hollow place in the ground, and water comes out. Samson judges Israel for twenty years.

REAL TALK **The Revenge Cycle**

Samson's story is a cycle of revenge. They cheated him, so he struck back. They struck back harder, so he struck back harder. Nobody ever won. You've probably seen the same thing in smaller ways: a rude comment leads to a meaner one, a fight in the group chat gets worse and worse, or two friend groups keep getting back at each other. Revenge never ends until someone decides to stop. Paul wrote, don't repay evil for evil, and leave room for God to judge (Romans 12:17–19). Breaking the cycle doesn't mean letting people

hurt you. If someone is threatening or bullying you, tell a trusted adult. But it does mean refusing to keep the fight going.

KEY VERSE

The woman bore a son and named him Samson. The child grew, and the LORD blessed him.

Judges 13:24 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God sent Samson even though Israel didn't cry out for help?
2. Samson said the Philistine woman looked right in his eyes. How do you decide what's right for you?
3. What's the difference between physical strength and real strength?
4. Where have you seen a cycle of revenge? How could it be broken?

TRY THIS *The next time someone does something that makes you want to get back at them, try doing the opposite: say something kind, or simply walk away. Write down what happened.*

CHAPTER 8

Samson and Delilah

Judges 16

Samson's last story is his most famous. It begins with him spending the night with a prostitute in the Philistine city of Gaza. The men of the city surround the town gate to ambush him at dawn. But Samson gets up at midnight, rips the doors of the city gate right out of the wall, posts and all, and carries them almost forty miles to a hill near Hebron. It's an incredible feat of strength. It's also a picture of a man who uses his gifts for himself, not for God's purposes.

"It came to pass afterward that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah." It's the only time the Bible says Samson loved a woman. And it's the only time the woman is named. The Philistine rulers come to Delilah and offer her an enormous bribe, eleven hundred pieces of silver from each of them, if she'll find out the secret of his strength. So Delilah asks him directly. "Please tell me where your great strength lies, and what you might be bound to afflict you."

Samson lies. Tie me with seven fresh bowstrings, he says. She does, with Philistines hidden in the room, and shouts that the Philistines are coming. He snaps them like thread. Then he says, use new ropes. Same result. Then he says, weave my hair into the loom. He gets up and pulls the whole loom with him. Each time, Delilah's intentions are obvious. Each time, Samson keeps coming back.

REAL TALK **Red Flags**

Delilah tried to hand Samson over to his enemies three times. Three times! Anyone watching would have said, Samson, get out of there. But he stayed. In relationships, red flags are warning signs that someone doesn't have your best interests at heart: they pressure you, manipulate you, guilt-trip you, try to control you, ask you to prove your love by doing something you don't want to do, or keep you away from friends and family. Feelings can make you ignore red flags. If someone you're dating is manipulating or hurting you, that's not love. Talk to a trusted adult. In the United States you can also contact the love is respect dating abuse helpline at 1-866-331-9474, or text LOVEIS to 22522.

Delilah turns up the pressure. "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and have not told me where your great strength lies." She nags him day after day, until he's sick to death of it. Finally, "he told her all his heart and said to her, 'No razor has ever come on my head; for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaved, then my strength will go from me and I will become weak, and be like any other man.'"

Delilah knows he's finally telling the truth. She calls the Philistine rulers, and they bring the money. "She made him sleep on her knees; and she called for a man and shaved off the seven locks of his head; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went from him." Then she shouts one last time. "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" He wakes up and thinks, "I will go out as at other times, and shake myself free." Then comes one of the saddest sentences in the Bible. "But he didn't know that the LORD had departed from him."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Was It the Hair?**

Was Samson's strength really in his hair? Not exactly. His strength came from the Spirit of the LORD, as the book keeps telling us. His hair was the sign of his Nazirite vow, the last part of his dedication to God he hadn't broken. He'd already broken the rules about dead bodies and drinking at his wedding feast. When he gave up the secret of his hair, he gave up the last sign of his commitment to God. The strength didn't leave because of a haircut. It left because God did.

REAL TALK **Not Knowing God Has Left**

Samson didn't realize God had left him. He'd been compromising for so long that he couldn't tell the difference anymore. That can happen slowly to anyone. You start skipping prayer, then church, then reading the Bible. You make little compromises that don't seem like a big deal. You assume everything's fine because nothing bad has happened yet. Then one day you realize you've drifted further than you ever meant to. The good news is that it's never too late to come back. But it's much easier not to drift that far in the first place. What are the warning lights in your spiritual life?

"The Philistines laid hold on him and put out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with fetters of bronze; and he ground at the mill in the prison." The man who did what was right in his own eyes loses his eyes. The man who carried off Gaza's gates is now a prisoner in Gaza, doing slave work. Then comes a quiet verse that changes everything. "However, the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaved."

The Philistines throw a huge party in the temple of their god Dagon to celebrate capturing Samson. They bring him out to entertain them, mocking him. Thousands of people are on the roof watching. Samson asks the servant leading him to let him lean on the central pillars holding up the building. Then he prays, maybe for the first time in a long time. "Lord GOD, remember me, please, and

strengthen me, please, only this once, God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes."

Even his last prayer is about personal revenge. But God answers. "Samson said, 'Let me die with the Philistines!' He bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell on the lords, and on all the people who were in it." His family comes and buries him. He judged Israel for twenty years, but he never finished the job. The angel had said he would begin to save Israel from the Philistines, and that's all he did: begin. It would be King David who finally defeated them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Samson in Hebrews 11**

It may surprise you that Hebrews 11, the Bible's list of heroes of faith, includes Samson. "What more shall I say? For the time would fail me if I told of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets." It says they "from weakness were made strong." Samson's life was full of selfishness, lust, anger, and broken promises. But at the end, blind and humiliated, he turned to God and trusted Him. Hebrews 11 isn't a list of perfect people. It's a list of flawed people who trusted a perfect God. That's encouraging. God can use you too, flaws and all. But Samson's story is also a warning. Imagine what his life could have been if he'd trusted God sooner.

SAFETY NOTE **Despair and Hope**

At the end of his life, Samson said, let me die. If you ever feel so hopeless or ashamed that you think about ending your life, please know you are not alone and you are not too far gone. God's love for you hasn't run out. Talk to a trusted adult right away, like a parent, school counselor, or pastor. In the United States you can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you're in immediate danger, call 911. Samson's hair began to grow again. Hope can grow again too.

KEY VERSE

Samson called to the LORD, and said, "Lord GOD, remember me, please, and strengthen me, please, only this once, God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes."

Judges 16:28 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Samson kept going back to Delilah, even after she betrayed him?
2. What are some red flags in relationships? How would you help a friend who's ignoring them?
3. How can someone drift so far from God that they don't notice He's gone?
4. What does it mean to you that Samson is listed in Hebrews 11?

TRY THIS *Make a list of warning lights for your spiritual life, signs that you're starting to drift. Share it with a trusted friend, and ask them to check in with you if they see any of them.*

CHAPTER 9

No King in Israel

Judges 17–21

The last five chapters of Judges are different from the rest of the book. There are no more judges. No more rescues. Instead, there are two stories that show how far Israel has fallen. They're framed by a sentence repeated four times, twice in its full form. "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes."

The first story, in chapters 17–18, is about a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim. He steals eleven hundred pieces of silver from his mother. When he confesses and gives it back, she uses some of it to make an idol for him. Micah sets up a little shrine in his house, with an ephod and household gods, and appoints one of his sons as priest. Then a wandering young Levite comes by, a member of the tribe that was supposed to teach God's law. Micah hires him as his personal priest for ten pieces of silver a year, plus clothes and food, and says, now I know the LORD will be good to me, since I have a Levite as my priest. He thinks religion is something he can buy.

Then the tribe of Dan, still looking for land of their own, sends scouts north. They stop at Micah's house, see the shrine, and later come back with six hundred armed men. They steal Micah's idols and offer his Levite a better job: be the priest for a whole tribe

instead of one household. The Levite happily accepts. When Micah chases them, crying, you've taken my gods that I made, they threaten him, and he goes home. The Danites attack a peaceful, unsuspecting town called Laish, burn it, rebuild it, rename it Dan, and set up Micah's idol there. And we find out who the Levite was: a grandson of Moses.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Rock-Bottom Religion**
>
> The story of Micah shows how confused Israel's worship had become. Micah used stolen money to make an idol, in direct violation of the Ten Commandments, and thought God would bless him for it. The Levite sold his services to the highest bidder. The tribe of Dan stole a false religion and made it their own. And a descendant of Moses himself led it. Later, Dan became one of the two places where King Jeroboam set up golden calves (1 Kings 12:29). The writer wants us to see that when everyone does what's right in their own eyes, even religion becomes something people shape to fit what they want.

The second story, in chapters 19–21, is the darkest in the Bible. A Levite and his concubine, a secondary wife, are traveling home and stop for the night in the town of Gibeah, in the tribe of Benjamin. An old man takes them in. That night, men of the town surround the house and demand the Levite be brought out to them, with violent intentions. Instead, the Levite forces his concubine out of the house, and the men of the town brutally abuse her through the night. In the morning, she is found dead at the door. The Levite takes her body home and sends a horrifying message to all the tribes of Israel, calling them to respond. "Such a deed has not been done or seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt to this day! Consider it, take counsel, and speak."

> **SAFETY NOTE** **Abuse and Sexual Violence**
>
> What happened to the Levite's concubine was horribly wrong. The men who abused her were wrong. The Levite, who forced her outside to protect

himself, was wrong. The old man, who offered women to the crowd, was wrong. The Bible tells this story to show how evil people can become, not to excuse any of it. If you have ever been touched in a sexual way you didn't want, pressured, threatened, assaulted, or abused, by anyone, including someone you know, a family member, or someone you're dating, it is never your fault. You did not cause it, and you don't have to carry it alone or keep it secret. Please tell a trusted adult, like a parent, teacher, school counselor, pastor, doctor, or relative. If the first person doesn't help, tell someone else. In the United States you can call the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673 or chat at rainn.org, any time. If you're under eighteen, you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453. If you are in danger right now, call 911. God sees what happened to you, He grieves it, and He is on your side.

The other tribes gather at Mizpah and demand that Benjamin hand over the men of Gibeah. Benjamin refuses and defends them. The result is a civil war. After two defeats, the other tribes win and nearly wipe out the tribe of Benjamin, leaving only six hundred men alive. Then, regretting that a whole tribe might disappear, but having vowed not to let their daughters marry Benjaminites, the Israelites make things worse. They attack the town of Jabesh Gilead, which hadn't joined the war, and later let the Benjaminites take young women from a festival at Shiloh by force, to be their wives. Every solution creates new victims. The book ends with the verdict. "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Is This in the Bible?**

Why would the Bible include stories this dark? Because the writer is making a point. These last chapters deliberately echo earlier stories. The scene at Gibeah mirrors the story of Sodom in Genesis 19, with one terrible difference: this time, the town is Israelite. Israel, who was supposed to be different from the nations God drove out, has become just like them, or worse. The Bible

doesn't hide the worst of human behavior, even among God's own people. It tells the truth about what we're capable of when we push God out of our lives. These chapters are a rock-bottom warning, a picture of a society without God's rule, where everyone follows their own heart and the most vulnerable suffer most. Notice too who gets hurt: women, again and again. The book that began with Achsah boldly asking for springs and Deborah leading the nation ends with women being abused and taken. The decline is measured in how the vulnerable are treated.

REAL TALK **Right in Your Own Eyes**

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. That might sound like freedom. Follow your heart. Do what feels right. Live your truth. But Judges shows where that leads when it's cut off from God: idolatry, violence, abuse, and chaos. Proverbs says, "There is a way which seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." This doesn't mean your feelings don't matter. It means your heart needs a King, someone wiser and better than you, to follow. The question isn't whether you'll follow something. It's whether you'll follow your own eyes or God's word.

Judges doesn't end with hope. It ends with a longing. Israel needs a king. The next books, 1 and 2 Samuel, tell how Israel got kings: first Saul, who failed, and then David, a king after God's own heart, who was also deeply flawed. The longing for a true King, one who would rule with justice, protect the vulnerable, and change hearts, kept growing. And the New Testament says that King has come.

KEY VERSE

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes.

Judges 21:25 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What does the story of Micah's idol show about how people can twist religion?
2. Why do you think the writer of Judges included such dark stories at the end?
3. What does it mean today to do what's right in your own eyes? Where do you see it?
4. How does Judges make you long for a true King?

TRY THIS *Read Ruth 1–4, a story set in the same dark time. Write down how Ruth and Boaz did what was right in God's eyes instead of their own, and how their story points to King David, and to Jesus.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Judges ends at rock bottom, with one sentence repeated like a verdict: there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Israel needed a king, but not just any king. The judges were brave, but they were also fearful, proud, rash, and reckless. Even the best of them couldn't change the people's hearts. And the next books show that Israel's human kings would fail too.

Jewish readers treasure Judges as a sobering story of God's faithfulness to Israel even in its worst days. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, saw in the judges a preview of a greater Rescuer. Hebrews lists Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah among people of faith, not because they were perfect, but because they trusted God, and "from weakness were made strong." The true King they all pointed to is Jesus. Unlike Samson, He used His strength to save others, not Himself. Unlike Gideon, He never drifted. And unlike every judge, He didn't just rescue His people for a while. He came "to give his life as a ransom for many."

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. Like Israel in Judges, when you cry out, He hears.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all done what's right in our own eyes.

Israel kept turning away from God to follow their own way. The Bible says all of us have done the same.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Judges shows how destructive sin is. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the true Judge and King.

The judges rescued Israel for a while. Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again, to rescue us forever.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Israel never deserved rescue. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Cry out and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've done what seemed right in my own eyes instead of following You. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You for never giving up on me. Thank You that Jesus, the true King, gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm crying out to You now. Forgive me and rescue me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. Keep me from drifting, and give me courage to follow You. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Judges 2, 6–7, and 16, then read Ruth, a story of faithfulness from the same dark era, and Hebrews 11.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Don't drift. Israel forgot God within a generation. Build habits that keep you close: daily prayer, Scripture, church, and friends who follow Jesus.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Judges was written so that God's people would see where life without Him leads. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Judges is right, the God who answered Israel's cries again and again is still listening, and He has never given up on you.

They put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD; and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.

Judges 10:16 (WEB)