

# Living in a Pluralistic Society



Participant's Guide

*"You shall have no other gods before me."*

*Deuteronomy 5:7*

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# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## The Book of Judges

### Introduction

#### INTRODUCTION

The first and last verses of the book of Judges clearly frame its historical setting. It covers the period between the death of Joshua and the end of the Exodus (1:1) and the beginning of the monarchy (21:25).

#### **Who were the “judges”?**

The “judges” who arose during this period were not primarily judicial officials in the contemporary sense. (Of all those mentioned in this book, Deborah came closest to what we consider a “judge.” The people brought “cases” to her as she held court under the Palm of Deborah [see 4:5].) Rather, they were mainly military leaders who meted out justice to evildoers and oppressors. In other words, they were “deliverers” or “saviors” who redeemed the people from slavery. When we read in Psalm 96:10-13 that the Lord will “come to judge the earth,” it means he comes to rule it and to liberate it from bondage. The narrator tells of twelve of these deliverers:

Othniel (3:7-11)	Jair (10:3-5)
Ehud (3:12-30)	Jephthah (10:6-12:7)
Shamgar (3:31)	Ibzan (12:8-10)
Deborah (4:1-5:31)	Elon (12:11)
Gideon (6:1-8:35)	Abdon (12:13-15)
Tola (10:1-2)	Samson (13:1-16:31)

#### **Relevance for today**

Israel had strong leadership under Moses and Joshua during the exodus, and later under David and Solomon in the monarchy. In both eras there was a strong human leader who represented God and ruled society on the basis of divine law. But in these intervening years, the Israelites lived in a “spiritually pluralistic” society. Due to Israel’s various failures, the society of Canaan was a mixture of pagan and believing peoples. There are many parallels between that situation and ours today. Largely due to the failures of the church, believers in the West find themselves living in a religiously pluralistic society. Individual Christians work and live among a great variety of gods—not only those of other formal religions, but also the gods of wealth, celebrity, pleasure, ideology, and achievement. Our era can also be characterized by the phrase, “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (21:25 KJV). Thus the book of Judges has much to say to the individualism and paganism of our own day.

Since there was no Moses and no king to lead, who “judged” Israel during that time? A superficial answer would be to say that God raised up charismatic individual leaders—“judges” who navigated the people through crises. But Jephthah had a better understanding when he referred to “the LORD, the Judge” (11:27). In other words, in times when believers live as a minority in

a pagan society, they are to look directly to God as their Lord and Judge. They are to follow his lead, and not the spirit or powers of their age. This is extremely difficult, as this book shows us. Judges is mainly the story of how believers failed in this task. (However, Joseph was a “success” story that preceded Judges, and later, during the Babylonian exile, people like Daniel offer additional positive examples. We will consider all of them in this study.)

Christians reading Judges today must ask: how can we be sure to follow God rather than the idols of our society and neighbors? How can we renew ourselves when we fail or fall?

#### Themes to look for

As can be seen from the list of judges above, the narrator gives some judges major treatment while others get only a single verse of mention. That immediately alerts us to the fact that the book of Judges is not merely a history book. (It is not *less* than true history, but it is much more.) The narrator is not just a reporter, but a teacher. What are his themes?

This is the place for a first word of caution. One commentator summed up the book of Judges as “despicable people doing deplorable things” and as “trashy tales about dysfunctional characters.” As the history unfolds, even the “heroes,” the judges themselves, become increasingly dysfunctional and flawed. They do many appalling things and their efforts have less and less redemptive effect. It is a dismal story. The reader will be led to ask, again and again, “What in the world is this story doing in the Bible?” The answer is an important one—it is the gospel! Judges shows us that the Bible is *not* a “Book of Virtues”; it is not full of inspirational stories. Why? Because the Bible (unlike the books of other faiths) is not about emulating moral examples. It is about a God of mercy and long-suffering who continually works in and through us despite our constant resistance to his purposes. With that in mind, look for the following themes.

*1. God relentlessly offers his grace to people who neither deserve it nor seek it, nor even appreciate it after they have been saved by it.* The book of Judges is not about a series of role models. Though there are a few good examples (such as Othniel and Deborah), they are early and do not dominate the narrative. The point is that the only true hero is God; the only true savior is the Lord. Judges is ultimately about grace abounding to chief sinners. God’s grace will triumph over the stupidest actions.

*2. God wants lordship over every area of our lives, not just some.* God wanted Israel to take the entire land of Canaan. Instead, they only cleared out some areas and learned to live with idols in their midst. In other words, they neither wholly rejected God nor wholly accepted him. This half-way discipleship and compromise is depicted by the book of Judges as an impossible, unstable compound. God wants all of our lives, not just part.

3. *There is a tension between grace and law, between conditionality and unconditionality.* Readers will find in Judges a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, God demands obedience because he is holy. On the other hand, he makes promises of commitment and loyalty to his people. Will his holiness and his conditional commands (“do this and then I’ll do this”) override his promises (“I will always be with you”), or will his promises override his commands? Put it this way: Are his promises conditional or unconditional? Judges is crucial, in that it shows that *neither* answer to that question is right. Nearly all readers of the Old Testament take either a “liberal” view (“Sure, God will always bless us as long as we are sorry”) or a “conservative” view (“No, God will only bless us if we are obedient”). But Judges will *not* resolve this tension. One commentator says, “It is this tension [between conditionality and unconditionality] more than anything else that propels the narrative.”<sup>1</sup> Only the New Testament gospel will show us how the two sides are both true because of the death of Christ on the cross.

4. *There is a need for continual spiritual renewal in our lives here on earth, and a way to make that a reality.* Judges shows that spiritual decline is inevitable, and spiritual renewal then becomes the continual need. We will see a regular, repeated decline-revival cycle. Some of the elements in this renewal include repentance, corporate prayer, the destruction of idols, and anointed human leaders. Renewal happens when we are under the right master/ruler; slavery occurs when we are under the wrong master/ruler. Judges is the best book in the Old Testament for the understanding of renewal and revival, while Acts depicts it best in the New Testament. Watch, however, for the fact that the revival cycles in Judges become weaker and weaker as time goes on, while in Acts they grow wider and stronger.

5. *We need a true Savior, to which all human saviors point, both through their flaws and strengths.* As we noted above (#1), the increasing magnitude of evil and brokenness in the narrative points us to our need of a savior, not role models. But the decreasing effectiveness of the revival cycles and the decreasing quality of the judges point us to the failure of any human savior. The judges themselves point us to someone beyond them all. In Othniel we learn that God can save through all, in Deborah that he can save through many, in Gideon that he can save through few, and in Samson that he can save through one. God will save by sending the One.

6. *God is in charge, no matter what it looks like.* The most pervasive theme is perhaps the easiest to miss. God often seems almost absent from the scene in Judges, but he never is. He works out his will through weak people and in spite of them. His purposes are never thwarted, regardless of appearances. The mills of God may grind slow, but they grind exceedingly fine.

*Notes* THE BOOK OF JUDGES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read Judges 1:1-2:5. Do you see any traces of the six themes in these first verses?

2. (In groups of 2 or 3) Which of the themes would be most helpful to you? Why is it personally relevant right now?



## THE ISSUE OF “HOLY WAR”

### The problem

One of the biggest problems the modern reader has with Joshua and Judges in particular (and the Old Testament in general) is God’s order to Israel that they “drive out” and evict the inhabitants of Canaan from their homeland. Here we have a nation doing something that would be condemned today by world opinion. What is done seems identical to modern “ethnic cleansings,” as when one ethnic group seeks to violently evict or exterminate another group. While we would consider it legitimate for people to engage in warfare to *defend* their homeland, most today would not consider it legitimate to go to war to confiscate someone else’s homeland. In addition, Judges seems to give a warrant for “holy war.” If we say that the conquest of Canaan in God’s name is a righteous action, why can’t others also claim that they are going to war in God’s name against “wicked infidels”? What do we say to all this?

### A false solution

It is far too easy to respond that the Old Testament “was a more primitive stage in religion” and that “it contains many barbaric statements and directives that we cannot accept anymore.” There is a severe problem with such a view. *Why* can’t we accept them now? The main reason we consider the conquest of Canaan problematic is because it breaks the sixth commandment (“Thou shalt not murder”) and the eighth commandment (“Thou shalt not steal”). But the Ten Commandments are *in* the Old Testament (Ex. 20)! So, if we reject the Old Testament as God’s true revelation, on what basis do we object to the “immorality” of the conquest? It is arbitrary to say “I like Exodus 20” but “I don’t like Judges 1.” If the Old Testament is not God’s Word, then who is to say that one chapter is better than the other? To deny the authority of the Old Testament in order to resolve this issue is like burning down your whole house to kill a rat that lives in it. If we don’t know *what* God’s Word is, then what is wrong with a little imperialism?

The real problem (and it *is* a real problem!) is that in Joshua and Judges, God allows the Israelites to do what he forbids anyone else to do all through the rest of the Bible. The moral law, as it is laid down in both the Old Testament and the New Testament for all time, is completely against conquest. When we kill people who have not attacked us and take their land, that is always considered theft and murder. So why does God allow this exception here? And why can’t this part of the Bible be used as a warrant for “holy wars” today?

**A way through the problem**

There are several important differences that distinguish Israel's mission to occupy Canaan from any other military action, before or since.

**1. First, the war is not carried out on the basis of race.** God's order to evict the Canaanites is not a directive to remove or kill people of a different race. When the invasion of Canaan began, Israel's spies were helped by Rahab, a resident of Jericho (see Joshua 2). Rahab was not only a Gentile, but a prostitute; she could have been seen as both a racial and a moral "outsider." Yet because she trusted in the Lord of Israel, she was incorporated into Israel and remained in Canaan. The purpose of the mission was to "break down the altars" of the idols (Judges 2:3) and evict pagan worship, not necessarily the people of any particular race. So this campaign is *not* a warrant for the warfare of one ethnic group against another.

**2. Second, the war is not carried out on the basis of imperialistic expansion.** Even within this special mandate, God does not allow the Israelites to plunder or enslave any of the people they fight. They are to be defeated and driven out—period. For example, in Joshua 7, Achan is judged for keeping plunder from a Canaanite town. What was normal for all military actions and invasions at that time was completely forbidden to the Israelites. Why? Because the purpose of the mission was not to become prosperous and powerful but to create a country in which the Israelites could serve and honor God. (The need to evict the Canaanites was probably due to how vulnerable the Israelites were to temptation. In other words, the eviction was not a testimony to how virtuous the people were, but how spiritually weak!) So this campaign is not a warrant for the imperialistic colonization of one country by another.

**3. Third, the war is carried out as God's judgment through direct revelation.** *To* Joshua (in Joshua 1:1-9) and *through* Joshua (in Joshua 23:1-16) and again through the priest's ephod (Judges 1:1), God gives specific verbal revelation to the Israelites to evict the Canaanites. Nothing less direct and unmistakable could be the basis for such action. (It would not be enough to say, "We've thought about it and we think the Lord is leading us to break the sixth and eighth commandments!") But why would God command such a thing?

The Old Testament scholar Meredith Kline called this "the intrusion ethic." God, of course, knows the end from the beginning. He alone has the right and the knowledge to see persons who will be condemned on Judgment day and to bring a judgment down on them "early." Thus God, the Judge of all, can determine to mete out justice on them now rather than waiting for the Last Day. Therefore the future judgment "intrudes" on the present. (In that sense, what is happening is not really more "primitive" but more "advanced.") This is not totally unusual, because the blessings of the gospel are also intrusions of the future grace into the present.

Therefore, this is not a mandate for believers in general to move coercively against unbelievers, nor a warrant for a “holy war” by one faith against another. The way we know the Lord’s will is to read the Ten Commandments and the other directives of the Bible to us—*not* to try to emulate everything described in all the histories of the Bible. Many people run into the same problem when they say, “We are running our church just like God commands us to in the book of Acts.” In Ephesians and 1 Timothy, Paul clearly lays down principles for church order. But at some points, the book of Acts only describes what the church *did*, not what God *told* it to do. We must be much more cautious in drawing conclusions from historical passages.

### Conclusion

This issue highlights the importance of the orthodox Christian view of God’s revelation. All branches of the church—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—agree that the Bible is entirely the unique revelation of God’s will. There are two opposite views, however, that could be very dangerous and lead us into “holy war.” On the one hand, some people believe that they are getting direct revelation from God that is on an equal footing with what Moses or Joshua or the apostles received. If you believe in that sort of “continuing revelation,” there is no control or check against “holy war.” You could always say that God is calling you to attack in his name and wipe out some group that is “of the devil.” On the other hand, many, many people do not believe the Bible is a final revelation at all. But if you don’t believe in an authoritative Word, there is *also* no control or check against “holy war.” You could always say that your conscience is calling you to attack and wipe out some group of people. But if you believe the orthodox view of the Bible, there is a very real control and check on how you use political power.

### Read with Humility

It is extremely easy for contemporary people to feel condescending about, or offended by, the actions of many characters in the book of Judges. God’s command to conquer Canaan is difficult enough to understand. But, in addition, we see how Israel deviated from God’s will and continually suffered deep moral lapses. The supposed “good guys” often treat women and people of other races in evil ways. But we as modern individuals must not assume that we would have been much more enlightened if we had been born in this ancient era. We should realize that we have the advantage of living in a society deeply influenced by the Ten Commandments and other biblical sources of our civilization. When you read of these ancient men and women, remember that our own inner natures are no better than theirs, fundamentally. Be willing to look for the ways in which you are *like* the people in the narrative. Don’t pander to your own ego by focusing on the ways in which you are *unlike* them.

1

Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* <sup>2<sup>nd</sup></sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), p 142.



# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## Halfway Discipleship

### Study 1 | Judges 1:1 – 2:3

1. Read Joshua 1:1-9 and 23:3-13. The latter passage describes the mission God gave the Israelites through Joshua just before he died. (a) What specific directions are they given? (b) Why do you think God insists that military bravery be combined with whole-hearted discipleship in this campaign? (c) Does this passage confirm the reasons mentioned last week that this is not a warrant for future “holy wars”?
  
2. Read Judges 1:19-35. Though beginning well (1:1-18), the Israelites eventually fail to drive out the Canaanites. Make a list of all the reasons given (or hinted at) in the text for why various tribes failed to do so.
  
3. Read Judges 2:1-3. (a) How does God assess the reasons for the Israelites’ failure to drive out the Canaanites? (b) In verse 2, what does he say was the real purpose of the campaign? (c) In light of Joshua 1 and 23, why do the reasons given in verses 19-36 constitute not just military failure but spiritual unfaithfulness?

4. (a) Is there anything in your life about which you can say, “I can’t do it” but which God may say, “You *won’t* do it”? (Read 1 Corinthians 10:13. Is there any place in your life where you are not taking this promise seriously?) (b) What two things does God say the Israelites have forgotten in 2:1? How can we overcome our excuses by reflecting on the same two truths?
5. Read Judges 2:1-3. (a) What tension do you see between the first “I said” in verse 1 and the second “I tell you” in verse 3? (b) How does this dramatic tension make the story of the judges gripping? (c) How does Jesus Christ solve this dilemma? (d) What practical implications are there for us when we break one of God’s laws?
6. Read Judges 2:1. (a) The angel of the LORD comes up from Gilgal. Why would God want them to remember Gilgal as they heard the charge of disobedience? (Read Joshua 5:4-10 on what happened there.)

7. Read Judges 2:3. God says that the Canaanites allowed to stay will now become “thorns” and “snares”. What things have you allowed to stay in your life that should be expelled? How do they become snares? Ask God for a “wedding” of his power and your willingness to remove them.





# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## Living Among Idols

Study 2 | Judges 2:3-6

### INTRODUCTION

In the book of Judges, the people of Israel continually fall into idolatry. Most readers will think that during these lapses the Israelites stopped worshiping the Lord and began worshiping other gods. (e.g. 2:12). But a more detailed case study of the times, given in Judges 17, shows that what most Israelites did was to *combine* the worship of the Lord with idols. See Judges 17:3, for example: “She said, ‘I solemnly consecrate my silver to the LORD for my son to make a carved image and a cast idol.’”

The pagan worldview was that there were many gods (e.g. of agriculture, business, love, music, and war), each of whom had a proscribed area of influence, and none of whom demanded lordship over every single area of life. In this view, everyone had his or her own god(s), chosen or discarded on the basis of one’s interests and needs. It was a “mix and match” religion in which the worshiper was sovereign, negotiating what was necessary. Paganism therefore could accept the existence (but not the exclusive sovereignty) of the Lord, who demanded that his worshipers give him absolute lordship over every square inch of life.

This is the greatest danger, then, for believers in a pagan world. It is not so much that the believer becomes an atheist, but that idols are combined with God in the heart. If a believer lives in a city where commerce is not just a practice but a functional god—providing people with identity and security—the danger is that the Christian maintains his or her doctrinal beliefs and ethical practices but divides heart worship between the Lord and money or career.

- 1. Read Judges 2:2-3. (a) What is the main reason the Israelites were to drive out the Canaanites and “not make a covenant” with them? (b) If the Lord is the only true God, how can the Canaanite gods be a “thorn” and “snare”?**

*Notes* LIVING AMONG IDOLS

2. **Read Judges 2:6-19. List the stages of the cycle the children of Israel continually repeated. (If you get stuck, compare these verses with 3:7-9, where all the stages are repeated.)**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. **Compare Judges 2:7-10 with Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20-25. In what ways may one generation fail to pass its faith on to the next generation? Did you have Christian parents? What was your experience?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. **Read Judges 2:16-19. Two groups are contrasted here, with each group vying for control of the Israelites. Name each group. How are they like each other? How are they opposite?**

5. **Read Judges 2:17. What does the word “prostituted” tell us about idolatry? About God and the relationship we must have with him?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. **The people’s failure (as a group) to take all of Canaan both resulted from and represented their failure (as individuals) to give God exclusive lordship over their whole lives. A good way to determine if Christ is Lord of an area of your life is to ask two questions: (a) Am I willing to do whatever God says about this area? (b) Am I willing to accept whatever God *sends* in this area? Name one or two (at most) areas where you are not passing these tests. What, then, *is* controlling you in that area?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. **Read Judges 2:20-3:6. According to this section, what are two reasons God did not drive out Israel’s enemies? How is this “judgment” also a form of mercy? Compare this passage with Hebrews 12:1-13. How has something difficult been a mercy in your life?**



# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## Ehud: The Unexpected Leader

### Study 3 | Judges 3:7-31

#### INTRODUCTION

In the long introduction, the author of Judges showed that Israel failed to drive idols out of the land, which created a dramatic tension between God's holy commands and his loving, faithful promise. He demands obedience, yet he has promised to save them. As a result of this apparent tension, the children of Israel go into a cyclical pattern of decline and revival. God continually chastens them for their sin, but then delivers them from their peril. He never casts them off, but continues to graciously and severely work for their growth. Beginning in 3:7, we start to get specific "case histories" that reveal these principles.

To the first readers of this passage, the great surprise would have been that Ehud, the man God used, was "left-handed" (v. 15). God swears by his right hand, he has pleasures at his right hand, and his chosen One sits at his right hand (Is. 62:8-9; Ps. 16:11; 110:1) Why? Since most people were right-handed, the right hand was a symbol of power and ability. But most intriguing is the term in 3:15, which literally reads "unable to use his right hand." Very possibly, Ehud's right hand was paralyzed or disabled in some way.

- 1. Why did the Israelites do evil and turn to idols, according to verse 7? How does 2 Peter 1:5-9 shed light on the root reason we do wrong? Compare the way this problem is addressed in Joshua 4:19-24. How can you address it today?**
  
- 2. Read Judges 3:7-11. This is the first example of a "revival" God sends to people who have become spiritually cold. What does God send to bring the renewal about? What do the people do? How can you keep these same factors present in your life?**

*Notes* EHUD: THE UNEXPECTED LEADER

**3. Read Judges 3:12-19. Why do you think the king would be so foolish as to meet alone and unprotected with a member of an oppressed, enemy nation?**

**4. Read Judges 3:15-30. How is Othniel's deliverance like Ehud's? How are they different?**

**5. What can we learn for ourselves from the differences between Othniel and Ehud? Consider lessons about (a) how spiritual renewal comes and (b) why troubles sometimes come to us.**

6. What does the unexpected nature of Ehad's leadership tell us about:  
(a) why God chooses to use the people he does (compare this passage with 1 Corinthians 1:26-29); (b) what God will finally do for the salvation of the world; and (c) how we should then expect the world to regard us?
7. Choose an application question for discussion: (a) What inherent deficits do you have that God could develop into assets in his service? (b) How could some troubles in your life become opportunities for spiritual renewal? (c) Have you been putting God "in a box," demanding that he act in a certain way, "according to the rules"?





# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## Deborah: The Woman Leader

### Study 4 | Judges 4:1 – 5:31

1. Read Judges 4:1-24. What gifts and skills does Deborah possess (4:4-14)? What were the effects of her career (5:6-9)?
2. How is Deborah's judgeship similar to the judgeships of Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar? How is it different?
3. How does Deborah's career modify both "strong conservative" and "strong liberal" views of women's leadership?

*Notes*      DEBORAH: THE WOMAN LEADER

**4. Read Judges 4:6-16 and compare with Hebrews 11:32-34. Barak is praised for the faith he exercised in this campaign. (a) In what ways does he show faith? (b) In what ways does he point the way to the ultimate Savior and Judge?**

**5. Read Judges 4:17-22 and 5:24-31. (a) How does 5:29-30 perhaps shed light on Jael's motives? (b) How does God's concern with the thing he wants done relate to his concern with the method in which it is done?**

**6. In 5:1-31, how is the song's description of events different from the historical account in chapter 4?**

7. Choose application questions for discussion: (a) Do you have a Judges 5 perspective on what is happening in your life, or only a Judges 4 perspective? How could Deborah's perspective on some recent events help you? (b) Is God calling you, like Barak, to do something for which you won't get much credit? How can you respond in faith? (c) Can you pray as Jesus does for your enemies, or only as Deborah does?



# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## Gideon Meets God

### Study 5 | Judges 6:1-40

#### INTRODUCTION

Israel's new oppressors are the Midianites, semi-nomads from the desert. Their aim, however, was different from those of Israel's former enemies. Their goal was not political control but economic exploitation. They pioneered the use of the camel (6:5) in warfare, which enabled them to make swift, wide-ranging raids on a land far from their own homes without fear of immediate reprisal. Their superior technology enabled them to plunder Canaan of all its food each year near harvest time. They did not set up a military government or levy taxes, but they left the Israelites in a state of complete poverty (6:6). Again we see that each successive oppressor had a different set of strategies and tactics. Israel was forced into a primitive existence deep in inaccessible mountain regions (6:2).

- 1. Read Judges 6:1-10. What three actions prepare the people for revival? What did God do? What did they do?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2. In Judges 6:1-10, what is the difference between repentance and regret? (Read 2 Corinthians 7:9-11.) Which do the people express? How does God try to help them? What do we learn from this for our own spiritual renewal?**

*Notes* GIDEON MEETS GOD

3. Read Judges 6:11-24. (a) God begins his deliverance though the people do not yet show signs of repentance. What do we learn from that? (b) Who is talking to Gideon—an angel or the LORD? Why does this figure keep turning up (see 2:1; 13:1-23)? How do Gideon’s fear of dying and his altar shed light on this question?

4. In Judges 6:11-16, is Gideon’s assessment of Israel’s problem right (v. 13) or is God’s right (vv. 1, 14)? How can we make the same mistakes in our lives?

5. Is Gideon’s assessment of his ability right (v. 15) or is God’s right (v. 12)—or are they both right? How is this a picture of what it means to be a Christian? What happens to us when we lose either “side” or perspective?

**6. Read Judges 6:16-40. How does the Lord prepare Gideon? In what ways does he show him how to see and deal with (a) the enemy among us (vv. 25-32) (b) the enemy around us (vv. 33-35) and (c) the enemy within us (vv. 36-40)? How do we need to make the same adjustments in our lives?**

**7. Application questions: How has God prepared you to serve others? How has God given you guidance at key times in your life?**







*Notes*    GIDEON LEADS TO VICTORY

4. **What do you need assurance about? (Or what lessons do you need God to teach you over and over?) How does God assure and teach you?**
  
5. **Read Judges 7:15-25. What did Gideon’s battle plan have going for it? Where does the strategy for the “surprise attack” come from? How does the strategy fulfill the dream of the barley loaf?**
  
6. **Where are you feeling “outnumbered” or in need of some intervention? How can you (a) accept the limits God has given you, and (b) accept that “God’s power is made perfect in weakness”? Can you ask the group to join you in your “battle” by praying for you?**
  
7. **Think back over chapters 6 and 7. Make a list of everything God used to help Gideon reach his potential as a leader.**

# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## The Failure of Gideon's House

### Study 7 | Judges 8:1 – 10:5

1. Read Judges 8:1-17. Observe Gideon's response to the Ephraimites (vv. 1-3) and the men of Succoth and Peniel (vv. 4-17). (a) How are all three groups similar in their responses to Gideon? (b) What do you think Gideon was feeling inside when he dealt with these groups?
  
2. In Judges 8:1-17, (a) How is Gideon forgetting the "lesson of the 300" (7:2)? (b) What emotions result when you forget God's grace?
  
3. In Judges 8:1-17, (a) Why do you think Gideon's response to Succoth and Peniel was different from his response to Ephraim? (Refer to 7:24-25.) (b) In 8:18-21, what reason is given for Gideon's relentless pursuit of a superior force with only 300 men (8:4, 10)? (c) One commentator says that Gideon proves we must "beware of the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit!" What do you think that means? What does it mean for us?

## Notes THE FAILURE OF GIDEON'S HOUSE

**Background Note:** The ephod of the high priest (Ex. 28) was a breastplate that covered the wearer's front and back. It was covered with ornamental gold patterns and studded with gems. On the front of the breastplate were the Urim and Thummim—two stones used to receive “yes” or “no” answers from God. (Many believe they were two-sided stones, much like coins. When they were “flipped,” two “up-sides” meant yes, two “down-sides” meant no, and a mixed result meant no answer.) Gideon's ephod (8:24-27) was a copy, an effort to ascertain God's answers to their questions. People came to worship it as an idol.

4. Read Judges 8:22-35. (a) Why did Gideon decline the offer of kingship? (b) How could Gideon resist the invitation to rule in God's place (v. 22) yet worship an ephod in God's stead (v. 27)?

5. (a) What good thing becomes an “ephod” and a “snare” in your life? (b) How is prosperity a greater spiritual test than adversity?

6. Read Judges 9:1-57. (a) How is the story of Abimelech distinctly different from that of every other leader we have profiled? (b) Why would the narrator devote so much space to this? (c) How did Gideon's actions sow the seeds for the disaster of Abimelech (8:29-31)? (d) How does the parable of the bramble bush (vv. 7-21) shed light on the meaning of the narrative?

7. Read Judges 10:1-5. What is so striking about the simple record of the two judges, Tola and Jair?



# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## Jephthah: The Outlaw Leader

### Study 8 | Judges 10:6 – 12:15

1. Read Judges 10:6-18. (a) How are the gods Israel worships related to the peoples that enslave them? (b) Why do you think the word “sold” is used in verse 7? (Compare Judges 2:14, 3:8, and 4:2 with Romans 1:24-25.) (c) What does this teach us for our own lives?
2. In Judges 10:6-18, (a) Why does God respond so brusquely to Israel's cry in verses 11-14? What does this tell us about their repentance (v. 10)? (b) Is there a contradiction between verses 13 and 16?
3. In Judges 10:6-16, (a) What do we learn about steps to spiritual renewal and revival? (b) What do verses 15-16 tell us about real repentance? (c) Which “step” do *you* most need to consider or do?

*Notes*      JEPHTHAH: THE OUTLAW LEADER

4. **Read Judges 11:1-11.** (a) How did Jephthah's early history make him an unexpected deliverer? (b) How did it prepare him for his judgeship? (c) How is Jephthah like the other judges and even Jesus in this regard? (d) How can terrible troubles prepare you to help others?
5. **Read Judges 11:12-28.** The king of Ammon justifies his attack on Israel by insisting that their land formerly belonged to the Ammonites (v. 13). What three arguments does Jephthah use to refute this claim in his letter of diplomacy? Why do you think this fell on deaf ears?
6. **Read Judges 11:29-40.** What does Jephthah promise God? Why does he promise it? Why does he keep his promise?



- 7. What a terrible story (perhaps the worst in the whole book)! What do you think the author hoped to teach us? What lessons can we learn from this incident?**



# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## The Birth of Samson

### Study 9 | Judges 13:1-25

1. Read Judges 13:1-2. How is this cycle of apostasy and renewal the same as earlier ones? How is it different? Why does the writer so often add “in the eyes of the LORD”? (See Judges 21:25.) What does the term tell us about sin?
2. In Judges 13:1-3, (a) what characteristics does this special birth share with those of Isaac, Samuel, John the Baptist, and Jesus? (b) What does this list tell us about God? (c) Notice the similarity to the announcement in Luke 1:31. How would Samson’s birth begin to prepare Israel for the real Messiah? (See verse 5.)
3. (a) What things does God tell Samson’s mother (13:3-5)? (b) Read Numbers 6:1-21. How was Samson’s Nazirite life unusual? How could living as a Nazirite prepare Samson for service? (c) What does this teach us about how God prepares us for service? How has he prepared you to serve him?

*Notes* THE BIRTH OF SAMSON

4. Read Judges 13:6-25. (a) What evidences of faith do you find in Samson's mother and father? (b) Why is the angel's return visit gracious yet firm? (c) How do you react when God won't give you more details? Why doesn't he give us more? (d) Why does the angel come back if he has no new information? What does this teach us about raising children (or living life ourselves)?
  
5. In Judges 13:16-21, (a) how is the mother's faith greater in the end than the father's? (b) What lessons for your life can you see in the father? The mother? (c) How many of your problems today stem from a basic mistrust of the goodness of God?
  
6. In Judges 13:16-21, how does the angel reveal who he is? How does this tell us who the angel is? Why is it remarkable that it took them so long to realize this was really the Lord?

# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## The Rise of Samson

Study 10 | Judges 14:1 – 15:20

### INTRODUCTION

The story of Samson is famous for its potent mix of sex, violence, and super-power—the stuff of a summer action movie! Yet when we read it as part of Judges as a whole, we will find it at least perplexing and probably disturbing. As Israel's spiritual condition worsens, the scene seems to be set for a great judge-leader, perhaps the greatest of all. The “annunciation” of chapter 13 also seems to prepare us for a wonderful, powerful deliverer. Instead we find the most flawed character in the book by far—a violent, impulsive, sexually addicted, emotionally immature and selfish man. Most disturbing of all, the Spirit of God seems to anoint and use his fits of pique, pride, and temper.

- 1. Read Judges 14:1-5; 15:9-13. What do these texts tell us about the level of conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines at that time? [Note: Timnah was a village in Israelite territory (Josh. 19:43).] How does this attitude differ from the attitude the Israelites have shown toward their oppressors in the past (see Judges 10:6-12)?**
  
- 2. In Judges 14:4, (a) how does God's plan for Samson differ from the way his parents (or we!) would have expected God to use him to deliver Israel from the Philistines? (b) What does this teach us about being patient with God's apparent inactivity?**



6. Review Judges 15:1-20. “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us?’ (15:11)—their question to Samson admits that there is in truth no such thing as harmonious co-existence between church and world, for where there is no conflict it is because the world has taken over.”<sup>1</sup> Give some examples of how the church’s efforts at avoiding conflict with the world have been (or are now) really surrenders.
7. Conflict with the world is a necessary part of authentic Christianity. What actions might God be calling you to take that would conflict with many in *your* “world”?

<sup>1</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Judges* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 142.









7. In Judges 16:22-31, why did Samson's strength return? (Read Hebrews 11:32-34 for the best answer.) How does Samson's story illustrate "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10)? How have you seen the principle work itself out in your life?

8. What is the biggest thing God has taught you through Samson's life?



# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## Men Without Chests

Study 12 | Judges 17:1 – 18:25

### REVIEW

The book of Judges has concentrated until now on the times God intervened to save Israel from its spiritual decline into idolatry. Each episode in the narrative followed a cyclical pattern, which Michael Wilcock called “rebellion, retribution, repentance, and rescue.”<sup>1</sup> We saw, however, that the rebellion got deeper and deeper until the repentance completely disappeared. More and more, the salvation God sent had to be sheer grace—accomplished with less and less cooperation on the part of the Israelites. Finally, in the judgeship of Samson, even God’s rescue had to be through the weakness and defeat of the rescuer! In all these ways, God is pointing us toward the gospel, showing us that his salvation must be through grace we do not merit. It is accomplished for us through the weakness and defeat of the Savior.

### INTRODUCTION

These last chapters of Judges are a departure from the earlier narrative structure. Earlier passages give us a bird’s eye view of things, usually saying only, “They fell into idolatry.” These chapters give us a ground-level, detailed view of life in Israel during those times. (Various references within the passages show that these incidents did not come chronologically after Samson and the other judges. They happened earlier, between earlier judges.) Earlier passages showed us how God rescued Israel, but these passages illustrate the spiritual condition he rescued them from. That is why these final chapters barely mention the Lord. They show us what life was like when Israel was left to its own devices. This view of humanity without God is so bleak that these passages are almost never preached on or even studied.

- 1. Read Judges 17:1-2. A lot of information is packed into this sentence! What do we learn about (a) what Micah has done, (b) what kind of person he is, (c) what kind of person his mother is?**

*Notes*    MEN WITHOUT CHESTS

2. **Read Judges 17:1-11. (a) In what ways is the worship practice of Micah and his mother “orthodox” and right? (b) In what ways does it contradict the Ten Commandments and other laws concerning the true worship of God?**
  
3. **The first of the Ten Commandments forbids us to worship other gods. The second forbids us to worship God with images we make (Ex. 20:3-4). What is the difference?**
  
4. **(a) How can we worship God with images today? (b) How does this lead to problems in our personal lives? (c) Read Colossians 1:15. How does the New Testament show us why God forbids anyone to make an image of him?**
  
5. **In Judges 17:1-11, Micah’s family religion is externally orthodox but internally idolatrous. It is not only idolatrous in its understanding of God, but in its approach to him. (a) What is the goal of their religion (v. 13)? (b) What are the means to that goal (vv. 4-5)? (c) What is its standard for behavior (v. 6)?**

6. In Judges 17:1-11, Micah's mother promises all of her money to the Lord (v. 3) but keeps most for herself (v. 4). How is this an important indicator of our spiritual condition?
  
7. (a) Read Judges 18:1-2. Why are the Danites still homeless in Canaan? (Read Josh. 19:40-48; Judges 1:27-34; 2:1-3). What can we surmise about their spiritual state? (b) In Judges 18:3-21, how do they relate to God in their quest for a home? How do they exhibit the same spiritual characteristics as Micah's family?
  
8. Read Judges 18:30-31. What is significant about this statement? Why do you think this whole fairly uninteresting story is told to us?

<sup>1</sup>

Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Judges* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 11.





# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## People Without a King

Study 13 | Judges 19:1 – 21:25

### BACKGROUND

**Levite.** The Levites were the descendants of Levi, one of Jacob's twelve sons. The Levites were the only tribe of Israel that was not given an allotment of land in Canaan. Rather than working the land for their livelihood, they were to live near and work in the tabernacle to carry out the worship of God. They were to be supported by tithes and gifts from the rest of the people. (Read Numbers 18:20-24.) Priests were Levites descended from Aaron (Num. 3:10), while the rest of the Levites assisted the priests in the work of the tabernacle. The Lord considered the Levites to be consecrated to his service and ministry (Num. 3:5-13) and thus they had a special responsibility to be holy.

**Concubine:** "A secondary wife acquired by purchase or as a war captive, and allowed in a polygamous society . . ." <sup>1</sup> A concubine was essentially a slave-mistress. She was not a prostitute but neither was she a wife in the full sense of the term. She was a "second class" wife, a slave-mistress, a sex object. That is why this passage sometimes calls the Levite the "master" of his concubine (19:27) but once her "husband" (v. 3). While God makes clear in the beginning (Gen. 2:24) and in the teaching of Jesus (Mark 10:7-8) that marriage is to be between one man and one woman, many believers in intervening times nonetheless had multiple wives and concubines (see Abraham in Genesis 16:2-3) contrary to God's design. However, from the history of Abraham through Jacob down to Solomon, the practice of polygamy is revealed in the Bible to bring heartache and pain in every family without exception. What we see here in Judges is that a Levite, who should have been quite holy, has been shaped by the pagan culture around him. He buys a concubine and treats her like a piece of property.

1. **Read Judges 19:1-10. Read the Background notes above. What can you tell about the relationship between the Levite and the concubine from (a) the way she left him, (b) how long he waited to go to her, (c) why (it is implied) she returned with him? Why do you think her father was so extravagantly positive to the Levite?**

*Notes* PEOPLE WITHOUT A KING

**2. Read Judges 19:11-25. (a) How does the narrator foreshadow the character of this city in verses 18-20? (b) How does the incident of verses 22-25 compare and contrast with the one in Genesis 19:1-11? What can we learn from the parallels?**

**3. Read Judges 19:25-30. (a) Why would the Ephraimite offer two women, including his own daughter, rather than the Levite? (b) Why do you think the concubine did not enter the house (v. 26)? (c) List the details given in verses 26-29 about the Levite's treatment of the concubine. What do these details tell us about their relationship? Why does the narrator give so few details of the mob's actions during the night, but so much about the Levite's actions in the morning? Why this focus?**

4. Read Judges 19:25-20:7. (a) Why do you think the Levite was indifferent to the concubine's abuse and rape, but furious about her death? (b) Compare the Levite's account (20:4-6) with what really happened. (c) Compare the moral performance of the Gibeah mob with the moral performance of the Levite. What does all this say about human nature and sin?
5. (a) In Judges 20:1-18, the stress is on the unity of Israel (see verses 1, 2, 8, 11). Compare 1:1-2 with 20:18. What is ironic and tragic about the unity here at the end of the story? (b) Why didn't the Benjamites turn over the guilty men (vv. 12-15)?

## BACKGROUND

**The battle of 20:19-47.** The Benjamites lived in hilly terrain that favored a defending force. Though vastly superior in numbers, the Israelites could only send in one or two tribes at a time to fight in the narrow space defended by the Benjamites. On the first and second days, the Benjamites defeat the Israelites and there is great slaughter and sorrow. God twice gives Israel answers (through the priest's ephod) on who to send each day, but these answers do not guarantee success as they did in the past. Finally, on the third day, the Lord assures them of victory. Israel chooses a new strategy. One force of Israelites engaged the Benjamites and began to withdraw, drawing the main force of Benjamites after them. But as they moved away from the city of Gibeah (vv. 29-31), another, larger force came up behind the main force of Benjamites and took Gibeah (vv. 34-39). Then they all turned on the Benjamite army that had been drawn away. Soon all but 600 Benjamites were destroyed (v. 47).

*Notes* PEOPLE WITHOUT A KING

6. Read Judges 20:48-21:9. (a) What evidence is there that bitterness and sinful anger are driving this conflict rather than a concern for justice? (b) How do anger and resentment affect you? How can we avoid vindictiveness?

7. (a) Did the civil war “purge the evil from Israel” (20:13)? Why not? (b) What could they have done instead? (c) 21:10-24. How does the rest of the chapter illustrate that “sometimes it is a worse sin to keep a promise than to break it”?

8. Read Judges 21:25. How is this verse an appropriate summary of the book of Judges? How does the following quote by Rebecca Pippert shed light on the book?

**Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our life.<sup>2</sup>**

9. What is the single most helpful or striking truth you have learned for yourself from the book of Judges?

<sup>1</sup> *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962), p 246.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Out of the Salt Shaker and into the World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 53.

