

***PROMISED LAND 1: Lesson Five, Jephthah, Samson,***  
***Consequences of Decline***  
***Judges 10 - 21***

**Subject:** Jephthah and Samson’s stories and two accounts of internal threats illustrate Israel’s moral and spiritual decay.  
**Main Idea:** Living by our own foolish “wisdom” results in personal and social disaster.

**Principles:**

1. *Bargaining with God is unnecessary and can end in disappointment.*
2. *Living according to our passions is perilous.*
3. *As the home goes, so goes the nation.*

### Introduction

Have you ever acting on your own foolish “wisdom.”<sup>i</sup> Hopelessly lost, you continue driving down one road after another, refusing to ask for directions. You try something new in the kitchen, confident you don’t need to consult a recipe. You muscle a repair when you should have used your brain. We do all kinds of crazy things we later laugh over, don’t we? But when a person or a family or a people group makes a habit of living this way, the consequences are no longer laughable. The book of Judges gives us a picture of the personal and social disaster that resulted when the Israelites chose to live by their own foolish “wisdom.”

The end of Joshua and the book of Judges tell us that the Israelites failed to drive the Canaanites from the land. As a result, the Israelites became increasingly “Canaanized.”<sup>ii</sup> The text suggests that the Israelites still acknowledged Yahweh, but they had demoted Him to a position of one god among many and also worshipped the Baals, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines (Judges 10:6, 1 Samuel 4:8). They became increasingly ignorant of the Law of Moses. Twice, the writer of Judges repeats, “Everyone did as they saw fit” (17:6, 21:25). Without divine intervention, Israel would have quickly lost her distinct identity. God disciplined His people by allowing foreign nations to oppress them, but when they cried out to him, he relented and sent a Judge to deliver them – it was an act of compassion that also protected His plan to preserve Israel for His greater purposes.

Of the twelve Judges that the book describes, our previous lesson covered five. Nothing negative is said about the first of these, Othniel, but thereafter, the behaviors and motives of the main characters is increasingly suspect. According to Hebrews 11, Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah were men of faith. How should we understand the rub between this statement and their behavior in the book of Judges? Moses was a sinner. King David was a sinner. Israel’s Judges also sinned, and in their case, the writer of Judges points to their immoral and foolish behavior as a reflection of the time in which they lived. While God used them mightily, they were deeply flawed and often acted out of their own foolish “wisdom.”

## I. Jephthah and Five “Minor” Judges – Judges 10 – 12

A. **Two Minor Judges** – Judges 10:1-5: Chapter 10 begins with a brief history of two Judges, Tola and Jair. Jair ruled over Gilead in the Transjordan. He had thirty sons who rode thirty donkeys, indicating his prosperity.

### B. Israel’s Trouble and Jephthah’s Rise – Judges 10:6 – 11:11

- i. Israel’s Sin and Punishment – 10:6-10: Like the accounts of the previous “major” Judges, the story of Jephthah begins with the cycle of Israel’s apostasy. The Israelites worshipped the gods of other nations and, as a result, the Lord sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites. In Jephthah’s story, the trouble with the Ammonites is recounted. The trouble with the Philistines is told in Samson’s story. The Ammonites brought trouble from the east to the land occupied by the tribes of the Transjordan. The Philistines brought trouble to the tribes west of the Jordan. The Ammonite oppression lasted eighteen years (10:8), while the Philistine oppression lasted forty years (13:1).
- ii. The Lord’s Rebuke and Israel’s Repentance – 10:11-16: The Israelites cried out to the Lord, as they had before when oppressed, and the Lord replied with a rebuke: Why were they turning to Him for help and not to the foreign gods they worshipped? The Israelites confessed their sin and got rid of their foreign gods. The writer tells us that the Lord could “bear Israel’s misery no longer” (10:16). Scholars Keil and Delitzsch explain God’s motivation:

*In order to bend the sinner at all, the love of God must withdraw its helping hand and make men feel the consequences of their sin and rebelliousness, that they may forsake their evil ways and turn to the Lord their God. When this end has been attained, the same divine love manifests itself as pitying and helping grace. Punishments and benefits flow from the love of God, and have for their object the happiness and well-being of men.* <sup>iii</sup>

### C. Jephthah’s War Against the Ammonites – Judges 10:17 – 11:40

- i. Jephthah’s Bargain – 11:1-11: Jephthah, son of Gilead, was born to his father through a prostitute. His half-brothers deeply resented him and drove him away to ensure he would have no part in their inheritance. Yet Jephthah was a mighty warrior and when the Ammonites gathered for war in Gilead, the Israelites realized they needed his assistance. The elders of Gilead located Jephthah and begged him to be their commander in fighting the Ammonites. Jephthah was understandably hesitant but used the opportunity to bargain for a position of permanent, tribal leadership

after he secured a military victory. The bargain was sealed with a pledge before the Lord (11:11).

ii. Jephthah's Failed Diplomacy with the King of Ammon – 11:12-32:

1. Jephthah's first action against the Ammonites was another diplomatic one. He asked the Ammonites why they were attacking the Israelites. Their king responded with an accusation that Israel had taken his land, a claim Jephthah refuted. He explained that after the Israelites left Egypt, they had obliged the nations who refused to let them travel through their countries. The Amorite kings, however, not only refused them passage but also attacked them. The Lord gave Israel the victory, as well as the territory the kings had occupied. It was this very land that the Ammonites now wanted Israel to give to them, a parcel east of the Jordan and between the Arnon and Jabbok tributaries (possibly, the Amorite kings that Israel had defeated had themselves taken the land from the Ammonites, or so the king claimed).<sup>iv</sup> Jephthah's conclusion was that Israel had a divine right to that land: "The God of Israel has driven the Amorites out before His people... Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you?" However, the king of Ammon disregarded him.
2. The Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah and he marched his army out to fight the Ammonites. In the Old Testament, the Spirit of the Lord came on a leader as an anointing for a specific task. Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites ended Israel's oppression by them but the record of the victory is overshadowed by the story of his foolish vow.

iii. Jephthah's Vow – 11:30-31:

1. Jephthah vowed that after the battle, he would offer the first thing to come out the door of his home to greet him as a burnt sacrifice. Jephthah's predecessors had not sworn vows. This vow was simply unnecessary. Human sacrifice was an accepted practice among the religions whose gods Israel had been worshipping (Judges 10:6, 2 Kings 3:27), but Jephthah should have known that the Law of Moses forbade it (Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 18:10). He had certainly shown familiarity with the history recorded in it (11:14-27). Furthermore, the Law made provision for those among Lord's people who "belonged to Him" (or were dedicated to Him) to be redeemed by a monetary gift (Exodus 13:13, Leviticus 27:1-8).
2. The Bible does not tell us what motivated Jephthah to make such a vow. At best, he was simply rash. Perhaps he had such a life-long habit of bargaining and negotiating that he just rashly acted out of

habit. At worst, he was so “Canaanized” that he believed his vow would guarantee him success. In either case, he acted out of his own foolish “wisdom.”

- iv. Fulfillment of His Vow – Judges 11:34-40: When Jephthah returned home, his virgin daughter ran out celebrating to greet him. As it turns out, she was Jephthah’s only child. The keeping of his vow meant that he would have no posterity. Nevertheless, Jephthah honored it. One attempt to soften the story has been to alter Jephthah’s wording so that instead of saying, “whatever comes out of the door of my house...will be the Lord’s *and* I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering,” he says, “...will be the Lord’s *or* I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering (11:31). The implication is that Jephthah could have chosen between the two outcomes: He could make a burnt offering *or* he could devote whatever came out his door *to service* at Israel’s sanctuary. If his daughter was “devoted to the Lord,” it would have meant a life of perpetual virginity, which could explain her request to mourn that she would never marry (11:37-38). However, a childless state would *also have resulted from her death* and most scholars think that concluding she was sacrificed is the only way to understand the text without distorting it.

**D. Jephthah’s Failed Negotiation and Civil War**– Judges 12:1-7: The Ephraimites resented the fact that Jephthah had not called them up for battle, a complaint they had also voiced to Gideon (8:1-3). When the land was first being settled, they displayed a complaining, resentful spirit against Joshua (Joshua 17:14-18). Unlike Gideon and Joshua, who dissolved the Ephraimites’ hostility with words of encouragement (Joshua 17:14-18, Judges 8:1-3), Jephthah’s response was defensive and only exacerbated the trouble (Judges 12:2-4). As a result, a civil war erupted between the Gileadites in the east and the Ephraimites in the west. The Gileadites gained control of the fords of the Jordan and took advantage of the Ephraimites’ regional accent to detect and kill any who attempted to escape back across the river. By the time the war ended, 42,000 Ephraimites had been killed (12:6)!

**E. Three Minor Judges** – Judges 12:8-15

- i. Ibzan: Ibzan had thirty sons, like Jair, but he also had thirty daughters. Special mention is made of the marriage of his children to Israelites outside their clan (probably to his political advantage).
- ii. Elon: We are told nothing about Elon, except where he was from, how long he ruled, and where he was buried.

- iii. Abdon: This man had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys.

**Summary Statement:** Although Hebrews 11:32 lists Jephthah as a man of faith, he is nevertheless remembered for his unnecessary bargain and the civil war that erupted after his failed negotiation. Instead of acting in accordance with the Law of Moses, he did “as he saw fit” and acted in his own foolish “wisdom.”

**Principle:** *Bargaining with God is unnecessary and can end in disappointment.*

**Application:** Do you consider yourself a successful negotiator? Have you occasionally bargained with God? It can take different forms, some very subtle.

- Maybe you have offered to serve Him in exchange for physical healing, to put a sin or bad habit to death in exchange for an answer to prayer, or to follow His leading in your life if He first proved His faithfulness in some specific way.
- Perhaps, even subconsciously, you’ve considered your attendance at Bible study as a earning you “points” with God toward your salvation or His blessing. The Bible is abundantly clear that this kind of bargaining is futile. Nothing we do or offer God can ever merit His favor (Isaiah 64:6; Ephesians 2:8-9).
- An even subtler type of bargaining occurs when we expect God to answer prayers that aren’t in line with His will. Do we know the word of God well enough to pray biblically? Jephthah either wasn’t very familiar with it or ignored what the Law of Moses said about human sacrifice. His prayer was answered, but as it turned out, Jephthah was deeply disappointed.

Bargaining with God is just one way we sometimes act out of our own foolish “wisdom.”

**Transition:** While Jephthah sought to solve problems with strategic bargaining, Samson was a self-centered man who was ruled by his passions. His story, once again, emphasizes God’s faithfulness in preserving His entirely undeserving people.

## II. **Samson** – Judges 13 – 16

### A. **Samson’s Introduction** – Judges 13

- i. The Philistine Territory: Samson ruled during the long period of oppression by the Philistines. While most of the Danites migrated to the north, for some reason, his Danite family still lived near the Philistines. The Philistines are among the “Sea Peoples” who migrated into the Levant in large numbers about 1200 B.C. When their attempt to invade Egypt was thwarted, they settled along the coast of southern Canaan in a confederation of five cities: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron.
- ii. Samson’s Unique Story

1. Samson is the last Judge recorded in the book of Judges and is given the most attention. Perhaps it is because he “most epitomizes the state of Israel as a whole” in this period: “As Israel went after foreign gods, Samson went after foreign women.”<sup>v</sup> Like Israel, Samson was abandoned by the Lord and did not know it, was blinded, and cried out to the Lord when oppressed. Like Israel, he was set apart for the Lord’s service, but nevertheless lived among and intermarried with the enemy.
  2. Samson’s unique, physical strength was a living illustration of the spiritual, emotional, and civic strength that was available to God’s people, if only they had turned to Him with all their hearts.
  3. Unlike the other Judges, Samson’s story does not include any regional or large-scale battles. Instead, he acted as more of a lone commando. The focus of his story is almost entirely on his personal struggles. Again and again, the Lord delivered him from situations he brought on himself, and in the process, brought judgment on the Philistines.
- iii. Sampson’s Separation: The story begins with the Angel of the Lord appearing to Manoah and his barren wife and announcing Samson’s birth. The Lord told them that Samson was to be a Nazirite. The emphasis on the Lord’s appearance and instructions with regard to the vow at the outset of the story suggests that it is an important fact to keep in mind.
1. A Nazirite vow was generally a temporary setting apart of oneself for the Lord. Apparently, Samuel and John the Baptist were also Nazirites. Paul seems to have taken a Nazirite vow on one occasion (reportedly, many early Christians did so). Those who took the vow were specifically restricted from cutting their hair, drinking anything fermented (or eating any product of the vine), and contact with a dead body.
  2. Unlike the typical temporary and personal nature of the Nazirite vow, Samson was set apart for the Lord as a Nazirite *from birth* and as a result of the Lord’s direct command *to his parents*. Since Samson is listed as a man of faith in Hebrews 11:32, we should probably assume that he learned the ways of the Lord from his parents and consented to comply with the vow. Unfortunately, the special separation for which he was intended stands in stark contrast to the life of unrestrained passion that he lived.

## **B. Samson’s Marriage to a Philistine – Judges 14 – 15**

- i. Samson’s Marriage was “from the Lord”: Against his parents’ advice, Samson determined to marry a Philistine woman in Timnah. 14:4 tells us, “This was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the

Philistines.” Since the Lord had forbidden the Israelites to intermarry, this statement may be confusing. However, the Bible sometimes states that an occasion was “from the Lord” that He only permitted (not directed). The Lord used Samson’s stubborn determination to do as he pleased to fulfill His designs.

- ii. Samson and the Lion: En route to Timnah, Samson was attacked by a lion, which he tore apart with his bare hands. Later, he came by the carcass and found it filled with bees. Ignoring his Nazirite commitment to avoid dead bodies, he reached in and scooped out the honey. He shared it with his parents but carefully avoided telling them where or how he got it. His determination to marry a Philistine and his contact with the dead lion indicate that he did not take God’s claim on his life as seriously as he should have.
- iii. Samson’s Wedding Feast: Samson’s wedding feast became an occasion for the Lord’s judgment on the Philistines. Prolonged periods of feasting were customary for weddings. “The word for feast, *mišteh*, in this context refers to a seven-day drinking bout at the home of the bride’s parents,”<sup>vi</sup> which was, again, something that was forbidden to a Nazirite.
  1. Samson presented a riddle that his guests would have been unable to solve without knowledge of his contact with the lion. The prize for solving the riddle was a new set of clothing for each of his thirty male guests. If they were unable to answer, Samson was to receive thirty sets of clothing from them.
  2. As the deadline for solving the riddle approached, the frustrated Philistines threatened Samson’s new bride into getting the answer out of him and sharing it with them. After much tearful pleading on her part, Samson finally explained the riddle and she, in turn, told the Philistine men. Incensed by the manner in which they solved his riddle, Samson went to Ashkelon, one of the Philistine city-states, killed thirty Philistines, and gave their clothing to the men attending the feast.
  3. Samson was so angry that he left his new wife (possibly without consummating the marriage) and returned to live in the home of his parents. The woman’s father attempted to save her from utter disgrace by giving her to one of Samson’s Philistine companions.
- iv. Cycle of Revenge: When Samson’s anger subsided and he decided to make amends with his wife, he discovered that she had been given to another man. In retribution, he torched the Philistines fields, beginning a

cycle of revenge that climaxed when he struck down a thousand Philistines with a donkey's jawbone (probably another violation of his Nazirite vow). Interestingly, the Israelites never used the occasions of Samson's attacks to rally for battle, and they had under other Judges. By this time, they seem to have given up and become content to live under Philistine rule, as long as they had some measure of peace in their lives.

### C. Samson's Two Lovers – Judges 16:1-21

- i. Samson and the Philistine Prostitute – 16:1-3: Samson went to Gaza, one of the Philistine city-states, and visited a prostitute. Even though his actions were clearly outside God's will, God continued to work through him and it became another occasion for Samson to use his unusual strength to demoralize the Philistines. The Philistines attempted to trap Samson inside the city but Samson lifted the gates of the city and carried them thirty-five miles to Hebron, in Judah's territory! Carrying what would have amounted to thousands of pounds for such a distance, not to speak of the strength required to free them from their foundation, was indeed a supernatural feat. What an amazing symbol of the divine strength that was available to the Lord's people, if only they would have turned to Him with all their hearts!
- ii. Delilah – 16:4-21
  1. Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah. Delilah's nationality is not stated. She lived not far from Samson's hometown. The fact that she cooperated with the Philistines for the purpose of destroying Israel's Judge insinuates that, like Samson's other women, she too was a Philistine. However, in a time when everyone in Israel "did what was right in their own eyes," the fortune offered for cooperation could have lured an Israelite woman (17:6; 21:25). In any case, she used the situation to her advantage.
  2. After three unsuccessfully attempts to discover the secret of Samson's strength, Samson finally told her that his strength was in his special relationship with God, of which his hair was a symbol. Leading up to this time, Samson had already failed to take his separation unto God seriously. Apparently, he took advantage of the Lord's grace one time too many times, because with his full revelation to Delilah and the cutting of his hair, the Lord finally left Samson. Most tragically of all, "he did not know that the Lord had left him" (16:20).

3. Samson’s unbridled passions finally led to his complete undoing. Without the Lord’s supernatural enabling, the Philistines easily subdued him, gouged out his eyes, and carried him away in shackles. What happened to him was yet another picture to the Israelites, who had “fritter[ed] away [their] high calling, live[d] by what [was] right in [their] own eyes, and provoke[d] Yahweh to abandon [them].”<sup>vii</sup>

**D. Samson’s Death** – Judges 16:21-31: Philistines imprisoned Samson in Gaza and set him to grinding grain. During that time, his hair began to grow (a portent that the Lord would yet again use Samson). Sometime later, the Philistines brought Samson into their temple where 3,000 of them gathered to watch the blind Samson perform, seeking to further his humiliation for their own entertainment. Samson prayed a final prayer, asking the Lord to give him back his strength and avenge him. The Lord answered and when Samson heaved against the supporting pillars of the temple, it collapsed. A great number of Philistines were killed, including their nobility (a crushing loss to their leadership, 16:23). Even more important, the Lord proved His superiority over the Philistine god Dagon, whom the Philistines had gathered to honor. Samson died in this final feat, and his family took him home and buried him.

**Summary Statement:** Although God used Samson, even in his death, his death was nevertheless a tragedy that he brought on himself by his ongoing, immoral exploits. In some ways, he was a man of great faith, but he was also a symbol of his own culture. Too often, he did “as he saw fit.”

**Principle:** *Living according to our passions is perilous.*

**Application:** The world tells us to do as we please, to “live and let live,” to follow our gut instincts, but to live according to passions is to live out of our own foolish “wisdom.” Passion is a gift of God that we can use for great good or allow to destroy us. When harnessed, it can stir us to great acts of service, but when left unbridled, it becomes an idol that drives and consumes us.

Samson’s culture was a sensuous one. Worship of the Baals involved sexual engagements that God forbade. Sexual passion is a prime example of a passion that can be used for great good, within the marriage relationship, or result in our destruction, when used outside that context. But there are other passions to be considered. Passion drives us to worship, work

productively, and be creative. However, we must be very careful even with these, for our passion can quickly turn and become the *object* of our worship, our work, and our creativity, a kind of idol. What a wonderful day it will be, in Heaven, when our passions are no longer a potential snare but only for pure enjoyment of God and for all His gifts. For now, however, living according to them is perilous.

**Transition:** Jephthah and Samson reflected the times and culture in which they lived. The two events described at the end of the book are a kind of addendum that further illustrates Israel's decline. These events did not necessarily occur at the end of the period. 20:28 says that Phinehas, son of Eleazar, was ministering as High Priest at this time, evidence that at least one of the stories occurred early in the period of the Judges. It seems they were put at the end of the book to make the point that, as the Israelites continued doing what was right in their own eyes, everything kept going downhill.

### III. Internal Threats Illustrated – Judges 17 – 21

#### A. Micah and the Danites – Judges 17 – 18

##### i. Micah and His Mother – Judges 17

1. *Micah's Theft:* The first story starts by telling of a Danite woman (living in the hill country of Ephraim) who had her silver stolen and placed a curse on the thief. Since curses were taken quite seriously, her son Micah, who heard the curse and was himself the thief, confessed. Micah's mother showed no concern over his thievery but rather pronounced a blessing on him, apparently as an attempt to override her curse. She consecrated the recovered silver to the Lord (evidence that the Israelites hadn't entirely abandoned worship of the Lord) but then used a portion of it to make an idol. Even if she intended it to represent Yahweh, it was a breach of the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4). Micah's theft and his mother's response are the first of several illustrations of Israel's moral decay.
2. *Micah's Religious Life:* Micah, apparently the head of the household, made a shrine in his own home, even though the Law of Moses forbade worship anywhere but at the one location of God's choosing (Deuteronomy 17). It was a center of worship at which he could worship the household gods "as he saw fit" (17:6). He then made an ephod (possibly to duplicate the garment that was only to be worn by Israel's high priest) and instituted his own son (who was not a descendant of Aaron) as his priest. Later, he took in another young man, a Levite (whose identity is otherwise kept from us until the end of the story), and installed him as one of his priests. The fact that he was a Levite probably encouraged Micah to hire him, although, as we later learn, he was not a descendant of Aaron.

3. *A Repeated Phrase*: The phrase, “In those days Israel had no king” is repeated twice in this story (17:6, 18:1), indicating a lack of spiritual leadership and supporting the notion that “everyone did as they saw fit” (17:6, 21:25). The two phrases occur together immediately following the description of Micah’s worship center, one that ignored the Law of Moses in virtually every way. Micah did not worship God in the way God instructed that He be worshipped. He worshipped “as he saw fit,” and no one in Israel was taking a role of spiritual leadership to keep that from happening.

ii. The Danites’ Relocation and Theft – Judges 18

1. *Tribal Relocation*: This story also serves the purpose of explaining how the Danites relocated to the north, although the land they had been deeded by Joshua was in central Palestine. Judges 1:34 tells us they found it too difficult to remove the Amorites (the Philistine city-states were in close proximity to the land assigned to the Danites). As a result, they abandoned their inheritance and sought another.
2. *Theft of Micah’s Idols and Priest*:
  - a. Some Danite spies who were seeking a new location for their tribe happened to come to Micah’s house, where they found the young Levite living and asked him to inquire of the Lord on their behalf. After receiving the Levite’s assurance of the Lord’s approval, the spies departed and found a city in the far north called Laish. Laish was occupied by Sidonians but, to the Danites’ pleasure, was separated by some distance from other Sidonian cities. The spies returned and encouraged the men of Dan to take the city for their occupation.
  - b. En route to Laish, the Danite army stopped at Micah’s home, stole all of Micah’s cultic items, and took the Levite with them who had served as Micah’s priest. They put their families and herds out in front of them, as they resumed their trip north, so that Micah would first encounter the soldiers if he happened to come after them. Micah did pursue them, but when he saw he was outnumbered he returned home without recovering his possessions.

3. *The Danites' Worship Center*: The Danites took the city of Laish, renamed it “Dan,” and set up their own center of worship, using Micah’s idols and the young Levite as their priest. We now realize that the story is more than just about the sins of a single family. Rather, the sins of that family mirrored the Israelite culture at large. Micah stole from his mother, but then an entire tribe stole from Micah. Micah was an idolater who disregarded the lawful manner in which the Lord was to be worshipped but he was not alone; these abuses were *common* in Israel, as the tribe of Dan proved. To emphasize the widespread nature of the corruption, the author, who has thus far left the identity of the young Levite concealed, unveils the shocking revelation that the young Levite who participated in this sordid affair was none other than *Moses' own grandson*, Jonathan! Finally, he emphasizes the disobedience of Moses’ grandson and entire tribe of Dan to the Law of Moses with his final statement that this Danite worship center continued in use “all the time the house of God was in Shiloh” (the only place the Law of Moses permitted Israel to worship).

**B. Civil War with Benjamin** – Judges 19 – 21: This second illustration of Israel’s decline highlights both its moral decay and its political instability. The episode begins by reiterating, “In those days Israel had no king” (19:1).

i. The Murder of a Levite’s Concubine – Judges 19

1. *The Levite’s Journey to Bethlehem*: As in the previous story, this story also involved a Levite. The Levites had been distributed throughout Israel (Joshua 13:14, 33, and Joshua 21). Among other things, they were responsible to be teachers of the Law of Moses, God’s word (Leviticus 10:11; Deuteronomy 33:10). Nevertheless, a Levite who lived in Ephraim took a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah, the first of several offenses. When she was unfaithful to him and returned to her parents’ home in Bethlehem, he attempted to reconcile with her. The concubine’s father, obviously eager for his daughter to keep her second-wife status, showed the Levite typical, middle-eastern hospitality, which delayed the Levite’s return. Finally, he decided he could delay no longer and set out, near the end of the day, taking his concubine with him.

2. *The Sin of the Gibeonites*

a. *No Hospitality*: In what is later revealed as a twist of irony, the Levite decided not to stop in nearby Jebus (Jerusalem), because it was occupied by non-Israelites, but continued another four miles to Gibeah, a Benjamite town, which he apparently thought to be safer. In days where there were no inns, it was customary to offer hospitality to travelers,

whether or not they were strangers. No one dared to spend the night in the open because of the risk of bandits. Yet no one in Gibeah extended such an offer to the traveling Levite. Just before dark, however, an old man (who was not a native of Gibeah) saw the small family and welcomed them into his home.

- b. *Rape and Murder*: Hearing that a stranger was in town, the men of Gibeah insisted that the old man put the Levite out on the street for their sexual gratification. The old man sought to protect his male guest by offering his own virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine as substitutes. A guest in one's home was protected with the same devotion one would guard one's own life. However, the men persisted until the Levite (doing what was right in his own eyes) finally cast his concubine out the door in order to save himself! The story so closely resembles what occurred in Sodom just prior to its famous destruction with fire and brimstone (Genesis 19:4-8) that one can hardly doubt that the author of Judges intended point: God's own people had become so immoral that they could actually be compared with the wicked Sodomites!

ii. Civil War with Benjamin – Judges 20

1. *The Concubine's Dismemberment*: At daylight, intending to continue their journey, the Levite callously instructed his concubine to get up from the doorstep where she had fallen, only to discover that she was dead. The outraged (yet not blameless) Levite then cut his concubine into twelve pieces and, seemingly for shock effect, sent them to each of the tribes of Israel. It is difficult to tell whether the Israelites were more stunned by the Levite's dismemberment of the corpse or by the story of the Gibeonites' murderous deed, but the effect that he intended was gained, for the Israelites agreed that their nation had sunk to a new low and something had to be done (19:30)!
2. Instead of showing loyalty to the Law of the Lord and turning over the guilty Gibeonites, the tribe of Benjamin decided to defend their fellow Benjamites. The sins of one city became the sins of an entire tribe and the sins of that tribe resulted in a national crisis. The Israelites, from the north to the south (20:1), resolved to launch a holy war against Gibeah. Such a unified response among the tribes is unique in the book of Judges. Tragically, they united against one of their own but were incapable of uniting against the Lord's enemies.

3. Although the Benjamites were outnumbered, on two successive days they defeated the Israelites. The Israelites had inquired of the Lord, prior to these battles. Interestingly, He answered their questions but without promising victory. Only on the third day, when Israelites were completely broken, did the Lord assure them of victory. The next day, they slaughtered the Benjamites. Between the battle and the burning of their cities, all Benjamite women and children were dead and only 600 Benjamite men remained.
- iii. The Israelites' Restoration of Benjamin – Judges 21: The Israelites had pledged not to give their daughters in marriage to the Benjamites, but after the civil war, their pledge created a dilemma. Without marriage partners, the tribe of Benjamin would completely die out. The Israelites found a two-fold solution. The men and married women of the only town in Israel that had failed to convene and join the battle were all put to death. The virgins who remained were given to four hundred of the Benjamites. The other two hundred Benjamites were given permission to “grab a wife” from among the virgin daughters of Shiloh at an upcoming festival. The unusual process allowed the men of Shiloh to keep their oath not to *give* their daughters to the Benjamites.

**Summary Statement:** These last two stories not only reveal the degree of moral and civil corruption and disunity that resulted from the Israelites doing “as they saw fit,” they also reveal that the national situation was simply a reflection of what was going on in the lives of individuals and families. The corruption in Micah’s home spread to infect the entire tribe of Dan and the single incident of lawlessness in Gibeah became a national crisis.

**Principle:** *As goes the home, so goes the nation.*

**Application:** It is always easier to blame our troubles on the influence of our culture than to examine our own hearts and homes, isn’t it? We complain that our culture is immoral and compromising but fail to address our private thought lives. We complain about corruption in our society, but in our own homes, we deny that exaggeration is actually lying or that taking items that belong to a family member or our workplace without permission is actually theft. We complain that we live in a self-centered culture but are really not very generous with our own money and resent the time our family members want from us. We complain about rudeness in our society but think nothing about using an occasional swear word at home or of our expectation that everyone should excuse our irritability when we are tired or have had a bad day.

In 2 Corinthians 7:1, Paul exhorts us to purify *ourselves* of everything that contaminates our body or spirit. “What business is it of mine,” he wrote, “to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside” (1 Corinthians 5:12-13).

We must take care of our own sin first and then the sin in our families and then the sin in our churches. 1 Peter 4:17 says, “For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God.” If we don’t begin at “home” (self first), our sin will spread like a disease.

There is an old saying that when I point my finger in accusation at someone else, three of my fingers will be pointing back at me.

### Conclusion

Judges is a heavy book with serious and amazingly relevant warnings. The Israelites lived by their own foolish “wisdom,” doing what was right in their own eyes. Are we much different?

James 3:13-18 tells us what godly wisdom looks like: “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil... *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere* [my emphasis].” That kind of wisdom, James says, results in a “harvest of righteousness.” Are you seeing a great harvest of righteous occurring in your family, your city, your country? If not, perhaps it is because too many of us who call ourselves Christians are still depending on our own foolish “wisdom.”

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<sup>i</sup> Stedman, Ray C. (2012 by Elaine Stedman). *Adventuring Through the Bible* (p. 153). Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House.

<sup>ii</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, pp. 74–76). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>iii</sup> Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (1996). *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Vol. 2, p. 272). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

<sup>iv</sup> Fleenor, R., & Ziese, M. S. (2008). *Judges-Ruth* (p. 173). Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company.

<sup>v</sup> Carson, D. A., France, R. T., Motyer, J. A., & Wenham, G. J. (Eds.). (1994). *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed., p. 279). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>vi</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 431). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>vii</sup> Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 462). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.