

Get Up, Warrior!

Today In Your Reading...

We continued and finished the story of Gideon, the next judge of Israel, who was used of God to break the power of the Midianites, and he did it with only 300 men. Gideon is another example of an ordinary person doing extraordinary things simply because he obeyed the Lord. As a result, the land of Israel had peace for forty years.

However, as soon as Gideon died, the Israelites returned to their old ways, that of worshiping Baal and other false gods. "They forgot the Lord their God who had rescued them from all their enemies...; nor did they show any loyalty to Gideon's family, despite all the good he had done for Israel" (8:34, 35). As a result, one of Gideon's sons, Abimelech, rose to power, killed his 70 half-brothers, and enslaved the people.

I am always inspired by the story of Gideon, perhaps because I can easily identify with him. Here was an average guy with no special skills or outstanding abilities, and he recognized his own insignificance in the world. In fact, when approached by the angel of the Lord to deliver Israel from its oppressors, he responded by saying, "How can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my entire family" (6:15).

Gideon was one of those who doubted his own abilities but who would, eventually, trust in God's. He also second guessed the Lord's call on his life. At first, he did God's work in secret (6:27). He laid out his fleece twice to confirm God's leading (6:36-40), and he even eavesdropped on conversations to bolster his confidence (7:13-15). But, **what he did, and what you and I can do as well, was follow the Lord one step at a time.** Doing so strengthened Gideon's faith, and, in time, the Lord used him to do great things for His people.

Daily Reflection

Why does God call and use the *feeble*, the *few*, or the *faithless* — people like you and me — to do His work?

One reason why **God uses the feeble, the few, and the faithless is so that He might receive the glory.** When He whittled Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300, He did so that the people would not boast in their own strength (7:2). He uses the weak to undermine the strong; He uses the foolish to confound the wise, and *He uses the inadequate and underwhelming to overthrow the seemingly invincible.*

Though Gideon had a low view of himself, did you notice how the Lord viewed him? The angel called him, "Mighty hero!" He called him this not because of anything Gideon had done or would do, but because "the Lord was with him."

Thank God that He is patient with your fears and hesitancy. Praise Him for using you despite your sins and shortcomings. *You, like Gideon, can do great and mighty things when you trust God's leadership in your life.*

Anyone who has the Lord with him is mighty; and, anyone who acts on His behalf is a hero. *While self-confidence is often misplaced, faith in the God of heaven is never misplaced.* In the words of Gideon (7:15), "Get up, warrior! For the Lord has given you the victory!"

The Truth of the Past

Today In Your Reading...

“God punished Abimelech for the evil he had done against his father, Gideon, by murdering his seventy brothers” (9:5, 56). Abimelech was badly injured when a millstone fell on his head; then, he had his armor bearer stab him with his sword. You also read how “God punished the men of Shechem for all their evil” (9:57).

After all of this, the Israelites abandoned the Lord, returned to their worship of Baal and Ash-toreth and did evil in the sight of God. This time, He handed them over to the Ammonites, who vowed revenge for Israel “stealing” their land when they came up from Egypt 300 years earlier. The people turned to a great warrior named Jephthah to save them (11:1-10). He would become the next judge of Israel.

In some ways, Jephthah was a picture of Christ. There was disdain surrounding his birth and he was an outcast of sorts, rejected by the community. But, when the people got into trouble, they called on him to be their savior. However, Jephthah wanted to be more than just their “savior.” He also wanted to be their ruler or lord. We will see these types of Christ-connections with several of the judges.

I thought Jephthah did two things that were admirable. First, when the King of the Ammonites explained his reason for attacking the Israelites, he claimed that they had stolen his land (three centuries earlier). Of course, the King’s claim was bogus, and Jephthah, who knew the true story, set him straight. Because Jephthah knew his history, he was able to catch the enemy in a lie (Deuteronomy 2, 3).

Our spiritual enemy is a master at historical revisionism. He is constantly at work revising what really happened. He skews the facts, rewrites the past, and perverts the truth in order

to undermine the people and purposes of God. It began in Eden, when the serpent said to Eve, “Did God say...?” He still twists the facts of history in his favor, revising them for his purposes. **We must not let him get away with it!** We must do what Jephthah did and know what God has done in our past, so that we can remind our enemy in the present. *Otherwise he will steal from us what is not rightfully his.*

The second thing I found admirable about Jephthah was his confidence in the Lord. He called out the Ammonite god Chemosh (11:24) and challenged him, knowing that he did not exist, and put the matter into the Lord’s hands, who is the Judge of all. May we exhibit this kind of confidence, not in ourselves, but in the ability of the Lord to defend His own people and purposes.

Daily Reflection

Does the enemy ever bring up your past in order to steal your present peace, joy, confidence, or victory? How so? How do you respond?

When the enemy brings up your past, **set him straight by reminding him of this truth — Christ has made all things new!** *Do not let the enemy steal your present with his lies about the past.* Be confident in the Lord your God!

Strength in Weakness

April 4 — *Judges 11:29-15:20*

Day 94 — 271 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

God raised up the last of the judges — Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. Only two of the five had stories recorded about them — Jephthah and Samson. While the details recorded about them both seriously frustrate me when I read them, I appreciate the fact that the Bible does not hide them from the reader; rather, the Bible exposes all of their flaws and failures.

What is obvious here is that **imperfect men do not make perfect judges.**

Jephthah, for example, defeated the Ammonites and the jealous Ephraimites, but he made a foolish vow that ended with the death of his daughter and only child. On top of that, Jephthah was guilty of human sacrifice, which was against God's law and certainly would not have honored Him. Thus, Jephthah, as a judge, was a terrible example of faithfulness to the covenant.

Samson is another heroic figure with disappointing flaws. Usually, when we think of Samson, we think of all his strengths. He killed a lion with his bare hands, he took out 30 Philistines single-handedly, he broke the ropes that the men of Judah bound him with, he caught 300 foxes, he whacked 1000 Philistines with a donkey's jawbone, and much more. However, what is often overlooked are Samson's weaknesses. He was a sucker for conniving women (foreign women), he was disobedient to his parents and to God, he despised his Nazarite vow, he practiced deceit, he befriended God's enemies, and he was arrogant, hot-tempered, and vindictive.

Both of these guys, particularly Samson, make us want to scream, "What are you doing?" But, we must remember that the period of judges was a hypocritical time of apostasy among God's people, and, unfortunately, the judges reflect this time in their own failures.

Yet, God still chose to use these men in order to achieve His purposes. Yes, in them we find much to complain about, but in them we should also find much comfort. **If God only used perfect people to do His work, then nothing would ever get done,** because *there are no perfect people.* God uses the weak to demonstrate His strength.

Daily Reflection

What does this tell you about your God, that He chooses to use people like you, despite all of your fears, failures, and flaws?

What comfort or confidence should you take from these truths?

God is good. In spite of all your sins and shortcomings, somehow His work is done and His purposes are accomplished. Praise His name for using you despite all that you have done or not done. **He is able to fulfill His perfect will with your imperfect words and ways.**

Belief and Behavior

April 5 — *Judges 16:1-18:31*

Day 95 — 270 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

As a whole, the nation of Israel has betrayed its covenant with God. This compromise is evident in every story of *Judges*. You witnessed it again in the sad story of Samson, the maddening mess of Micah and his mom, and the discourteous deeds of the Danites. The book reads like a contemporary television show. How droll and depressing! Is there not someone who stands for godliness, righteousness, or justice?

What is on display in these unfortunate stories is the truth that *belief affects practice*. **One's doctrine influences one's deeds.** *One's view of God, whether high or low or even non-existent, will affect one's view of everything else, including how he lives.* A healthy fear of God leads to faithful obedience to God, while a separation from God leads to sins against God and a stroll down the path of self-destruction.

Isn't it interesting that the *political* chaos that is pictured during this time — there was no king and everyone did what was right in his own eyes — was produced by the *immorality* of the people, which was linked to their *religious* beliefs? It started with idolatry and the worship of false gods, which led the people to perform all manner of immorality and injustice.

God called His people to separate from the world, yet Samson chose to separate from God and, instead, embrace the world. Rather than stand against the paganism of his day, *he was sleeping with the enemy*. In the end, he ended up bare, blind, and bound. Micah separated from the Lord, then stole from his mother, set up an idol, and secured for himself a Levite to be his personal priest; and, the Danites abandoned the Lord, abused Micah and his family, and then affirmed idolatry in their tribe for generations to come. **Belief affects practice. Behavior follows belief. Sin follows separation.**

Daily Reflection

All of these stories hinge on a relationship with God. Allowing distance, apathy, or separation to occur in that relationship is detrimental. How do you prevent these from occurring?

One of the first lies the enemy dares you to believe is the one that says, "The grass is greener on the other side." Have you ever fallen into this trap? How so? What can you do in the future to avoid this pitfall?

The Gospel — your relationship with the Lord — is more than just dealing with your sins, making you right before God, or securing your future. *Your understanding of the Gospel should affect how you live.* Your behavior follows your beliefs. **Focus first on your relationship with the Lord. Everything else will fall in line.**

The Right Way

Today In Your Reading...

The book of *Judges* ended with perhaps the most repulsive story so far, that of the Levite and his concubine, the horrific behavior of the tribe of Benjamin, and the resulting civil war between Benjamin and Judah (a glimpse into the coming conflict between Kings Saul and David). It is alarming how fast and how far the Israelites fell away from the Lord and His covenant, so far, in fact, that the people of Gibeah (Benjamin) repeated the awful actions of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Genesis 19:1-11*).

The book ends with a summary statement of this period, "In those days Israel had no king, so the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes" (*21:25*). Here is the author's way of saying, "The wheels have come off of the wagon and all hell has broken loose!"

While he pointed out that these things happened before there was a king, the problem was not that they didn't have a king. **The problem was that the people had been unfaithful to the King they already had.** They had abandoned the King of heaven, who had delivered them from bondage and from their enemies; they had been unfaithful to their covenant, and they had "spit" in God's face and run to the arms of false gods. As a result of their separation, they experienced life without Him; and, **life without God in the picture is chaotic and revolting.**

While we may think that these people were foolish, we must consider what is happening in our society today. Like the Israelites, we have abandoned our godly heritage, removed God as our guide, and welcomed evil into our midst. The prevailing philosophy of our day is that of **moral relativism**, the idea that there is no absolute or universal moral standard for law or behavior, that everyone is free to choose what is right in his own eyes. As the German atheist Friedrich

Nietzsche wrote, "You have your way; I have my way. As for *the right way*, it does not exist."

Daily Reflection

Do you sense that moral relativism has become the norm? Can you predict the outcome of holding to such a perverted philosophy?

While the thought of everyone doing what's right in his own eyes might sound "liberating," it only gives way to license, meaning that every evil imaginable is "right" and will, in time, become legal. Living out such a philosophy is impossible, of course, because **everyone can't be right**; and *pursuing such a course will only end in social self-destruction*, as it did in the period of judges. The wheels will come off of the wagon and all hell will break loose!

What, then, is the solution? Simple, the Gospel, changed hearts and minds and a return to God as our guide. **There must be a standard of morality for all people, in a places, at all times**; and, there is — God's natural moral law. As Creator and Sovereign of the universe, He gets to make the rules, and His rules bring order, goodness, and justice to all people and all societies. Ignoring God's statutes only invites every person to fulfill his sinful fleshly desires, which spells disaster for us all.

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is only death. But, I — the Lord Jesus — have come that you might live and have it more abundantly" (*Proverbs 14:12; John 10:10*).

A Life of Honor

April 7 — *Ruth 1:1-4:12*

Today In Your Reading...

The life and ministry of Jesus are often foreshadowed in the Old Testament, neatly hidden in the events and characters there (called types). We have already looked at several types of Christ, for example the Ark of Noah, the Passover Lamb, and the Tabernacle. Typology brings the Bible to life, as one discovers the amazing providence of God, how He fits all pieces into His puzzle. The story of Ruth and Boaz is such a piece, concealing another beautiful type of Christ — *the Kinsman Redeemer*.

When Naomi and Ruth found themselves widowed in a foreign land, they returned to Israel to find their nearest kinsman. In the Old Testament, a close relative could redeem (buy back) a family member sold into slavery, redeem land that was sold under economic duress, or redeem the family name by virtue of marriage. Though these women had been estranged by their circumstances, God, by way of Boaz, redeemed their present situation and future fate.

Like Naomi and Ruth, we were once far off from God, dead in our trespasses, but He, being rich in mercy, redeemed us by the blood of His Son Jesus and made us His legal heirs, having adopted us into His family. Therefore, **Christ is our Kinsman Redeemer**. He restored all that we lost because of sin, and He has given us a future and a hope. Praise God that He led us to our Redeemer and that He gave us a new life to live (*Gal. 4:4, 5; Eph. 2:1-7, 13*).

Daily Reflection

What I found refreshing today was the character demonstrated in the lives of Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth. Having just read of the disgusting deeds done in the period of judges, where everyone did what was right in his own eyes, it was a relief to read of people doing what was right and treating others with respect.

Even after a great deal of suffering and hardship, Naomi released Orpah to her family and concerned herself only with Ruth's future. Evidently, Boaz was a godly man who cared for the poor and the widowed; both workers and women were treated well on his property, unlike in other fields (2:22). Then, there was Ruth, who was faithful and kind to her mother-in-law, diligent in her work, and obedient to the system of redemption, even though she was a Moabite. Even Boaz said, "Everyone in town knows that you are an honorable woman" (3:11).

Is this not how the people of God should act in the midst of a perverse and wicked people? *We are to be faithful among the faithless*. We are to be courteous and considerate among the discourteous and inconsiderate. We are to be hardworking among the lazy and entitled; and, **we are to be honorable among the despicable**.

What about you? Are you a Naomi, a Ruth, or a Boaz? Do your words, actions, attitudes, and character separate you as an honorable person? Why does it matter if you are an honorable person or not? Who cares? What's the point?

You are not to be honorable for honor's sake. You are not to be set apart to gain attention for yourself, but to be a light for the Lord, to reflect the difference that He can make in one's life. **You are to be honorable to honor the one worthy of honor — Christ alone**.

The Prayer of Jabez

Today In Your Reading...

We covered the ending of the book of *Ruth* and the introduction to the book of *1 Samuel*. Then, wedged in between were the genealogies of Judah from the book of *1 Chronicles*. What's interesting to me is that the topic of all three of these passages was children. Ruth was blessed with a child named Obed, who was the grandfather of King David and, therefore, in the lineage of Christ. Though Hannah was barren, at least in the part that you read today, she will be blessed with a child named Samuel, who becomes a great prophet; and, of course, the genealogies of Judah are filled with scores of descendants.

Children are blessings from the Lord. He "enabled Ruth to become pregnant" (*Ruth 4:13*); but, He did not give Hannah children, for a time, for He had "closed her womb" (*1 Samuel 1:5, 6*). God is the giver and sustainer of life; and He allows children to be born in His timing and for His purposes. We, as parents, are blessed to have a part in our children's lives.

Another thing I find interesting, regarding children, is names. Although parents technically name their children, somehow God intervenes and gives meaning to them. Throughout the Bible, names are intentional and, in God's providence, names reflect His purposes. Ruth and Boaz named their son Obed, meaning "servant." Hannah will name her son Samuel, meaning "asked of God." Then, nestled among the genealogies today, there was a man named Jabez, whose name means "pain or sorrow," because "his birth had been so painful" (*1 Chron. 4:9*).

Maybe that is why the author paused here and pointed out the fact that Jabez was "an honorable man, more distinguished than any of his brothers." He had overcome his name and

found the key to happiness — a relationship with the Lord his God.

I'm sure that you are familiar with the prayer of Jabez: "Oh that You would bless me and extend my lands! Please be with me in all that I do and keep me from all trouble and pain" (*4:10*).

On the surface, this prayer seems selfish, "Bless me and extend my lands? Keep me from trouble and pain." But, the Bible says that God answered his prayer, which means that this prayer must have been God-centered not self-centered.

It was not that the words of Jabez were somehow magical, but rather it was the fact that he placed his trust in the Lord that God honored him. Jabez was not asking for his territory to be expanded so that he could have more stuff, but rather so that he could do more for the Lord and influence more people in His name. It was a humble and genuine prayer for God's presence and power to be evident in his life. Jabez wanted to live a life that was not distracted by sin, a life that honored his God.

Daily Reflection

Have you discovered life's true source of happiness, the real escape from pain and sorrow? **It is not in possessions but in a Person; it is not found in relationships with others but in a relationship with God.** Write your own humble and genuine "prayer of Jabez" and may God answer it.
