

PROMISED LAND 1: Lesson Four,
Causes of Israel's Decline, Deborah, Gideon
Judges 1 - 9

Subject: Israel fell into a cycle of apostasy and was delivered from enemies by five Judges.

Main Idea: We are in trouble when we become comfortable with the progress we have made and gradually stop doing all that we should.

Principles:

1. *We worship what we value the most.*
2. *Small sins lead to big problems.*

Introduction

For me, a good cup of tea or coffee are examples of God's many gifts. As I drink them, I savor the flavor and give Him thanks. Over my lifetime, however, I have learned that I am easily addicted to caffeine. Too much one day means my energy will lag the next. On a few occasions when I've had deadlines to meet, I've gotten myself into trouble by steadily increasing my caffeine intake until eventually, my head is in such a fog that I can no longer concentrate. I never set out to do the wrong thing on those occasions. I simply threw caution to the wind and stopped doing all the right things for my body.

How would you finish this sentence: I never set out to do the wrong thing, but little by little I just got comfortable and stopped _____? Maybe you were sick one Sunday and still recovering the next. Another opportunity came up the third week, and before long, it just got easier and easier not to go to church. Maybe you took a break from exercise, but that was a few years ago, and now... You might have forgotten to tithe one month, and a year later, you're finding it's easier and easier to just give the Lord a small tip, if anything. Perhaps you took up a fun hobby that has slowly encroached on the time you used to invest in relationships. You never meant to offend that person, but you never really apologized and now the two of you just don't speak. You certainly didn't intend to become a negative person; you just stopped counting your blessings. For most of us, there is always a temptation to become content with things as they are and the progress we've made and gradually stop doing all that we should. We certainly don't set out to fall into sins and poor habits, but when we gradually stop doing all the right things, we find ourselves in trouble.

This is exactly what happened to the Israelites after they entered Canaan. They didn't intend to do the wrong thing. They didn't wake up one day and decide to be idolaters. They just got comfortable with the progress they had made in their conquest of Canaan and stopped driving their idolatrous neighbors from the land. Repeatedly, the Lord and His representatives had warned of the danger of allowing Canaanites to live among them. However, in the very first chapter of Judges, we are told that pockets of Canaanites remained in virtually all parts of the land. The book of Judges tells us of the consequences. The war-weary Israelites did not set out to do the *wrong* thing. They just got comfortable with the progress they had made and gradually stopped doing the *right* thing.

I. Introduction to Judges and the Cycle of Apostasy – Judges 1:1 – 3:6

A. Authorship and Date: No one knows who wrote the book of Judges. Jewish tradition says that the prophet Samuel, Israel’s last Judge, compiled it and the book of Joshua. The period of the Judges was a transitional period between the unique leadership of Moses and Joshua and the period of Israel’s monarchy. It began with the death of Joshua and ended with Saul’s coronation. Saul’s coronation can be quite certainly fixed at about 1050 B.C. However, the beginning of the period of the Judges hinges on the date of Joshua’s death which, in turn, is contingent on the date of Israel’s exodus from Egypt. Liberal scholars generally hold to a later date for the Exodus (around 1290 B.C.) than conservative scholars (1446 B.C.) Moses and Joshua led the Israelites approximately 60 to 70 years following the Exodus. This leaves us with a period for the Judges that ranges somewhere between 150 and 350 years in length.

B. The Judges

- i. Twelve Judges: The book identifies six “minor” Judges (Shagmar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon) and six “major” Judges (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson). Their categorization as “major” or “minor” simply reflects how much was written about them. It is possible that these twelve Judges are only a representative listing. Twelve is a memorable number, since it is the same as the number of Israel’s tribes and of months in a year. The behavior of Judges like Jephthah and Samson indicates that the Judges were not primarily chosen for their knowledge of the Law or their spirituality. God used them *in spite* of what they were, in order to accomplish the preservation of Israel.
- ii. The Office: The office of a Judge is hard to define, since these rulers were not elected to, nor did they inherit, their position. They were individuals whom God raised up and who spontaneously took leadership when the need arose. Primarily, they were military deliverers. Some are also indicated as having prophetic and judicial roles. Almost certainly, some were regional rather than national Judges and the periods of their leadership overlapped.

C. The Setting: After the death of Joshua and the elders of Israel (who probably outlived Joshua by at least twenty years), the entire nation fell into decline and defeat. The book begins with two descriptions of Israel’s failures. Chapter 1 describes the Israelites’ failure to completely take the land and chapter 2 describes the cycle of spiritual apostasy into which they had fallen. The central section of the book illustrates that cycle, telling of specific oppressions of Israel by her enemies and the Judges who were raised up to deliver her. The book ends with two illustrations of just how broken and anarchic Israel became. It was a

period of spiritual darkness and political unrest. For us, the entire book is one huge, flashing warning sign: Be careful or this could happen to you!

D. Local Battles Won and Lost – Judges 1:1 – 2:5

- i. Judah's Leadership: In the absence of any individual leader after Joshua's death, Judges 1:2 reveals the tribe of Judah as God's chosen leader. According to Genesis 49, Jacob had prophesied that Judah would lead his brothers.
- ii. Disobedience Among Every Tribe: According to Judges 1, seven-and-a-half tribes did not completely drive the Canaanite/Amorite inhabitants out of the land. Only nine-and-a-half tribes possessed land west of the Jordan and one of the two not listed (Simeon) was, by implication from verses 1-3, included with the tribe of Judah. Furthermore, Issachar's omission could be random.ⁱ The picture that is painted in chapter 1 is that none of the tribes were fully obedient. Former residents remained in all parts of the land.
- iii. The Lord Confronted Israel at Bokim – 2:1-5: The Lord confronted the Israelites, saying that because they failed to break down the altars of these other people groups and instead entered into covenants with them, He would no longer assist them in driving out the former residents. He would allow the pagan peoples to remain as thorns and snares (2:3), to punish the Israelites for their apostasy (2:20-21), to test their faithfulness (2:22; 3:4), and to give a new generation of Israelites experience in warfare (3:2). God often disciplines us by simply giving us what we want. "You want to abuse your body?" He says, "Okay. Let's see what happens when you do." "You no longer want to tithe or go to church on Sunday? Okay, let's see how your life goes when you pull away from God's people. Let's see how you fare when you don't give first to me." Although the Lord *punished* Israel, we nevertheless see His grace in using this punishment as an *opportunity to learn*. The test left open the opportunity for each new generation to choose to serve the Lord.

E. Israel's Cycle of Apostasy – Judges 2:6 – 3:6

- i. A New Generation – 2:6-9: After the death of the generation who had witnessed all the great things the Lord had done through Joshua, the next generation neither knew the Lord nor what He had done (2:10). They had not witnessed the crossing of the Jordan, the Battle of Jericho, and the national battles in which the Lord fought on Israel's behalf. Daniel I. Block comments: "If God's people ever forget the grace that he has lavished on them in redemption, covenant relationship, and the revelation of his will, the slide into apostasy is inevitable."ⁱⁱ
- ii. The Cycle – 2:10-19: A cycle of apostasy began.

1. *Rebellion*: The Israelites forsook the ways of their ancestors and began doing what the people around them were doing (2:12). They did evil, worshipping the various gods of the land and provoking the Lord to anger (2:11-13, 17, 19).
 2. *Retribution*: As a result, the Lord withdrew His hand of protection and divine enablement and handed the Israelites over to their enemies (2:14-18). He thwarted their progress and even fought against them.
 3. *Repentance*: Oppressed and afflicted by their enemies, Israel became greatly distressed (2:14-18) and cried out to the Lord (3:9, 15; 6:6, 7; 10:10).
 4. *Restoration*: Out of compassion, the Lord relented and raised up Judges to deliver them (2:16-18). Following the death of each Judge, however, Israel once again turned away from the Lord and the cycle repeated.
- iii. Israel's Idolatry – 3:5-6
1. Among the many Canaanite gods, Baal was the most prominent, but El was considered their highest deity. El's wife was Asherah (meaning "grove," as in a grove of trees). The Old Testament frequently references the smashing down of Asherah poles. One of El's brothers was Dagon (the main deity of the Philistines). He was the god of grain. Dagon had two children: Baal and Anat. They were gods of fertility. "Baal" means "husband" or "master." There were many local "varieties" of Baal; therefore, we sometimes read about "the Baals" (in plural). Baal's consort was Ashtoreth (or Anatⁱⁱⁱ).
 2. The Canaanites believed that if people imitated the intercourse of the gods, then their fields, flocks and families would be more fertile. To this end, they established male and female temple prostitutes with whom the common people had sex. Thus, wherever Baal was worshipped, sexual anarchy was sure to follow.

Summary Statement: The book of Judges begins by setting the period in the context of the cycle of apostasy.

The cycle began with the Israelites' idolatry, but how did the Israelites begin worshipping the Baals? Joshua 1 repeatedly emphasizes that they failed to live separately from the Canaanites. Four times in Joshua 1, the writer says that the Israelites subjected the local peoples to forced labor (1:28, 30, 33, 35), when they should have driven them out or killed them. This is critical and telling information, for when they were given the opportunity to obey God and rid the land of the Canaanites, they decided they would *benefit more* from allowing them to remain.

Principle: *We worship whatever we value the most.*

In a narrow sense, idolatry can be defined as the spiritual worship of idols (usually statues). However, since Samuel equated arrogance with idolatry (1 Samuel 15:23) and Paul called greed idolatry (Colossians 3:5), we should consider idolatry as *greater admiration, love, or reverence for anyone or anything other than the one, true God.*

The Israelites did not set out to do the wrong thing. Once they had been in the land for a little while, they probably got to know a few of the Canaanites and decided some of them really didn't seem like such bad people. They built their houses next to them, began trading with them, and before long, started intermarrying with them. After that, it isn't difficult to imagine how they adopted the Canaanites' religious practices.

The Israelites did not set out to ruin their lives. They just got comfortable with the progress they made (the land they had already gained) and gradually, they stopped doing all the right things. After seven long years of fighting, the Israelites valued their comfort and the benefit of slave labor more than they valued absolute obedience to the Lord. The results were devastating.

Application: What do we value most? Is it our time or our money? Is it an image we want to portray: an image of success or an image of spirituality or an image of a perfect family? Do we value comfort more than we value the blessing of absolute obedience to the Lord? We usually mean well. We intend to worship the Lord and Him alone. But when we begin making small compromises with sin and bad habits, we will eventually end up in trouble: openly worshipping something or someone other than God.

If you are not sure what you value most, ask your closest friends and family members. We easily deceive ourselves, but what we worship is obvious to those who really know us.

Transition: With the context of this cycle of Israel's apostasy established, 3:7 begins the middle section and main body of the book of Judges, in which the cycle of apostasy is illustrated. In Judges 3-9, the cycle repeats and the Lord sends a Judge to rescue Israel five times. We are told a fair amount about four of these and one is a minor Judge.

II. Illustrations of the Cycle of Apostasy – Judges 3:7 – 9:57

A. First Three Judges – 3:7-31

i. Othniel

1. Othniel, a Judahite, was Caleb's nephew (younger brother, in some translations). He also became Caleb's son-in-law. We were

introduced to him in the book of Joshua, when he met Caleb's challenge to win Caleb's daughter's hand in marriage by helping Caleb expand his territory.

2. The formula of the cycle is repeated in full in the telling of Othniel's story: Israel did evil, forgot the Lord, and worshipped the Baals. In His anger, the Lord handed them over to the king of Aram Naharaim, who subjected them. (Aram Naharaim, "Aram of the two rivers," was probably modern Iraq/Syria in northwest Mesopotamia.) The Israelites cried out to the Lord and He raised up Othniel who saved them. Following that, the land had peace for forty years until Othniel's death.
 3. 3:10 tells us that the Spirit of the Lord came on Othniel. The Holy Spirit never permanently indwelt individuals prior to Christ's ascension. However, in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is said to have "come upon" an individual, usually as an anointing and empowering for a special work.
- ii. Ehud: In the time of the left-handed Benjamite, Ehud, the Moabites (with help from the Ammonites and Amalekites) attacked and subjected the Israelites. Ehud killed the king of Moab by deception, requesting a private audience and claiming he had a message for him from God. He used the opportunity to thrust a sword into the king's belly. With the king dead, he gathered the Israelites for battle and successfully overthrew the Moabites, subjecting them and bringing peace to the land for eighty years.
 - iii. Shamgar: The Philistines, who migrated to the coastal regions of southwest Israel in large numbers during the late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries BC, had become a serious threat to the Israelites during the period of the Judges. We learn almost nothing about the minor Judge Shamgar, except that he delivered Israel from the Philistines by striking down six hundred of them with an ox goad.

B. Deborah – Judges 4 – 5

- i. Israel's Enemy: Unlike the previous troubles described with foreign invaders, in the days of Deborah and Barak, trouble came from the very Canaanites the Israelites had failed to drive from the land. Jabin, king of Hazor, may have been a descendant of the king of Hazor whom Joshua killed (Joshua 11:1, 10-12). Hazor was in the northern part of Canaan. We are reminded in 4:1 that the Canaanites' twenty-year, cruel oppression of the Israelites did not occur in a vacuum. The Israelites, once again, "did evil in the eyes of the Lord," so "the Lord sold them into the hands of

Jabin.” However, the enemy who is given the most attention in the text is not Jabin but the commander of his army, Sisera. The Canaanites’ superior military is emphasized by the mention of Sisera’s 900 iron chariots.

- ii. The Heroes: Eventually, the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help. Three heroes are named in this account.
 1. *Deborah* was a prophetess. Beyond that, her role in Israel is widely disputed by Bible scholars. Some say she held a judicial role,^{iv} while others insist that when she “held court” (4:5), it was only to act as a prophetess and give the Israelites God’s answers.^v Some Bible students conclude that *Barak* is portrayed as God’s deliverer (Judge), rather than Deborah. Hebrews 11 names Barak along with several of Israel’s Judges. Yet Judges 4:4 affirms that *Deborah* was leading (“judging”) Israel at the time. We need not be too concerned over the debate. Ultimately, this account (along with the others) emphasizes that *God* was Israel’s true deliverer.
 2. *Barak* led Israel in battle against the Canaanites. Deborah sent for him and charged him with gathering 10,000 men from the northern tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun to wage war against Sisera. Barak agreed, but only on the condition that Deborah would accompany him. At Barak’s advance, the Lord routed Sisera and his troops, and Sisera fled on foot (4:15). However, Barak did not receive the honor for the victory, since he relied on Deborah’s presence instead of the Lord’s. The credit he expected to receive was given to a woman.
 3. *Jael*, Heber’s wife and a non-Israelite, is the third hero in the story. Exhausted from the battle, Sisera entered a tent belonging to Jael’s family. Jael drove a tent peg through Sisera’s skull while he slept. Her motives are never explained. The highlighting of women in the story and the unconventional method by which the enemy was killed are what make this story unusual. Women were often not considered more than a piece of property in ancient times. The God of Israel honors women along with men.
- iii. Deborah’s Hymn of Praise – Judges 5: The positioning of a poetic account, such as the one in Judges 5, immediately following a record of the account in prose is only found in the Old Testament here and in Exodus 14-15 (the story of the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea). The poem ends with Deborah’s declaration, “So may all your enemies perish, Lord! But may those who love you be like the sun when it rises in its

strength.” Ironically, strength (social, political, and spiritual) is what eluded the Israelites during the period of the Judges! The Israelites needed new hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-33, Hebrews 8:7-13).

C. Gideon – Judges 6 – 9

i. Israel’s Trouble – 6:1-10

1. *Israel’s History with Midian:* Once again, Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord and, once again, the Lord used an enemy nation to discipline them (6:1). The Midianites were descendants of Abraham and his wife Keturah, making them distantly related to the Israelites. However, were idolatrous and had proven to be a snare for the Israelites during the time of Moses and Joshua. As a result, the Lord had told Israel to put them to death (Numbers 25:17-18).
2. *The Midianites’ Oppression:* According to Judges 6:1-4, the Midianites were destroying Israel’s crops as soon as they were planted. For an agrarian society, the implications extended beyond a single year, since the grain not only fed them but also provided the seed needed to plant again the following year. Additionally, the Midianites were taking the Israelites’ livestock. The combined result was destruction by starvation. This went on for seven years, long enough for the Israelites’ situation to have become quite desperate.
3. *The Israelites’ Cry and the Prophets:* When the Israelites cried out to the Lord, He first sent a prophet. In Moses’ day, the Lord’s physical presence among the Israelites was evident in the pillar of cloud and fire. After the Israelites entered Canaan and no longer had the pillar, the voice of the prophets became all the more important. They were God’s spokesmen and women who called the Israelites to repent. This prophet reminded the people that they had brought their trouble on themselves. The Lord had told them not to worship the Amorites’ gods but they had not listened. It was a call to repentance. Presumably, they responded, for the Lord raised up another Judge, Gideon.

ii. Gideon’s Call – 6:11-35

1. *The Angel of the Lord:* For the second time in Judges, the Angel of the Lord makes an appearance (2:1, 6:11). Some identify this “Angel” as the human prophet (the messenger) God sent in verse 8.

Others see Him as an angelic being. One trouble with these views is that the people who encountered this “Angel” in the Old Testament perceived that they were seeing God Himself. Gideon certainly made this assumption (6:22). At the time of His appearance, Gideon was threshing grain in a winepress to prevent the Midianites from taking notice. It seems ironic that Gideon was hiding from his enemy at the time the Lord addressed him as a “mighty warrior”!

2. *Gideon’s Doubts*

- a. First, he had doubts about the Lord. The Angel told Gideon the Lord was with him. Gideon seemed to have trouble believing the Lord could be with him personally when he saw no evidence that the Lord was with Israel corporately. His response conveyed his uncertainty about the Lord’s presence and power: “If the Lord is with us, why are we in this trouble with the Midianites?” (6:13). He must have genuinely doubted the stories of old he had heard about the Lord’s miracles. Considering what we have been told about the prevalence of idolatry in Israel, it seems likely that Gideon held semi-pagan notions about God.
- b. Second, Gideon had doubts about himself. When the Lord answered Gideon’s question by saying He planned to deliver Israel through *him*, Gideon attempted to excuse himself from the mission, saying that his family was too insignificant in the tribe of Manasseh for him to be given such a role. Interestingly, the subsequent story of Gideon tearing down his father’s altar (6:25-32) lends evidence that Gideon’s father was actually a wealthy man with an influential position in the community. If nothing else, we can conclude that Gideon was genuinely insecure about doing what the Lord asked of him.
- c. Gideon asked the Angel for a sign and that He remain while Gideon prepared Him an offering. Consumption of a meal offered to the gods was understood to mean acceptance and favor upon the offerer. The quantity of food Gideon prepared (an ephah of flour is equivalent to twenty-two liters) is another indication of his family’s wealth. The Angel of the Lord consumed Gideon’s offering with fire and then immediately disappeared. Instead of being comforted,

Gideon was suddenly terrified, realizing he had seen God “face to face” and that this would surely mean his death. By some undisclosed means, the Lord spoke to Gideon, assuring him, “Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die” (6:23). Gideon built an altar there and called it, “The Lord is Peace” (6:24).

3. *Gideon’s First Challenge* – 6:25-32: The Lord developed Gideon’s courage by having him take a step of leadership close to home. He told Gideon to tear down his father’s idols and replace them with an altar to the Lord.

- a. Apparently, his father had been responsible for providing a place for the community to worship the Baals. As Block notes, Gideon’s village had “been paganized, and, while Gideon [was] aware of the traditions of Yahweh (v. 13), for all practical purposes he and his family [were] Baalists...[Gideon could not] embark on God’s mission of deliverance [until he] cut out the mark of apostasy at home.”^{vi} God’s primary concern was not Israel’s oppression by Midian but their sinful idolatry. That was the root of their trouble!
- b. Gideon obeyed but acted at night, out of fear. The following day, the men of the town planned to kill him because, in their view, his actions amounted to apostasy and blasphemy of Baal. His father’s success in defending his son reflects his influence in the town. “If my son has offended Baal, won’t Baal defend himself?” he asked (6:31).

iii. Gideon’s Fleece – Judges 6:36-40

1. *Gideon’s Test*: The Midianites had joined forces with the Amalekites and other eastern peoples. Together, they crossed the Jordan into Canaan (6:33). The “*Spirit of the Lord*” came on Gideon (as with Othniel, 3:10) and Gideon summoned several of the northern tribes to go with him against the Midianite coalition. Gideon knew God had called him to strike down the Midianites. He had no reason to question God’s will in the matter. Nevertheless, he sought further assurance. He laid out a fleece overnight, telling God that if there was dew only on the fleece and the ground was dry in the morning, he would know God would use him to save Israel. After God answered him favorably, Gideon reversed the strategy,

asking God to make the fleece dry and the ground wet. Again, God answered his request.

2. *Gideon's Motive*: What was behind Gideon's test? Since he was so riddled with fear, it is possible he may have been looking for a way out of leading Israel in battle. Perhaps he still lacked faith and hoped to change God's mind about using him. Another possibility is that his pagan family upbringing continued to influence his thinking. Although he had heard of the Lord's great deeds in the past and although the Lord had consumed his offering, he still lacked confidence that God *was able* to do what He promised. If this was the case, he may have put the fleece out as a way of looking for further proof of God's power. If nothing else, Gideon was weak and struggling and just needed confirmation.

 3. *God's Response*: Deuteronomy 6:16 tells us not to put the Lord to the test when we are unbelieving. God was under no obligation to accommodate Gideon's request. He did so as a gracious concession. Gideon asked for the miraculous and he asked with specificity. He would have been better to have asked for assurance without demanding anything too specific. On the other hand, Gideon does provide a positive model for us with regard to prayer. He went to the Lord with his insecurity and that should be our response when we are afraid. Philippians 4:6-7 exhorts us, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."
- iv. Gideon's Victory – Judges 7:1 – 8:3
1. *Gideon's Army Reduced* – 7:2-8: The fighting men of the northern tribes rallied to Gideon and prepared for battle. The Lord did not want the Israelites to boast that they had been delivered from Midian by their own strength. Through a process of whittling down Israel's soldiers until a meager 300 men remained, God determined to prove that *He* was Israel's deliverer and would give Gideon the victory.
 2. *Gideon's Fears Assuaged* – 7:9-15: The night Gideon was to attack, the Lord gave him further assurance of victory through the dream of a Midianite.
 3. *Gideon's Military Strategy* – 7:15-25: Gideon defeated the Midianites by shrewdly convincing them that his army was larger

than it was by supplying his 300 men with torches, jars, and trumpets. With these, they created such a sight and sound with that the surrounded Midianites panicked and begin attacking one another. Israelites from Naphtali, Asher, Manasseh, and Ephraim then chased down the Midianites as they fled.

4. *The Offended Ephraimites* – 8:1-3: The Ephraimites were offended that Gideon had not included them among those he initially called up for service. Gideon wisely avoided a potentially serious conflict by acknowledging the Ephraimites’ important role in securing the Jordan and capturing two significant Midianite leaders.
- v. Gideon’s Pursuit of the Midianite Kings – 8:4-21
1. *Refusal of Assistance*: Gideon and his exhausted band of 300 crossed the Jordan in pursuit of two Midianite kings. His tired men needed refreshment. However, the Israelites of Succoth and Peniel (in the Transjordan) were not as confident of Gideon’s success as the tribes in the west had been. They refused to help Gideon, even after he threatened them with retribution.
 2. *Gideon’s Private Vendetta*: It seems that Gideon had a personal vendetta motivating him to driving himself and his tired men until he finally captured and killed the kings. Later in the account (8:18-19), we learn that these two Midianite kings had killed Gideon’s brothers in some previous battle. Some Bible students believe Gideon’s private vendetta against these kings marks the beginning of his downfall. Later in the chapter, we are told that Gideon ultimately returned to idolatry (8:27). While the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon to accomplish his victory over the Midianite forces (6:34), it is interesting that chapter 8 says nothing about the Lord’s involvement with Gideon. While chapter 7 speaks of the support his fellow Israelites gave him, chapter 8 tells of the lack of support he received from the private, Israelite citizens in Sukkoth and Peniel. It is possible that this lack of support from his fellow Israelites and his vicious retribution against them are evidences that the Lord was no longer with him.
- vi. Gideon’s Refusal of Kingship and Later Life – 8:22-35
1. *Kingship Refused*: Following Gideon’s success, the Israelites offered to make him their king. They wanted him to be more than a Judge. They sought the security of an established dynasty: “Rule over us – you, your son, and your grandson” (8:22). According to 8:23, Gideon refused them, asserting that the Lord alone should rule over them. His statement certainly reflected correct theology. However, scholars disagree about his true intention. Some find evidence in the text that his refusal was merely a sham.

- a. First, Gideon requested that his men give him a portion of their plunder. This was a service normally rendered to kings. The amount of gold they gave him was a huge sum (1700 shekels: the equivalent of 43 pounds, or 19.5 kilograms, of gold)!
 - b. Second, he used the gold to make an ephod. Previously, an ephod has only been referred to in the Scriptures with regard to Aaron's priestly garment. The fact that Gideon's ephod was "placed" in Gideon's hometown may suggest that it symbolized Gideon's establishment of a new religion, the worship of Baal-Berith (8:33). Establishment of new religion was also a kingly prerogative. The ephod is said to have become a snare to Gideon and his family (8:27).
 - c. Third, Gideon kept for himself the purple garments of the kings of Midian and their pendants (8:26), objects that proved one's kingly status.^{vii}
2. *Gideon's Later Life*: Even if we give Gideon the benefit of the doubt and assume that his rejection of kingship was sincere, the events that sum up the remainder of his life affirm that over time, Gideon's attitude toward kingship changed. As ancient kings often did, he took a large harem of wives, as well as concubines. One of his concubines bore him a son whom Gideon named Abimelech, the meaning of which is telling. Abimelech means, "My father is king!" "Although God is occasionally referred to as 'father' in the Old Testament (Psalm 68:5; Isaiah 9:6; Malachi 2:10), that is not likely the meaning intended by Gideon. Gideon has already made some regal decisions, and the name of his son represents one more."^{viii} Sadly, Gideon's later life was characterized by idolatry (8:27). As if to emphasize it, between verses 29 and 35 of chapter 8, he is twice referred to as Jerub-Baal ("Baal contends"). All Israel traveled to his hometown to worship.
- vii. Gideon's son, Abimelech – Judges 9: Chapter 9 serves as a transition to the remainder of the book of Judges. From this point forward, the personal lives of the main characters reflect the reality of Israel's progressive spiritual, moral, and political decline and show Israel at its worst.
1. *Abimelech's Kingship*: Gideon's son Abimelech is not portrayed as a Judge in Israel. Rather, his story is an addendum to Gideon's. Whatever we might think about Gideon's motivation and position with regard to kingship, Abimelech clearly and actively sought it, murdering his 69 of his 70 brothers in the process. It seems he wanted to be heir to his father's position, if only in a regional sense.

2. *The Curse:* The story is one of retribution, in which the Lord brought Abimelech's evil actions, and those of the men of Shechem, back on their own heads. The citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo crowned Abimelech king. Jotham, the brother who escaped Abimelech's rampage, challenged them to consider whether their actions were honorable. He uttered a prophetic curse, predicting that Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem would eventually destroy one another.
3. *The Outcome:* Jotham's prediction came true when an outsider named Gaal stirred up animosity between the citizens of Shechem and Abimelech. However, Shechem's governor, Zebul, warned Abimelech of Gaal's self-serving plot. Angrily, Abimelech attacked and killed the very citizens who had crowned him king and besieged the nearby town of Thebez. A woman trapped inside the tower dropped a stone on his head, killing him. In the end, Abimelech's story is the story of a failed attempt to establish monarchy in Israel and illustrates just how bad things in Israel had become. Moses had given instructions for instituting kingship (Deuteronomy 17:14-20), but none of them were heeded. The serious consequences of idolatry were growing.

Summary Statement: The Lord gave Gideon a tremendous victory, but he ended up leading his fellow Israelites and immediate family into idolatry. The consequences extended beyond his lifetime.

Principle: *Small sins lead to big problems.*

Illustration: Every now and then, we hear of a great Christian man or woman whose life and ministry are devastated by some grotesque sin. Those things do not happen overnight! A man who deeply loves God does not wake up one morning and decide to have a sexual relationship with his secretary. A godly woman does not become an alcoholic in a single day. Small compromises are made in the beginning, sometimes with good intentions, but those sins add up and eventually erupt in a crisis.

What led Gideon to set up an ephod in his hometown and start acting like a king? Whatever it was, it didn't result from a sudden change of heart. Perhaps it began with lingering resentment against the kings who had murdered his brothers. Maybe he gradually started believing that he had "helped God out" by defeating the Midianites and deserved some honor. It could have resulted from a growing love of wealth after he collected just a single earring from the plunder of each of his fellow soldiers. Grotesque sin always begins with small decisions and shifts in attitude.

Application: We are in trouble when we become comfortable with the progress we have made and gradually stop doing all that we should. Small sins lead to big problems. We may be tempted to think, at times, that dealing with our small sins and bad habits is not as important as accomplishing some greater goal. But if we don't deal with habits of gossiping, swearing, impure thoughts, angry outbursts, failure to respect others and their property, or any number of other "small sins," they will eventually lead to some kind of disaster.

Conclusion

In recent weeks, we've been exploring the Israelites' failure to enjoy fullness of life in the Promised Land and trying to learn from their mistakes. The book of Judges indicates that they got comfortable with the progress they had made and gradually stopped doing all they should have done to rid the land of sin and its influence. For us, these chapters are a big, flashing warning sign.

A.W. Tozer describes five vows for spiritual power and dealing thoroughly with sin is the first: "Sin has been driven underground these days and has come up with a new name and face... [It] is called by various fancy names – anything but what it really is. For example, men don't get under conviction anymore; they get a guilt complex... [But] sin is still the ancient enemy of the soul... So don't call your sins by some other name... Call it what it is."^{ix} And that is what we need to do, brothers and sisters: Call our sin what it is and put it to death, before it leads us into moral decay and complications we never would have expected.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Carson, D. A., France, R. T., Motyer, J. A., & Wenham, G. J. (Eds.). (1994). *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed., p. 269). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

^{iv} Carson, D. A., France, R. T., Motyer, J. A., & Wenham, G. J. (Eds.). (1994). *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed., p. 270). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

^v Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 197). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

^{vi} Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 265). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

^{vii} Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, pp. 299–300). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

^{viii} Fleenor, R., & Ziese, M. S. (2008). *Judges-Ruth* (p. 141). Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company.

^{ix} Tozer, A.W. (1996). *Five Vows for Spiritual Power* (pp. 3-4). Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications.