

THE BOOK OF JUDGES – PART FIVE – CHAPTERS 17-21

As the book continues, the theme remains the same, why God's people did not 'possess their possessions'. This pictures our failure to possess the best God has for us in Christ. The emphasis gradually changes from the failure of the people who turned to other gods and became enslaved to the nations around them, to the failure of those who were called to lead God's people. Their failure was always of the same kind. They could be most impressive in public but they did not apply their message at home. Eventually failure in marriage and the family would undermine their public leadership. It still does.

Gideon the fearful gradually became Gideon the valiant warrior. God gave him one of the greatest victories in military history when 300 unarmed men defeated an army of 135,000. He refused to become the king but still accepted a gold offering worth many millions of dollars as if he deserved credit for the victory. He turned it into an object of worship and the people followed his example as we too can make the success of our Christian ministry the centre of our worship. At home he ignored God's command by having multiple wives and a girlfriend with whom he fathered Abimelech, the 'father of the king'.

Again the Israelites turned to other gods.(8:33) Their next supposed saviour was self-appointed. Abimelech saw himself as the leader the people needed. He saw leadership in worldly terms as raising himself above people which meant destroying all possible rivals, in this case his seventy half-brothers. He did not understand that God's kind of leadership is the very reverse.(Lk.22:25,26) One brother, Jotham, escaped the massacre to challenge him.(9:5-21) Abimelech's short reign was marked by continuing jealousy and conflict. It ended when a woman dropped a millstone on his head from a tower he was besieging.(9:22-57) The promise of Gen.3:15 was fulfilled again just as in the story of Jael and Sisera.(4:21) The only answer to the Devil, to temptation and to pride is that Jesus gets into our thinking.

Several other judges followed, each of whom God used despite their failure to apply God's word at home by taking multiple wives, as Gideon had.(10:1-5) One of the powerful messages of this book is that God uses us despite our failure. Learning nothing from history the people again turned to other gods and not surprisingly were again soon enslaved first to the Philistines and then to the Ammonites. Eventually they cried out to God and once more He reminded them why this had happened. The enemy were threatening but where was the deliverer going to come from, the people asked?(10:6-18)

We are introduced to yet another family in which God's commands about marriage had been ignored with predictable consequence. Gilead had sons from his marriage but another son, Jephthah, from his adulterous relationship with a prostitute. There was jealousy between them and Jephthah was driven out. He became leader of a gang of outlaws, a public nuisance in peace time but a great asset in war.(11:1-3) His brothers asked for help against the Ammonites and he agreed – at a price. If he won they would make him king. (11:4-11) Jephthah began negotiations with the king of Ammon who demanded the return of his historic land. Jephthah responded wisely from the Bible; God had given the land to Israel. Why did the Ammonites not ask their god to give it back?(11:12-28) In common with a select group of Old Testament

leaders Jephthah was now given the Holy Spirit to equip him for the task ahead. He made a disastrous mistake by driving his second bargain, this time with God, victory in exchange for a sacrifice. God gave him victory, not because of the bargain but because of His grace. As he returned home, to his horror it was his only daughter who ran out to meet him. The Lord did not want a human sacrifice but Jephthah's pride compelled him to keep his bargain with God.(11:29-40) We too can sacrifice our children because of our pride over 'our' ministry.

Pride was what provoked civil war in Israel between Jephthah's supporters and the tribe of Ephraim.(12:1-7) Several more polygamous leaders followed Jephthah of whom nothing else is remembered other than their capacity to produce children. (12:8-15)

Yet again the Israelites showed that they had learned nothing, as they turned away from God and became enslaved this time to the Philistines. It took 40 years of misery before they were prepared to admit their foolishness. The Lord had plenty of time to prepare His next saviour, Samson. He announced his birth, first to his mother who had been childless. Step by step, first the mother to be and then her husband discovered, not only God's plan for their future son, but who it was who was bringing them the message. The angel of the Lord is an Old Testament title for Jesus Christ. First He told Manaoh and his wife that He was 'I am'(13:11; Exod.3:14) and later that His name was 'wonderful'(13:18; Isa.9:6). Finally they caught on when He identified Himself with the sacrifice they offered which foreshadowed Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Samson was to be brought up as a Nazirite, no alcohol, no contact with the dead and no haircut.(Num.6:1-21). Manaoh's first illogical reaction when he recognised the Lord was that they would die. His wife pointed out the obvious – how if they died could they become parents?(13:1-23)

God kept His promise as He always does. The baby was named Samson, 'strong' – but the question for the future was, whose strength would he use? As he grew the Holy Spirit was beginning to work in his life.(13:24,25) But so were his natural desires and the question for the next three chapters was, who would win? Samson's problem was always the same – whom would he marry? He was attracted by what he saw of a woman, the outside. God knew the heart. His first choice was a woman from Timnah, a Philistine, who did not share his faith. His parents tried to dissuade him but he was adamant. As the family approached Timnah a lion attacked, a picture of how the Devil prowls around looking for Christians he can persuade to follow their appetites rather than God.(I Pet.5:8) In God's strength he killed the lion. Later he found a bee's nest in the carcass and enjoyed the honey, as when we depend on God's strength, His word becomes sweet food and continuing strength to us.(Ps.119:103)

Despite the warning of the lion, Samson went ahead with the wedding. According to local custom it was preceded by 7 days of partying with 30 young men. Samson could not resist showing off by setting them a riddle about the lion and the honey, and making a bet. The guests threatened the bride to be and she pestered Samson until they had the answer to the riddle. His pride had left him in deep trouble but when he trusted in God's strength, the Lord rescued him, not to help pay a bet, but because defeating the Philistines was His plan anyway.(14:10-20)

Samson went home from the battle which followed the wedding without his new bride. When he did return to consummate the marriage, she had been given to someone else. In a fury he used foxes tied in pairs to destroy his enemies' wheat fields. There is no indication that God had anything to do with his cruelty to animals. In revenge for his action the Philistines killed his wife and her family, and Samson took on the Philistines single handed so that he was now a marked man. A series of remarkable pictures of Jesus follow. First he hid in the cleft of a rock as Moses once had.(Exod.33:22) Jesus was the 'rock' in whom we can hide from God's anger.(I Cor.10:4) His own people handed him over to his enemies. In God's strength once again he broke the bonds of certain death and was victorious over the enemy at Ramath-Lehi, the high place of the jawbone, a reminder of Calvary, the hill of the skull. His thirst was satisfied by water miraculously brought from a rock, as Moses had split the rock in the desert,(Exod.17:6; Jn.7:37-39) again a picture of how the life of the Spirit flowed out because of His death on Calvary. For the next 20 years he was the spiritual leader of his people.(15:1-20) Surely now he would not make the same mistake again?

Twenty years later he again strayed into Philistine territory and again looked at a woman who did not belong to God. His enemies surrounded the place to get revenge. At midnight he realised he should not have been there and walked out taking their city gates on his shoulders. No-one liked to argue. Once more God's strength rescued him from the consequence of his sin.(16:1-3) Yet again he made the same error with yet another Philistine woman. The previous one had sold herself to him. This one was prepared to sell him to his enemies. All she had to do to collect the money was to find out why he was so strong. Time and again he made up a story to try to put her off. Each time it was apparent he was still as strong as ever. Finally he gave in and told the secret of this strength, the hair he had promised God not to cut. Clearly this was the truth at last. God and His strength had left him. His enemies leaped out of hiding and pinned the helpless Samson down. First they gouged out his eyes which had so often got him into trouble and then they threw him in prison. Some time later the Philistines planned a party to celebrate the defeat of Samson and the victory of their god over the real God. Those who laugh at defeated Christians are also laughing at a discredited God. Powerless Samson was the centre of attention as they mocked him. In repentance Samson called on God to restore His strength one last time. With outstretched arms, like Jesus on the cross, he defeated the Philistines once again. At last he had learned the secret of victory, reckoning ourselves dead with Jesus. (Rom.6:11)

Two further sad stories conclude the book.

17:1-6 Q.1 How did Micah show his repentance? What mistake did his mother make? What effect did her mistake have on Micah and his family? How do we make the same mistake today and with what effect? How does verse 6 give the clue as to why such things happen?

17:7-13 Q.2 How in this next story did Micah now make the problem worse? How should the Levite have responded to Micah's request? What warning is there here for all Christian leaders?

18:1-31 Q.3 How does the mission of the tribe of Dan continue the theme of the book of Judges? What opportunity did the Levite have to help them in their mission? How did he waste the opportunity and so undermine the future of a whole tribe? Again how does this story illustrate Christian leadership gone wrong? What do you suppose Micah might eventually have learned from this whole miserable story? Against whom was this story directed, Micah, his mother, the Levite or the Danites?

19:1-9 Q.4 What mistake did the Levite in this next story make first in his marriage and then in his attempts to fix the problems between them? How should he have gone about avoiding and resolving their difficulties? What can we learn from this story about marriage counselling?

19:10-30 Q.5 The rest of the chapter describes the horrific behaviour of a mob of men in a small town in the territory of Benjamin. While in no way excusing their actions how had the Levite contributed to a situation which should never have happened? What might be the significance for us of a story which began at Bethlehem and ended near Jerusalem? How did the Levite respond to the loss of his wife? Was his response appropriate?

20:1-48 Q.6 The problems of one family became the problems of a town, then a tribe then a nation. How does a failure of Christian leadership sometimes cause an ever extending circle of damage? How should the sin of the men of Gibeah have been dealt with? How should sin in the church today be dealt with?

21:1-24 Q.7 Having almost lost one of the twelve tribes how did the rest of Israel go about trying to remedy the problem? Was this God's solution? How might they have dealt with the situation differently? What modern day message is there for us in this story?

21:25 Q.8 The last verse has been repeated over and over in the last 5 chapters of the book, 17:6; 18:1; 19:1. How does it help us to understand these last two stories? How does it sum up the failure of leadership in the latter part of the book of Judges?