

# *The Book of Judges*

Growth Group Study Guide



GOSFORD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Cover image: Samson with the Jawbone by Salomon de Bray (Dutch, 1597 - 1664)

## Introduction

The Book of Judges is like a car crash in slow motion. It's horrible, but you just can't look away. It reads like the script of a movie, spattered with colourful heroes and villains that seem larger than life - often as they deal out bloody death.

Set in the period after Israel has taken possession of the promised land; it follows the careers of the leaders (Judges) God raises up to deliver his people from their enemies. Altogether, the Judges make something of a hermeneutical corkscrew - spiralling with the nation of Israel - deeper and deeper into the depravity and destructive consequences of rebelling against God. In this, it becomes clear the Judges are not the solution to Israel's persistent rebellion.

Despite this, the book of Hebrews lauds a number of Judges (Heb 11:32-33). As such, we should not be too quick to judge the Judges and dismiss them as our teachers. Rather, we should recognise them as numbered among the "great cloud of

witnesses" (Heb 12:1), by which our own performance as Christians can be evaluated. Indeed, Hebrews 11:1-2 would encourage us to find 'faith' in the Judges.

What's more, the Judges are seen as part of salvation history fulfilled in Jesus THE messiah (Heb 12:2) and as such we should be sensitive to the Judges as shadows of him and how they might make us wise for salvation through faith in him (2 Tim 3:15).

### **Tips for studying Judges**

Judges is a cracking read - so get into it!

It'll really help if you read the passage before you get to growth group.

It might also be worth doing some dramatic readings together; with different people reading different parts and characters.

## The Downward Spiral

### Judges 1:1—3:6

The Book of Judges begins after the death of Joshua, Israel's great military leader and Moses' successor. Just before he died, Joshua gathered the Israelites and gave them a pep talk.

READ JOSHUA 23:4-7

1. What does Joshua say will happen after his death?
2. What does he urge the Israelites to do?

READ JUDGES 1:1-18

3. Would Joshua have been surprised at how things are working out in Judges 1:1-18?

In verses 5-15 we get two snapshots which give us an insight into the kind of things that happened during Judah's campaign.

4. The first talks about Adoni-Bezek (vss5-7). Does he get what he deserves?

5. As a representative picture, what does this gory episode tell us about Judah's campaign?

In verses 12-15 we meet the first of a number of prominent women who feature in the book of Judges.

6. What kind of character is Achsah?

7. Why do you think this story of Achsah is placed here?

READ JUDGES 1:19-22

8. Would Joshua have been surprised to read verse 19? Why?

9. What do you think these verses signify for the rest of the book?

## READ JUDGES 1:23-36

### 10. How does the campaign go for the rest of the tribes?

The Israelite campaign is ineffective. Their attempt to destroy Luz is typical. It's not destroyed, just transplanted. Unlike in the well-known story of the Canaanite Rahab helping the Israelites conquer Jericho and coming to serve Yahweh, the man from Luz just wants to preserve his pagan culture and religion and is mercifully permitted to do so by the Israelites. At face value this seems like a good thing except it expressly contravenes God's word (Deut 7:2) and leads to big problems for Israel.

## READ JUDGES 2:1-5

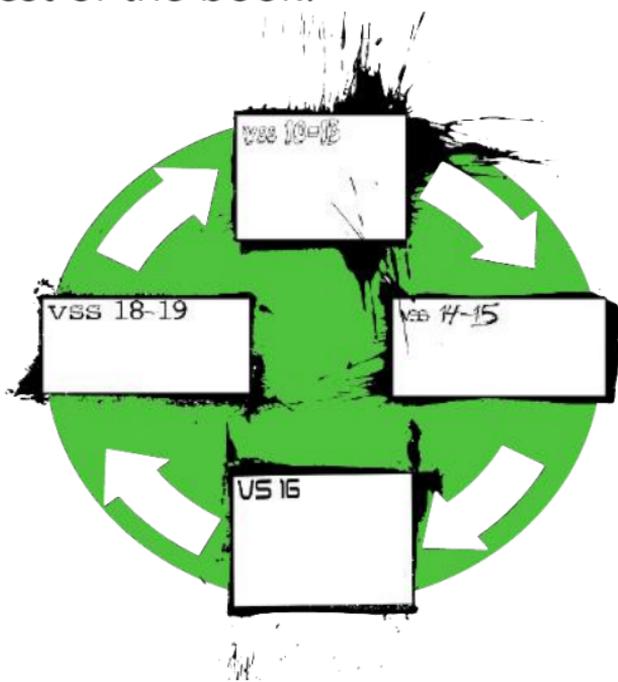
### 11. What's the cause of Israel's failure to drive out the Canaanites?

Given the Israelites' disobedience the question of how God can keep his initial promise to give their forefathers the land and

not drive out the inhabitants and their gods is a vexed one. We see something of an answer to this in the following section.

## READ JUDGES 2:6-19

In verses 10 to 19 we get a summary of the whole period of the Judges starting at the time of Joshua which has a repeated cycle throughout the rest of the book.



10. Fill in this cycle in the boxes below.
11. According to these verses, what is a Judge?
12. How effective are the Judges?

## READ JUDGES 2:20-3:6

13. What was God's final verdict on Israel?
14. What did God do in the light of Israel's actions?
15. What purpose/s did this serve?
16. What was the result?

Israel fails completely to learn from God's punishment or to listen to his word. She is rebellious and persistent in her defiance and covenant unfaithfulness, despite God's continued justice and mercy towards her. The stories that follow in the rest of the book demonstrate the cycle outlined in 2:6-19 and expose the heart of Israel's problem in that it was the problem of her heart.

Yet verses 2:6-19 also suggest where the heart of the solution lies. It lies in God's mercy working through a deliverer that God raises up.

READ HEBREWS 3:7-4:16

17. Why is it helpful to read and reflect upon Israel's hardness of heart?

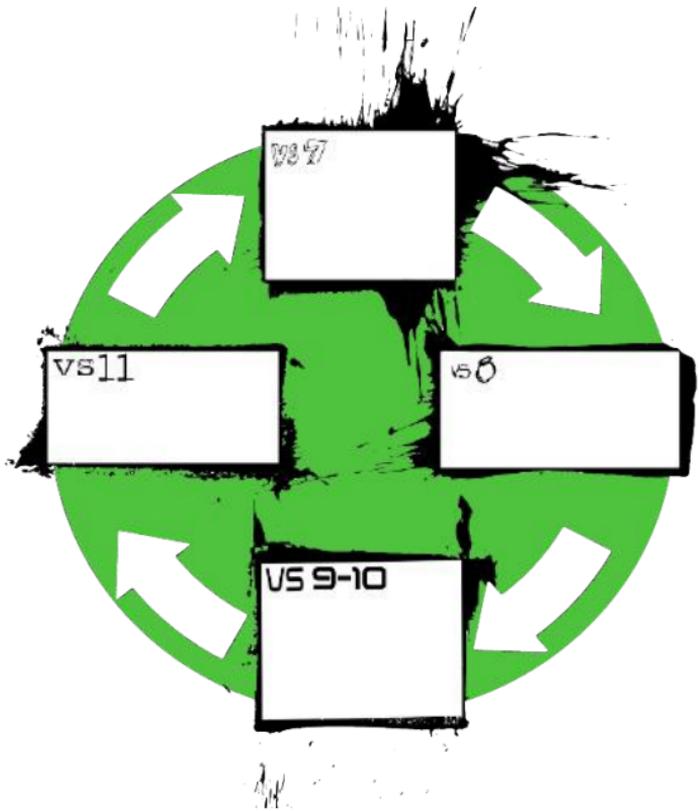
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# Othniel and Ehud

Judges 3:7-31

READ JUDGES 3:7-11

OUTLINE THE EVENTS OF THE OTHNIEL STORY

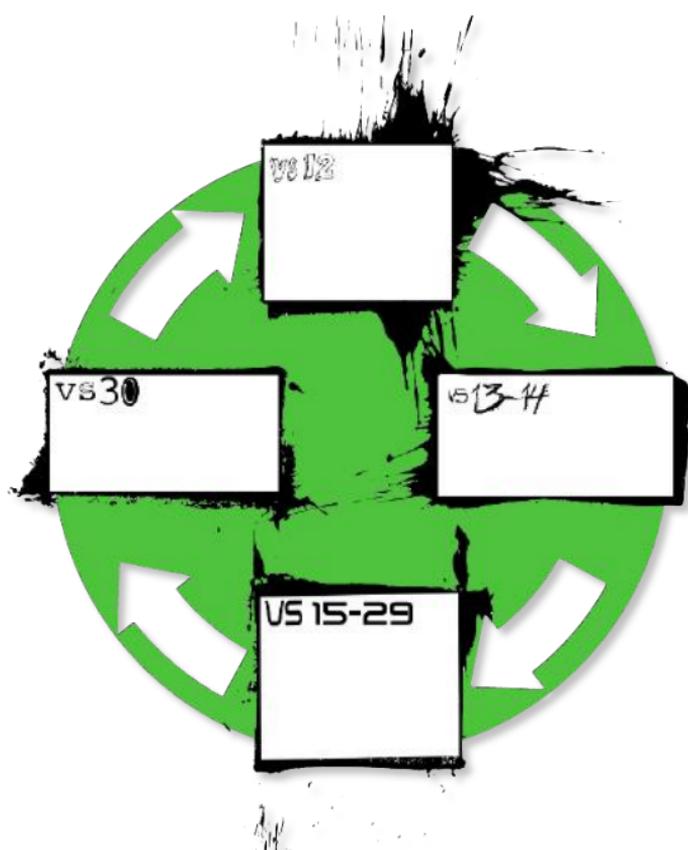


1. What do we already know about Othniel (see Judges 1:12-13)?

Is he the kind of guy you'd choose to be Judge?

Othniel is connected to the preeminent tribe of Judah. He is a holy-war hero and related to the great Caleb. He is your true blue-blooded Israelite and first Judge and as such embodies the institution and models what a Judge should be and do. We're meant to compare every other Judge after him to him. So let's see how the next Judge measures up. **READ JUDGES 3:12-31**

Note the similarities of Ehud's story to Othniel's.



2. What are the differences in the accounts of Othniel and Ehud?

3. What do these differences highlight about the way God works?

Ehud is a surprising choice of saviour-Judge to follow Othniel. If only for the irony of being a Benjamite. "Benjamin" means "son of the right hand" that is, right-handed. As God's chosen Judge, Ehud is the "son of the right hand" par excellence. But he is left-handed! Aside from the possible stigma of some personal defect associated with being left-handed, the irony of being God's left-handed right hand man is not lost on the author of the book. Ehud is your Robin to Othniel's Batman. You don't expect him to be saving the day. But unlike the account of Othniel, the narrative relishes the details of Ehud's deliverance and the Moabites undignified demise. At Ehud's hand, God's salvation is scandalous. We wouldn't expect God to use such a man or the methods he employs. These expectations are challenged again by the brief note about Shagmar in

verse 31 which has similar grotesque, satirical qualities to those in the Ehud story. The defeated enemy is made to look ridiculous by the single handed performance of an unlikely hero whom God raises up to save Israel.

## Think it through

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

4. What similarities can you see between this and the stories of Othniel, Ehud and Shagmar?
5. In what ways should this affect our understanding of the cross of Christ? How should it affect our proclamation of it?
6. What does it tell us about God, that he's willing and able to save his people through the efforts of Ehud and Shagmar?
7. In the light of all this, what place should boasting have in your life? (Judg. 3:10, 15, 28; 1 Cor 1:26-31)

Finish with prayer for your adopted ministry, the needs of your group and the mission of our local church.

# Deborah and Barak

Judges 4—5

READ JUDGES 4—5

NOTE THE SIMILARITIES OF THE DEBORAH/BARAK STORY TO OTHNIEL'S



2. What are the significant differences in the accounts of Othniel and Deborah/Barak?

3. What strikes you as remarkable about Deborah?

4. How do you feel about Barak's response to Deborah's call to action? What's wrong with it? (vs 8)

5. Does the battle in verses 10-16 exactly follow Deborah's words in verses 6-7? What significance do you see in this?

6. How would you have expected Jael to treat Sisera? Why?

7. How does verse 22 fulfil Deborah's prophecy in verse 9? Is this a fitting judgement on Barak? Why or why not?

If Ehud was God's surprising call of *misère*<sup>1</sup> to win the day, then Deborah and Jael are his

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<sup>1</sup> a bid in various card games to win by losing – it's a surprising way to win.

open *misère* <sup>2</sup>. Not only is Deborah a prophetess (rare in those days) she is said to be judging Israel (4:4). This is remarkable because the sense in which she was doing this was to be the effective ruler of the nation as a whole. No other woman in the Bible held such an office. Like the later prophet Samuel, she delegates the deliverance of Israel from its enemies. Like Moses beforehand, she acted as a final court of appeal for the settling of difficult issues. She is extraordinary. But even more surprising, the real hero in this story is not Deborah but another woman who's not even an Israelite, Jael. Where Deborah is instrumental in saving Israel and in so doing exposes the deficiencies of a leading man in the story, Jael undoes them all. She conquers both the leading men, depriving Sisera of his life and Barak of his honour. The rich irony of this is captured in Sisera's last words of request to Jael which literally read:

"Stand in the doorway of the tent and if a

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<sup>2</sup> a *misère* bid where the player bidding must reveal all their cards. No-one ever really expects to get a winning *open misère* hand.

man comes and asks you, 'Is there a man here?' say 'No'." (vs 20)

The irony being of course that as Barak arrives after Jael's pegging of Sisera, with one dead and the other emasculated, there is no man there and as promised the honour of delivering Israel goes to a woman.

REREAD JUDGES 5:24-31

8. What seems to be the main point of this section?
9. What would be ironic about the Israelites singing along with Deborah and Barak the final words in verse 31 of their song? (compare 4:1 and 6:1)

### Think it through

10. What might we sing instead? (see Romans 5:6-11) Can you think of a favourite hymn or song that does this?
11. How might the account of Deborah and Barak instruct us on what it means to be a man of honour?

12. In what ways can we be guilty of lack of faith in God's word and attempt to try and manipulate him like Barak was?

13. Read Matthew 4:1-4. How does Jesus show us the way to avoid Barak's error?

14. According to Hebrews 11:32-33, Barak is an example of faith. What did he do right that we might emulate?

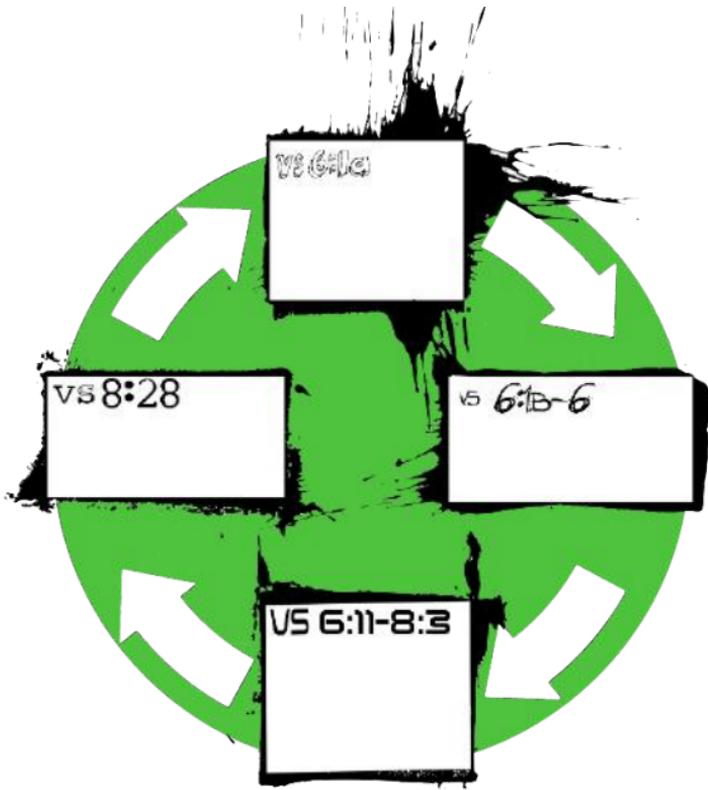
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# Gideon

Judges 6:1—8:28

READ JUDGES 6:1—8:28

Note the similarities of the Gideon story to Othniel's.



1. What are the significant differences in the accounts of Othniel and Gideon?

2. What does the break with previous cycles of the Judges with the prophet in 6:7-10 tell us about God? About the Israelites?
3. What reason does God give for reducing the number of fighting men (7:2)?
4. Who is conspicuously absent in Gideon's efforts in 8:4-27 and what does this imply?
5. How do Gideon's actions in 8:4-27 bring about what God was concerned to avoid in 7:2?
6. What is motivating Gideon in his later actions? (8:18-21) What effect does this have on God's deliverance of Israel? (8:22-27)

## Think it through

7. According to Hebrews 11:32-33, Gideon is an example of faith. What did he do right that we might emulate?
8. What might the way Gideon acted warn us of?
9. Read John 14:31 and Philippians 2:5-16. How did Jesus demonstrate that his rule over God's people is not like Gideon's?
10. In the light of this, what steps might we take to safeguard against taking the path that Gideon took?

Finish with prayer for your adopted ministry, the needs of your group and the mission of our local church.

## Abimelech

**Judges 8:29—9:57 & Galatians 6:1-10**

READ JUDGES 8:22-24 AND THEN 8:29-35.

1. What does Gideon refuse? What actions of his call into question what he says on this?
2. How do Israel treat the Lord? How did Israel treat Gideon's family? What link do you see?

Jerubbaal is Gideon's other name, given to him in chapter 6 after he destroys Baal's altar. Jerubbaal means 'he contends against Baal'. The irony of course is that while initially contending against Baal, Gideon's own kinglike behaviour serves to lay the groundwork for Israel to instead contend for Baal. Baal-Berith in verse 33 means 'Baal of the covenant' and only serves to highlight how exacting the Israelites sin is in rejecting their covenant with God in favour of Baal. Their sin is not accidental or born of

ignorance or unintentional, but a deliberate rejection of God.

**READ JUDGES 9:1-21 AND DEUTERONOMY 27:11-26**

3. From verse 7, Jotham tells a fable from Mount Gerizim. What is the significance of this?

4. What do you think is the point of Jotham's fable?

The thornbush or bramble in Jotham's fable is a dangerous plant for people to associate with because its unpredictable. It can provide shelter but it can also destroy. Indeed, it promises to destroy those who don't take refuge in him as their king (9:15). However, by making Abimelech king and enabling his murderous ways, Jotham effectively curses the rulers of Shechem to the same fate Abimelech faces (9:20).

**READ JUDGES 9:22-57**

5. How does God answer Jotham's curse from verse 20?

6. How does Abimelech die? What is

fitting about this? (see verse 5, 18, 46-49)

7. What is God's purpose in all these events? (see verses 23-24, 56-57)

## Think it through

8. Is there any winner in this story? What does this tell us about sinners?

9. How do we escape God's curse for our sin? (Galatians 3:13-14)

## READ GALATIANS 6:1-10

10. The principle in verse 7 has been graphically illustrated by Abimelech. Where do you see this at work in others and in your own life?

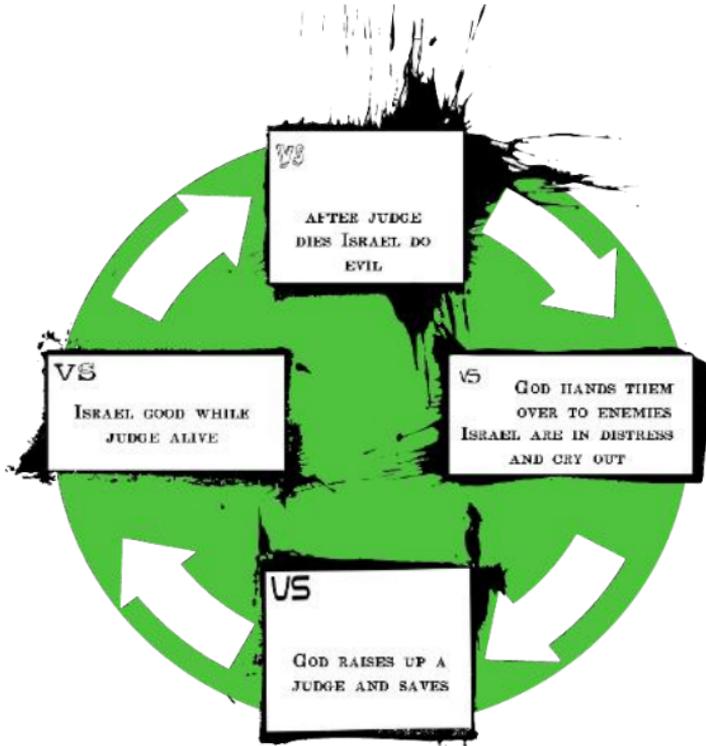
11. How might we apply the law of Christ to those 'reaping what they sow'?

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# Jephthah

## Judges 10—12

READ JUDGES 10:1-12:15 AND FILL IN AS MUCH OF THE FAMILIAR CYCLE BELOW AS IT CONCERNS JEPHTHAH.



1. What is missing and/or different in this cycle to previous cycles?
2. What is God's response to the Israelites' cry? (10:11-16) What does this tell you about his attitude towards

them?

3. Who raised up Jephthah to save Israel? What is the significance of this? (10:17-11:11)

4. How is the elder's treatment of Jephthah similar to Israel's treatment of God? (11:1-11)

5. What is the main point of Jephthah's message to the King of Ammon? (11:12-28)

6. What is your view of Jephthah's vow? Why do you think he makes it?

7. How does Jephthah's vow mirror the first exchange between God and Israel in 10:11-16?

Throughout this episode Jephthah has demonstrated a masterful use of words to get what he wants.

8. What does the outcome of Jephthah's vow teach us of the power

of words and particularly their place in how we relate to God?

### Think it through

9. According to Hebrews 11:32-34, Jephthah is an example of faith. What does he show us of the nature of faith?

10. What do Romans 10:9-13 and James 3:1-12 say about the right use of our words?

Finish with prayer for your adopted ministry, the needs of your group and the mission of our local church.

# Samson - the last judge

Judges 13—16

READ JUDGES 13:1-25 AND FILL IN AS MUCH OF THE FAMILIAR CYCLE BELOW THAT YOU CAN.



1. What is missing in this cycle compared to previous cycles?
2. What is significant about there being no mention of Israel crying out for help this time?

3. Read Numbers 6:1-21. What did it mean to be a Nazirite? What is to be different for Manoah's wife's son?

4. What is the purpose of this amended Naziriteship for Manoah's wife's son? (13:5)

In contrast to every other Judge, the phrase '...the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him...' in verse 25 is used of Samson alone. Some have suggested that the sense of what is happening here is akin to the inner turmoil of a dreamer awaking from a disturbing dream, and as such foreshadows the turbulent life he's about to embark on, which at the very least has been initiated by God.

## READ JUDGES 14:1-15:20

In seeking a Philistine wife Samson is blind to all reason and duty, consumed by what his eyes see and heart desires.

5. What is the reason we are given for such erratic passion? (14:4) How do you feel about this?

6. How would you describe Samson's Spirit enabled activity? (14:6, 19, 15:14)

7. How do you reconcile this with Samson's motivation for such activity? (14:19, 15:7-8, 11)

8. What is the significance of the exchange between God and Samson over his thirst? (15:18-19)

Samson is an enigma. As a Nazirite, he's a complete failure. Both in his relationships with Philistine woman and in his contact with corpses he fundamentally breaks his vows, and mirrors Israel, a nation committed to lusting after other gods and stained with

violence and vengeance. However, in all his imperfection, Samson is still God's chosen saviour upon whom the Spirit rushes to fulfil his promise "...he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines." (13:5)

**READ JUDGES 16:1-3**

As Gaza is a significant Philistine city, so Hebron is a significant city in Judah.

9. What message might Samson be sending to the Philistines and to the Israelites in Judah by superhumanly placing Gaza's city gates on top of the hill that faces Hebron?

**READ JUDGES 16:4-31**

10. Clearly Samson is attracted to Philistine women. However, what is different this time around?

11. How is this Samson's undoing?

When Samson teases Delilah with ways to neutralise his super strength, he literally says he will become weak as any other man, as if still wanting, unconsciously, to retain his

individuality. However, in verse 17, as he tells the truth and opens his heart to Delilah, there is a subtle change of wording. He says he will become "weak, like every other man". On this change, one commentator notes:

"Now he forfeits this too (his individuality), and reveals to her how he can become like every man ... Maybe this is what Samson, in his heart of hearts, has wanted his whole life."

His separateness as a special Nazirite - signified by his uncut hair; and effective through the Spirit propelling him into conflict with the Philistines - has always got in the way of peaceful relationships with the Philistines. As a result, Samson has had to fight with them, even though it hasn't necessarily been what he wanted. Perhaps then, as he opens his heart to Delilah, he's actually saying "I don't want to be special anymore. I don't want to fight anymore. Shave my head and make me normal, make me like every other man." And it's at this point that Samson mirrors Israel, who like him - although chosen before existing - has never fully embraced her calling; and had repeated illicit love affairs that have led to her

undoing.

12. How do the Philistines interpret their capture of Samson? (vss 23-24). What is ironic about this? (see verses 20 and 22)

13. What motivates Samson to pray (16:28)? Does this undo God's destiny for him (13:5)?

### Think it through

14. In the end, how is Samson a pattern of the salvation won by Jesus?

15. According to Hebrews 11:32-34, Samson is an example of faith. What does he show us of the nature of true faith?

READ ACTS 2:22-24 AND 4:27-28.

16. How does the death of Jesus demonstrate God's power over human evil?

17. What in this world do you find the

hardest not to love more than God?  
Why?

Finish with prayer for your adopted ministry,  
the needs of your group and the mission of  
our local church.

### Deuteronomy 12:1-14, Judges 17—18

In the story of Samson, we see a Judge, God's chosen deliverer, for the most part doing what was right in his own eyes. In this he is preemptive of the entire nation of Israel as detailed in the final chapters of Judges. In these chapters there is the repeated phrase, "everyone did what was right in their own eyes" surrounded by stories detailing how this attitude sees Israel descend into a chaotic mess.

**READ DEUTERONOMY 12:1-14 AND JUDGES 17**

1. What do you make of Micah's confidence in verse 13?
2. Does the author of Judges make any comment on the situation in this chapter?

**READ JUDGES 18:1-21**

3. Why do you think the Danites take Micah's idols, ephod and Levite priest?

4. What do you think motivates the Levite priest (18:4, 20)? How then are we to treat what he says on behalf of God? (18:6)

READ JUDGES 18:22-31

5. What is Micah's problem?

6. In verse 10, the Danites attribute their victory over the people of Laish as God putting them into their hands. What might be the real reason they won? (18:7, 10, 27-28)

The Danite conquest has the whiff of the successful God-given conquest under Joshua (Num 13; Josh 2) with spies sent to scout the land of promise, accompanied by a Levite priest and an ephod, and with the assurance of victory at God's hand. However, that initial whiff of God's blessing upon a deeper breath sours into the stench of idolatry that ultimately blows ill for the tribe of Dan and indeed for all of Israel.

7. What hint is there that the Levite and his religious pedigree and trappings will not be a blessing?

### Think it through

8. How did Micah and the Danites think to secure God's favour?

9. What is the nature of the religious error in these chapters? Why is this a problem?

10. What do you think were the reasons for Micah and the Danites' syncretistic idolatry?

11. How might Christians be tempted to be syncretistic in their thinking and practice?

12. How are Christians, in fact, guaranteed God's blessing? (Eph 1:3, 2:8)

13. In what ways might Micah and the Danites' idolatry be a warning to us? (1 Cor 10:1-14)

Finish with prayer for your adopted ministry, the needs of your group and the mission of our local church.

### Judges 19–21

The final chapters of Judges are perhaps the most difficult to read in the whole Bible. They detail a level of depravity that is truly sickening. Which is kind of the point. We are meant to be sickened by the behaviour of Israel as a whole so that we might not only know but feel the terrible consequences of 'everyone doing what they see fit'. (21:25)

#### READ JUDGES 19

1. What does the author of Judges flag as the underlying reason for the outrageous behaviour detailed here? (vs 1)

The opening story of the Levite recovering his disgruntled concubine uses the Hebrew word for 'heart' five times. Verse 3 "her husband went to speak to her heart", verse 5 "'Refresh your heart...'", verse 6 "'stay tonight and let your heart be good.'", verse 8 "'Please strengthen your heart. Wait till afternoon'" and verse 9, "'Stay and let your heart be good...'". The way 'heart' keeps occurring

makes one wonder whether the Levite has done what he came to do - speak to his concubine's heart and reconcile with her. The fact that only the Levite is mentioned in verse 10 as leaving, with the concubine numbered amongst his possessions, suggests not.

**2. What might this suggest of the state of the Levite's heart? How does this bear itself out? (vs 25, 28-29)**

**3. Who is worse, the men of Gibeah or the Levite and his host?**

This is one of the ugliest stories in the Bible. After making special effort to reach an Israelite town instead of risking the night in a pagan city, the Levite and his party find themselves in a situation reminiscent of that which happened in the worst of pagan cities, Sodom (Gen 19). The behaviour of the men of Gibeah, the Levite and his host in their brutal, callous and lethal treatment of the concubine stand as a mirror to the nation of Israel as a whole. A nation of people who do what they see is right in their own eyes but in so doing descend into a depravity worthy

only of death and destruction.

READ JUDGES 20:1-48

4. Does the Levite's account match what actually happened? What is he trying to do with his account of the events?

5. Do you think Israel responds appropriately to the Levite's story? (compare their response here to other calls to fight)

6. Why do you think Israel was defeated by the Benjamites the first two times if the Lord was directing her?

Third time around, the Israelites are victorious and pursue the Benjamites with such ferocity they reduce them to almost nothing, only 600 soldiers from a whole tribe. The irony here, is that this is what Israel should have done at the beginning with the Canaanites. The sad irony being that they seem to be better at killing their brothers than their enemies. And with that, it seems

one tribe will be lost from Israel for good.

READ JUDGES 21:1-18

7. What's the problem? Who's responsible?
8. What's the first attempt at a solution? Is it justifiable?
9. What's the second attempt? How would you describe this solution?
10. What is the narrator's conclusion about the problem with Israel? (vs25)

The cruel irony of this story is that it comes full circle. Where the Benjamites are undone by one ambush plan they now use another to secure their survival. Where the justification for a 'righteous' war is in response to the abuse of a woman, the elders of Israel end up justifying the abuse of many women to compensate for the excesses of that war. It seems a people committed to doing what is right in their own eyes are blind to any other path but moral and religious

chaos.

However, the narrative also attributes Israel's decline to another thing - the absence of a king. (18:1, 19:1, and importantly 21:25). That the book ends on this note points to how God will ultimately keep his promises despite the sin of his people. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes because they had no king. We need a ruler who'll overcome our sin.

However, the many kings of Israel that follow this period fail to obey God, let alone lead the Israelites into obedience. A new type of king was needed. One who would obey God. One who would deal with the problem and consequences of 'everyone doing whatever they see fit'.

And Jesus is that King. Announced as such upon his crucifixion with a sign above his head reading "This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:38). In his Friday death and Sunday resurrection, Jesus is proclaimed the true King of Israel with power. And in his now ever living and loving rule he deals with the world's sin, cleanses grubby hearts, and offers God's vital alternative to the self-

destructive path of 'doing whatever we see fit.'

## Think it through

Think back on what you have seen of Israel and the various Judges.

11. Where is the greatest temptation you face to 'do whatever you see fit' like Israel did?

12. What element of true faith seen in the has left an impression on you?

13. What is it about Jesus as THE King and THE Judge that impresses you or moves you the most?

Finish with prayer for your adopted ministry, the needs of your group and the mission of our local church.