



Faith Connections

Bible Study Guide

Fall
22

*The Story of a People
God's Early Leaders*



Bible Study Guide

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Perspectives

Help Wanted!

Located in most newspapers (print and online) is some type of “Help Wanted” section. Each ad contains some kind of description of the work the employer is seeking people to do, and often the kind of person desired to fill that position. If you are looking for employment, and you feel you are qualified to do the job, you answer the want ad.

Throughout the Bible we see God calling out, “Help Wanted!” You may be thinking, “God doesn’t need our help!” Though all-powerful and not dependent on any creature, God has chosen to carry out His plans through lowly human instruments—people who are obedient. God worked through people like Moses, Isaiah, Peter, Paul, and He still works through people today who have surrendered their lives to Him and are open to His leading.

The Hebrews, God’s people, were slaves in Egypt. God was going to set these people free and give them a land of promise. Therefore, God was looking for a person to lead the people out of bondage. Someone with a humble heart. Someone He could work through. Someone who would be open to His divine direction. God called Moses (Exodus 3). But Moses could not do what God was calling him to do by himself; therefore, God promised to be with Him (3:12). God chooses to work through people, but they cannot do His will on sheer human power; they need the power of God working in and through them.

One of the messages of this quarter is that God is looking for people to work in His kingdom—those who will say “yes” to His power, presence, and leading in their lives. God has placed His image in us (Genesis 1:27) and calls us to be the “light of the world and the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13-16)—reflecting His glory in the world. We are His “masterpiece created to do good works” (Ephesians 2:10) and He calls us to “go into the world and preach the good news” (Matthew 28:19) We often think God will do it “some” way; He doesn’t need us to share our faith, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, visit the prisoner, and so on. However, God is calling out, “Help Wanted!” Will we answer that call?

May God bless you as you study His Word this quarter!

MIKE WONCH

Editor

September

4

GOD PLANS DELIVERANCE

God has compassion on His children and continually works to bring deliverance.

THE WORD

EXODUS 2:1-17

Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, ²and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. ³But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. ⁴His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

⁵Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. ⁶She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.

⁷Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"

⁸"Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother. ⁹Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. ¹⁰When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

¹¹One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. ¹²Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. ¹³The next day he went out and saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked the one in the wrong, "Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?"

¹⁴The man said, “Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid and thought, “What I did must have become known.”

¹⁵When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well. ¹⁶Now a priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came to draw water and fill the troughs to water their father’s flock. ¹⁷Some shepherds came along and drove them away, but Moses got up and came to their rescue and watered their flock.

23-25

KEY VERSE

²³During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. ²⁴**God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.** ²⁵So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Exodus begins with notable connections to the Genesis narratives. Israel has become “exceedingly fruitful,” “multiplied greatly” (Exodus 1:7), and populated the land to a point where a new Pharaoh feels threatened and enacts a violent decree to oppress Israel. In order to control his environment, the Pharaoh establishes a law to kill every Hebrew boy by throwing them in the Nile (1:22).

MOSES IS BORN**Exodus 2:1-4**

The birth of Moses takes place in the context of this dark and violent time in Israel’s story. Chapter 2 begins with an introduction to a family from the tribe of Levi. They already have two children, Miriam and Aaron. The birth of their next son happens under Pharaoh’s genocidal decree. They take a risk by saving his life and hide their baby boy for three months.

When they could no longer hide this baby boy, Moses’ mother, Jochebed (Exodus 6:20), makes a small basket with papyrus leaves, tar, and pitch. She carefully places her little three-month-old baby boy in

Did You Know?

Moses was placed in a small basket (literally ark, *tēbat*). The only other occurrence of this term for the small basket is its use for Noah's ark (*tēbat*) in Genesis. The intentional use of this term helps to connect this moment in Exodus with another perilous moment where God intervenes to save humanity from the destructive forces of water.

MOSES IS RESCUED

MOSES FLEES

the Nile. One cannot help but imagine the heartbreak of this moment as she lets him drift away from her fingertips, her heart wrenching in pain. . . silent and desperate prayers uttered to God.

Exodus 2:5-10

In the next movement of the story, a surprising shift takes place. The baby is floating down the river under the watchful eye of his sister, Miriam (2:4). As the baby floats down the river, the daughter of Pharaoh hears him crying and responds with mercy. She sends her servant down to get the child, fully aware that he is a Hebrew baby (2:6). In this moment, the future leader of Israel is rescued by women from Pharaoh's own household. Pharaoh's daughter names the Hebrew baby, "Moses"—"because I drew him out of the water."

God works through women to subvert the plans of oppressive and powerful forces. One important literary feature in these early chapters is to observe that many of the women are named, yet the "pharaoh" is nameless! This literary clue reminds us that God is working behind the scenes in creative and mighty ways through every day, ordinary people. God is at work through unlikely people to subvert the powerful forces who commit themselves to violence and oppression.

Exodus 2:11-17, 23-25

Moses is now a young man, raised in an Egyptian household, and painfully aware of the unfair treatment of the Hebrew people under the oppressive regime of the Egyptians. Moses witnesses a Hebrew slave being beaten. Moses identifies with the Hebrews and sees them as "his own people" (2:11). Beating slaves was not unusual in the ancient world. Slaves in this context did not have many rights. Moses' reaction reveals that he feels the injustice of this moment on a very human level, even if what he witnessed was not technically against the Egyptian law

Think About It

The Exodus narrative does not give many details about the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, except that they “feared God” (Exodus 1:17). What a powerful reminder of what is possible from unlikely places and courageous people!

codes. Moses kills the oppressive taskmaster and then hides the Egyptian body in the sand. Moses’ violent conduct reaches the ears of Pharaoh. To escape a death sentence, he flees to Midian for safety. Moses’ life is turned upside down in one decisive moment.

In Midian, Moses sits down by a well. Here, Moses meets and rescues the seven daughters of Reuel, a priest of Midian, from cruel and territorial shepherds (2:16-22). They invite Moses to their home and call him “an Egyptian” (2:19). The Midianites were descendants of Abraham (Genesis 25:1-2). Though later depictions of the relationship between Midian and Israel is complicated (Judges 6:1-6), in this scene, Midian becomes a haven for Moses. Moses’ identity is continually complex. He was raised as an Egyptian but is aware that he is a Hebrew. The family invites him to stay, and he will eventually marry one of Reuel’s daughters, Zipporah. The complex nature of his identity is revealed in the naming of his first son, Gershom, “I have become a foreigner in a foreign land” (Exodus 2:22). What is fascinating for Moses is that at this moment, God is about to respond to the cries of the people. God has not forgotten His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis 50:24).

Moses’ experiences through his time as a refugee, leader, and shepherd will provide the framework for all that is to come. God’s plan for divine redemption will involve the most unlikely people to accomplish the impossible.

REFLECT **T**hink about the ways God has worked through the most unlikely people to touch your life.

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September

11

GOD EQUIPS HIS LEADER

God equips those He calls into His service.

THE WORD

EXODUS 3:1-15

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

⁴When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

⁵“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁹And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

¹²And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”

¹³Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

KEY VERSE

¹⁴God said to Moses, “**I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’**”

¹⁵God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ “This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.

ENGAGE THE WORD

MOSES IS CALLED BY GOD TO LEAD

Moses embodies struggle: through questions of identity, worthiness, past acts of violence, and an unknown future. In Exodus 3, Moses is called to join in God’s plan to save Israel from oppression to a new future, a future of freedom. This calling will require Moses to trust God in new ways.

A THEOPHANY AND A TASK

Exodus 3:1-10

The unsuspecting Moses is going about his daily activities, shepherding Jethro’s flock, working in the family business. Moses is not anticipating a holy moment, nor intentionally venturing near sacred spaces. Even so, Moses is an attentive shepherd. His eyes move about the landscape, protective of his sheep. As he is going about his everyday tasks, a moment happens that changes his trajectory forever. Moses notices something odd, a “strange sight”—a small bush on fire that is continually burning (Exodus 3:3). Moses approaches the bush.

This scene in Exodus 3 is described as a theophany. Theophanies are unusual and extraordinary events witnessed in powerful moments within prophetic call narratives. God’s presence consumes these moments with mystery and awe. We see other examples of theophanies with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Here

Did You Know?

To know God was to have special access to Him. God gives His name to Moses, I AM WHO I AM (Yahweh). God's name implies His constant abiding presence. Moses was not alone on his mission, God was with him every step of the way.

in Exodus 3, the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the flames of the bush (Exodus 3:2). Though scholars have discussed broadly the significance and identity of the “angel of the Lord,” what is evident is that the presence of the Lord is in this moment and in this place.

The Lord calls to him, “Moses, Moses.” After the Lord grabs Moses’ attention through the great sight and calling his name, the Lord instructs Moses to keep some distance and to remove his sandals. The reason for this is because “the place” is now “holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). God’s divine presence makes this ordinary space a sacred space. In the ancient Near East, going barefoot before gods and kings is viewed as a sign of reverence and respect. There are examples in Mesopotamian and Levantine sources that depict this act of respect for sacred spaces in much later sources as well.

This encounter takes on even greater significance as Moses learns about the covenant connections of this God. “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6). Whatever questions of identity that Moses struggled with, this moment communicates to Moses that his lineage is connected to the covenant people (Genesis 15; 17). During this theophany, Moses will begin to learn more about his identity and calling, with a commission to partner with God for a task like no other! Moses probably imagined that he was worlds apart from his home in Egypt, worlds apart from his Hebrew family. God meets Moses where he is, relationally and geographically. The Lord can close any gap of distance we think we can create, surprising us with grace and purpose.

The Lord *sees* and *hears* Israel suffering. The root from “to see” and “sight” is a key term in this chapter, used seven times. The Lord is ready to act to free Israel—inviting Moses to partner in this movement—from lives of bondage, scarcity, and oppression to new

Think About It

Once the people are brought out of Egypt they “will worship God on this mountain” (3:12). Mt. Horeb is also known as Mt. Sinai in the text. This mountain will become a sacred place for all of Israel. The symbolic significance of this “mountain of God” is more important than its location. Worship at Sinai will involve a re-orientation of identity and purpose for God’s people.

lives of abundance and purpose. What Moses saw and heard back in Egypt (Exodus 2:11), is also seen and heard by God. This time, Moses will have the guidance from the Lord to fulfill what he witnessed in an even greater way, beyond what he could have hoped or imagined for Israel.

Exodus 3:11-15

With this call comes struggle and doubt. Moses asks, “Who am I?” This struggle is a familiar one in the Old Testament. The Lord’s response is consistent, “I will be with you.” This assurance of divine presence is heard by others during great commissioning moments, such as Joshua (Joshua 1:9) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:8). Moses is called to lead and will be equipped through the promise of the Lord’s abiding presence.

The Lord’s divine presence is also assured to Moses through the divine name, “I am/I will be” (Exodus 3:14). Moses inquires, “Who is sending me?” The response is a name that captures the paradox of presence and mystery. The name is derived from the Hebrew verb “to be.” Moses will continue to understand that the identity of the Lord is inseparable from the Lord’s actions and activity. “I will be with you” is accompanied by the revelation of the divine name, “I will be who I will be.” Presence and identity are relationally connected. Moses’ question, “Who is sending me?” will continually be answered throughout the Exodus story: “I am with you” and “I will be who I will be.”

A CONVERSATION CONCERNING IDENTITIES

REFLECT As you read today’s story, do you find areas in your life where you relate to Moses?

JENNIFER M. MATHENY

September

18

GOD CONFRONTS PHARAOH

God is sovereign over every situation and every power of this world.

THE WORD

EXODUS 5:1-9

Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness.’”

²Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go.”

³Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the LORD our God, or he may strike us with plagues or with the sword.”

⁴But the king of Egypt said, “Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their labor? Get back to your work!” ⁵Then Pharaoh said, “Look, the people of the land are now numerous, and you are stopping them from working.”

⁶That same day Pharaoh gave this order to the slave drivers and overseers in charge of the people: ⁷“You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw. ⁸But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don’t reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God.’ ⁹Make the work harder for the people so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies.”

22-23

²²Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Why, LORD, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? ²³Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and you have not rescued your people at all.”

6:1-8

¹Then the LORD said to Moses, “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.”

²God also said to Moses, “I am the LORD. ³I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself fully known to them. ⁴I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they resided as foreigners. ⁵Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant.

KEY VERSE

⁶“Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. ⁷I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. ⁸And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.’”

ENGAGE THE WORD

Moses struggles with his commissioning by God to return to Egypt. He struggles with doubt, trust, and uncertainty. The Lord assures Moses through signs and promises that He will assist him. The Lord even allows Aaron, Moses’ brother, to assist and speak for Moses. The Lord says, “I will help both of you speak and teach you what to do” (4:15).

**WORK HARDER
WITH LESS
RESOURCES: BRICKS
WITHOUT STRAW**

Exodus 5:1-9

Moses returns to Egypt with the blessing of Jethro, his father-in-law. All who sought to kill Moses in Egypt have died (4:19). Moses and Aaron meet at the mountain of God in the wilderness. Moses shares with Aaron all that that God has commanded. The brothers gather together all of the leaders of the Israelites. Moses performs the signs before them and they believe all that Moses shares with them. The people respond in worship before the Lord, thankful that the Lord has heard their cries and is deeply concerned for their situation (4:31).

Did You Know?

Before the final plague (11:1—12:29), the Israelites are instructed to hold the Passover meal (Exodus 12:12-14). This meal commemorates this moment of divine redemption from Egypt. This meal within the Exodus tradition theologically connects to the New Testament with the unleavened bread feast and Jesus' Last Supper, arrest, death, and resurrection (Mark 14:12-25; Matthew 26:17-29; Luke 22:7-22; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

THE ARM OF GOD IS MIGHTIER THAN THE HAND OF PHARAOH

IT GETS WORSE BEFORE IT GETS BETTER

With the support of the people, Moses and Aaron set out to confront Pharaoh. When they arrive, they share God's command to Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" This command is given so that Israel would worship the Lord in the wilderness (Exodus 5:1). Pharaoh refuses and asks, "Who is the Lord?" In Pharaoh's mind, he is not only an Egyptian ruler, but also a god. He refuses to acknowledge the Lord. Moses and Aaron warn Pharaoh that plagues and death may be upon Egypt at this refusal. Pharaoh not only rejects this request, but he also oppresses Israel even more.

The Egyptian taskmasters instruct the Hebrews to continue meeting their brick making quota without a straw supply! They even have to gather the straw themselves. The Egyptian overseers beat the Israelite overseers because Israel was struggling to meet impossible quota demands. In the Pharaoh's mind, oppressive measures will divert all thoughts Israel may have of following Moses and Aaron. The tension heightens as the Israelite overseers complain and challenge Moses and Aaron by saying, "May the LORD look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials have put a sword in their hand to kill us" (5:21).

Exodus 5:22—6:8

Moses questions the Lord, wondering why he was sent back to Egypt. Things are much worse for them now as the oppressive hand of Pharaoh grows heavier. In Moses' mind, this was not how he envisioned things unfolding. The Lord reminds Moses of the covenant promise, the revelation of the divine name and divine presence. God hears their cries and remembers all that is promised (6:2-5) and Moses is instructed to prepare the people (6:6-8).

The Israelites still struggle with Moses' message. All they can see at this point in their story is that their lives are getting worse. The hand of Pharaoh was so

Think About It

Midnight (literally, “in the half of the night”) is the turning point for Israel, representing the final stage before they are released.

Midnight is also mentioned in critical moments and/or judgment in the life of Samson (Judges 16:3), Ruth (Ruth 3:8), Job (Job 34:20), and Solomon (1 Kings 3:20).

PLAGUES

heavy upon them that they are moved to discouragement and hopelessness. Nevertheless, God will meet Pharaoh’s oppressive hold over them with an “outstretched arm” and “mighty acts of judgment” (6:6).

In the following chapters (Exodus 7—11), the Lord displays sovereignty over Pharaoh through a series of plagues. This “contest of gods” reveals that the Lord is the true God over all kingdoms and structures that seek to oppress and enslave. In this epic confrontation, the Lord will send a series of 10 plagues to speak to the hardened heart of the Pharaoh, revealing that this earthly ruler with god-like status is no match for Israel’s God (Exodus 7—12). With God, there is always hope, even in the darkest moments.

God’s mighty power and acts of judgment will be displayed through a series of 10 plagues. Many of these plagues are associated with specific gods in Egypt (e.g., Hapi, the Egyptian Nile god; Re, the sun god; Osiris, the god of the dead, afterlife, and patron god of pharaoh). The question and statement Pharaoh makes in 5:2, “Who is the LORD that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go,” will be answered throughout the next nine chapters.

REFLECT **T**ake time to thank God for hearing the cries of your heart.

JENNIFER M. MATHENY

September

25

GOD FIGHTS FOR HIS PEOPLE

God delivers when His people stand in faith.

THE WORD

EXODUS

14:1-4

Then the LORD said to Moses, ²“Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon. ³Pharaoh will think, ‘The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.’ ⁴And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.” So the Israelites did this.

10-14

¹⁰As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. ¹¹They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”

KEY VERSE

¹³Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. ¹⁴**The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.**”

19-23

¹⁹Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel’s army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, ²⁰coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought

darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

²¹Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, ²²and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

²³The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea.

30-31

³⁰That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. ³¹And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

ENGAGE THE WORD

ON THE MOVE

Exodus 14:1-4

The next stage in Israel's flight to freedom involves a bizarre travel itinerary. The Lord instructs Moses to tell Israel to "turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea" (14:2). There are clearly onlookers from Egypt as Israel sets off into the wilderness. The news of this itinerary change will get back to Pharaoh and it will appear as if the Israelites are wandering aimlessly! This will entice Pharaoh to pursue.

The Lord says, "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them." The language of the Lord hardening Pharaoh's heart is complex. In several instances, the text says Pharaoh "hardened his own heart" (7:22; 8:15; 8:19; 8:32; 9:7). In other moments, the cause of the hardening is credited to the Lord (4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1; 10:20; 10:27; 11:10; 14:4; 14:8; 14:17). Many scholars see this act of hardening as the outworking of Pharaoh's own stubbornness being fully given over to his own pride and arrogance.

Israel will appear to be at their weakest to Pharaoh . . . wandering aimlessly through the desert, hemmed

Did You Know?

The Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1-21) is understood as one of the oldest poems in the Old Testament. It displays God's powerful acts over oppressive forces. It also proclaims that God will "plant" Israel on the mountain of their inheritance. Israel has a home, rooted in the presence of the Lord.

WAVERING TRUST AND GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

in with no place to escape. In this moment, where death will appear inevitable, God will display power to rescue once again, gaining glory through this act of judgment. There is a wordplay with Pharaoh's heart and God's glory. The verb used for Pharaoh's heart being "heavy/hard" has the same root letters for "glory." This highlights the final act of judgement. Part of the purpose of this salvific act for Israel is so that the "Egyptians will know that I am the LORD" (14:4). The Lord is sovereign, and the Lord's glory will be known amongst all nations and people.

Exodus 14:10-14

As the Egyptians close in ready for battle, the Israelites cry out to the Lord. They also turn against Moses, blaming Moses for leading them to their deaths (14:11). The Israelites quickly forget that it was the Lord who instructed them to go this route. They even complain that they would have preferred to live under oppression than to die as free people in the wilderness (14:12). They complain that it would be better to "serve" the Egyptians. This is more than a complaint, but a theological statement. This wavering trust is met by God's faithfulness. The psalms recount this moment as "rebellion" and a moment of forgetting God's faithful love (Psalm 106:7). What reverberates through this recounting is a continual reminder of God's faithful love and provision.

In this critical leadership moment, Moses draws their attention back to God. Moses tells them, "do not be afraid" . . . "stand firm" . . . "watch." The Israelites role at this impossible moment is to "be still" because "the LORD will fight for you" (14:14). The Lord has proven to be powerful in every moment leading up to this one. Israel is learning to trust as a newly rescued people.

WATER DIVIDED

Exodus 14:19-23

The angel of God appears again for the second time after the theophany of Moses and the burning bush.

Think About It

The words, “do not be afraid,” are often uttered by a divine voice during terrifying moments in the Old Testament (Genesis 15:1; 21:17; 26:24; 46:3; Joshua 8:1; 10:8; Isaiah 40:9; 41:10; 43:1). These words remind the hearer that God is present and active in their situation.

God’s presence is made visible to them through a protective cloud and fire. The cloud provides a secure and mysterious wall between the Israelites and the Egyptians. This is the one place in the Exodus story where the cloud goes behind them. This waiting went all through the night. Moses stretches out his hand over the sea before him and an east wind sent by the Lord drives back the sea and divides it. Where there was no way forward, the Lord creates a path on dry ground. The Lord fights for them in ways they could have never imagined or prepared for! Where the Israelites imagined death, the Lord sustains life. All they are instructed to do is stand firm and wait. Once the sea parts, the Israelites move forward with the Egyptian army behind them. As they pursue Israel, the Lord looks down and creates chaos and confusion for the attackers. Even the chariot wheels become jammed! It is clear to the Egyptians that the Lord is causing this as they proclaim that the Lord is fighting against Egypt (14:25). This powerful moment reveals the Lord as sovereign over the watery chaos. . . able to wield its powerful force to crush the Egyptians in pursuit.

GOD HAS TRIUMPHED

Exodus 14:30-31

The mighty hand of God has triumphed over the oppressive hand of Pharaoh. Here, this anthropomorphic image of God’s hand reveals that in this contest of deities, the Lord is victorious. As the Lord leads them through this path on dry ground to safety, Israel begins to trust in the Lord and Moses. The Israelites pass through the waters, similar to new birth imagery, to become a people called out by God to continue on this journey which began with the call of Abraham.

REFLECT | In what way do you need God’s delivering power in your life today?

October

2

GOD PROVIDES FOR HIS PEOPLE

God wants His children to trust Him in faith both in times of plenty and need, remembering that He is always near.

THE WORD

EXODUS 16:1-18

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. ²In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. ³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. ⁵On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.”

⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?” ⁸Moses also said, “You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord.”

⁹Then Moses told Aaron, “Say to the entire Israelite community, ‘Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.’”

¹⁰While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community,

they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud.

KEY VERSES

¹¹The LORD said to Moses, ¹²“I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.’”

¹³That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, “It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. ¹⁶This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Everyone is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.’”

¹⁷The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. ¹⁸And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed.

ENGAGE THE WORD

As we journey into Exodus 16, it is important to recall that the Lord has miraculously delivered Israel through the parting of the sea waters. As they stood firm, Israel witnessed the mighty hand of the Lord fight for them (14:4, 31). Moving on in this story will prove to be no easy task. Israel will struggle with physical and emotional obstacles: uncertainty, fear, hunger, thirst, frustration, and regret.

THE PEOPLE GRUMBLE

Exodus 16:1-3

The Israelite community find themselves on the move once again, journeying from Elim to the Desert of Sin. In this place, Israel complains and grumbles. They begin to question their situation and even express regret in leaving Egypt. Hunger softens the harsh memories and they begin to reminisce about their time in Egypt, imagining moments of feasting together!

Did You Know?

The Israelites are instructed to gather bread each day. Daily needs are before them, and they are instructed not to store up. In Matthew 6:11, Jesus shares that one should pray for “daily bread.” Learning to trust God with daily needs becomes a place of spiritual formation for Israel that also guards against hoarding and excess.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR GATHERING AND SABBATH

It is fascinating that the abuse and oppression they faced in Egypt is all but forgotten. Hunger is a powerful force. Entering into this “liminal” (from the Latin word, *limen*, which means “threshold”) space pushes them to the edges of themselves, and even distorts the reality of their past. Israel has literally stepped over the threshold from their lives in Egypt to follow God and Moses into the wilderness. Faced with uncertainty, all they can envision is a worse-case scenario.

Exodus 16:4-5

As Israel is feeling pushed to the edge of this liminal space with hunger and fear for their future, God responds with provision and instructions. These instructions provide a blueprint for an invitation to trust the Lord, to trust Moses, and to trust one another. The Lord promises to provide bread from heaven; in doing so, they will see the glory of the Lord (16:7). The instructions include how to gather this bread each day and to gather twice as much on the sixth day so that everyone may rest on the seventh day. These instructions reveal provision for Israel’s needs and also provides a test to train them in trust (16:4). Israel’s formation as a people who trust in God might appear to begin with the basics of bread, but it encompasses liturgical significance. Deuteronomy 8:2-3 reflects on the gift and test:

“Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that humanity does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

DIVINE PRESENCE

Exodus 16:6-12

The Lord responds to Israel’s complaining with the

Think About It

Often a crisis for physical items, food, and employment becomes a crisis of faith in our lives. Throughout the Old Testament, famine becomes a situation that moves people geographically, yet also into places of deeper faith (e.g., Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and his children, Naomi and Ruth).

THE LORD PROVIDES

gracious gifts of bread and quail. Moses and Aaron instruct the community to come before the Lord because they have been heard (16:9). Earlier, the Lord heard them crying out under the oppressive hand of Pharaoh and here, as they complain to God, God hears them. God is one who hears and responds. Rather than responding in anger, the Lord will provide sustenance and instruction for the people. The instruction provides a pattern for gathering that takes into account the needs of each person: “Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed.” The Israelites are being trained to trust God on a daily basis, in becoming aware of each one’s needs, and to learn the weekly rhythm of rest. The purpose of this response is so Israel will know that the Lord is their God (16:12).

Exodus 16:13-18

Upon theological reflection, these moments of care are the hand of God. The manna has been described as “the food of angels” (Psalm 78:25, NLT) and “bread from heaven” (Psalm 105:40, NLT). The purpose of these gifts from heaven help Israel *become* in this liminal space. They learn to trust the Lord in these everyday rhythms, learn how to live in community, learn how to worship, and even learn how to rest.

After years under oppression in Egypt, one can only imagine the daily formational activities that will invite Israel over the threshold of fear to a place of trust and from grumbling to praise. This invitation is for Israel to learn how to live as a new people, a people who know and trust the Lord.

REFLECT

Are you fully trusting God in all areas of your life?

JENNIFER M. MATHENY

October

9

GOD INSTRUCTS HIS PEOPLE

God gives His people instructions for living in a loving community that reflects His character.

THE WORD

**EXODUS
20:1-17**

And God spoke all these words:
²“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

³“You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

⁸“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹²“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³“You shall not murder.

¹⁴“You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵“You shall not steal.

¹⁶“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

¹⁷“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

ROMANS

13:8-10

KEY VERSE

⁸Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

ENGAGE THE WORD

GOD SPEAKS

Exodus 20:1-2

That phrase, “God spoke all these words,” expresses the conviction that God’s law is an extension of God’s will. The keeping of the commandments is a faith response to the Person and work of God. The Israelites’ gratitude for their deliverance is expressed by their obedience to these commandments. Therefore, what follows are not simply rules to be obeyed, but a guide to relationships with God and with each other.

LAWS THAT LOOK UPWARD

Exodus 20:3-11

The Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4) opens with the petition that the name of God might be hallowed. This may seem like an obscure idea until one understands that it means something like this: “May we honor you with the singular and ultimate devotion which You alone deserve.” The Ten Commandments begin with a similar concern. In a world of many gods, the confession that the Lord alone is God could not be taken for granted.

The second commandment, which forbids the creation of images, is a protection against the violation of the first commandment. From other scriptures the meaning becomes clear that what is forbidden in the second commandment is idolatry and, in

Did You Know?

Jesus was questioned by a certain lawyer who asked, “What is the most important commandment?” (Matthew 22:34-40). Jesus answered by summarizing the ancient Ten Commandments. He covered the first four commandments by saying that we should love God with our very existence (heart, soul, mind, and strength). Then Jesus summarized the last six commandments by saying we should love our neighbors just like we love ourselves. We still affirm that the words spoken to the Israelites at Sinai hold true in our desire to live in obedience to God.

LAWS THAT LOOK OUTWARD

particular, the human-made forms that promote and sustain it.

The third commandment forbids the misuse of the divine name. Jews, and Christians after them, have understood this commandment to prohibit the trivial use of divine names. This is not, however, just an issue of profane speech. The NIV “misuse” helps us reconsider what “taking the name of the Lord in vain” might really amount to. In fact, the name of the Lord is not to be associated in any way with a lying testimony, a false oath, or magical spells and spiritism.

God instituted the Sabbath in creation (Genesis 2:2-3). Now it appears as the subject of the fourth commandment. Bearing the double validation of creation and commandment, it is no wonder Israel took pains with Sabbath-keeping. The basis for keeping the day was not only the “six on, one off” pattern of God in creation, but also was tied to the fact that God blessed and hallowed the seventh day.

Exodus 20:12-17

If we understand that parents are representatives of God in the lives of children, to honor one’s parents is to honor God. This fifth commandment is directed toward children of all ages (since we are all children). To honor one’s parents means to obey them, but it means more. It means that when the years have taken their toll and infirmity sets in, one’s parents are still to be honored.

The commandment against murder protects human life. More than that, Genesis 9:6 tells us that to kill another human being is to deface the “image of God.” Premeditation might determine the penalty to be suffered by the one who kills another, but killing, whether from carelessness, wantonness, or anger, is forbidden.

The seventh commandment prohibits adultery. Adultery is sexual relations between persons, at least one of whom is married. At issue is the sacredness

Think About It

The fact that Christians are under grace instead of law should not lead us to think that the Ten Commandments do not apply to us. In fact, Matthew 5:17-29 states that the commandments are not to be relaxed at all, but pushed to their deepest level—the threshold to more serious discipleship.

of the marriage relationship of husband and wife. Sexual relations between unmarried persons is not addressed by this commandment. The commandment protects the fidelity of spouses.

“Thou shalt not steal” may have included the forbidding of kidnaping. They were to respect the property of others and don’t take things that do not belong to you.

The ninth commandment is popularly used to censure a liar. The thrust of the commandment, however, is the protection of the legal system. In one ancient legal system, the Code of Hammurabi, the perjured witness would receive the sentence fitting the crime of which he or she falsely accused another.

In the 10th commandment we encounter the immoral engine that empowers the violation of all the others. It is covetousness. The general command is that we are not to covet our neighbor’s house. “House” should be understood to mean “household” and can thus be extended to almost everything about our neighbor. The details of the commandment prohibit our coveting either the persons in our neighbor’s life or his/her possessions.

UNENDING DEBT

Romans 13:8-10

When we become believers, God’s transforming love is poured into our lives (Romans 5:5). To be in Christ is to be claimed by and for love. The claim of love is compared to a debt, an unpayable, unending debt. Because we have received God’s love, we must love others: “Whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.”

REFLECT

In what ways is your life fulfilling the law of love?

October

16

GOD DWELLS AMONG HIS PEOPLE

God chooses to live among His people.

THE WORD

EXODUS 40:1-16

Then the LORD said to Moses: ²“Set up the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, on the first day of the first month. ³Place the ark of the covenant law in it and shield the ark with the curtain. ⁴Bring in the table and set out what belongs on it. Then bring in the lampstand and set up its lamps. ⁵Place the gold altar of incense in front of the ark of the covenant law and put the curtain at the entrance to the tabernacle.

⁶“Place the altar of burnt offering in front of the entrance to the tabernacle, the tent of meeting; ⁷place the basin between the tent of meeting and the altar and put water in it. ⁸Set up the courtyard around it and put the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard.

⁹“Take the anointing oil and anoint the tabernacle and everything in it; consecrate it and all its furnishings, and it will be holy. ¹⁰Then anoint the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils; consecrate the altar, and it will be most holy. ¹¹Anoint the basin and its stand and consecrate them.

¹²“Bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance to the tent of meeting and wash them with water. ¹³Then dress Aaron in the sacred garments, anoint him and consecrate him so he may serve me as priest. ¹⁴Bring his sons and dress them in tunics. ¹⁵Anoint them just as you anointed their father, so they may serve me as priests. Their anointing will be to a priesthood that will continue throughout their generations.” ¹⁶Moses did everything just as the LORD commanded him.

34-38

KEY VERSE

³⁴Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁵Moses could not enter the tent of

meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

³⁶In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; ³⁷but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. ³⁸So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Exodus 25-31 gives specific instructions for building the tabernacle and its contents, the priestly clothing, and the items that will be placed in the court-yards of the tabernacle. Exodus 35-40 recounts Israel carrying out these detailed instructions. The purpose of this portable sanctuary is so God will “be present among them” and “meet” with them (Exodus 25:8-22).

KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

Exodus 40:1-16

Israel begins the new role as a kingdom of priests on the first day of the first month. “Then the LORD said to Moses: ‘Set up the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, on the first day of the first month’” (Exodus 40:1-2). Israel was birthed as a new people in the first month of the year (Exodus 12:1-2), and here . . . another new beginning!

Worship involves the entire person. As you read these verses, notice how many the senses are involved. The smells, sights, sounds, and sense of touch create a symbolic experience involving the whole person and the whole community. This idea of symbolic space may seem foreign to us. One way to imagine this space and its importance is to think about your own family rituals and yearly rhythms. Imagine your own home and the possible transformations it may go through around Christmas time. There may be a special space for the tree, furniture may move around, and decorations set out. Perhaps there are special recipes your family enjoys and is on the “must have” list every Christmas!

Traditions are powerful. Even personal family rituals

Did You Know?

In current culture, the ark of the covenant is one of the most famous objects constructed for the tabernacle (Exodus 25:10-21) thanks to the movie, *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). Similar to its depiction in the film, the ark in the Old Testament was both desired and feared, a visible sign of God's presence. The last mention of it is during the time of King Solomon. We know the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, but the ark is missing from the list of items removed from the temple during this siege (Jeremiah 52:17-23). Its whereabouts remain a mystery.

help us see how meaningful these moments can be. When the recent pandemic was at its peak, many of us did not celebrate the holidays in our traditional fashion. The loss was felt by many. These holiday examples demonstrate, in part, the powerful nature of symbolic space, the logical order of placement and supplies, and the importance and significance of appointed roles.

The symbolic significance in each item of dress for the priests, tabernacle furnishings, and ritual acts communicate that stepping into the Lord's presence is not done lightly. Though God is good, God is holy and God is other. Though God is in one sense beyond us, God also desires relationship and intimacy with us. Every item in the tabernacle prepares the community to be in the presence of God. One example that reveals the convergence of the material and symbolic is evidenced in the high priest's diadem. As high priest, Aaron wore a unique headdress. On his turban was a gold diadem engraved with the words, "HOLY TO THE LORD" (Exodus 39:30). As God's representative, Aaron literally and symbolically carried the name of the Lord before the people. As Aaron blessed the people, he spoke the name of the Lord upon the community. Favor, blessing, and bearing the Lord's name are a holy vocation for Israel.

GOD'S PRESENCE

Exodus 40:34-38

The work is finished. "Then Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and altar and put up the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. And so Moses finished the work" (Exodus 40:33). The cloud descends upon the tabernacle and the glory of the Lord fills this space, the inner sanctuary and the holy of holies, the entire tabernacle! Glory means "heavy" or "weighty." This is no ordinary cloud! This cloud has been with them through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21), the parting of the sea (Exodus 14:19), on the

Think About It

God's presence continues with Israel, even after their temple was destroyed and they went into exile. During the COVID pandemic last year, God's presence was felt in new ways for many of us, with the loss of our normal experience of community gatherings. The presence of God meets us in unique and powerful ways, even as the landscapes of our lives shift, similar to the story of Israel.

mountain of God (Exodus 19:16), and now in their midst (Exodus 40:34-35). What a beautiful reminder that God cannot be contained and chooses to be present. Israel has been freed from slavery to lives of worship.

The presence of God is a theme that traces throughout the Old Testament into the New Testament. Jesus Christ is Immanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). The Holy Spirit is with God's people, fills them, comforts, guides, and teaches (John 14:26). The people of God are now the temple. God continues to be present, even as believers look forward to the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21). Revelation 21:1-5 states,

"Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, *'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'* 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true' (emphasis added).

REFLECT **B**reathe a prayer of thanks to God for His continued presence in your life.

JENNIFER M. MATHENY

October

23

GOD NEVER GIVES UP

*God continually extends grace and pursues
even the most rebellious people.*

THE WORD

JUDGES 2:6-7 **A**fter Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land, each to their own inheritance. ⁷The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel.

10-23

¹⁰After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. ¹¹Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹²They forsook the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the LORD's anger ¹³because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. ¹⁴In his anger against Israel the LORD gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. ¹⁵Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

¹⁶Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. ¹⁷Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. They quickly turned from the ways of their ancestors, who had been obedient to the Lord's commands. ¹⁸**Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD**

KEY VERSE

relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. ¹⁹But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

²⁰Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, “Because this nation has violated the covenant I ordained for their ancestors and has not listened to me, ²¹I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. ²²I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the Lord and walk in it as their ancestors did.” ²³The LORD had allowed those nations to remain; he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua.

ENGAGE THE WORD

The book of Judges illustrates God’s relentless love for people. In story after story God extended grace to Israel when most of us would have given up. Though they continually turned toward other gods, the Lord continually reached out and rescued them.

GRACE FOR THE FIRST GENERATION

Judges 2:6-7

Joshua and his generation experienced God’s grace when God gave them the promised land. They had clearly seen His grace in “all the great things the LORD had done” (v. 7). They had crossed the Jordan at flood stage, watched the walls of Jericho fall, and fought battles that only God could have won. The land was truly God’s gift to them. It was a place where they could become a community of faithful worshipers of the Lord and be a light to the nations.

As a result, that generation “served the LORD” (v. 7), like a subject would serve a king. They ordered their lives according to the Lord’s royal decrees, which were the laws given at Sinai. Very simply, this meant that they sought to love God above all and love others as themselves. This is the kind of response God desires from those who experience His grace.

Did You Know?

Archaeological excavations from the period of Israel's judges reveal that Israelite culture did not differ greatly from Canaanite culture. Israel's villages reflect a simpler lifestyle, but religious life unfortunately appears very similar to the Canaanites.

GRACE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Judges 2:10-16

One problem with grace is that people so often take it for granted. Within one generation Israel “knew neither the LORD nor what he had done” for them (v. 10). The Hebrew word translated “knew” speaks of experiential knowledge, not just head knowledge. The next generation undoubtedly heard the stories of the Jordan and Jericho. But they had not experienced them firsthand, nor had they needed to trust the Lord to defeat enemies. They inherited blessings from the previous generation, but not their faith. Faith is not something we can inherit.

As a result, the next generation turned to other gods for guidance in life. They shifted from conquest to co-existence with their enemies. Instead of transforming their world, they tolerated it. The “various gods of the peoples around them” seemed very attractive (v. 12). “Baal and the Ashtoreths” promised prosperity since they claimed control over fertility of the ground as well as the womb (v. 13). Their worshipers expected abundant harvests, healthy herds, and flourishing families.

The major shortcoming of Canaanite religion though is that it was not true. Baal and Ashtoreth did not really exist. Israel's God actually controlled these aspects of life. Therefore, honoring other gods did not help anything, except to make Israelites more acceptable to the Canaanites. Rather than distinguishing themselves from the Canaanites and witnessing to them, God's people had become just like them.

In spite of Israel's unfaithfulness though, the Lord responded graciously to them. He “raised up judges, who saved them” from their enemies (v. 16). Though Israel did not earn or deserve it, the Lord devised a way to deliver His people from the consequences of their poor choices. These “judges” were people that God empowered to free Israel from their enemies and lead them back to faith in the Lord. Today we might call them “saviors” or “rescuers.”

Think About It

Most stories in the book of Judges tell us that people cried out to God before He rescued them. But our passage does not mention this. While repentance often precedes salvation, God's grace does not depend on it.

GRACE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

We should also notice God's grace in His punishment of sin. Sometimes grace hurts. The Bible says that the Lord allowed His people to be "plundered," "sold" into slavery, and defeated by their enemies (vv. 14-15). How is this gracious? It allows people to experience some of the consequences of life without God. Hopefully the pain and loss that sin produces will help them to realize how important their relationship to God is. Thus, God graciously permits people to feel sin's sting in hopes that they may turn back to Him.

Judges 2:17-23

Unfortunately, Israel had faithfulness issues for generations. Even though God continued to rescue them, they continued to renege on their commitment to God. Once their enemies were gone so was their trust in God. The Bible says they "quickly turned from the ways of their ancestors" (v. 17) and "refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways" (v. 19). Each time they moved away from God they "returned to ways even more corrupt" (v. 19). The constant failure of faith digs a deeper hole each time.

Once again, the Lord extended grace in a way that may seem strange. He did not remove obstacles to faith. He allowed the Canaanites to remain in the land in order "to test Israel" (v. 22). Faith needs testing to become strong and true. In His grace, God permits temptations in the life of believers. But as each test comes, we can be sure that God will continue to offer grace even when our faith falters. God never gives up on His people.

REFLECT

Is there a situation you need God to rescue you from today?

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October

30

GOD RAISES UP DEBORAH

God has plans for those who obey in faith.

THE WORD

JUDGES 4:4-22

Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. ⁵She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. ⁶She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. ⁷I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’”

⁸Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.”

⁹“Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him.

¹¹Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses’ brother-in-law, and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaanannim near Kedesh.

¹²When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, ¹³Sisera summoned from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River all his men and his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron.

¹⁴**Then Deborah said to Barak, “Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?” So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand**

KEY VERSE

men following him. ¹⁵At Barak's advance, the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot.

¹⁶Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim, and all Sisera's troops fell by the sword; not a man was left. ¹⁷Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jabin king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite.

¹⁸Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my lord, come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket.

¹⁹"I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.

²⁰"Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone in there?' say 'No.'"

²¹But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

²²Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead.

ENGAGE THE WORD

The story of Deborah and Barak is also about a woman named Jael. Each of these three played an important role in God's plan to deliver His people. They remind us that every person is needed in God's kingdom. The unknown as well as the well-known contribute to God's purposes in this world.

DEBORAH MOTIVATES BARAK

Judges 4:4-9

Deborah was one of the most famous people in Israel during her time. She even had a tree named after her, "the Palm of Deborah" (v. 5). People came to her for divine direction because they recognized her special connection to God. As a "prophet" she seemed to know the mind of God and could speak for Him (v. 4). Her location in "the hill country of Ephraim" placed

Did You Know?

Canaanites believed Baal controlled the rain. So, when the Lord sent a thunderstorm to bog down Sisera's chariots, He proved who was really in control of this world.

her right in the middle of the tribes of Israel where she was easily accessible to all (v. 5).

On the authority of “the LORD, the God of Israel” (v. 6), Deborah challenged Barak to deliver Israel from Canaanite oppression. As a result of their sin, Israel had fallen under the control of Jabin, the king of the powerful city-state of Hazor. This meant that the Canaanites collected heavy taxes from the Israelites and imposed other injustices on them. Jabin's commanding general was Sisera, who enforced Canaanite sovereignty with a large contingent of chariots and other troops.

God gave Deborah the task of motivating Barak, which was not easy. Few could believe what she predicted, not even Barak. How could ill-equipped Israelites take on an army with the most advanced technology of the day and win? Yet, Deborah boldly proclaimed God's word to Barak and backed it up with her actions. She “went with Barak” into the battlefield (v. 9). God needs people of vision and faith like Deborah who stand up and speak truth with conviction.

BARAK ROUTES THE CANAANITES

Judges 4:10-16

Barak may not have had the gift of faith like Deborah, but he had other abilities. As a military man, he knew how to follow orders and give them. He gathered the troops at Mount Tabor as God commanded (v. 10) and led the attack when Deborah gave the word (v. 14). He did what Deborah could not likely have done.

Barak came from the tribe most affected by Canaanite oppression. His tribe of Naphtali settled near the key city of Canaanite power, Hazor. They and the neighboring tribe of Zebulun undoubtedly respected Barak's military leadership because they responded immediately when he summoned them. Perhaps, his name, which meant “lightening” or “flash,” reflected his effective military abilities.

Whatever Barak's particular gifts might have been, God used them in routing the Canaanite army. Ac-

Think About It

In this story God used the gift-
edness of both
famous and
ordinary people
to bring salva-
tion. What if one
of them had not
been willing to
use their abilities
for God's purpos-
es?

**Jael Delivers the
Final Strike**

cording to the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, the Lord brought a storm that caused the Kishon River to flood and render chariots ineffective in battle. Even the Canaanite commander "Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot" (v. 15). While Barak and his army's military abilities were essential, the deciding factor in the victory was God. The Lord gave Sisera into Barak's hands for He had "gone ahead" of him with a thunder storm (v. 14).

Judges 4:17-22

Jael completed Israel's victory over the Canaanites. She fulfilled Deborah's earlier prophecy to Barak that "the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman" (v. 9). At the time, Barak probably thought she was speaking of herself. But the story takes an interesting twist, as God's plans often do.

Jael belonged to a clan of Kenites, who were distant relatives to the Israelites, descended from Moses' in-laws. They had accompanied Israel to the promised land and settled near Hazor, along the road that Sisera took as he fled the battle. When an exhausted Sisera sought sanctuary in Jael's tent, she did what Bedouin women ordinarily did. She offered hospitality and drove a tent peg. She served her guest graciously and, since Bedouin women typically set up the tents as the family moved, she wielded a hammer skillfully. Her abilities may not seem as outstanding as Deborah's or Barak's, but they were no less useful for God's purposes.

God has a way of using every person who is willing to place their lives in His hands. Whether we serve a nation or a family, possess many talents or a few, lead thousands into battle or engage only one, each of us can contribute to God's work in this world.

REFLECT

In what ways can your abilities be used in the kingdom of God?

November

6

GOD CALLS GIDEON

God sees potential in every person.

THE WORD

JUDGES
6:7-24

When the Israelites cried out to the LORD because of Midian, ⁸he sent them a prophet, who said, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ⁹I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. And I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors; I drove them out before you and gave you their land. ¹⁰I said to you, ‘I am the LORD your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.’ But you have not listened to me.”

¹¹The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites.

KEY VERSE ¹²**When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.”**

¹³“Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.”

¹⁴The LORD turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?”

¹⁵“Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”

¹⁶The LORD answered, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive.”

¹⁷Gideon replied, “If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me

a sign that it is really you talking to me. ¹⁸Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you.”

And the LORD said, “I will wait until you return.”

¹⁹Gideon went inside, prepared a young goat, and from an ephah of flour he made bread without yeast. Putting the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot, he brought them out and offered them to him under the oak.

²⁰The angel of God said to him, “Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth.” And Gideon did so. ²¹Then the angel of the LORD touched the meat and the unleavened bread with the tip of the staff that was in his hand. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the LORD disappeared. ²²When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, “Alas, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!”

²³But the LORD said to him, “Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.”

²⁴So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD Is Peace. To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Gideon’s story confirms that God sees potential when others do not. Gideon lacked confidence that he could do what God asked of him. Yet, God patiently worked with him. God was calling him and God was all he needed to accomplish his calling.

THE LORD’S CALL THROUGH A PROPHET

Judges 6:7-10

As with other stories in the book of Judges, Gideon’s begins with Israel suffering because of their sin. About a generation after the victory of Deborah and Barak, Israel once again tried to fit in with the people around them and began to “worship the gods of the Amorites” (v. 10). As a result, nomad gangs invaded their land during harvest, plundering Israel’s crops and animals. The worst of these raiders were the Midianites.

When Israel finally turned to the Lord for help, “he sent them a prophet” (v. 8). The prophet reminded Israel of God’s grace toward them in the exodus from

Did You Know?

Israelites did not normally use winepresses to thresh crops. Threshing floors were typically located on flat surfaces upon hills where wind could help separate seed from chaff as the farmer tossed grain into the air.

THE LORD'S CALL THROUGH AN ANGEL

Egypt and the conquest of Canaan. God “rescued” them from the Egyptians and other oppressors, “drove ... out” the Canaanites, and “gave ... their land” to Israel (v. 9). God had committed himself to Israel and looked for a like commitment from them. The prophet asserted, “The Lord is your God,” not the gods of their neighbors (v. 10).

The prophet concluded his message with a terse indictment, “you have not listened” (v. 10). This was also the prophet’s call from God. He challenged those who had not listened to listen. They must hear what the Lord says about life, pay attention to His wisdom and guidance, instead of consulting the gods of popular culture. This is God’s message to every generation, including ours.

Judges 6:11-16

Gideon undoubtedly heard God’s call through the prophet, but did not respond to it. He continued to act as if the gods of the Midianites controlled life. He threshed his wheat in a secret place, “a winepress,” so the Midianites would not find him (v. 11). Gideon decided to hide rather than confront. He did not believe he could do anything about the evil around him. He maintained that he had little influence in Israel because his family was “the weakest in Manasseh” and he was “the least” (perhaps the youngest) in his family (v. 15).

Further, Gideon was not sure the Lord could do anything about the Midianites either. He asked the angel, “Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about?” (v.13). Since life had become difficult, he assumed God was no longer present with them. But Gideon assumed wrong. Ironically, Gideon was witnessing God at work at that very moment when the heavenly messenger “came and sat down under the oak” (v. 11). He was too busy complaining to notice the wonder of God right before his eyes.

The angel’s opening line revealed that God was

Think About It

The time needed for Gideon to fix a meal for his guest reflects not only the relaxed atmosphere of the ancient world, but also God's patience to wait for people to heed His call.

indeed active and aware of the potential in Gideon. First, he asserted that "the LORD is with you" (v. 12). Gideon obviously needed to be reminded of God's presence in his life, as do we all. This is why the angel told Gideon to "go in the strength you have" (v. 14). When the Lord was with him, Gideon had all the strength he needed to do anything God asked of him.

The angel also called Gideon "mighty warrior" (v. 12). This term referred to a person with special status in Israel. It designated one who not only had exceptional military skills but could also influence his community. The angel knew that Gideon had more going for him than he realized, especially when the Lord was with him.

**THE LORD'S CALL
THROUGH A SIGN****Judges 6:17-24**

The angel had gotten Gideon's attention, but he was not fully convinced. So, the angel gave Gideon a sign. He turned the meal Gideon prepared for him into a sacrifice and "fire flared ... consuming the meat and bread" (v. 21). Gideon knew then he had "seen the angel of the LORD face to face" (v. 22). God was definitely calling him.

The Lord has a way of confirming His call upon the lives of His people. He may do something spectacular as He did for Gideon, or He may not. Sometimes God gives us direction through the Bible, a friend, or simply an inner peace. In any case, if we remain attentive, God can assure us of His calling for God knows our potential and longs to see us fulfill it.

REFLECT Consider what God might be calling you to do today.

JIM EDLIN

November

13

GOD LEADS GIDEON

Every victory is God's victory.

THE WORD

JUDGES
7:2-15

The LORD said to Gideon, “You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, ‘My own strength has saved me.’ ³Now announce to the army, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’” So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.

⁴But the LORD said to Gideon, “There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will thin them out for you there. If I say, ‘This one shall go with you,’ he shall go; but if I say, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ he shall not go.”

⁵So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, “Separate those who lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps from those who kneel down to drink.” ⁶Three hundred of them drank from cupped hands, lapping like dogs. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

KEY VERSE

⁷The LORD said to Gideon, “With the three hundred men that I have left, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the others go home.” ⁸So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites home but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others.

Now the camp of Midian lay below him in the valley. ⁹During that night the LORD said to Gideon, “Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands. ¹⁰If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah ¹¹and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp.” So he and Purah his servant went down to the outposts of the camp. ¹²The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern

peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore.

¹³Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. “I had a dream,” he was saying. “A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed.”

¹⁴His friend responded, “This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands.”

¹⁵When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down and worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, “Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands.”

19-21

¹⁹Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guard. They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands. ²⁰The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, “A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!” ²¹While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Gideon’s battle with the Midianites proved that every victory is God’s victory. God needed nothing more than willing participants, because He can use anything to win a battle. There is no limit to God’s abilities and creativity.

GOD WINS WITH A FEW

Judges 7:2-8a

Most military men would question Gideon’s preparation for war. Having more warriors seems better than having less. But bigger is not always better. Sometimes less is more, and for Gideon’s battle it certainly was.

God instructed Gideon to reduce the size of his army to only a fraction of what it had been. First, Gideon sent home “anyone who trembles with fear,” which reduced his force by over two-thirds (v. 3). According

Did You Know?

The Israelite camp at the Spring of Harod was located only a few miles across the valley from the Hill of Moreh, where the Midianites could easily watch Gideon's army slowly dwindle away.

to Deuteronomy 32:10, this tactic should strengthen the morale of the remaining warriors. Then, Gideon eliminated another two-thirds of those left because of the way they drank water. He selected “those who drank from cupped hands, lapping like dogs” over those who knelt down to drink (v. 6). Apparently, the former remained more alert for battle.

God's primary reason for reducing the army was not so much about paring down to a committed core though. He explained that he did not want Israel to say, “My own strength has saved me” (v. 2). Israel suffered from the human tendency toward self-reliance that leaves God out of the picture. Self-confidence is not a bad trait unless it forgets that victory depends upon God. A little self-doubt is helpful when one realizes that human weaknesses can be the avenue to revealing the Lord's strength. God does not need a host of mighty warriors to win victories. He only looks for those who will trust Him.

GOD WINS WITH DREAMERS

Judges 7:8b-15

With his troops reduced to a small fighting force, Gideon was anything but over confident. Any realist could see that he was clearly outnumbered. He had only 300 soldiers, while his enemy appeared to be as “thick as locust” (v. 12).

When Gideon looked at the situation realistically, he was “afraid to attack” (v. 10). So, the Lord gave him a sign that victory was assured. The Lord had previously given Gideon signs through an angel and a wool fleece (Joshua 6:21, 40). Now God showed him a sign through a dream. God's patience with Gideon was remarkable. Obviously, our faith matters a great deal to God.

God directed Gideon to go near the Midianite camp and eavesdrop on his enemy. He heard a Midianite soldier tell of dreaming that “a round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp” (v. 13). His fellow soldier understood it immediately. The bar-

Think About It

Pottery shards are the most common finds in archaeological excavations because ancient people used pottery vessels every day for cooking, storing, and eating. Yet, God employed these common vessels to help win a battle for His people.

**GOD WINS WITH
BROKEN VESSELS**

ley bread represented the poor Israelite farmer whose basic crop was barley. The dream foretold Israelite victory.

Hearing the dream infused fresh faith into Gideon. God encouraged the realist with a dreamer. Through the eyes of faith, Gideon could see that victory was not only coming but had already happened. He told the Israelites, “the LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands” (v. 15). The Hebrew verb translated “has given” conveys a completed action. Victory was assured because God is always the victor.

Judges 7:19-21

The end of this story is not surprising: Gideon routed the enemy. How this happened is very interesting and emphasizes once more that every victory comes from God.

The sound of pottery breaking and trumpets blaring in the middle of the night disoriented the Midianites. While Israel watched, “all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled” (v. 21). In the chaos they turned on each other. God had used broken vessels that could no longer be used for their original purposes to accomplish His purposes.

God does not need a large army to win a battle. He can win with a few who are willing to trust Him. Neither does God rely on realists to point out unfavorable odds. He can use a dreamer to infuse faith into people. And God does not depend on whole vessels to defeat foes. He can win with broken ones. With God victory is assured.

REFLECT

Consider how God might use the ordinary in your life for His glory.

JIM EDLIN

November

20

GOD GIVES SAMSON TO HIS PEOPLE

God's redemptive plans for this world unfold through dedicated people.

THE WORD

JUDGES
13:1-16

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.

²A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was childless, unable to give birth. ³The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, "You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son.

⁴Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. ⁵**You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines."**

⁶Then the woman went to her husband and told him, "A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name. ⁷But he said to me, 'You will become pregnant and have a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from the womb until the day of his death.'"

⁸Then Manoah prayed to the LORD: "Pardon your servant, LORD. I beg you to let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born."

⁹God heard Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman while she was out in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. ¹⁰The woman hurried to tell her husband, "He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!"

KEY VERSE

¹¹Manoah got up and followed his wife. When he came to the man, he said, “Are you the man who talked to my wife?”

“I am,” he said.

¹²So Manoah asked him, “When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule that governs the boy’s life and work?”

¹³The angel of the LORD answered, “Your wife must do all that I have told her. ¹⁴She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her.”

¹⁵Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “We would like you to stay until we prepare a young goat for you.”

¹⁶The angel of the LORD replied, “Even though you detain me, I will not eat any of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, offer it to the LORD.” (Manoah did not realize that it was the angel of the LORD.)

24-25

²⁴The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the LORD blessed him, ²⁵and the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him while he was in Mahaneh Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

ENGAGE THE WORD

The saga of Samson tells the tragic story of a gifted person who failed in his life mission. Samson was dedicated to God from birth by dedicated parents. So, the beginning of his story is hopeful, because God uses dedicated people to accomplish His purposes in this world.

A DEDICATED CHILD Judges 13:1-5

Samson’s story begins with an announcement of his birth, which indicates God was up to something special. Throughout the Bible we can notice that God chose to bring new hope through new life. The births of Isaac, Moses, Samuel, and Jesus, all marked a new day in God’s redemptive plans. The birth of a child is always significant.

As with Isaac and Samuel, an angel announced Samson’s birth to a barren woman. The child would be a “Nazirite” (v. 5), which was a person especially dedicated to God. According to Numbers 6, a Nazirite avoided

Did You Know?

A Nazarite was not the same as a Nazarene, though the words sound similar. The latter designates a person who came from the village of Nazareth, while the former identifies someone who made a vow to God.

A DEDICATED MOTHER AND FATHER

three things to signify his commitment: grape products, dead bodies, and haircuts. God did not consider these things inherently evil. Rather, shunning them indicated that a person had been set apart for God's purposes. These actions reminded the person, as well as others, that they were wholly committed to God. According to the angel, Samson must be set apart in order "to take the lead in delivering Israel" (v. 5).

Israel had once again become dominated by foreign oppressors because of their sin. In fact, "the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines" (v. 1). Their oppression had been no accident because the Lord permitted it. Their deliverance would not be accidental either. The Lord had decided to deliver them through a dedicated child.

Judges 13:6-14

Dedicated children often come from dedicated parents. This was true for Samson. The angel instructed his mother to dedicate herself to motherhood by avoiding "fermented drink" and "anything unclean" (v. 7). The first prohibition was wise counsel for an expectant mother, but not necessarily a regular practice in ancient Israel. The second prohibition, however, had already been prescribed in Leviticus 11 for all of God's people. It was one way Israelites distinguished themselves as people of God, while undoubtedly keeping them healthier as well.

Samson's father also committed to his role in the child's life. He prayed for the Lord "to teach us how to bring up the boy" (v. 8). He recognized God was doing something special through this child and did not presume to know how to be a father to such a one. Fatherhood is not a natural skill. It requires godly guidance. When the angel of the Lord answered Manoah's prayer and appeared a second time, Manoah asked, "What is to be the rule for the boy's life and work?" (v. 12). This is a great question for any father to ask God. The unique potential in every infant

Think About It

Strangers often come bearing gifts from God. Manoah realized his visitor had been sent by God when he offered him a meal. As we offer hospitality to others, God frequently reveals His presence among us.

A DEDICATED GOD

compels every father to seek the Lord's wisdom in child-rearing.

God's initial instruction for Manoah was to support his wife in her commitment. The angel told him, "Your wife must do all that I have told her" (v. 13). In other words, Manoah's first responsibility was to encourage and assist the mother of his child. According to his conversation with the angel, Manoah was not likely the perfect father. He clearly had doubts and lacked understanding. But God still worked through him to accomplish His purposes.

Judges 13:15-16, 24-25

This part of Samson's story also reminds us of how dedicated God was to His people. If we want to see what unwavering commitment looks like, we only need to look at God. The Lord had announced his purpose for Samson's life in verse 5: he would lead in delivering Israel. Thus, the Lord would not be easily distracted by Manoah's questions or lack of understanding. The angel of God refused to be entertained with a meal. Rather, he instructed Manoah to remain focused and offer his food as a "burnt offering" to God (v. 16).

In the end, God delivered on His promise. Samson was born and "the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him" (v. 25). The hopes of the oppressed rose because the Lord had remained faithful to His covenant. The Lord had found dedicated parents who would raise a dedicated child. The divine plan to rescue the people began to take shape as parents and their child committed themselves to God's purposes in this world.

REFLECT

Is there something in your life that you need to commit to God?

November

27

GOD LEAVES SAMSON TO HIMSELF

The path to spiritual ruin is often gradual and subtle.

THE WORD

JUDGES
16:4-9

Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah. ⁵The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, “See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver.”

⁶So Delilah said to Samson, “Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued.”

⁷Samson answered her, “If anyone ties me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, I’ll become as weak as any other man.”

⁸Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she tied him with them. ⁹With men hidden in the room, she called to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” But he snapped the bowstrings as easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

15-22

¹⁵Then she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when you won’t confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven’t told me the secret of your great strength.” ¹⁶With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was sick to death of it.

¹⁷So he told her everything. “No razor has ever been used on my head,” he said, “because I have been a Nazirite dedicated to God from my mother’s womb. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man.”

¹⁸When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, “Come back once more; he has told me everything.” So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands. ¹⁹After putting him to sleep on her lap, she called for someone to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him.

KEY VERSE

²⁰**Then she called, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” He awoke from his sleep and thought, “I’ll go out as before and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the LORD had left him.**

²¹Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding grain in the prison. ²²But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Samson had so much going for him: a miraculous birth, dedicated parents, and the empowerment of God’s Spirit. If anyone should have succeeded in fulfilling his life mission for God, it was Samson. For Samson, temptation and sin formed formidable foes that even his great strength could not defeat.

THE DOWNWARD DESCENT

Judges 16:4-9

Samson’s road to ruin was gradual and subtle, filled with poor choices along the way. The path of sin always is. It is seldom sudden. In previous chapters we read how Samson’s attraction to Philistine women caused all sorts of problems. Rather than confront God’s enemies, he had chosen to consort with them. This, of course, distracted him from his life mission and God’s people remained in bondage to the Philistines. In addition, he began to break some of his Nazarite vows—his commitment to set himself apart for God’s purposes. He attended wine drinking parties and touched a dead body. Only the vow to leave his hair uncut remained.

So, when Samson “fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek” (v. 4), no one should have been

Did You Know?

The Philistines had five main cities. If the rulers of each of these cities gave Delilah “eleven hundred shekels of silver,” she would have received about 140 pounds of silver to betray Samson.

surprised. He had been down in the valley before and survived. He had toyed with sin as he did with Delilah’s questions about his strength. But sin is not a toy to play with; it is a disaster to run from. Like a person playing with fire, Samson had only been singed before. God had empowered him to overcome his enemies and escape. As a result, Samson seemed to believe God’s blessings immunized him from sin’s consequences. But there is no vaccine for sin. Samson had misunderstood God’s grace.

Samson also misunderstood how determined his enemies were to see him fail. The rulers of the Philistines each offered Delilah “eleven hundred shekels of silver” for her help, an enormous amount of money (v. 5). Samson’s demise obviously meant a great deal to them, as does our downfall to our enemy. Our descent into sin is Satan’s greatest triumph. We dare not underestimate his determination, for he prowls “like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” according to 1 Peter 5:8.

THE DELILAH DECEPTION

Judges 16:15-17

Samson lied to Delilah three times about the secret of his strength. Ironically, she accused him of having deceived (“made a fool of”) her, when in fact she was deceiving (making a fool of) him (v. 15). She also questioned his love for her while she clearly loved money more than him.

This is the way of evil. It can sound so reasonable, so convincing. Love does appear to prove genuine when a person can “confide” in another (v. 15). But the flaw in Delilah’s argument is that love does not need to be “prodded” with “nagging” (v. 16). As with all of the enemy’s arguments, there are all holes in them. Sin is not reasonable, nor forthright. Satan is a liar.

Samson, however, fell for Delilah’s deception. He explained that his Nazarite vow to leave his hair uncut marked him as a person “dedicated to God” (v. 17). This was the source of his supernatural strength. At

Think About It

Leaders in God's kingdom may face the severest temptations because of their widespread influence. If Satan can cause them to fall into sin, the effects upon the community of faith is significant.

**THE DEVASTATING
DESTINATION**

that point, he had shared his most precious secret with his enemy. Literally, he "revealed all his heart" to Delilah, though his heart had belonged to God (v. 17).

Judges 16:18-22

Delilah wasted no time once she knew Samson's secret. With cold calculation she proceeded to contact the Philistine rulers, caress Samson to sleep, and call for a barber to cut his hair. Once Samson lay his head in Delilah's lap, sin had its day. Samson's "strength left him" (v. 19) and "the Philistines seized him" (v. 21). They humiliated him by gouging his eyes out, binding him, and making him do the menial task of grinding grain. Sin had taken God's hero farther than he ever wanted to go.

One of the saddest moments in all of Scripture is when Samson awoke expecting God to rescue him and discovered that "the LORD had left him" (v. 20). God's grace is stubborn, but not disrespectful. God honors our freedom to choose and leaves us to the consequences of poor choices in hopes that they will draw us back to Him. Though the Lord may leave, He does not go far. The final verses of this story tell us that Samson called upon the Lord once again (v. 28) and God answered. Samson's suffering brought him back to God, but sin had exacted a heavy toll.

Today we can be thankful a Savior has been born to rescue us from the bitter consequences of sin as well as its power. We do not have to follow Samson's example. Our destiny does not need to be the same as his because on Christmas day we celebrate the One who came to "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

REFLECT Samson was his own worst enemy, not the Philistines. The enemy within caused defeat, not the enemy outside of him. We must win the private battles of life before we can win the public ones.

Key Verse Memory

Committing God's Word to memory is an important goal for Christians of every age. To assist you in this worthy objective, we have suggested three key verses for memorization. Select one verse to memorize each month or memorize one verse of your choosing for the quarter.

Key verses for Fall 2022:

Exodus 3:14a

Exodus 14:14

Romans 13:8

COMING NEXT QUARTER

Winter 2022-23

Unit 1: The Supremacy of Christ: Colossians

Colossians is an uplifting reminder of the hope of the gospel. This study will focus on the power of the gospel, the certainty of salvation, and the supremacy of Christ.

Unit 2: Meaningful Bible Study

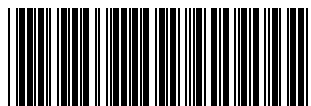
As we explore the authority and relevance of the Bible, we will gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which God's Word brings us into closer communion with God.

Unit 3: The Life of David

This study explores the lessons learned from the life of David.



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