

THE STORY OF THE BIBLE

VOLUME FOUR

Herbert W. Armstrong led the Worldwide Church of God (formerly The Radio Church of God until 1968) until his death in 1986. Hundreds of millions heard his voice and read his literature. God called him in the fall of 1926 and he was converted in the spring of 1927. Over the course of Mr. Armstrong's ministry, God revealed through him a great many true biblical doctrines, which had been lost to the Church through the centuries. After his death, his successors ceased to believe and teach these doctrines. Although copyright law prohibits The Restored Church of God from reproducing and distributing literature produced while he led the Worldwide Church of God, we are committed to the preservation and teaching of all of these truths!

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VOLUME FOUR

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INTRODUCTION

by David C. Pack

This is the fourth volume of a special series. These books truly represent “THE STORY OF THE BIBLE.” Many have attempted to write various kinds of “Bible Story Books,” but they are usually written only for children, and are primarily designed to entertain instead of *educate* or *inspire*. The reader will see that the wonderful style and artwork of this series capture the spirit of God’s Word, with its intended lessons and vital meaning.

Most children’s versions of the Bible terribly misrepresent important stories that it contains—and they are written with wrong emphasis—and wrong *meaning*! Instead of leading children to the true God, and to the true doctrines of His Word, children are left with the impression that the Bible only contains a *few* stories, and is mostly a book about war, violence, blood, thunder and death.

This is terribly wrong!

In keeping with the modern generation’s obsession with graphic violence, most efforts to reflect the teachings of the Bible “play” to this interest. Youth are given what they *want* to read, not what they *need* to understand. The many stories of the Bible are intended to teach VITAL LESSONS to people of *all* ages. Modern writers miss the mark when they *cater to* children, rather than properly *teach* them what God intends.

If young people learn the Bible in a *wrong* way—with emphasis on the *wrong* things, while ignoring the enormous number of lessons that the Bible contains—at least two bad things result.

First, all these wrong concepts and approaches must be unlearned and replaced by right knowledge and understanding of what the Bible *really* says. Unlearning error is a most difficult thing to do, and is actually far harder than learning the truth correctly the first time, leaving no need to sweep the mind clean of what has been wrong or misunderstood.

Second, young people will later find the stories of the Bible have been trivialized and made irrelevant, and they may find themselves turned off by its message rather than being excited and thrilled about what they are learning.

The modern system of education is morally and spiritually bankrupt! Deluded educators have been biased against God and His Word by the atheistic teaching of evolution poured into them from childhood. They have taught young people for decades that there are “no absolutes” and that they must follow “situation ethics.” They have led the world into a kind of secular humanism—where people are driven by how they *feel* rather than clear definitions of *right* and *wrong*! But there is right and wrong in life—and those who are teaching the children of this world have cut themselves off from this knowledge

(Isaiah 59:1-2). They cannot teach what they were never taught!

Also, this world's churches keep young people steeped in traditional pagan philosophies and teachings that have deceived the world for millennia. They have ignored the great spiritual principle of CAUSE and EFFECT that governs *every* aspect of life. They have neglected to teach true *spiritual* values. They have defaulted their responsibility in all the critical areas of leadership—and have utterly failed in their greatest responsibility, which should have been to instill in young minds the marvelous truths of God's Word—to teach youth how to live, not just how to earn a living.

This is a tragic state of affairs!

Many who attempt to study the Bible become confused, frustrated and disillusioned, believing that it is too difficult to understand. As a result, many who *would* seek to teach their children true Christian standards and values, either give up altogether or leave such education to the *many* theological “experts,” who offer no end of differing—and conflicting—views.

Such an approach only serves to further confuse young people about the Bible, thus, in many cases, alienating them from it. But those who truly seek to understand God's Word, without adding their own interpretation (II Peter 1:20), will find that there *is* simplicity in it (II Corinthians 11:3).

Children need to be taught this simplicity! They need to know who and what they are—and why they were born—that they are future sons of God in the making!

You were born for a *reason*. Your life has a SUPREME PURPOSE! The Bible reveals how to be in harmony with the true God—and His purpose for life. The world is ignorant of this. So are most parents. They have no idea how or what to teach their children. No one is guiding parents, because no one knows *how* to guide them. Sadly, though the Bible is a gripping, interesting—even *fascinating*—book of true stories (all part of one great story), most find it dull, dry and boring.

This series is written to completely change this misconception in the minds of people of all ages! It uses language designed to expand your mind through the use of word pictures. Our goal has been to make the Bible *real*—to make it talk directly to parents and children. With only a little explanation, parents will be able to read these volumes to children as young as age three.

In today's world, youth are universally misguided, abused, neglected and ignored and this fuels a variety of rampant, escalating social problems. This is because society as a whole has rejected the SOURCE of true happiness, success, peace and fulfillment—GOD'S WORD. As King Solomon admonished, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6).

How many are even *attempting* to do this today?

Many true doctrines of God were restored to His Church in the middle of the 20th century. By the 1990s, they had largely been discarded by its new leaders. Part of our commission is to once again “restore what was restored” and to continue to “turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:6). The Restored Church of God *has* completely restored *all* God's doctrines to the Church!

Under the faithful leadership of Herbert W. Armstrong (1892-1986), various Church youth programs were established as part of the fulfillment of this important responsibility. These included the Y.O.U. program (Youth Opportunities United—for teens), and the Y.E.S. program (Youth Educational Services—for young children). There was also a *Summer Educational Program* (S.E.P.), providing teenagers with the opportunity to fellowship with other teens and develop many skills and talents in a camp environment.

There was also much youth-oriented *literature*, offered to the young people of God's Church. These included a *Youth* magazine for teenagers, *Youth Bible Lessons* for children from kindergarten through sixth grade—and *The Bible Story* series.

Children are far too precious to ignore or neglect. While parents *must utilize* the tools that are available to them, they cannot do this if these tools have not been created.

As the only true extension of Mr. Armstrong's ministry, The Restored Church of God is re-creating these same written tools—as well as the magazines, books, booklets, articles and letters that once taught the full truth of God to millions around the world.

This series is being rewritten—with new volumes to appear on a regular basis—to once again make the Bible *simple*, so that the stories in it come to life! But these volumes are *not* just for children! It is our hope that parents and children alike will enjoy and benefit from them. Its forerunner was a six-volume work, once described as “written for children 5 to 105.” The original series is no longer available—but this new one is!

CHAPTER FIFTY

AFTER THE FALL OF JERICHO

Our story thus far: Inspired by God, Joshua led the army of Israel to cross the Jordan River and surround the walled city of Jericho. During the first six days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Israelite soldiers silently marched around Jericho once per day. The only sound that the troops made came from trumpet blasts, given by seven priests.

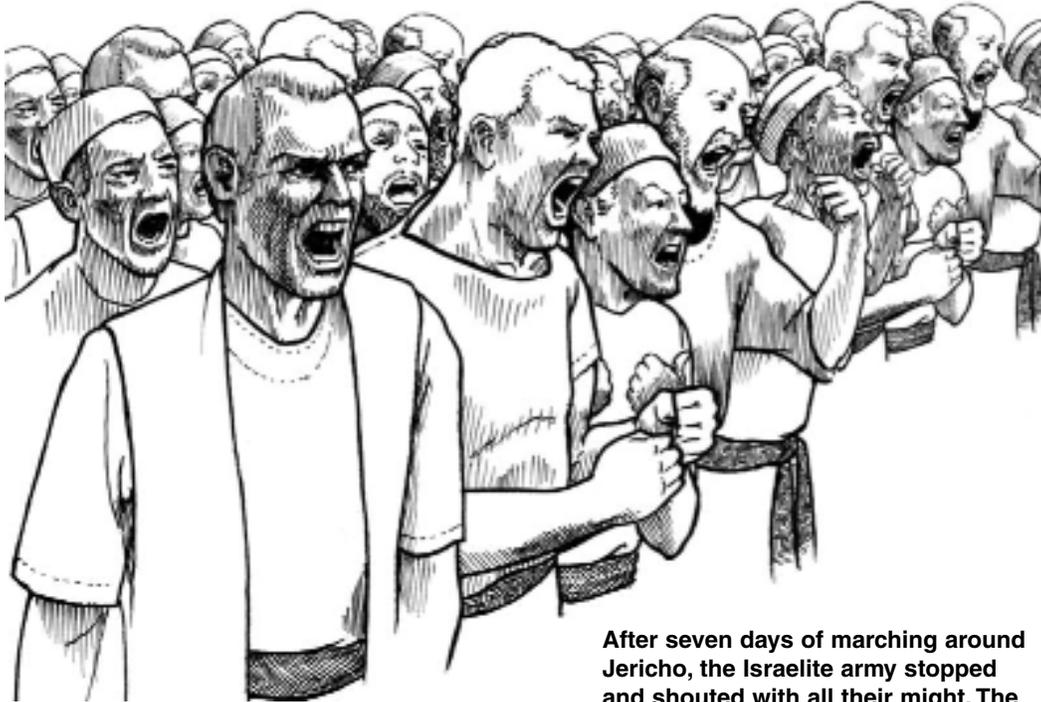
But when the seventh and last day of the feast came, God led Israel to encircle the city seven times. At the sound of a long, terrifying trumpet blast, all of the Israelite soldiers shouted at the top of their lungs. Suddenly, the massive, thick double-walls of Jericho crumpled, broke apart, and fell down flat (Joshua 6:1-20).

Obedying God's instruction, Joshua led his troops into the city. The people who dwelled there were in shock. For centuries, their city had been a defiant walled fortress. It was known throughout the region for its violent attacks upon the weak, and for its prosperous markets and goods. And now, Jericho was in ruins, open to attack.

The people screamed at the sight of Israelite soldiers invading their once-secure home. The soldiers of Jericho were quickly defeated, and the life of every man, woman and child was taken. In His supreme mercy, God did not allow them to continue living their pagan ways of witchcraft, idolatry and other paths of wickedness. In the future, long after Jesus Christ sets up the kingdom of God on earth, God will raise the people of Jericho back to life. He will then give them the precious opportunity to know their Supreme Creator face to face. No longer will they be deceived by the false god of man's world (II Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2; Revelation 12:9), because Satan the devil and his demons will be removed from mankind's presence forever.

Jericho's Wealth Dedicated to God

Obedying God's command, the Israelites destroyed everything that lived in Jericho—even the oxen, sheep and all other livestock. God



After seven days of marching around Jericho, the Israelite army stopped and shouted with all their might. The walls of Jericho then fell flat.

wanted the city to be utterly destroyed. Its destruction was to remind everyone that Satan’s system of get, hatred, selfishness and greed will one day be utterly destroyed.

None of the Israelite soldiers were allowed to take any of the city’s vast treasures and goods—riches of silver, gold, precious jewels, vessels of iron and brass, or its livestock. The riches were to be delivered to God for His use at His earthly tabernacle. There, they would become a part of God’s holy treasury (Joshua 6:19).

Rahab and Family Survive

Joshua gave special orders to the two men who had previously spied out Jericho and the surrounding countryside.

He said to them, “Find Rahab the innkeeper and bring her to me. Make sure that none of our soldiers hurt her in any way. As for her family and loved ones who hid with her when Jericho’s walls fell flat—no harm shall come to them, either.”

In making this command, Joshua fulfilled Israel’s promise to spare the lives of Rahab and her family. This was because she had courageously hidden and protected the two spies from the king of Jericho’s men.

The two young men gladly carried out Joshua's commands. Amid the dust and rubble that was once the great walls of Jericho, the spies came to Rahab's home. It was still intact. Tied to a window was a scarlet thread—a sign that told the Israelite soldiers to do no harm to those inside the house.

When the two men knocked on the front door, a pair of eyes peeked through a dark curtain. It was Rahab. Seeing the spies she had protected, she bolted to open the door. Behind her were her parents and other family members, who greeted the young men with warm, but cautious, smiles.

The spies said, "Gather your belongings. Bring only what you can use, for this city shall be burned down to the ground."

They did as instructed. Then the men brought Rahab and her family before Joshua.

The Israelite leader thanked Rahab for her courage and kindness, saying, "It takes an unusual woman to risk her life—and the lives of her family—for strangers. In return for what you have done, we have spared your lives. However, speaking for all Israel, we would like to do more for you. We will give you and your family your own land and allow you to live among us. As long as you follow the ways of God and reject your former pagan ways, you shall prosper among us in freedom and peace."

Rahab and her family danced, and hugged each other, because they were so overjoyed at hearing this good news!

Much later, Rahab married Salma (also called Salamon), who was son of Mashon. Salma was a leader and prince over the tribe of Judah. Years later, Rahab and Salma's great-great-grandson grew up to be one of the greatest servants of God in the history of mankind. He is known in the Bible as King David. Rahab's long family line also produced an even greater servant of God—the One who became the Messiah, whom Moses referred to as "that Prophet" (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18). His name is Jesus Christ (Acts 3:22-26; 7:37).

Joshua Pronounces a Curse

Now that Jericho was utterly destroyed, God inspired Joshua to warn Israel that the walls of that wicked city must never be rebuilt.

Standing on a platform, Joshua looked down upon the large crowd of men who surrounded him. He said, "The Eternal will curse any man who dares to rebuild the walls of this evil city. Any man who is foolish enough to defy God's will and attempt to rebuild Jericho's walls will do so at a heavy price! Such a man will lay down the walls' foun-



Amid Jericho's rubble, Israelite soldiers help Rahab and her family emerge from their home—the only structure left standing.

dations at the price of losing the life of his firstborn son. And setting up the city's gates will cost that man the life of his youngest son. So be warned and take the threat of God's curse to heart! Tell it to your children and to your children's children. Israel must never forget God's will in this matter" (Joshua 6:26).

In God's eyes, the walls of Jericho had come to symbolize Satan's way—the way of greed, hatred, war, selfishness—the way of GET. It is the way that mankind has been practicing since Adam and Eve ate of the wrong tree in the Garden of Eden. Jericho's walls represented man's world and his carnal desire to rely upon himself instead of trusting in his Creator. Since God wanted to teach Israel to rely on Him to bring them success, peace and prosperity, He could not allow Jericho's symbolic walls of defiance to be rebuilt.

The people of Israel took God's curse very seriously. They made sure to pass His warning on to generation upon generation of Israel's descendants. Though God allowed people to live at the site of Jericho's ruins (Joshua 18:21; II Samuel 10:5), they knew better than to rebuild that city's walls and gates. For centuries, no one dared to test God in this.

However, a man did eventually come along and rebuild Jericho's walls. As a result, that man's eldest and youngest sons were killed—just like God said would happen (I Kings 16:34)!

A Humbling Defeat

News of Israel's recent victory began to spread throughout all the land, striking fear and worry among the peoples of Canaan. Those dwelling in cities, towns and villages were especially frightened. Many wondered, "If Jericho is no match for these Hebrews, how can we be safe?"

Kings and rulers throughout the land sent out spies to alert their kingdoms to Israel's every move.

Israel's next military target was the city of Ai, which was up in the highlands, above the Jordan Valley. Joshua sent out spies, who returned to him days later and gave him a good report.

They said, "There's no need to send our whole army up against tiny Ai. The city has only a few people, so it should be fairly easy to take it over. Two or three thousand of our soldiers are all you need to attack Ai. When the people there see our show of force, they may even surrender without a fight."

Moved by their confident report, Joshua took his spies' advice and sent 3,000 Israelite troops to go up and march against the city. After

about 15 miles of marching uphill through a rugged ravine and rocky terrain, the small army of Israelites came within sight of Ai.

“It’s so small,” said a lieutenant. “Much smaller than Jericho. This will be as easy as eating cake!”

Excited, the Israelites confidently marched forward—but what they thought would be an easy victory soon turned into a humiliating defeat! When the army drew near the walls of the city, the main gate swung open—and out poured a raging flood of Canaanite warriors!

The Israelites stopped dead in their tracks.

“What? What’s this?” someone shouted. “Where did all these soldiers come from?”

The snarling, screaming Canaanites rushed ever closer and closer. To the Israelites, they seemed like wild men madly driven by rage, and bent on Israel’s utter destruction.

“Look at them!” yelled one man, his eyes wide from disbelief.



“There’s too many of them! What should we do? What should we do?”

Shouts of “We’re doomed! We’re all doomed!” clashed with screams of “Run! Run for your lives!” among Israel’s 3,000 troops. Struck to the very bone with fear, every soldier turned and ran for safety. Meanwhile, the warriors of Ai hunted them down, like ravenous, bloodthirsty lions chasing after prey. They pursued the Israelites, chasing them away from the city, out of the highlands, even managing to kill a few of the Hebrews as they descended the rugged ravine. When the battle was over, 36 Israelite soldiers had lost their lives (Joshua 7:2-5).

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

THE DESTRUCTIVE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

It was clear to all that God did not protect Israel that day. He allowed them to suffer this shameful defeat. When Joshua was told what had happened, he understood that there had to be a reason why God removed His divine protection from His people.

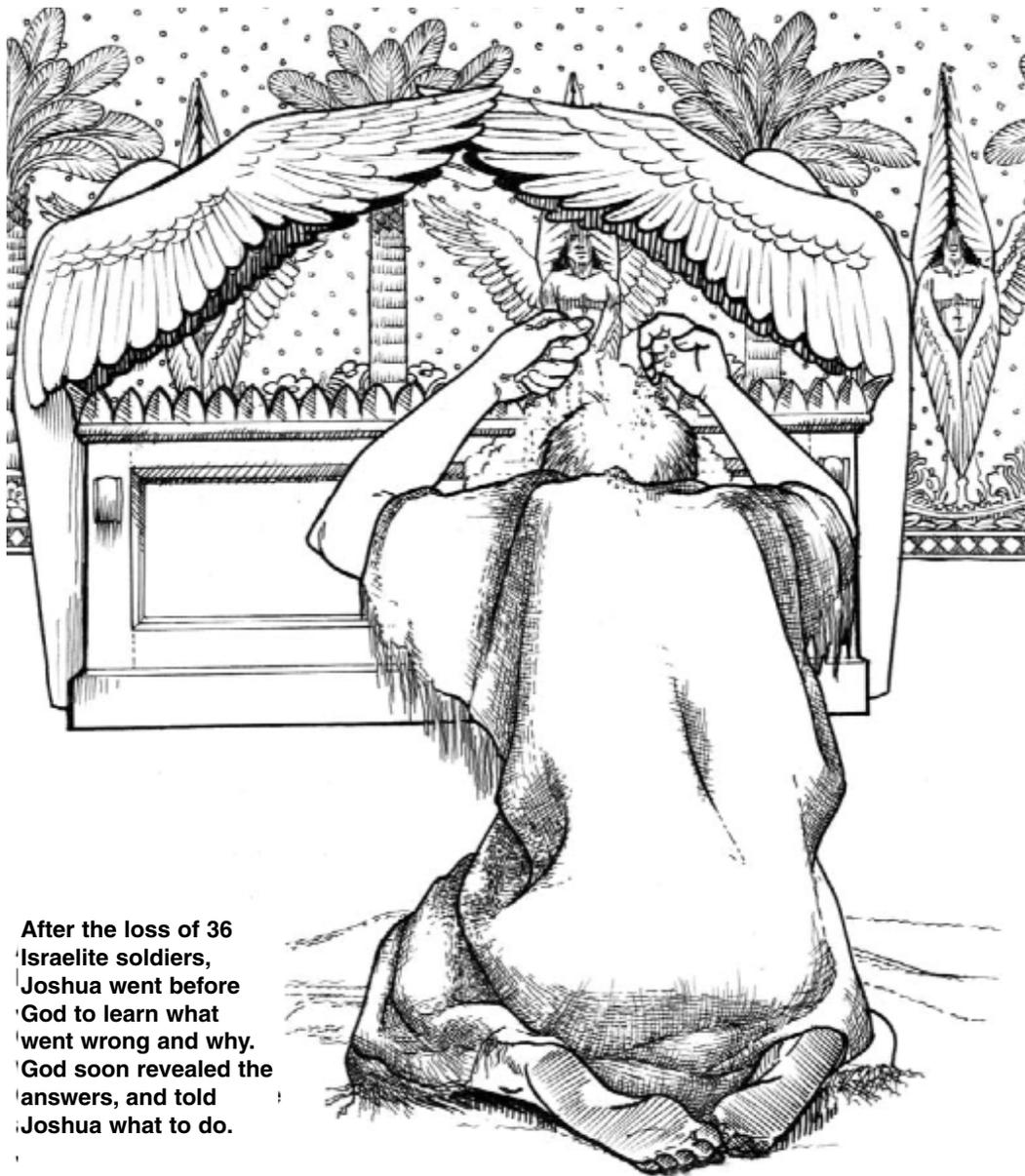
As was the custom in ancient times, Joshua tore his clothes and poured dust over his head. So did the elders of Israel. This custom was a public sign of humility and great distress. Full of mourning and anguish, these men chose to humble themselves in order to draw closer to God (Joshua 7:6-9).

All human beings (yes, even the nicest ones) are naturally filled with pride, vanity and selfishness. They get these rotten attitudes from Satan the devil, whom the Bible calls “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). Like a powerful radio station, the devil broadcasts wrong thoughts, such as greed, bitterness, envy, rage, and many other deceitful attitudes and desires. As a result, mankind has taken on the mindset of Satan himself—this is carnal nature, which is naturally hostile to God (Romans 8:7). By humbling themselves, Joshua and the elders sought to remove these carnal attitudes so that God would reveal to them His will.

Today, God does not require people to tear their clothes and pour dust over their heads in order to draw close to Him. We have a close, personal relationship with God through daily Bible study, heartfelt prayer and meditation, and through regular fasting.

The Disastrous Effects of One Man’s Sins

For hours, Joshua lay flat on the ground before the Ark of the Covenant, which represented God’s heavenly throne. In tearful, fervent prayer, he brought questions before his Creator. When it was time, God decided to reveal why He had allowed Israel to suffer such a humiliating defeat by the hands of their enemies.



After the loss of 36 Israelite soldiers, Joshua went before God to learn what went wrong and why. God soon revealed the answers, and told Joshua what to do.

God said, “Israel has sinned against Me! The people have broken My covenant by stealing what belongs to Me—the gold, the silver and other spoils of war that came from Jericho’s fall. These things were to be devoted to Me, for use at My tabernacle. But the people have stolen from Me, and they have deceitfully hidden My things among their own possessions.”

Suddenly, Joshua realized that one of his soldiers must have disobeyed God’s command to devote all the treasures of Jericho to God’s holy tabernacle. “No wonder God did not fight for us against the city of Ai,” Joshua said to himself.

God said, “Since Israel ignored my command, and did not obey My voice, I did not fight their battle for them. Without Me, Israel is helpless against their enemies. Without My help, Israel is doomed to destruction, because they are accursed. I will not be with Israel, unless you destroy the accursed among you—the one who stole from Me and used deceit to cover up this sin.”

Due to the sins of one greedy and rebellious man, the whole nation of Israel was now cut off from God’s divine protection. Joshua quickly understood that he had to find out who this sinner was, before God totally abandoned Israel—which would mean certain destruction. Already, news of Israel’s recent defeat was spreading throughout the land. Joshua knew that if something was not done soon, the kingdoms of Canaan could band together and hunt down Israel, like ravenous wolves encircling a helpless lamb.

God did not want this to happen to His people. So He instructed Joshua in how to find this thief among Israel’s millions of people (Joshua 7:10-15).

The Guilty Man Is Revealed

Early the next morning, Joshua ordered all the tribes of Israel to assemble before him and the elders.

“We have suffered a devastating defeat at the hands of our enemies,” he said. “This happened for a purpose—God wanted to get our attention. In His mercy, He only allowed 36 of our men to be killed. It could have been far worse.

“Here is why God did not fight for us at Ai: There is a thief among us! This foolish man has stolen from God, and has cloaked himself in deceit to conceal the evil he has done. This one man’s sins of thievery and deception have cut us off from the Almighty God. Unless this sinner is revealed, Israel will no longer be blessed with God’s protection. And as you all know, without God, we can do nothing!”

Joshua’s blunt words got everyone’s attention. The massive crowd of Israel’s millions of people began to whisper among themselves: “Who is this sinner? If he was man enough, he would reveal himself and spare us from suffering for his sins.”

But the thief did not reveal himself. He nervously looked back and forth among his neighbors, pretending to be innocent, and hoping that no one suspected him of guilt.

Following God’s instructions, Joshua ordered that lots be cast. In ancient times, this was done among God’s people in order to determine God’s will. In man’s 6,000 years of history, God has only spo-

ken to a few people—and, even then, He often chose various methods to communicate with them. Today, God mainly communicates His will through His inspired Word, the Holy Bible. God also gives wisdom and understanding to those who obey Him and seek to please Him (James 1:5; Psalm 111:10; I John 3:22).

With each lot representing a tribe of Israel, God determined that the lot with Judah's name be taken.

Joshua said to one of his close assistants, "So now we know that the thief is from the tribe of Judah."

Lots were cast again; this time, each lot represented a clan within the tribe. God determined that the lot representing the clan of the Zarhites be taken.

The thief grew even more nervous. Realizing that he would soon be revealed, he desperately sought for a way of escape...but none could be found! He and all who belonged to the families of the Zarhites were under the watchful eyes of the whole nation of Israel. Everyone in the camp anxiously waited for God to expose the guilty man.

Again, lots were cast, and, this time, the family of Zabdi was taken. Zabdi dutifully brought his entire household before Joshua and the people. After lots were cast one more time, God revealed the man who had stolen from Him.

All eyes fell upon Achan, son of Zabdi, the son of Zerahm, of the tribe of Judah (Joshua 7:16-18).

The Destructive Consequences of Sin

Everyone gasped the man's name. Zabdi swung around, grabbed his son by the shoulders, and said, "Achan, how could you!"

Achan wanted to run and hide and get away as far as possible. But it was too late for that now. He had thrown away earlier opportunities to come forward and turn himself in. Now he had to face the consequences of his wicked actions. And everyone knew that those consequences would be severe.

Dripping from sweat and cowering in fear, Achan stood before Joshua, who silently looked at him, sadly shaking his head. Now that the identity of the thief had been revealed, Joshua knew what had to be done next. He took no pleasure in it.

He said, "Achan, my son, I beg of you, glorify the Eternal God of Israel, and confess to Him your sins. Tell me what you have done—and do not lie or try to hide it from me. By now you should know that nothing can be hidden from God."

With his head bent low from guilt and shame, Achan said, “Yes, I admit it. I have sinned against the God of Israel. After the walls of Jericho had fallen, I invaded the city alongside my fellow soldiers. But somehow we got separated, and I ended up by myself. That’s when I discovered a beautiful Babylonian-style garment. Right away, I could tell that it must have belonged to a very important and wealthy leader or official—perhaps even the king of Jericho himself. In the same place where I found the garment, I also discovered silver, about five pounds worth, and a wedge of gold.”

“Go on,” Joshua said. “What happened next?” Every man within earshot leaned in closer to hear the thief’s answer.

Achan said, “When I saw how expensive these things were—the garment, silver and gold—I thought to myself, ‘Surely, God already owns everything. What need does He have for these material things? And did not God bring us up out of Egypt so that we might prosper here in the Promised Land and enjoy the spoils of war from our enemies?’”

Achan did not want to look Joshua in the eye. With his chin pressed down upon his chest, the thief said, “Once I saw them, I lusted after these things. I coveted them, even though God had made it clear that all the spoils of war from Jericho belonged to Him. I decided to take them—so I did just that. After I made sure that no one was looking, I brought the valuables back to camp, and then dug a hole in the midst of my tent, and hid them there.”

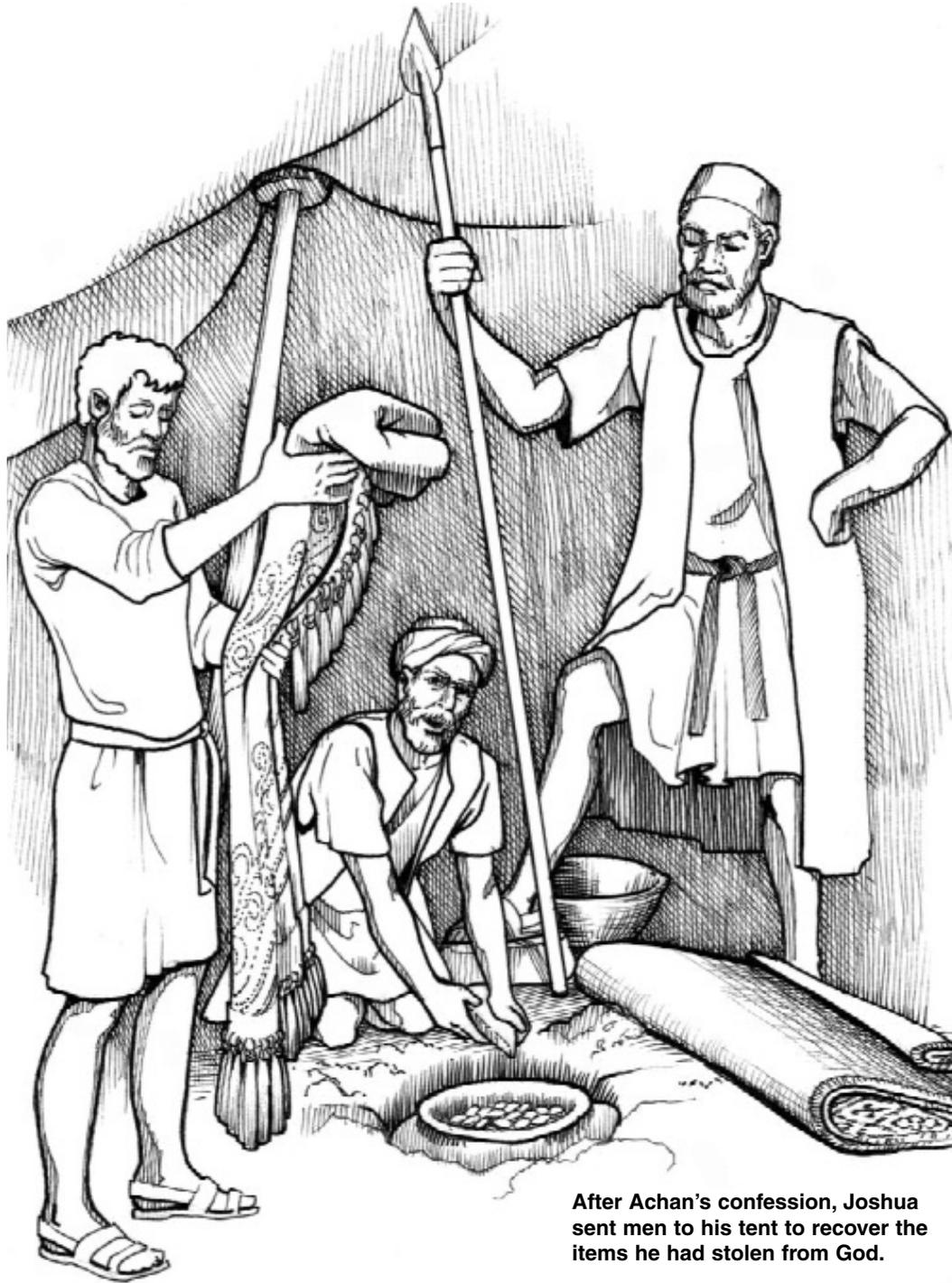
Immediately, Joshua sent messengers to Achan’s tent to retrieve the stolen articles. Once there, the men found the royal garment, five pounds of silver and one wedge of gold hidden in the ground, just as Achan had said. The messengers gathered the spoils of war and brought them before Joshua, the elders and the whole camp of Israel.

As Israel’s Judge, God saw that this was done, and inspired Joshua to execute the Eternal’s divine judgment.

He said, “Israel was made to suffer because you gave in to your lustful desires instead of putting God first. Because of what you have done, 36 men lost their lives, and Israel no longer has God’s divine protection.”

Joshua had Achan and the stolen items rounded up with Achan’s possessions—his oxen, sheep, donkeys, tent, and everything else that belonged to him. Then Achan and all these things were brought to the Valley of Achor (which means “valley of trouble”). Achan had caused much trouble for the people of Israel. Now, the Israelites were going to cause trouble for him.

As his sons and daughters watched, the whole camp of Israel gath-



After Achan's confession, Joshua sent men to his tent to recover the items he had stolen from God.

ered around Achan and hurled stones down upon him. There, the thief died in anguish and much pain from the overwhelming weight of the stones and rocks. Next, all of Achan's belongings were burned—and utterly destroyed (Joshua 7:19-26; 22:20).

Breaking One Equals Breaking Them All

Achan had allowed himself to be swayed by material things, coveting after things that did not belong to him. In this, he broke the Tenth Commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s” (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21).

To Achan, the expensive garment, silver and gold became more important to him than obeying God. This meant that Achan also broke the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7).

And when Achan, motivated by his lust and greed, stole from God, he also broke the Eighth Commandment: “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19).

He knew that what he did was wrong, but instead of repenting—changing his mind and desires, and choosing to do the right thing—he hid the stolen treasures. He even pretended to be innocent, acting as though he was obeying God.

Ultimately, when a person breaks just one of God’s laws, he has actually broken ALL of them (James 2:10-11). Breaking God’s laws is sin (I John 3:4), and the wages of sin—the penalty that is earned—is death (Romans 6:23).

Achan’s sins brought nothing but pain, misery and destruction upon the people of Israel, to his family and, ultimately, to Achan himself.

But now that he was no longer alive to continue in his evil ways, Israel no longer had to suffer from being without God’s protection. Being cut off from God is one of the devastating consequences of sin (Isaiah 59:2).

The Eternal was now ready to fight Israel’s battles for them, and bring them success in the Promised Land.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

THE FALL OF AI

Now that the sins of Achan had been dealt with, God spoke to Joshua about attacking the city of Ai once again.

He said, “Do not worry or be afraid, Joshua. Go up and attack Ai, for I will fight your battle for you and give Israel success. You shall do to Ai and its king what you did to Jericho and its ruler. However, this time Israel may keep all the spoils of war for themselves.”

Hearing this, Joshua was deeply grateful. He thanked God in heartfelt prayer for promising to protect Israel and give them success against their enemies.

The Eternal then gave Joshua detailed instructions in how the city was to be taken in battle.

Brimming to the full with confidence and inspired by a new sense of purpose, Joshua rushed out to put God’s battle plan into action (Joshua 8:1-2).

Setting Up For the Attack

Joshua chose 30,000 battle-tested soldiers and sent them off on a secret mission: They were to travel up to Ai undetected, and secretly camp to the west side of the city.

“Whatever you do,” Joshua said to his officers, “don’t let the people of Ai be aware of your presence. Conceal yourselves until I give you the signal.”

Armed with these and other instructions, the 30,000 troops marched out into the night.

Early the next morning, Joshua inspected the rest of the army, making sure that all the soldiers were ready to follow God into battle. Then Joshua, the elders of Israel and the soldiers marched up the rugged ravine, and on into the central highlands, until they came to the northern wall of a valley that lay before Ai, which was in the south. From there, Joshua ordered 5,000 troops to head west and lay in ambush between Ai and Bethel.

He had explained to his officers, “Ai and Bethel are only a few miles apart from each other. Once we attack Ai, the king of Bethel may be tempted to join against us in battle. You men are to stop this from happening.”

The captain of the 5,000 Israelites troops said, “Yes, sir,” and led his men off to complete their mission.

Once they were set in place, Joshua and the rest of the army climbed down into the valley and settled in for the night.

The next morning, the guards who stood watch along Ai’s walls were startled to see that the Israelites had come back. From across the other side of the northern plain, they could see the movement of foot soldiers slowly marching toward the city. At once, messengers raced to alert the king of Ai of the news (Joshua 8:3-14).

The king rolled out of bed, yawning and stretching. He said, “Don’t these Hebrews know when they’ve been beat?”

His assistants nervously laughed. One man said, “My lord, what shall we do?”

The king shot the trembling servant an evil look. He said to him, “We go out and slaughter every last one of these Israelite dogs—once and for all!”

The man said, “Yes, my lord. I will inform the commander of our army right away.”

“No,” said the king. “This battle belongs to me. I will personally lead my army. I want Israel to taste blood, pain and death by my very own hands.”

King of Ai Outwitted

Joshua and a small army of soldiers slowly marched down to the city. Smug and filled with self confidence, the king of Ai gave the command and his army of Canaanite warriors poured out from the city gates, just as they had done before. Closer and closer, the two armies drew near each other, ready to clash to the death with swords, spears and other deadly weapons.

As the screaming, bloodthirsty Canaanites drew within striking range of their enemy, the Israelites suddenly turned around and ran.

The king of Ai gleefully shouted, “Look at these cowards—they’re running for cover just like last time! Hunt them down, men! Don’t let these dogs get away!”

The Canaanites screamed even louder, hoping that their war cries would cause confusion among their enemies.

The king turned to one of his lieutenants and said, “Send a mes-

senger back to the city to tell all my troops there to come out and help us catch our enemy. Also tell them to signal the king of Bethel to send his men, too. I'm sure he would want to join us in our victory.”

The lieutenant saluted his king, and then rushed back to Ai.

God's battle plan was working. He was leading Joshua to use a small army of Israelites to act as decoys. Their mission was to lead all of Ai's warriors out of the city. Pretending that they were fleeing for their lives, Joshua and his decoy troops led the Canaanites east, toward the barren wilderness.

When he was certain that all of Ai's troops had left the city, Joshua raised his spear, which had a bright banner attached to its end. This was the signal that the 30,000 soldiers-in-hiding were waiting for. From a safe distance, Israelite scouts spotted Joshua's signal, and then raced back to the hidden troops.

“It's time!” they shouted.

Unbeknownst to the warriors of Ai, the 30,000 Israelite troops rushed into the city and began to kill everyone in sight. Then they set the city on fire—Ai was engulfed in flames.

Meanwhile, the king of Ai and his men drew closer, ever closer to the fleeing Israelites...when suddenly, a Canaanite soldier looked back and shouted, “Look! Look at the city! It's on fire!”

The whole army of Canaanites stopped dead in their tracks. Looking back, each man was amazed to see dark pillars of thick, black smoke shoot up into what had been clear sky. And at the edge of the plain, they witnessed an angry glow of red, orange and yellow fire covering the walls of their hometown.

The king said, “Forget about these Israelites. We need to get back to Ai before it burns to the ground!”

Just then, Joshua ordered his fleeing soldiers to turn around and attack. The warriors of Ai were surprised to see that the Israelites were no longer afraid of them—and they were even more shocked that the 30,000 troops who had set Ai on fire were now heading straight for them.

While the king and his officers tried to quickly come up with a plan of attack, one of the Canaanite soldiers pointed to the north: “Look! Even more Israelites are coming!”

These were troops that Joshua had concealed in the valley north of Ai. They climbed up from the southern wall and emerged onto the battlefield.

Things did not look good for the king and his men. They were cut off from the east, the north and the south. Their only hope came from the west, from their allies at the city of Bethel. What the king of Ai did

not know was that Joshua had earlier sent 5,000 of his men to stop Bethel's army from helping their sister city.

Trapped, confused and disillusioned, the army of Ai was doomed (Joshua 8:15-22).

Hung From a Tree

Amid the confusion of battle cries and the clashing of swords, the army of Israel destroyed the army of Ai. Every soldier from that evil Canaanite city was slain. Only its king was left alive after the battle was finally over.

Knowing that each of his 12,000 subjects, both within and outside the city, had been killed, the king did not expect to receive a better fate.

He was not mistaken.

His captors brought him before Joshua. The man of God said to the king, "The Eternal God of Israel has judged you and your people. And now His wrath has come upon you. As the Creator of all that exists, God has given you life—and He has the right to take it away."

At Joshua's command, the king of Ai was quickly executed. Then, as a sign of God's wrath and righteous judgment, the king's body was hung from a tree until sunset. This became a warning and reminder to all of Israel that disobeying the one true God brings a horrible curse. For the rest of the day, the sight of the dead ruler's body hanging from a tree sobered the thoughts of God's people—and it motivated them to want to obey the Eternal. No one wanted to end up like the king of Ai (Joshua 8:22-29).

Obedying God's law, Joshua had the king's body taken down from the tree before sunset (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). Then it was properly buried under a pile of stones at the gate of the fallen, burned-out city of Ai. Had the body not been taken down, it would have brought undue attention. People would eventually forget the point of the lesson and end up committing the same sins that the guilty man had committed. Ultimately, the whole land would be cursed.

Many centuries later, a certain man was hung on a cross, sometimes referred to as a tree (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; I Peter 2:24). Yet this man had done nothing wrong to earn such a curse—never in His life did He ever break God's laws. He did not deserve the penalty that comes from breaking those laws—death (Romans 6:23). This man was completely innocent.

His name was Jesus Christ.

Christ took it upon Himself to take the curse of the Law—the death penalty (Galatians 3:13). By doing this, He paid the death penalty for



all human beings so that we do not have to pay it—IF we strive to obey the Eternal and change our thoughts, attitudes and actions from Satan’s way of GET to God’s way of GIVE. By dying upon a cross (a stake or type of tree), Christ took on the curse of bearing God’s wrath and judgment, in our place.

A Special Ceremony

Now that the people of Ai had been totally destroyed, their livestock, treasures and other spoils of war were taken and distributed among the Israelites.

Some days later, Joshua led the people north on another journey through the countryside.

Before his death, Moses had given Israel special instructions, commanding them to build an altar at Mount Ebal after crossing the Jordan River (Deuteronomy 11:29-30).

Once they arrived, Israel was divided into two main groups. The tribes of Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph (which consisted of the half tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh) and Benjamin assembled before Mount Gerizim in the south. Meanwhile, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali assembled before Mount Ebal.

Between the two mounts lay the city of Shechem. This was the place where God first appeared to Abram (who later became Abraham) in the Promised Land (Genesis 12:6-7).

At Mount Ebal, Joshua had an altar of uncut stones built. Upon its completion, burnt offerings and peace offerings were presented before the Eternal. Then, upon the stones of the altar, Joshua wrote a copy of the law, which God gave through Moses.

The blessings and curses of the law were read before the entire assembly. From before Mount Gerizim, all the people said, “Amen” (meaning, “So be it”), as each of the blessings for diligently obeying God and keeping His laws were read aloud. And, from Mount Ebal, all the people there said, “Amen,” as each curse for disobedience was pronounced. Everyone in the whole congregation of Israel gave their full, undivided attention to these important words—all the men, women, and even the little children, as well as the non-Israelite strangers who lived among God’s people. Everyone was warned that what they did with the knowledge of these special blessings and horrible curses would determine Israel’s future in the Promised Land. It was now in the hands of the people to choose the path to amazing success and prosperity—or to unimaginable failure and shame (Joshua 8:30-35; Deuteronomy 27 and 28).

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

THE DAY THE SUN STOOD STILL

News of Israel's miraculous victories over Jericho and Ai spread throughout Canaan. Even in the farthest reaches of the Promised Land, reports of Israel's dramatic and amazing triumphs were being talked about. Soon, each king who ruled over a city-state on the western side of the Jordan began to worry—what if his city was next to fall?

Putting aside their differences, the kings of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites banded together into a single fighting force. By human standards, such a vast army of fierce warriors could have overwhelmed and destroyed Israel.

But the Israelites were not alone—God was on their side. He fought their battles for them. The allied kings of Canaan failed to realize that going up against the Supreme God of the universe was like a flea daring to fight against a giant bull elephant!

Not all of the Canaanites were so foolish as to believe they could survive such a one-sided slaughter. When the Gibeonites heard about Jericho and Ai's defeat, they knew that it was only a matter of time before Israel would destroy them as well. Even though the city of Gibeon was a well-armed stronghold manned by capable soldiers, the people there were deeply afraid that Israel would soon attack—especially since Ai was only a few miles away!

The Gibeonites did not go along with their fellow Hivites in putting their trust in the newly-formed Canaanite alliance. They realized that no matter what they did, they had no chance of wiping out Israel.

So the Gibeonites came up with another plan, and then gathered a group of men to go on a special mission.

Judging By Sight

The Israelites were encamped at Gilgal, which was being used as a headquarters for Israel's government. One day, as Joshua and the eld-

ers of Israel were conducting business, one of Joshua's trusted assistants came up to him.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you," he said, "but we have visitors—foreigners from a foreign land. They have asked to speak to you."

Joshua and the other men exchanged puzzled looks.

"Who could these men be?"

Curious, Joshua followed his assistant, who brought him before a group of strange-looking men.

The leader of the group stepped forward and said, "We are ambassadors of a far-off country. We have heard of your great power and miraculous victories in battle. As representatives of our people, we have journeyed great distances through rugged wastelands in order to make a covenant of peace with you."

Joshua and the elders eyed these strangers with suspicion. They took note of their foreign robes, which were torn and dusty, and their sandals, which were worn from much walking. They also noticed that the foreigners' donkeys carried sack and wineskins that were old, battered and torn. The strangers did seem to have traveled a far distance through harsh territory...

But Joshua and some of the elders were not yet fully convinced.

One of them said, "You say that you came from afar, but how do we know that what you say is true? Perhaps you are really from among these neighboring Canaanites—how can we be sure?"

The foreigners gave nervous smiles as their leader spoke up: "Trust us. We are simply here to establish peace between your people and ours. In fact, consider us your servants."

The elders of Israel whispered among themselves, some saying, "Peace is always good. What do we have to lose?"

But Joshua said to the strangers, "Who are you? Where do you come from?"

Again, the leader of the foreigners spoke: "We, your servants, come from a far off country. We have traveled all this way because of the Eternal your God. His great and powerful name has reached even our ears. His great fame is becoming well known, even among our people—how He all but destroyed Egypt as He released Israel from slavery; how He used you to destroy the kings of the Amorites from the other side of the Jordan River, especially kings Sihon and Og.

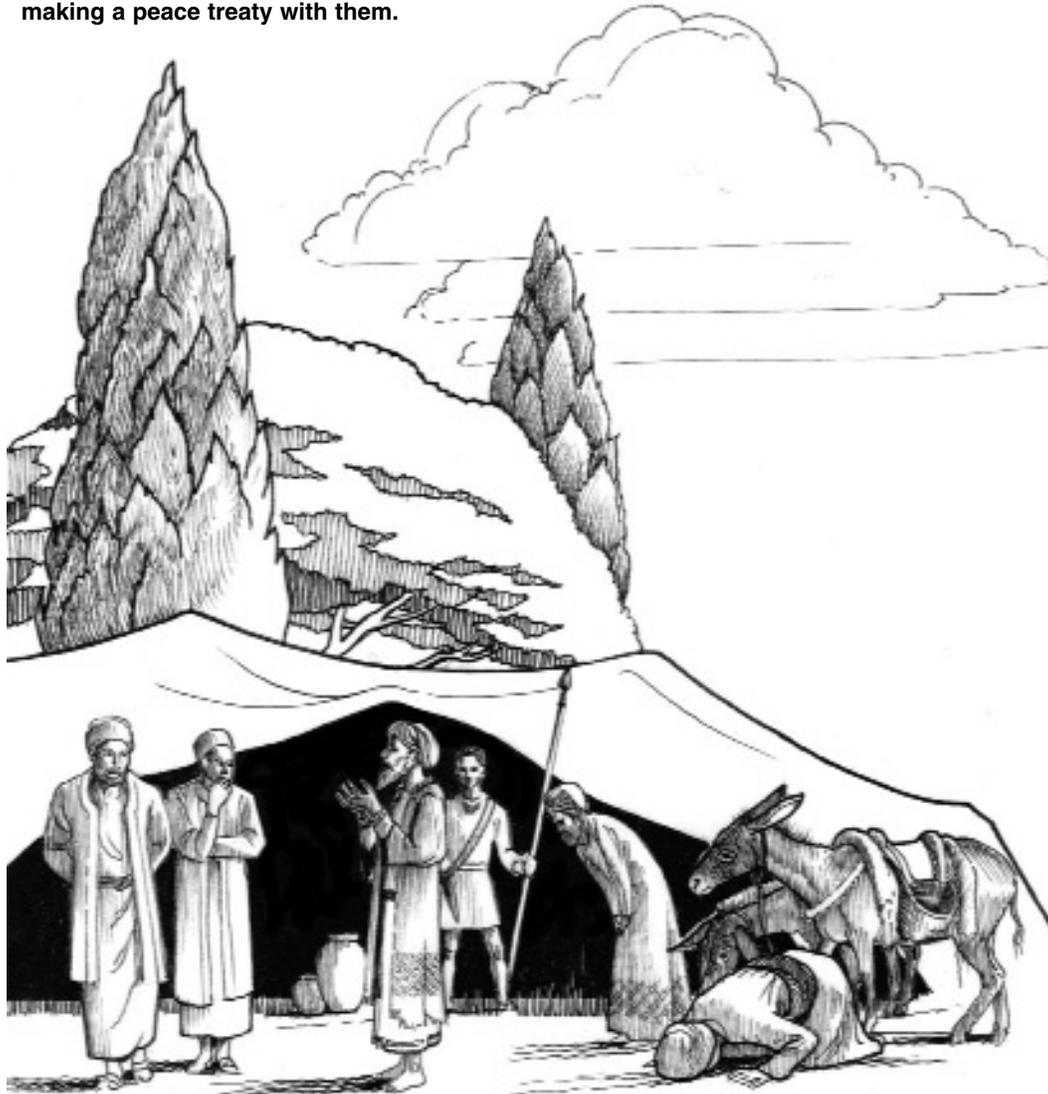
"From our elders to the very least of us, all of our people desired that we travel great distances just to speak with you. Our only desire is to establish peace between you and our people—nothing more" (Joshua 9:1-13).

These smooth words put Joshua and the elders at ease. And thus,

the leaders of Israel made a serious mistake, one that most people still make, even to this day: They did not rely on God to guide them to make the right decision. Instead, they judged the strangers by their appearance, rather than by their character and how they lived. If only Joshua and the elders had rejected their human reasoning and had sought out God's will—God would have made it clear who these strangers really were!

Now the Israelites would have to pay a heavy price for failing to rely upon God. Their wrong example is recorded in the Bible to teach us how to live.

Posing as diplomats from a faraway land, the Gibeonites tricked Joshua into making a peace treaty with them.



Strangers Revealed!

At the end of the third day and with their minds made up, Joshua and the elders of Israel made a hasty peace treaty with these foreign visitors. Making a solemn oath, they said, “There shall be peace between your people and ours. We will not make war with you.”

Of course, the strangers were extremely pleased.

Then Joshua said to them, “Come, stay with us for a while.”

“No,” the strangers said. “We cannot stay. We have been away from our people far too long. We must get back to our country and tell them the good news.”

“Send a messenger,” said Joshua. “The rest of you can continue your visit with us in peace.”

With shifty eyes and sweat dripping across their brows, the foreigners said, “Uh, no...no, really we must leave. We have other important business that must be taken care of back home.”

Though their nervous behavior made Joshua and the elders curious, Israel’s leaders bid the strangers farewell and sent them on their way.

Three days later, Joshua and all of Israel learned why the foreigners were in such a hurry to leave.

Continuing in their conquest for the Promised Land, the army of Israel came to the foothills of Canaan in order to attack the neighboring Canaanite cities there. As he had done in the past, Joshua sent out spies to secretly scout out the land to examine the strengths and weaknesses of their enemies. It was these spies who discovered the true identities of the strangers.

“They’re Canaanites, Joshua! Every one of them!” the spies reported. “They’re called the Gibeonites. They live out here in the cities of Gibeon, Chephirah, Beroth and Kirjath Jearim. These so-called ‘foreigners from a far-off land’ deceived us!”

Joshua and all of the Israelite leaders were stunned by the news—and suddenly realized that they should not have made a serious decision, such as a peace treaty, based on sight alone (II Corinthians 5:7). They should have asked God for His guidance.

The elders asked Joshua, “What shall we do? After all, these Gibeonites are still Canaanites—shouldn’t we obey God and destroy them, along with all of the other nations of Canaan?”

Many of the elders nodded their heads in agreement.

But Joshua said, “It’s too late for that now. We made a foolish mistake in not seeking God’s will. Now we will have to suffer the consequences.”

“But these deceivers are Canaanites. They must be destroyed!”

Joshua shook his head. “No, we made a promise and gave our word. We are not like these pagan nations, who say one thing and do another. We are the people of God. Since the Eternal always keeps His word, we must follow His example and keep our word—even if it hurts!”

Though Joshua had made a terrible mistake in making peace with the Gibeonites, he now yielded to God, allowing the Eternal to develop His holy, righteous character within him (Joshua 9:15-18).

The People Get Angry

The whole camp of Israel grumbled and complained when they learned that they were not allowed to attack Gibeon and her sister cities. Joshua and the other leaders explained to the people why Israel must keep their covenant of peace with the Gibeonites. “We must keep our word,” they said.

But many Israelites were still displeased. One man said, “What then—shall we let these Gibeonites roam free and suffer no punishment for their treachery?”

“No,” the elders said. “Joshua has a solution for dealing with these deceivers (Joshua 9:19-20).

The Gibeonites Are Punished

The leaders of the Gibeonites were brought before Joshua and the elders of Israel. Taking note of their angry faces, they feared the worst, wondering within themselves, “Will these Israelites break their promise? Are we about to die?”

Joshua broke the silence. “Why have you deceived us? You said that you were foreigners from a far-off country—but now we know that you are nothing more than liars and deceivers!”

One of the Gibeonites spoke up: “We misled you because we know that the Eternal your God commanded Moses to bring you to Canaan so that your people would inherit this land. We also know that your God has commanded Israel to destroy all the people living here—including us! Therefore, we were afraid of you, especially when we learned of how you utterly destroyed the people of Jericho and Ai!”

The Gibeonites lowered their heads as Joshua folded his hands and frowned. They said to him, “Our lives are in your hands. Do with us as seems right and good for you to do.”

The frightened men expected to be slain right then and there.

But they were surprised to hear Joshua say, “From this moment on you and your people are under a curse: You shall be our slaves. Never again shall you taste the breath of freedom.”

From that very day, all the people of Gibeon and her sister cities became enslaved to the nation of Israel. Their duties were to cut wood and carry water for the Israelites and for God’s altar of worship (Joshua 9:22-27).

Gibeon Under Attack!

Adoni-Zedek, the king of Jerusalem, was boiling mad! In his mind, it was bad enough that Israel had destroyed Ai. But now Gibeon—a city even greater and more important than Ai—had just made a peace treaty with the Israelites.

“Gibeonite traitors!” the king screamed as his military officers, aides and servants trembled from his show of rage. “Gibeon should have allied with the rest of us Canaanites.”

One of the king’s commanders said, “Yes, my lord, and the sister cities of Chephirah, Beeroth and Kirjath-jearim have foolishly joined in Gibeon’s treachery. With their combined resources, Israel is even stronger than before. What shall we do?”

The king said, “We shall deal with those Hebrews in good time. But first we must take care of Gibeon. We’ll make an example out of them so that no other city will ever dare to make peace with the Israelites.”

And so the king of Jerusalem sent messengers to the kings of Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon. Together, these five kings gathered their combined armies and surrounded the city of Gibeon. Though Gibeon had many warriors to defend it, the overwhelming size of these allied armies meant certain doom.

Fortunately, a team of Gibeonite men managed to secretly slip away from the city, and immediately headed for Gilgal to get help.

Standing before Joshua and the elders of Israel, the Gibeonites made their pleas: “Save us! Our city is surrounded and under attack by the combined forces of five kings. Remember that we are your servants, and save us from being slaughtered!”

Joshua may have been tempted to say no. Israel could have used this as an opportunity to let the Gibeonites be destroyed, without breaking the peace treaty. However, Joshua, whose mind was led by God’s Holy Spirit, saw the “big picture”—that this was the perfect opportunity to destroy five major armies all at once instead of taking each of them on five separate times.

With God's approval, Joshua led the army of Israel on the march to Gibeon.

Throughout the night, the Israelites climbed up through twenty miles of harsh, rugged countryside. Along the way, God encouraged His servant, saying, "Do not fear these pagan armies, Joshua. For I have delivered them into your hands. By the time the battle is finished, not one man shall stand before you" (Joshua 10:1-9).

When God sets His mind to do something, it is absolutely guaranteed to happen! Therefore, God often speaks of things that have not yet occurred as though they already have happened.

The Day the Sun Stood Still

Early the next morning, the Israelites arrived at Gibeon, which was completely encircled by a massive army of bloodthirsty warriors, like ants surrounding a sugar cube.

God led His people to attack, ensuring them victory over their Canaanite enemies.

Seeing thousands of their comrades and fellow soldiers being slaughtered by the Israelites, the surviving warriors panicked and ran for their lives—and the Israelites ran after them in hot pursuit! No matter where the enemy tried to flee, the mighty men of Israel chased and hunted them down, cutting off their escape.

Many of the Canaanites fled down the road that led to Beth-horon. As they hastily made their long descent, God produced a mighty miracle: He rained huge hailstones down upon the heads of the fleeing troops, slaughtering more of them than those killed by the Israelites. God also saw to it that none of the hailstones fell upon His people, who were chasing their enemies.

And then God produced an even greater miracle: To give the Israelites enough daylight time to catch all of the Canaanite soldiers, God answered Joshua's prayerful request to make the sun stand still for a whole day!

All were amazed to witness such a spectacular sight. And this led the Israelites to fear God and respect Joshua as God's servant (Joshua 10:9-14).

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

RECEIVING THE INHERITANCE

When messengers told Joshua that the five kings of the Canaanite alliance had fled to a cave at Makkedah, he immediately called for a squad of soldiers.

He said to them, “Go to this cave and block its entrance with large stones, and post a couple of your troops to stand guard. I don’t want any of those five kings to escape. We will deal with them as soon as the battle is finished. After you have placed the stones and posted the guards, go back to pursuing our enemies. Attack their rear guard. And don’t let any of them escape to their cities.” The soldiers said, “Yes, sir,” and went off to fulfill Joshua’s command.

When the battle was finally finished, Joshua and his men met at the cave where the five kings were hiding. The stones were removed and the kings were brought out.

As they lay on the ground, defeated and humiliated, Joshua pointed to the pagan rulers and ordered his officers to step on their necks. This was an act of further humiliation for the kings, who were used to exalting themselves above others.

Then five kings suffered the same fate as the king of Ai: After they were slain, their dead bodies were hung on trees. Then they were cut down before sunset and thrown back into the cave. Sealing it again with stones, the cave—which the kings thought would be their place of safety—was turned into a tomb (Joshua 10:16-27)

Conquering Southern Canaan

Next, God inspired Joshua to lead the Israelites into a military campaign against the southern cities of Canaan. One by one, the pagan cities of Makkedah, Libnah and Lachish fell, and all who dwelled within them were put to death.

This angered Horem, king of Gezer. He raced to save Lachish from defeat—but he and his army were wiped out by the army of God.

Israel marched on to Eglon, taking it in one day. The city of Hebron fell next, and then Debir. Clearly, God was with Israel, for it was the Eternal who granted them so many victories. Soon, Israel had conquered all of the hill country, the south land, the lowlands and the wilderness slope, utterly destroying all—kings and citizens alike—who resided within their cities.

With the land largely secured and under Israel's control, Joshua and the Israelites returned to their headquarters camp, at Gilgal (Joshua 10:28-43).

A New Threat

King Jabin of Hazor did not learn from Israel's recent victories. He somehow convinced himself that he and the other Canaanite rulers of the north could defeat Israel. In his foolishness, he failed to see that attacking God's people meant attacking God Himself.

Jabin conspired with the kings of Madon, Shimron, Achshaph and all the other rulers of the north. Their combined armies, which the Bible says seemed as vast as the sand on the seashore, assembled at Merom with warhorses, chariots and a thirst for bloodshed. They were united for one purpose: The utter destruction of Israel.

When Joshua heard about this, he began to worry and give way to fear, for this was the largest army that had yet assembled against the Israelites.

God reassured His servant, telling him, "Do not worry or be afraid of this army. Tomorrow, I will deliver all of them slain before Israel. In fact, you shall even cripple their warhorses and burn their chariots."

Once again, God's words of encouragement gave Joshua the courage he needed to do the impossible (Joshua 11:1-6).

Whenever you are worried or afraid, you can turn to God. The Bible contains many words of encouragement, and numerous promises that God will personally intervene in your life, if you seek Him.

Conquering the North

Instead of waiting to be attacked, Joshua led the Israelites into a sudden attack. And, as He had done before, God delivered success into His people's hands. The armies of the allied kings suffered great losses, causing the survivors to run for their lives. But their flight was in vain; Joshua's men chased them down until none were left alive.

And Joshua did come to fulfill what God said would happen: He crippled the enemies' horses and burned their chariots!

After this, came the utter destruction of Hazor, the head of the northern alliance of city-states. At Joshua's command, the city, which had been built on the mounds of ancient ruins, was burned to the ground. There were no survivors.

As for the other cities that had been built on mounds, Israel utterly destroyed all the inhabitants and took their precious treasures and spoils.

With God's deliverance, the Israelites had conquered 31 of the kings who ruled kingdoms on the western side of the Jordan River. After about seven years of military campaigns, Israel had finally come to largely dominate the land of Canaan on both sides of the Jordan (Joshua 11:7-23; 12:7-24).

Dividing the Promised Land

Joshua was now a very old man (about 100 years old). He had done much in serving God and leading Israel to victory.

But God was not finished with His servant yet. There were still pockets of land yet to be conquered and put fully under Israel's control. This included all the territory of the Philistines, who controlled a strip of land along the Mediterranean Sea, as well as the Geshurites and several other peoples.

However, God decided to go ahead and divide portions of the Promised Land to the individual tribes of Israel. Nine and a half tribes eagerly looked forward to receiving their inheritance. (Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had already received their portions years earlier, over on the eastern side of the Jordan River.) The Israelites used lots to seek God's will in determine which piece of land each tribe was to inherit.

However, the tribe of Levi, which contained the priesthood, was dedicated to doing God's work, such as maintaining the tabernacle and tending to burnt offerings. The Levites did not inherit land; instead, they received 48 cities, which were to be scattered throughout all the tribes. The Levites were to set the daily example for the other tribes of seeking God first.

After Ephraim and Manasseh received their portions of land, they failed to completely rid themselves of the Canaanites who dwelled there. Instead, representatives of these tribes complained to Joshua, claiming that their inheritance wasn't big enough.

"Not big enough? What about the forest wilderness where the Perizzites and other Canaanites dwell? Take their land and clear it for yourselves."

The representatives of the tribes said, “But those Canaanites have chariots of iron! We can’t drive them out!”

Joshua said, “What? Don’t you realize that you are a great and powerful people? Don’t you remember how God has given victory time and time again? Take the land and drive out these Canaanites. God will fight your battles for you, but you must do your part!”

This is a vital lesson from which we can learn. God will fight all our battles for us. But many times, He expects us to do certain things to show that we trust Him. If God always did what we wanted, without requiring any efforts of our own, we would not properly fear and respect Him—which means we would not obey Him.

Ephraim, Manasseh and the rest of the tribes did not learn this lesson. Ultimately, they failed to completely remove the Canaanites from their lives (at best, they made some of them slaves, which was not what God had wanted). The people of Canaan and their pagan, Satan-influenced way of life represented the way of sin. Sin is like poison—even a little bit of it will kill you. Israel’s failure meant trouble and misery for future generations of Israelites (Joshua 13-17).

Caleb Claims God’s Promise

When it came time for the tribe of Judah to come to Gilgal and receive their share of the inheritance, Caleb was among them. Of all the people of Israel, Caleb and Joshua were the only ones to have come out of Egypt. The other Israelites had been born during the 40-year march out in the barren wilderness.

At 85 years of age, Caleb was a faithful and long-time servant of God. He came before Joshua, Eleazar the high priest, and the heads of the tribes of Israel and spoke to them.

“Forty-five years ago, Moses sent forth twelve men to spy out the Promised Land. Ten of those men brought back false reports, causing God’s people to panic and rebel against Him. But Joshua and I reported the good things about the Promised Land—that even though it was occupied with fierce enemies, Israel could overtake them all, even the giants. All we had to do was put our trust in God.

“Because Joshua and I showed faith, Moses made a promise to us—that we would be allowed to enter the Promised Land. I am now here to claim my portion of the inheritance, which God promised to me and my descendants.

“Though I am old and gray, I am still as strong as I was 45 years ago. Give me the mountain region of Hebron, where the Anakim, the descendants of giants, dwell. With God’s help, I will drive them all out.”

After Joshua's death, Caleb assumed the role of Israel's physical leader.



The leaders of Israel were touched and impressed by Caleb's bold request. They could see that this was a man full of courage and faith. Joshua recognized Caleb's claim to the land of Hebron and gave Caleb his blessing (Joshua 14:6-15).

Now that Hebron was given to him, Caleb went out to take possession of it. Without hesitation, he and his family attacked and drove out the three families of Anak. Then he set out to conquer the people of Debir.



Caleb and Joshua looked back on their forty days of scouting the Promised Land, and the amazing things they found...

Caleb turned to his countrymen and made a bold challenge: “Any man who is courageous enough to overtake the city of Debir, to him I will give the hand of my beautiful daughter Achsah for marriage.”

One man who stepped up to the challenge was Othniel. He was the son of Caleb’s brother. Relying fully on God, Othniel led his troops to overtake the city and drive out its inhabitants.

Well pleased, Caleb kept his word. Othniel and Achsah were married.

Caleb and the other leaders of Judah were impressed by Othniel’s leadership and bravery. They could tell that God was preparing this young man to be used for a special purpose (Joshua 15:13-17).

Unfortunately, not all of Judah learned from Caleb and Othniel’s example of totally removing their enemies from the land. Like the rest of the tribes, Judah did not drive out pockets of Canaanites who stubbornly held on to the territory, such as the Jebusites, who maintained firm control over Jerusalem (verse 63).



Joshua Receives His Inheritance

God remembered His promise to Joshua, His long-time servant, because, along with Caleb, Joshua had shown faith in speaking well of the Promised Land years ago. He decided to give to Joshua and his descendants their own portion of the inheritance.

Joshua, who came from the tribe of Ephraim, asked for Timnath Serah, which was in the mountains of Ephraim's territory. There, he built a city in which to live (Joshua 19:49-50).

Homeward Bound

The Israelites had come a long way. Decades ago, they were slaves in Egypt, toiling under

the sun while making bricks of clay and straw. Their miserable lives had been transformed by God, who freed them from their Egyptian masters, and brought them through the barren wastelands, into Canaan.

With the vast majority of the Canaanite kingdoms destroyed, God had fulfilled His promise to deliver the Promised Land into the Israelites' hands. Now that twelve tribes had received their inheritance, all Israel had to do was drive out the remaining strongholds of Canaanites who still dwelled in the land (Joshua 21:43-45).

Since the land of Canaan was, for the most part, secure and under Israel's control, it was time for the soldiers of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh to journey back home. Their families were waiting for them back in the territory east of the Jordan River.

Joshua called the soldiers to come before him at Shiloh, which was where God's tabernacle now resided. The seat of Israel's government had been transferred from Gilgal to Shiloh (Joshua 18:1).

Joshua said to them, “You have kept your word and have fought valiantly with your brother tribes. With your help, the Promised Land is now ours. You may now go home.”

The soldiers cheered and clapped and jumped up and down with joy.

“But remember this,” Joshua warned. “Be careful to keep all of God’s laws, walk in His ways, and hold fast to His commandments. Always put God first—do not forget Him. Serve God with all your heart and being.”

Joshua also reminded them to share their many spoils of war with their fellow tribesmen, who stayed behind back in the east to protect their families and work the farmlands. During the years they had fought alongside their brother Israelites, the soldiers of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had collected many precious treasures: Cattle, silver, gold, brass, iron and fine clothes, as well as swords, shields and other valuable weapons (Joshua 22:1-9).

Sobered by these words, the soldiers nodded. Upon receiving Joshua’s blessing, the men bid farewell to the leaders of Israel and their fellow countrymen, and departed for home.



CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

ON THE VERGE OF CIVIL WAR

Sometime later, after the two and one-half tribes had left, a bad report began to spread among God's people: A great altar had been built over by the Jordan River! The Israelites knew that it was against God's law to have more than one altar of worship in the land. Sacrifices and burnt offerings were to be made only on the altar at God's tabernacle, in Shiloh. Threes times a year, during the Days of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Firstfruits (also known as Pentecost) and the Feast of Tabernacles, representatives from all the tribes of Israel—both west and east of the Jordan—were to come before God's tabernacle and present their offerings.

Fingers pointed to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. Some people said, "They must be planning to worship other gods on this altar of theirs!"

"We can't let that happen. God will surely curse all of us for this sin!"

Men from all the tribes west of the Jordan River assembled at Shiloh and prepared to make war with the tribes in the east.

Joshua knew better than to jump to conclusions. Years ago, he had learned a very sore and bitter lesson when he had assumed that the Gibeonites were foreigners from a far-off country and not a part of the Canaanites. Because of this mistake, Israel was forced to keep the Gibeonites alive, as slaves.

This caused many Israelites to think, "It's too hard to get rid of these Canaanites in our land. Let's make them our slaves instead, like we did with the Gibeonties." But this was not what God had wanted.

Realizing that Israel was about to curse itself with a bloody and savage civil war, Joshua calmed the crowds who shouted for war.

He said to the people, "Before we commit ourselves to a horrible bloodbath that will take the lives of many thousands, we need to get the full facts. I will send Phineas, son of Eleazar the high priest, to travel to the land of Gilead and speak with the tribes of the east. A

leader from each of our western tribes will go with him. We must not jump to the wrong conclusions, as we did with the Gibeonites. We must let God's wisdom guide us to get the full truth of this matter—before we do something we will later regret.”

All the people, even the ones who screamed for war the loudest, saw the wisdom in Joshua's calming words.

Accusations and Misunderstandings

The leaders of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh were surprised by the arrival of Phineas and the rulers of the western tribes of Israel. They hurried to prepare a great feast for their guests, but Phineas and the rulers said, “Now is not the time for feasting. We have important matters to discuss.”

The leaders of the eastern tribes were puzzled, especially when they took note of the frowns and scowls on the faces of their visitors. They could tell that this would not be a pleasant, friendly visit.

Phineas spoke up: “What treachery is this against God? Why are you turning away from Him by building for yourselves an altar of worship? Do you remember the iniquity of Peor, when some of our men caroused with pagan women, and ended up serving their false gods? The Eternal punished Israel for those men's sins, taking the lives of 24,000 people with a plague. If you rebel against the Eternal your God, He will be angry with all of Israel. We will all suffer because of your sin.

“We realize that your territory is separated from the rest of Israel by the Jordan River. Perhaps you feel that your portion of the inheritance is unclean and not truly a part of the Promised Land. If so, cross over and come to God's tabernacle at Shiloh. Take possession among us; we will share the land with you. Only do not rebel against the Eternal your God by building for yourselves an altar of worship.

“Remember that when Achan sinned, stealing from God the forbidden treasures of Jericho, his sin brought God's wrath down upon all of us. Achan did not die alone—many Israelites suffered because of him.”

The leaders of the eastern tribes had been silent throughout Phineas' speech. What he had said shocked them. Their brother Israelites had just accused them of rebellion and worshipping false gods!

As soon as Phineas was finished speaking, the men spoke up to their defense: “The Eternal is God of all gods. None is greater than Him. If we have built this altar to turn from following God or to rebel

against Him and the other tribes of Israel, let God Himself require an account from us.

“Here is the real reason we built this altar: It is to serve as a reminder for generations to come—nothing more!

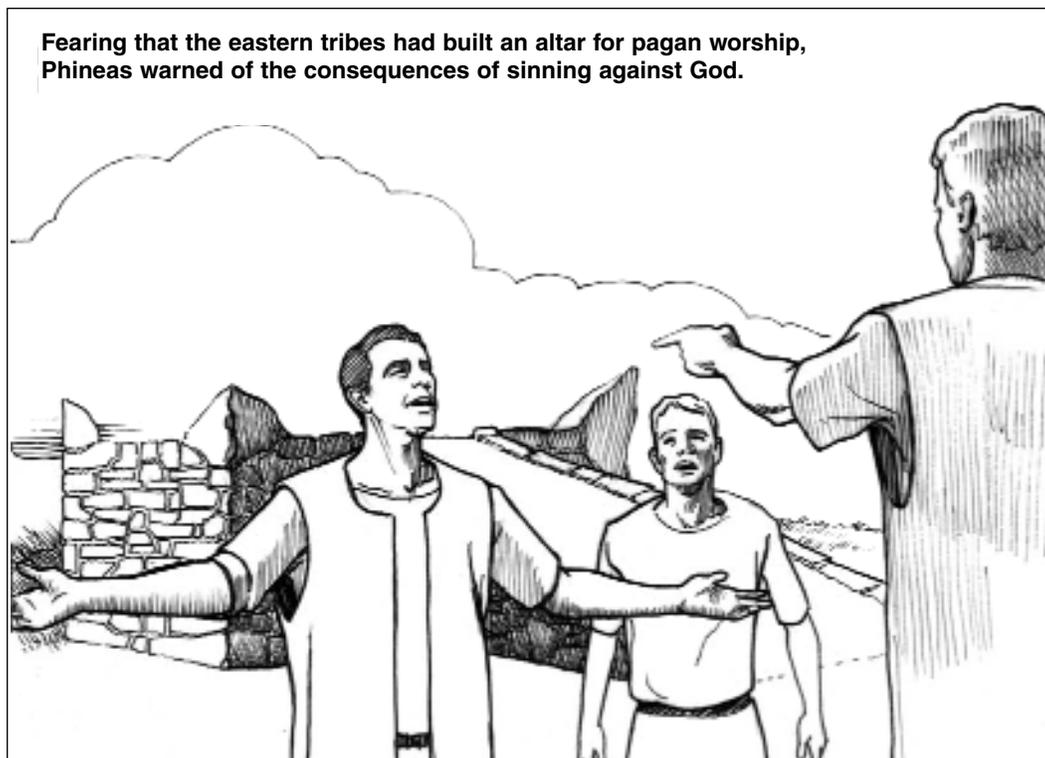
“Suppose your descendants said to ours, ‘You’re not really a part of Israel. That’s why God set the Jordan River as a border between your people and ours. You have no part in God!’ If this were to happen, your descendants might cause ours to stop fearing God. They would then seek false gods and become like the pagan Canaanites.

“We did not build the altar to make burnt offerings and sacrifices. We built it to serve as a witness and a reminder between you and us and between our future generations. The altar is to remind everyone that we must serve God and offer sacrifices at His tabernacle. In this way, no one will be able to deny us of our responsibility.”

Phineas and the western leaders of Israel were greatly relieved. Now that they had gathered all the facts, they knew that there was no need to start a civil war.

Phineas said, “God is truly among us, for you have not sinned or rebelled against Him.”

Everyone rejoiced together and feasted. Afterward, Phineas and the others journeyed back to Shiloh, and told Joshua and the rest of Israel the good news (Joshua 22:10-34).





Joshua Warns Israel

When Joshua reached 110 years of age, he assembled the elders, princes, judges and officers of Israel, and spoke before them:

“The day of my death is near. Listen to me, and heed my words after I am gone.

“You have seen all that God has done to our enemies—how that Israel has had success after success because the Eternal has fought our battles for us. The Promised Land has been divided among the twelve tribes, with all the nations of Canaan cut off from opposing us.

“God will expel the pockets of Canaanites who remain among us; then you shall have complete and total control of the land, as He has promised.

“But you must do your part. Be confident, and keep and do all that is written in the book of the law. Do not compromise with God’s way.

“Do not make peace with the remnant of the Canaanites. And do not serve or worship their pagan gods—don’t even mention their names.

“Always put the Eternal first in your life. Serve Him and Him only, for He has driven out great and powerful nations from before you. Because of God, not one of them has been able to stand up to you unto this very day.

“If you continue to follow the Almighty, He will continue to bring you success over your enemies. One man shall be able to chase a thousand. Why?—because the Eternal your God fights your battles for you, as He has promised. All you need to do is trust Him. Therefore, make sure that you love God with all your heart and being. Always serve Him and Him only.

“Otherwise, if you forget your God and make peace with the pagans, marrying into their families and becoming like them, then know this: God will not drive the rest of your enemies out from the Promised Land. And they will become snares and traps to you, and thorns in your eyes. This will continue until you perish from the land the Eternal has given you.

“Behold, the day of my death is very near, so remember this: Of all the good things that God has promised to us, not one has failed to come true. Therefore, so shall God bring upon you all the evil things He has promised, if you rebel against Him. These include destroying you from this good land.

“If you break God’s covenant and go off to serve other gods (which are not gods at all), God’s righteous anger shall be kindled against you for your evil actions. And Israel shall suffer the consequences—therefore, beware!” (Joshua 23).

A Rededication to God

At Shechem, Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel for one final solemn meeting before he died. Once again, he gathered the elders, heads, judges and officers of Israel to present themselves before God.

Joshua said, “Thus says the Eternal God of Israel: ‘Centuries ago, Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived far away on the other side of the Euphrates River. There, they served other gods. Then I

called Abraham and made him to be My servant. I led him throughout all of Canaan, and gave him children, including Isaac.

“To Isaac I gave twin sons, Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau and his descendants the mountains of Seir, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt.

“I sent Moses and Aaron to be My representatives. And I struck Egypt’s pride with ten miraculous plagues, bringing you up out of slavery. After I delivered you from Egypt, I brought you to the Red Sea. There, you were trapped between the sea, the mountains and the onslaught of Pharaoh’s army. Your fathers cried out to Me, and I intervened. I separated you and the Egyptians with darkness. Then I parted the Red Sea, providing you a way of escape—and setting a trap to crush Pharaoh’s soldiers under the waves of the sea.

“After dwelling in the wilderness for many years, I brought you to the eastern side of the Promised Land. The Amorites, who dwelled there, fought with you, but I delivered them into your hands, so that you might possess their lands. I destroyed them from before you.

“Then Balak, king of Moab, conspired against you to destroy you. He sent for Balaam, the false prophet, to pronounce a curse upon My people. But I would not listen to Balaam. Instead, I used him to bless you, and so you were delivered from his hands.

“Then you crossed the Jordan River and came to the city of Jericho. The men of Jericho and all the other nations and peoples of Canaan tried to oppose you, but I delivered them all into your hands. I am the One who drove them out from before you like hornets—not you and your sword and other weapons.

“Now this land is yours. I have given you a land you did not labor for, and cities you did not build. Dwell in them, and eat of the vineyards and olive groves, which you did not plant. The Eternal has spoken.”

The people considered the seriousness of these words as they remembered how far they had come in life.

Breaking the silence, Joshua spoke: “Now therefore, fear and serve God. Put away the pagan gods that your fathers served on the other side of the Euphrates and down in Egypt. Serve the Eternal only!

“If it seems evil to you to serve God, choose this day whom you will serve—whether the gods that your fathers worshipped or the gods of the Canaanites. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Eternal!”

The people said, “God brought us out of Egypt, and out from the cruel bonds of slavery. He did awesome works and wonderful signs before our eyes. He preserved us during our march to the Promised

Land, and drove out the people who lived here. Far be it from us to forsake the Eternal to serve other gods. We, too, will serve Him, for He is our God.”

“Don’t be so sure of yourselves,” said Joshua. “You cannot serve God unless you continually forsake all other gods. For the Eternal is a jealous God; He will not tolerate the worship of idols and foreign gods. If you forsake the Eternal and serve other gods, He will harm and even destroy you, just as surely as He has done you good.”

But all the people insisted, “We will serve the Eternal!”

Joshua said, “Then you are witnesses against yourselves this very day—that you have chosen the Eternal as your God, to serve Him always.”

“Yes! Yes!” they shouted. “We are witnesses!”

“Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, idols that the remaining Canaanites worship in your lands. Turn your heart and affection to the God of Israel.”

They agreed, saying, “Yes, we will serve the Eternal and obey His voice.”

Satisfied with their response, Joshua made a covenant with Israel, making a statute and ordinance in Shechem. Then he wrote down the words into the Book of the Law of God. He also took a large stone and set it under an oak tree by the sanctuary of God. The stone served as a witness to Israel, to remind the people of their promise to fully serve and obey God.

And so the people returned to their own territories (Joshua 24:1-28).

The Death of Two Faithful Servants of God

Not long afterward, Joshua died. He was buried in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Serah in Ephraim. Due to his faithful and obedient example, Israel served the Eternal all the days of Joshua’s life, as well as throughout all the days of the elders of Israel who outlived him.

Some time later, Eleazar, son of Aaron and the high priest of Israel, also died. His faithful son Phineas took his place as high priest (Joshua 24:29-31, 33).

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

A NEW GENERATION

Deeply saddened by the death of Joshua, a great servant of God, the people of Israel remembered their promise to dedicate their lives to serving the Eternal and to drive out the remaining Canaanites from the Promised Land.

Representatives from all the tribes came to God's tabernacle at Shiloh to see Phineas, Israel's high priest. They boldly said to him, "We are ready to keep our promise. Which one of Israel's tribes should be first to march into battle and begin driving out the enemy?"

Through Phineas, God gave His answer: "Judah shall go into battle first. Indeed, I have already delivered the land into Judah's hand. All they need to do is to fully take it."

Upon hearing God's decision, the people of Judah gladly stepped up to the challenge, hungry for battle. Judah was the tribe that led the way during Israel's march through the wilderness. When it came to facing the enemy and fighting to the death, Judah was used to taking the lead in marching into battle.

Since the tribe of Simeon's territory was situated within the borders of Judah's territory, Judah asked the people of Simeon to join them in their war campaign. "In return for your help," they said, "we will help you drive out the Canaanites who are still in your land."

Simeon quickly agreed.

This new alliance between the brother tribes pleased God, who is always pleased when brothers live and work together in peace and unity (Psalm 133).

Judah and Simeon March

Once the war campaign began, God greatly blessed Judah and Simeon with success. The Canaanites and Perizzites were either destroyed or fleeing for their lives.

But there was one pagan warlord who refused to give up—Adoni-Bezek, an infamous king who ruled over the powerful city-state of

Bezek. His evil reputation was known throughout the land: He often boasted about cutting off the toes and thumbs of 70 kings, using these body parts as table scraps for his dogs! He did this to humiliate them and to make them useless in battle. Without thumbs, the kings could no longer grip their swords and defend themselves in battle. And without toes, they could no longer march into battle or firmly stand their ground against enemy soldiers on the battlefield.

Adoni-Bezek ruled his subjects with cruelty and wickedness. He and his people had no intention of giving up the land to the Israelites, so they stubbornly resisted them.

But Judah and Simeon were just as determined. They launched an attack against Bezek, conquering the city and destroying 10,000 men. They even captured Adoni-Bezek!

When the infamous warlord was brought before Judah and Simeon's leaders, there was little talk about what to do with him.

Some said, "Kill him and hang his body on a tree, like Joshua did in the past."

But someone else said, "No, that's too good for him. Let's treat him the way he treated those 70 kings."

The tribal leaders quickly agreed, and Adoni-Bezek's thumbs and toes were cut off. Humiliated, the captured warlord admitted, "God has repaid me for what I have done to other kings."

Judah and Simeon then attacked the city of Jerusalem, bringing Adoni-Bezek along as their prisoner. In the aftermath, all of its defiant inhabitants were killed and Jerusalem was burned to the ground. There, Adoni-Bezek died.

Jerusalem was in the territory of Benjamin (Joshua 18:11, 21, 28), which bordered Judah. Though Judah had destroyed the city and driven out the Canaanites there, Benjamin failed to take full control of its territory. And, because they did not quickly come in, rebuild Jerusalem and occupy it, the Jebusites did so. They stubbornly resisted Benjamin's attempts to get them to leave (Judges 1:21).

Next, Judah and Simeon headed southward to drive out the enemies dwelling



there, and in the mountains and lowlands. Victory after victory was handed to them, thanks to God (Judges 1:1-9).

God Fulfills a Promise

Living peaceably with the people of Judah were the Kenites. They descended from Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. Many years ago, when Moses was leading Israel on the march through the wilderness, he had asked Hobab, Jethro's son, to stay with them. Moses wanted to rely on Hobab's knowledge of the land and the desert. In return, Moses promised to Hobab, his family and descendants a portion of the Promised Land. Hobab agreed to Moses' terms (Numbers 10:29-32).

After some time, God fulfilled Moses' promise to the Kenites, and gave them the City of Palms.



God now decided to fulfill Moses' promise by giving the Kenites, the descendants of Jethro and Hobab, the City of Palms. Located amid the ruins of Jericho, this was a precious oasis of springs and palm trees.

Now it was time for Judah to help Simeon get rid of the Canaanites living in its allotted territory. Together, they attacked the city of Zephath, utterly destroying it. Its name was then changed to Hormah.

Next, they attacked and defeated the Philistine kingdoms of Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron and all their territories, situated along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Clearly, God was with Judah and Simeon.

However, though they did remove the enemy in the mountains, they failed to fully get rid of the Canaanites in the lowlands.

Unfortunately, they fell back on excuses: "They have better weapons than we do—many chariots of iron pulled by war horses! Our swords and shields are no match for them. And we are not allowed to have many horses." Long ago, God had forbidden Israel to multiply for themselves horses of war (Deuteronomy 17:16). The Eternal wanted His people to completely rely upon Him for victory against their foes—not on physical weapons.

Yet, despite all the successes the Eternal had blessed them with, the carnal-minded Israelites still could not find it within themselves to fully trust their God. Instead, they allowed fear and human reasoning to get in the way and guide their thinking. Being physical-minded, they put their trust in what they could see instead of in the one true God whom they could not see (Judges 1:16-19).

Conquering Bethel

Now it was the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh's turn to fully remove the Canaanites from their lands. Guided by God, they decided to attack the city of Beth (formerly known as Luz). This was the place where, many years earlier, God spoke to Jacob in a dream, promising to give him and his descendants the land of Canaan. Jacob had changed Luz's name to Bethel, which means "House of God" (Genesis 28:10-19).

A scouting party, sent by Ephraim and Manasseh to spy on Bethel to study its strengths and weaknesses, spotted a man and his family sneaking out from the city's walls.

The leader of the scouting party said, "That man must have come out of the city from a secret entrance. If he shows us where it is, our troops can sneak into Bethel and attack it from within."

Surrounding the man and his family, the Israelites said, "Show us

how you got out of the city, and we will have mercy on you.”

The man took note of his captors’ sharp swords and determined faces. Fearing for the safety of his family, the man did not hesitate to agree.

With the man’s help, the Israelites captured Bethel.

The Israelite scouting party kept their word and let the man go. He moved his family to the land of the Hittites and built a city, calling it Luz (Judges 1:22-26).

Failure After So Many Victories

Like Judah, Simeon and Benjamin, Ephraim and Manasseh failed to completely remove all the Canaanites from their territories. The tribes of Asher, Naphtali and Zebulun failed, too.

In fact, Manasseh and Zebulun compromised; they put the Canaanites under forced labor: “If we can’t get rid of these Canaanites, we’ll make them our slaves.”

But this did not remove the problem—it only created more problems, such as making their enemies even more hostile and deeply bitter. Future generations of Israelites would suffer from this built-up hatred. This was one of the reasons why God wanted the Canaanites utterly destroyed—only then could His people live in lasting peace throughout the land (Judges 1:27-33).

Dan, the smallest of the Israelite tribes, lacked enough faith to claim God’s promise to help them totally defeat all their enemies. In fact, the Amorites forced the Danites to flee up into the mountains, cutting them off from the rich farmlands down in the valley.

Ephraim and Manasseh came to Dan’s aid, but in the end, they only managed to force the Amorites into hard labor (verses 34-35).

Although the Israelites may have had good intentions, they were still carnal-minded. Only a handful of special men and women were blessed to have God’s Holy Spirit working within their minds. The vast majority of the people did not have this special power from God—and without it, it was impossible to fully trust God and defeat all their enemies.

Israel’s Cycle of Rebellion

Eventually, the generation of Israelites who were born during Israel’s march in the wilderness and were delivered into the Promised Land had all died.

A new generation arose who did not remember all the signs and wonders of God (the pillars of cloud and fire, the parting of the Jordan

River, God making the sun stand still, and so forth). Perhaps their parents had failed to teach and remind them of all that the Eternal had done for His people. Whatever the case, this new generation of Israelites did not appreciate God, nor did they fear and respect His great power. As a result, they did not obey Him.

Because Israel's former generation foolishly allowed the Canaanites and other pagan nations to live among them, their children, now adults, desired to serve the false gods of the land. The world still worships them to this day—they are the gods of Christmas, Easter, Halloween and other pagan holidays, which the one true God hates.

Deceived by Satan the devil, the Israelites allowed their minds to be swayed by the tinsel and glitter of ancient pagan religions, which had been invented centuries earlier by Nimrod, soon after the Great Flood.

Israel wanted to serve and worship these false gods; the people made excuses, saying, "We need to be more open-minded, and worship the gods of the people around us." They wanted to be just like all the other people in the world.

This made God angry. After all He had done for them, God was so easily forgotten by His people.

To teach them a lesson, and to bring them to repent and cry out to Him, God sold Israel into their enemy's hands. Whenever Israel tried to fight against them, God would not give His people the victory—in fact, He fought against them! Soon, their enemies began to get the upper hand over the Israelites, taking back towns, villages and farmlands. Israel was under great distress (Judges 2:10-15).

But God did not completely abandon Israel. He truly did want His people to repent so that they would keep His laws and taste success. So God raised up special servants called judges, or deliverers. God, the ultimate Judge and Deliverer, used these human judges to deliver His people from constant persecution and the oppressive hand of their enemies.

But Israel would not listen to God's judges—at least not for very long. The Israelites entered into a miserable cycle of (1) rebelling against God, (2) suffering by the hand of the Canaanites as God used them as His tool of punishment, (3) crying out to God and repenting, (4) being rescued by God, (5) obeying Him, and then (6) rebelling against God all over again. The cycle went this way for many generations.

Israel's problem was that the people would not cease from doing whatever they wanted to do. Like Adam and Eve, they wanted to judge for themselves right from wrong. But only God can do this. Stiff-necked Israel stubbornly refused to obey their Creator (verses 16-19).

God's anger grew to be so hot, He decided to no longer drive the Canaanites out of the Land of Promise. Instead, He decided to use them to test His people, to see whether Israel would seek Him and strive to keep His commandments and ways (verses 20-23).

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

EHUD AND THE KING OF MOAB

This new generation of Israel was spoiled and rebellious. They had forgotten all that God had done for them. So God decided to teach His people about the harsh realities of war. He did this to put them in dire situations from the constant attacks of their enemies. This would bring Israel to cry out to God and seek His help. God used war to maintain Israel's military readiness and to test them to see if they would obey His voice and keep His commandments (Judges 3:1-4).

To carry out His plan, God used the five overlords of the Philistines, as well as all the Canaanites, Sidonians and Hivites who lived in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-Hermon to Hamath.

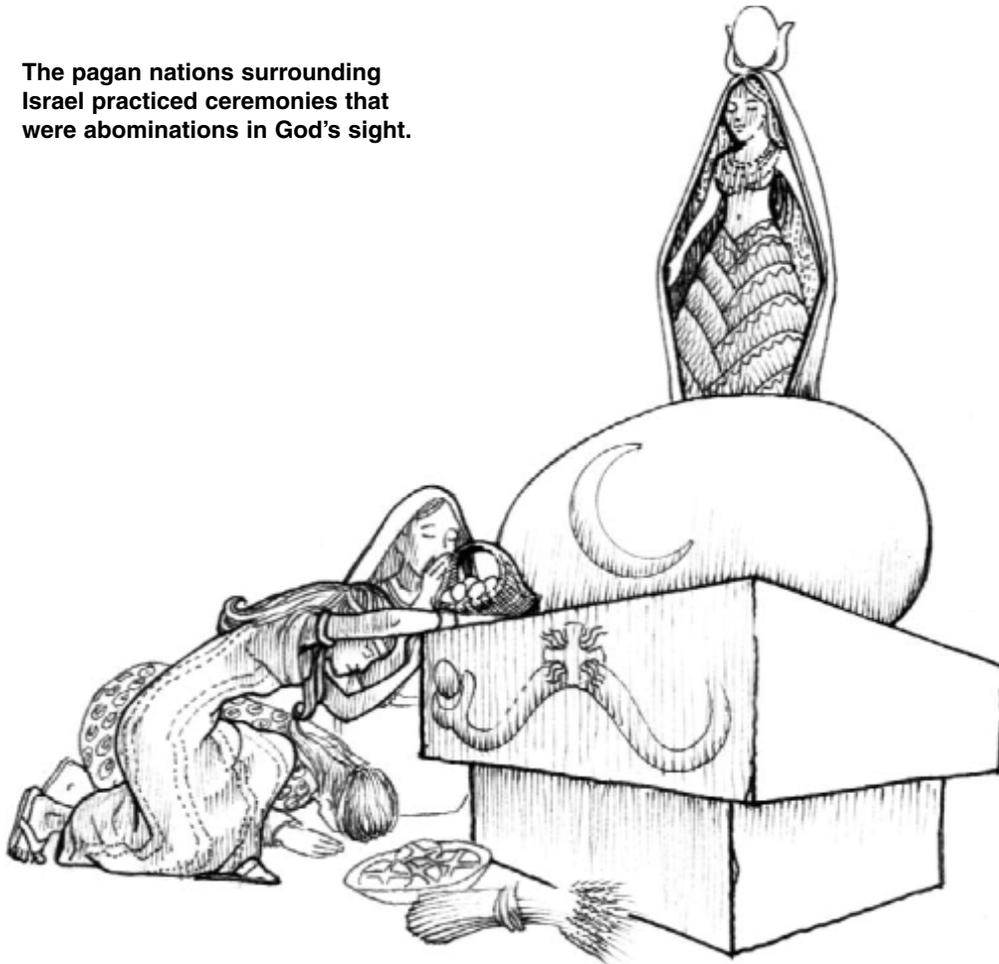
The Philistines are enemies of Israel even to this day. They are regularly mentioned in world news reports on television, radio and in newspapers. They are now known as the Palestinians.

Israel's First Judge

Since Israel decided to ignore God's command to utterly destroy all their enemies, the Israelites compromised with them instead. They intermarried with pagan races, many times in order to make peace treaties and political alliances. This led Israel to accept the customs, practices and beliefs of the land—including serving foreign gods, such as Molech (whom the people of Ammon worshipped by sometimes offering their children as human sacrifices). Israel began to put their trust in other nations and in the false gods they served. And so, the Israelites rejected their God, the One who had freed them from slavery and brought them out of Egypt.

Hot with anger, God sold His rebellious people into the ruthless hands of Chusan-Rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia. His kingdom was outside of Canaan, far to the east in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The army of the king of Mesopotamia invaded the Promised Land and overran the Israelites, forcing the people to pay

The pagan nations surrounding Israel practiced ceremonies that were abominations in God's sight.



heavy tribute of precious jewels and metals. For eight years, the Israelites suffered under his oppressive rule.

Finally, like they had done back in the days of Egypt, they cried out to the Eternal God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They thought back to their childhood and remembered the stories their parents and grandparents used to tell them—of all God's awesome signs and marvelous wonders, and how He had enabled Israel, a former nation of slaves, to conquer hordes of Canaanite nations. So the people cried out to God—especially when they realized that their adopted false gods could do nothing to save them.

Though He did not have to, God had mercy on Israel. He deeply cared about and cherished them. He wanted them to fully experience the happiness, peace and prosperity that come from obeying Him. Responding to their constant, heartfelt pleas for help, God raised up a judge to deliver the Israelites from their plight.

From the tribe of Judah, He chose Othniel, nephew and son-in-law of Caleb. With God's Spirit leading him, Othniel gathered men coura-

geous enough to follow him into battle. He led his army up against the king of Mesopotamia and his forces, defeating them.

All the Israelites shouted for joy and praised God for the victory. They gladly followed Othniel's leadership for the next 40 years.

Because Othniel was a righteous man, he set the right example throughout his life. As a result, the people obeyed God, leading to 40 years of peace, without fear of oppression from outsiders (Judges 3:5-11).

Delivering a Message From God

After Othniel's death, a new generation of Israelites arose. They forgot about the one true God and ran after the false gods of the land. They did not learn from the mistakes of the previous generation.

When He saw that His people were giving themselves over to wickedness, God decided to teach Israel a sore lesson. He used Eglon, king of Moab, to unite the armies of the Ammonites and the Amalekites under his leadership.

"Together, we shall overrun these Hebrews," Eglon boasted. "We shall make them bow down to us and be our slaves."

The newly-formed Moabite alliance attacked the Israelites, oppressing God's people, making their lives bitter and miserable. They even took the City of Palms away from the Kenites (Judges 3:12-13).

For 18 long years, the Israelites lived under King Eglon's frequent oppression.

Once again, Israel remembered their God and cried out to Him. Wanting to show them mercy, the Eternal answered their desperate pleas by raising another deliverer. His name was Ehud, from the tribe of Benjamin.

Inspired by God, Ehud came up with a plan. He knew that Eglon expected the Israelites to regularly pay him a tribute of riches. According to ancient customs, this involved a flashy ceremony, in which a parade of Israelites would present their gift to the king.

Ehud put his plan into action: He joined the parade, which was held at Eglon's royal palace, and masqueraded as one of the presenters of the king's tribute. During the ceremony, Ehud took note of how many guards were on watch and memorized the layout of the palace.

Eglon took great delight by this spectacle—especially when he received the tribute present. He boasted to his servants and men of war about his power. "These Israelites know how to put on a good show. Perhaps that's all they're really good for," he laughed. His men

laughed with him. The king was so fat that when he laughed, his body shook like gelatin.

When the ceremony presenters departed for home, Ehud went with them, but he only went as far as the quarries at Gilgal. Then he slipped back to Eglon's palace.

Coming to the front gate, he said to the guards, "I have a message for the king."

The guards stared at him, then sneered, "Tell us the message. The king is too busy to be bothered by a Hebrew dog."

"This message is special—it is from God. Only the king has the privilege to hear it."

Reluctantly, the guards escorted Ehud to the king's private chambers.

Surrounded by servants and aides, Eglon spotted his guards escorting Ehud into the room, and said, "What is this thing you bring before me?"

The guards said, "He claims to have a message from God."

Ehud stepped forward. "That is correct, my lord. God has given me a special message for you."

Eglon leaned forward in his chair. "Well, then, speak."

"This message is for your ears only, my lord. Only you are worthy enough to hear it."

The king saw that Ehud was not carrying a sword, but had his guards search him anyway. Assuming that Ehud was right-handed like most people, the guards only searched the left side of his body. Most people were (and still are today) right-handed. This meant that most people who carried swords and knives had them strapped to the left side of their bodies, along the torso or left hip. This was so they could reach for their weapon in one swift motion.

But Ehud was left-handed! So he was used to carrying his weapon on the right side of his body. Knowing that he would be searched, Ehud did not carry a sword; he had an 18-inch, double-edged dagger strapped to his right thigh and hidden under his clothing. The king's guards did not find Ehud's weapon.

Satisfied that Ehud did not pose a threat to him, Eglon dismissed his guards and servants.

When they had left the room, the king said to Ehud, "Alright then, we are alone. This better be good. What is this special message of God?"

Ehud approached the king and said, "Here is God's message." He then reached into his robes with his left hand.

Eglon thought, "Perhaps this is another gift."

But he was sorely wrong! Ehud drew out his 18-inch dagger and thrust it into the king's huge belly. It went in so deep that even the handle sank into Eglon's fat, gelatin-like body. Ehud left the dagger inside the wicked king, who died in horrible pain.

Not wanting to get caught by the king's men, Ehud locked the doors to Eglon's private chambers, and then escaped outside from the porch.

Some time after Ehud had escaped, the king's servants came to Eglon's private chambers to attend to their master. They were somewhat surprised that the doors were locked from the inside.

Ehud delivered a deadly message to Eglon.



One said, “Perhaps he is busy relieving himself.”

“Yes,” another agreed. “We better not disturb him.”

So they waited. And waited. And waited some more. The servants all waited a long time outside the king’s private chambers before they mustered up enough courage to check on their master.

Nervously, one of the servants used a key to unlock the doors, then peeked inside and saw Eglon’s lifeless body lying on the floor (Judges 3:14-25).

“Guards!” he screamed. “Guards, come at once! Someone has killed our king!”

Rallying the Troops

Ehud had made his escape over the Jordan River and headed for Seirah, which was up in the mountains of Ephraim. There, he took a trumpet and sounded the alarm to assemble. All the Israelites who heard the trumpet blasts came down from the mountains and assembled before Ehud.

Everyone in the throngs of people was curious and asked questions of each other.

“What is this about? Why has this man called for us to assemble? What’s the emergency?”

Standing before them, Ehud addressed his restless audience: “The king of Moab is dead. God has delivered him into my hands. Now follow me into battle, and the Eternal will deliver your enemies into your hands!”

The news of wicked Eglon’s death caused the Israelites to cheer, and praise God. They readily banded together into one fighting force, united under Ehud’s command.

Ehud led his troops down to the fords of the Jordan River, seizing control of the area. They then set up a defense barrier so that the Moabites could not cross over the river. When the enemies tried to do just that, Ehud and his soldiers slew 10,000 of them—not one escaped from the Israelites’ hands.

This was a great victory for Israel, for God had rescued them from this tyranny and oppression. And, following Ehud’s righteous leadership and example, Israel went back to serving God. For the next 80 years, the Eternal gave His people peace and security (Judges 3:26-30).

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

DEBORAH AND BARAK

After Ehud died, God raised up another deliverer, over at the western end of the Promised Land. His name was Shamgar. He fought against the five overlords of the Philistines, killing 600 of their men with an ox goad, a simple farming instrument. It was a long pole, about eight to ten feet in length and about six inches around. It had a metal tip at one end, used to prod or turn oxen; at the other end was a flat curved blade, used for cleaning plows (Judges 3:31).

A new generation of Israelites arose after Ehud's death. They had forgotten this judge's right example. Israel soon drifted back to worshipping gods that did not exist. They also intermarried with God-hating pagan nations, whom the Eternal had long ago commanded Israel to utterly destroy.

God once again found that He had to teach His people to fear and obey Him, which was the only way they could taste true success. So God decided to use Jabin, king of Canaan, as His tool of Israel's punishment.

Jabin, who reigned from the city of Hazor, sent 900 deadly iron-wheeled chariots along with a massive army to descend upon the Israelites. Panic and terror seized the land. For the next 20 years, King Jabin, with Sisera as his army commander, maintained brutal control over the lives of the Israelites (Judges 4:1-3).

God Uses Deborah and Barak

Living under Jabin's brutal whims and dictates caused the Israelites to realize that their help would not come from their false gods. The people grew restless. They needed relief from the constant pressure of fear and persecution.

The people came to realize that there was someone who could rescue them. They began to whisper among themselves, "Only the God of our fathers can give us rest from our enemies."

So the people turned to a God-fearing woman named Deborah, a prophetess and judge whom God sometimes spoke to in order to reveal His will.

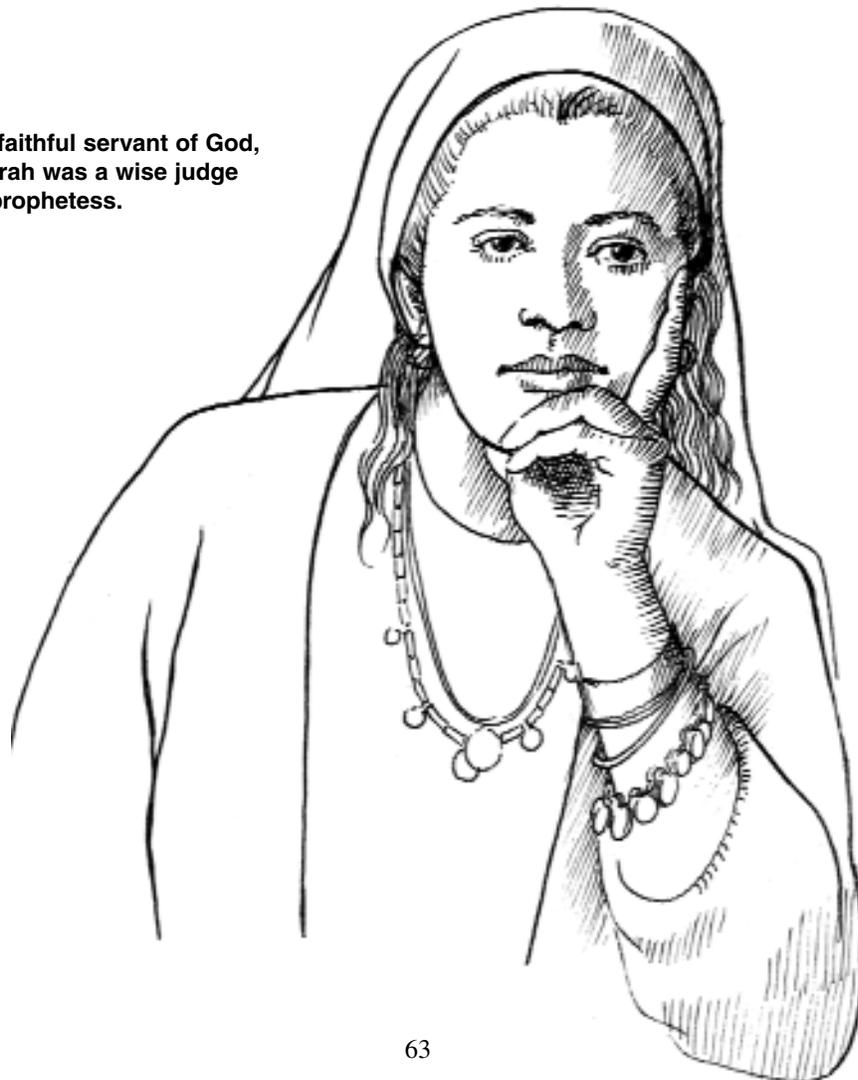
The Israelites visited Deborah in the mountains of Ephraim, between Ramah and Bethel, so that she might pray to God on their behalf.

Once again, God took pity on them. He said to Deborah, “Send for Barak, son of Abinoam. I have a special mission for him.”

Deborah sent messengers to Kedesh, which was in the allotted territory of Naphtali, to send for Barak.

When he came before her, she said, “Listen to the words of the Eternal God of Israel: ‘Go gather 10,000 warriors from the tribe of Naphtali and Zebulun, and get ready to do battle at Mount Tabor. I shall bring Sisera, commander of Jabin’s army, against you. I shall bring you victory over his chariots of iron and his fighting force, and I will deliver Sisera into your hands at the River Kishon.’”

**As a faithful servant of God,
Deborah was a wise judge
and prophetess.**



When Deborah had finished delivering God's message, she expected Barak to rush out to do God's will. But Barak was afraid. He did not trust God enough to believe that the Eternal would deliver him from Jabin's ruthless warriors.

He said to Deborah, "I will go...but only if you will go with me. I know that God listens to you. If you won't go, then I will not go either."

Unfortunately, Barak was suffering from spiritual short-sightedness. He could not see the "big picture" of God's Master Plan and how he fit into it. Barak was more afraid of the physical enemy he could see than the invisible God, whom he could not see.

Deborah was taken aback by Barak's demand. She said, "Very well, I will go with you. But mark this: You should have put your faith in God, not in me, His servant, nor in any other human being. You should be grateful that God has decided to still use you. Yet, because you have let your fear get the best of you, Sisera's life will be taken by the hand of a woman. She will get the glory—not you!"

Barak lowered his head in shame. He realized that he had just made a big mistake (Judges 4:4-9).

Spies Alert Sisera

Deborah accompanied Barak to Kedesh, where he assembled 10,000 soldiers from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. These fighting men were ready to clash swords and follow God's lead into battle.

Living near Kedesh, at Zaanaim, was a man named Heber, a Kenite. Heber had separated from his fellow Kenites, who were friends of the Israelites, and he and his family became friendly with King Jabin.

From a hiding place, Heber and a servant spied on the events taking place in nearby Kedesh—the movement of troops, supplies and weapons. Taking note of the 10,000-man army that Barak was assembling, Heber said to his servant, "Israel must be planning to launch an attack against Jabin."

He sent messengers to report this to Sisera, the king's general, who was alarmed by the news.

"What? These Israelites actually think they can defeat my forces? What folly! We'll trample them down like mud!" Sisera quickly gathered all of his troops, plus his 900 chariots and horses of war, and marched up to Mount Tabor.

Everything was proceeding according to God's plan.

Sisera Tries to Hide

After God revealed to Deborah that Sisera's army was on the way, she told Barak, "The day of victory is at hand. Sisera and his troops are on the march. God will give you success over Israel's enemies!"

Greatly encouraged, Barak led his men to march down from Mount Tabor to meet Sisera's troops at the River Kishon.

Soon, the opposing forces faced each other on the battlefield. Sisera gave the command to charge, and his men, hungry to shed blood, wholeheartedly obeyed. The pagan warriors shouted heart-grIPPING screams as they charged forward toward the Israelites.

Though they did not see Him, God intervened. He caused Sisera's deadly iron-wheeled chariots to break down and fly apart. Their drivers were thrown out into the battlefield, only to be trampled to death by their horses, which tripped over and collided into each other.

Witnessing the confusion and disorder before them, Sisera's foot soldiers panicked, and then fled for their lives. Barak and his men chased after them, hunting them down even back to their home base at Harosheth Hagoyim. By the time the battle was finished, all of Sisera's warriors were utterly destroyed—not one man was left alive.

But Sisera managed to slip away from the chaos of the battlefield. Looking for a place to hide, he headed for the tent of Heber the Kenite. Heber was away, but his wife Jael was at home.

"Quick, hide me. The people of Israel are looking for me—they could be here any moment!"

Jael offered to hide Sisera in her tent. In ancient times, men were not permitted to intrude into the tents of women. Sisera accepted her offer and hid there.

As she covered him with a blanket, he asked for a little water to quench his thirst. He was exhausted from having to run for his life. Wanting him to relax and feel at ease, Jael opened a jug of fresh milk and gave him a drink.

Then Sisera said to her, "Stand guard at the tent's entrance while I rest. If anyone comes and asks if a man is in your tent, tell them 'no.'"

Jael nodded obediently, saying, "Do not worry. You are safe here." She then stood outside the tent and waited for her guest to fall fast asleep.

When she finally heard his soft snoring coming from beneath his blanket, Jael sneaked back into the tent and tip-toed over to him. Then, taking a hammer, she hammered a long tent rail into the side of Sisera's skull, taking his life!

Meanwhile, Barak and his men were hot on Sisera's trail, which led to Heber's encampment of tents. There, Barak was met by Jael.

"We're looking for Sisera, the commander of King Jabin's army. His trail ends here—where is he?"

Calmly, Jael led Barak to her tent, explaining to him what she had just done. Upon seeing Sisera's lifeless body, Barak understood that God had kept His word—Sisera's life had been taken by the hand of a woman (Judges 4:14-22).

**While Sisera slept, Jael
drove a tent spike
through his head.**



The Midianites Take Revenge

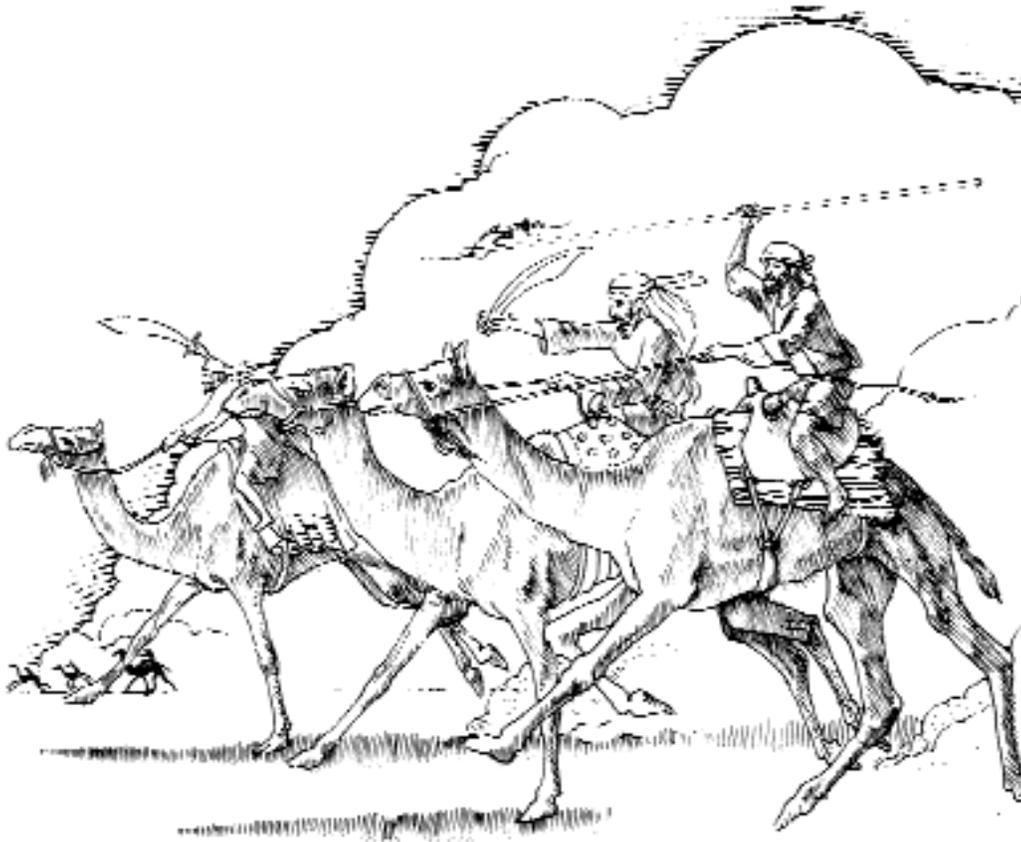
Learning of the destruction of Sisera and his army, King Jabin knew that his days were numbered.

The Israelites rallied around Barak's spectacular victory, becoming stronger and more united under God. They soon came to utterly destroy Jabin and his kingdom (Judges 4:23-24).

To thank God for freeing Israel from Jabin's tyrannical rule, Deborah and Barak, inspired by the Holy Spirit, sang a triumph song of thanks and praise (Judges 5).

For the next 40 years, the Israelites experienced peace in the land.

A new generation of Israel arose after Deborah and Barak had died—an ungrateful generation who forgot about their righteous examples and what God had done for His people. This new generation turned their backs on God, rejecting Him to serve false gods and their carved images. Once again, carnal-minded Israel sold out God's laws to follow after the wicked practices, customs and traditions of the pagans.



To restore Israel back to worshipping Him and to keep them from destroying themselves, God knew He had to punish His people again. This time, He used the Midianites, who resided at the eastern borders of the Dead Sea. Their capital was Arnon.

Back in the time of Moses, the Midianites, along with Balaam the false prophet, conspired with King Balak of Moab in trying to destroy Israel. Since God did not allow Balaam to curse His people, Balaam convinced the Midianites to use their women to charm and seduce the men of Israel. Soon, the Israelites engaged in sinful relationships with these foreign women—they even bowed down to their false gods!

This aroused God's wrath. He sent a plague among the Israelites, taking the lives of many.

Once the sin was removed, God commanded Israel to take revenge on the Midianites by utterly destroying them all, except for little girls and women who had never been in marriage-like relations with other men. Israel did as they were commanded, slaying the Midianites—including all five of their kings, plus Balaam—and taking for themselves the treasures and spoils of war. They also burned down all of their cities and strongholds.

For many generations, the Midianites sought revenge.

With God using them as His tool of punishment, the Midianites overran the people of Israel, afflicting the Israelites more than any other enemy thus far. Time grew so dark for Israel that many of the people hid in caves and dens up in the mountains and were forced to live like wild beasts, for they were no longer safe living in the lush, fertile plains and valleys down below. And the Midianites hunted them down, making their lives more miserable than ever before.

Israel's suffering under the Midianites' constant persecution caught the attention of wandering hordes of pagan peoples, such as the Amalekites and the descendants of Ishmael. Like vultures hungering to feast on the dying and weak, they took advantage of Israel's plight. They joined the Midianites in regularly invading the Promised Land, from the Jordan River in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. They would encamp in the plains and await the harvest. Each year, as the Israelites struggled to gather enough fruits, vegetables and grains to last them through winter, the Midianites and their allies would swoop into the fields like locusts, taking whatever they could carry—food, sheep, oxen, donkeys—virtually everything.

Lacking enough food, living in caves like wild animals, and not being able to enjoy the Promised Land in peace and security, Israel was at its worst point yet (Judges 6:1-6).

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

GOD CALLS GIDEON

For seven years, God allowed Israel to suffer under the brutal hand of the Midianites and their allies of wandering nations.

The stiff-necked, carnal-minded Israelites came to remember and appreciate the peace, security and success they had once enjoyed. Their hollow lives caused them to remember the wonderful benefits of serving the Eternal God. So the people began to cry out to Him.

God loved and cherished His people. He deeply wanted the very best for them. When they rejected Him, choosing to follow ways that only bring misery, suffering and death, God knew that He had to set their paths straight. This is why He punished them.

Sometimes, God allows bad things to happen to His people today. He does this in order to get their attention—to wake them up from drifting into pursuing the distractions of man’s world. Trials help Christians to focus on the Eternal and His soon-coming kingdom.

Responding to the pleas of the people, God raised up a prophet (the Bible does not reveal the man’s name). He sent His prophet to go up to the caves and dens where they hid.

The people assembled before this man, wondering if God would use him to answer their prayers. They all leaned forward to listen to the prophet’s words.

The man said, “Thus says the Eternal God: ‘I brought you out of Egypt, freeing you from slavery. I delivered you from Pharaoh’s cruel and unjust hand and from all who ruthlessly oppressed you. I drove out your enemies from before you and gave you their land—with towns, villages, cities and farmlands waiting for you to occupy. I warned you that I am the one true God—that you must not fear the gods of the Canaanites, the idols of this land. You were to fear and obey Me only. But you refused. You did not fear Me and you did not listen to My voice.’”

The prophet said nothing more, but departed. His message caused the bewildered Israelites to think about their rebellious behavior and

attitudes. They began to appreciate the previous 40 years of peace that God had blessed them with.

Many of the Israelites then began to wonder, “Will God forgive us for our sins? Will He send another deliverer, as He did in the past?” All of Israel waited for God to reveal what He would do next (Judges 6:7-10).

A Message From the Eternal

In the village of Ophrah, in the territory of Manasseh, there was a man named Gideon, who was threshing wheat in a winepress. Normally, this was done by using cattle to tread wheat on a threshing floor. But Gideon did so with a winepress because he feared the Midianites. He knew that they might swoop in at any moment and take away his wheat. Gideon and his family desperately needed this crop, for there was very little wheat left to harvest.

Gideon worked behind a tree so that he could not be seen. As he raced to get the wheat ready so that he could then hide it from the Midianites, he did not notice that a stranger had come and sat beneath the tree. The stranger appeared to be a handsome, strong-looking man who wore fine clothing, clean and crisp. He definitely did not look like he had been living in a dirty cave.

The stranger said to him, “The Eternal is with you, Gideon, you mighty man of valor!”

Gideon was surprised by the man’s presence and speech. Taking note of the high quality and boldness of the stranger’s appearance, Gideon wondered if he was in the presence of someone very important.

He said to him, “My lord, if the Eternal is with us, then why are we cowering in caves like wild animals? Why do we flee at the first sight of Midianite troops? Where are all of God’s miracles, which our fathers told us about—how God brought us out of Egypt and freed us from the bonds of slavery? The Eternal has forsaken us; He has delivered my people into the hands of the Midianites.”

Gideon had grown tired of living in daily fear, feeling helpless and without hope.

The stranger boldly said, “The Eternal is with you. Go in His might and you shall deliver Israel from the Midianites! Have I not sent you?”

Gideon suddenly realized that he was speaking with the Messenger of the Eternal. This Messenger was the One who would later be known as Jesus Christ.

Gideon said to Him, “But how can I deliver Israel? My family is

the least in the tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's household. There's nothing special about me."

Unlike most people, Gideon did not think that he was better than others. This meant that he had the right kind of attitude, the kind that God looks for when choosing His leaders. God rejects those who think they are greater than others—He knows that such vain people will not fear and obey Him.

The tribes of Israel were divided into clans and families of tens, fifties, hundreds and thousands. Gideon's clan, the Abiezrites, was the smallest in Manasseh, which is why Gideon did not think he was great or special.

The Messenger of the Eternal said, "I will be with you, Gideon. I shall enable you to conquer the Midianites as though they were only one man" (Judges 6:11-19).

Like Moses before him, Gideon needed to be reassured that God would truly work through him. Gideon could not yet bring himself to believe that God would choose to use someone like him to deliver Israel. So Gideon asked for a sign.

"Please stay here where you are. I will be right back and bring You an offering."

The Messenger graciously agreed, knowing that men need His help to walk by faith and not by sight (II Corinthians 5:7).

Gideon raced to gather the best that he had. He prepared a young goat, then baked unleavened bread and put broth in a pot. He presented this offering before the Messenger of the Eternal.

The Messenger said, "Put it on this rock and pour the broth."

Gideon obeyed.

When the Messenger of the Eternal took His staff and touched the offering, fire shot out from the rock, totally consuming the offering!

Gideon stood in awe, amazed by this miracle. It showed that God had accepted His offering. Gideon turned to speak with the Messenger of the Eternal, but He had disappeared.

Suddenly realizing that this was truly God's Messenger, Gideon was struck with fear. "Have mercy on me, great God," he prayed, "for I have seen Your Spokesman face to face."

Gideon was afraid that he did not pay God's Messenger proper respect. He also knew that he was unworthy to be in God's divine presence—and that the natural, full brightness of God could have easily destroyed him!

As he worried, the voice of God spoke to him: "Peace be with you, Gideon. Do not fear. You shall not die."

Thankful and filled with awe, godly fear and respect, Gideon built

an altar to God. He called it “The-Eternal-Is-Peace.” In the wonderful world tomorrow, all people will learn that living God’s ways always brings peace (Judges 6:20-24).

“Let Baal Contend”

That very night, God spoke to Gideon again. He said, “Take ten of your trusted servants and take your father’s seven-year-old bull with you. Destroy the altar of Baal, which belongs to your father, and chop down the carved image of wood next to it. Cut up the wood and build an altar for Me on the summit of this stronghold. Then use the wood to burn the bull upon My altar.”

Gideon obeyed even though he knew that it would be dangerous for him if he was caught, because his family and the people of Ophrah still put their trust in pagan gods. He decided to carry out God’s instructions at night so that he would not be seen. Then he took ten of his family’s most trusted servants and did as the Eternal had commanded.

The next morning, the people of the village were horrified to see what had been done to Baal’s altar. They also noticed that the wooden image of the Canaanite goddess Asherah, which stood next to the altar, was missing. The townspeople were shocked and angered.

“Who did this evil deed? Who would be wicked enough to disrespect the holy things of Baal and Asherah?”

They inquired throughout the town to discover the identity of the guilty person. Since Gideon did not join them in their worship of idols and false gods, the people of Ophrah came to suspect him.

Convinced, they confronted Joash, Gideon’s father: “Bring us your son Gideon. He is a troublemaker. We know what he did to Baal’s altar—he must die for his crime.”

Amazingly, the townspeople were willing to execute one of their own citizens for disrespecting Baal—but they were not willing to execute those who disrespected the one true God through idolatry!

Joash, who loved his son very much, stood up for him. (Loving parents protect their children. And often, parents give them orders that are for their own protection.)

Joash said to his son’s accuser, “Will you fight Baal’s battles for him? If Baal is a god, then let him fight for himself.”

The accusers paused, exchanging nervous and embarrassed looks with one another. If they insisted on executing Gideon, it would appear that their pagan god was too weak to deal with a physical man. So they backed away from their accusations and let Gideon be.

From then on the people of Ophrah called him “Jerubbaal,” which means “Let Baal contend.” For everyone said, “Let Baal contend with Gideon for tearing down the altar. Baal shall deal with this criminal” (Judges 6:25-32).

The Midianite Threat

News of Gideon’s so-called crime traveled far and wide, even reaching the ears of the Midianites, Amalekites and the other desert wanderers. And they did not like what they heard. The leaders of these pagan hordes met together to discuss the situation.

One ruler stood up before his peers and said, “This looks like the first sign of a rebellion. If so, we must act now and stamp out the rebellion before it grows.”

The other leaders agreed. Quickly, the Midianites and their allies assembled their combined troops and went on the march. After crossing the Jordan River, they stopped at the Valley of Jezreel and set up camp. Extending for about ten miles, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, the Valley of Jezreel and the connecting Valley of Megiddo have been used throughout history as infamous battlefields.

Hearing about the approaching threat, Gideon asked God to show him what to do.

CHAPTER SIXTY

GIDEON'S THREE HUNDRED WARRIORS

God sent the power of His Spirit to give Gideon the courage and boldness to meet the enemy head-on. Wasting no time, Gideon blew the trumpet alarm, calling for his clan, the Abiezrites, to assemble.

Once they had gathered before him, Gideon addressed them with a rousing speech: “For seven years, we have cowered under the threat of the Midianites and their ruthless allies. They have preyed upon our people like locusts. The time has come for our oppression to end.”

“But how?” someone shouted.

“By turning back to God—by fearing and obeying Him, and putting the Eternal first in our lives, as our fathers did in the past. God is the reason why Israel had so much success over their enemies, years ago. God will fight for us again, IF we put Him first. But if you continue to bow down to Baal, Israel is doomed. Baal cannot save us. Neither can the other false gods of the land. But the Eternal can!”

With one voice, the Abiezrites agreed to follow Gideon into battle.

Then Gideon sent messengers throughout Manasseh and the neighboring tribes of Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali. And these tribes responded to Gideon’s call to fight (Judges 6:33-35).

Asking for Miracles

As Gideon and his leaders examined terrain maps and discussed battle plans, men whom he had sent out to spy on the Midianites’ camp came back with their report: “The enemy has amassed an army so large, it seems like a swarm of locusts. The Midianites and their allies are spread out as far as the eye can see” (Judges 7:12).

The report shook Gideon’s faith. He began to have doubts. “Is God truly using me?” he wondered to himself. “I have never commanded an army before. And I come from the smallest clan in my tribe—surely God wants someone greater than me to deliver Israel. After all, who am I?”

At this point, Gideon did not understand that God can use anyone to lead His people—as long as that person is humble and yielded to His divine will.

When he was alone, Gideon prayed to the Eternal. “Almighty God, if You will deliver Israel through me, as You have said, then please prove this to me with a miraculous sign. I shall leave a fleece of wool on the threshing floor overnight. Tomorrow morning, if there is dew on the fleece but the ground is completely dry, then I will know that you shall use me to deliver Israel.”

God has often had to encourage His servants, who sometimes lack the faith to go forward. So the Eternal was very patient and merciful to Gideon.

The next morning, Gideon discovered that the fleece was soaked with dew—in fact, he was able to wring out an entire bowl of water from it. Yet the ground had stayed dry. God had answered Gideon’s request.

Though encouraged by this miraculous sign, Gideon’s faith still was not strong enough. So he prayed to God again: “O Eternal God,



please do not be angry with me. Just let me ask of You one more sign: I will leave the fleece on the threshing floor overnight again. When tomorrow morning comes, let the fleece be dry but the ground be wet with dew. Then I will know that You are truly using me.”

Again, God did as Gideon had requested. The next morning, Gideon anxiously awoke to find that the ground was soaked with dew while the fleece was completely dry!

Gideon was so encouraged by this second miracle that he found the faith to do what had to be done (Judges 6:36-40).

However, since God had patiently allowed Gideon to test him, God decided that it was time to test Gideon. God often tests His servants in order to discover their weaknesses and to build His holy, righteous character in them.

**Gideon was inspired
to see God answer
his prayers.**



Gideon's Three Hundred Mighty Warriors

Early the next morning, Gideon led his 32,000 troops on a march, encamping beside the spring of Harod. They were about four miles south of where the Midianites encamped, by the hill of Moreh, across from the Valley of Jezreel.

In private, God spoke to His servant, saying, "Gideon, you have too many soldiers marching with you into battle. If I were to give the Midianites into your hands now, Israel might be tempted to boast and claim that they had brought the victory by themselves. They will not look to Me as their only true Source for success. I cannot allow this. Therefore, tell your men that if any of them are afraid to go into battle, they may turn back now. In this way, their fear and insecurities will not affect the morale of the other soldiers."

Though he did not wish to see any of his troops leave, Gideon saw the wisdom in God's command. He immediately addressed his men, telling them that if they were afraid, they could freely go home. No harm would be done to them. Of the 32,000 men under his command, 22,000—more than two-thirds—departed from the camp!

Gideon shook his head. "Well," he said to one of his lieutenants, "at least 10,000 of them stayed behind."

But God had more to say to Gideon: "There are still far too many soldiers in your army. Bring your men down to the water to drink. In this way I will test them: Those who cup water with their hands, lapping the water like dogs, shall be separated from those who bowed down on the ground to drink."

Again, Gideon obeyed. He watched as the vast majority of his 10,000 troops carelessly laid aside their weapons and sat down



to drink from the spring. But only 300 men wisely kept their weapons near them as they cupped water with their hands and drank. These alert men cautiously looked around to see if the enemy might attack at any moment.

God said to Gideon, “By these 300 men will I deliver the Midianites into your hand. In this way, all will know that the victory came from Me, not from large numbers of troops.”

Though his faith was tested, Gideon obeyed God and sent the other 9,700 soldiers home, telling them that they would not be needed.

Then he and the 300 soldiers took provisions, including trumpets, torches and empty pitchers, for their march into battle.

That night, God spoke to Gideon again: “Get ready to attack, for I have delivered the Midianites into your hands. However, if you are afraid to go down and attack, then visit the camp in secret and take your servant Purah with you. There you shall hear what your enemies have to say—and their fear will strengthen you to fight.”

Gideon thought about this, and then agreed. Taking along his trusted servant Purah, the two disguised themselves in robes in hopes of blending in with the allied troops of the Midianites. Then, early in the evening, they crept into the camp.

They came to a group of enemy soldiers huddled around a roaring campfire. The men laughed and boasted of how they would destroy Gideon’s army and plunder their camp.

“After our victory, we’ll probably invade and plunder the neighboring towns and villages,” one man said. “Our saddlebags will be filled with the spoils of war.”

All of the other men laughed—all except for one man who remained silent. From the look on his face, the others could tell that something was bothering him.

“What’s wrong? Is your belly too queasy for tomorrow’s bloodbath?”

The man said, “I just had a bad dream. I know it must have some dire meaning.”

Curious, they said, “Tell us about it.”

“Very well. In my dream a loaf of barley suddenly tumbled into our camp. The loaf struck a tent, causing it to fall, overturn and then collapse. What does this mean?”

His friend said, “I know what it means: The sword of Gideon, son of Joash, leader of Israel, shall strike us down! His God has delivered Midian and the whole camp into Gideon’s hand!”

The men were no longer laughing. Reports of the dream and its meaning spread from tent to tent, striking the whole camp with fear and doubt.

In the dream, the loaf of barley symbolized Israel. Barley was considered to be an inferior grain, with only about one half the value of wheat. The Midianites and their allies considered Israel to be an inferior nation. Clearly, God inspired both the dream and its interpretation in order to strike fear in Israel's enemies.

Gideon understood this, and his faith and courage grew. He and his servant quickly returned to the Israelite camp.

Then Gideon alerted the 300 troops to battle, and shouted, "Arise! The time for victory is here! The Eternal has delivered the camp of the heathens into your hand!" (Judges 7:1-15).

Confusion in the Camp

Though he knew that God would intervene in battle and hand them the victory, Gideon realized that he had to do his part. So he applied godly wisdom and divided his warriors into three companies of 100 men. Every man took with him an empty pitcher, to be used to cover the light of his torch. Then, they quietly approached the Midianite encampment. Gideon led his company of 100 troops to the outpost of the camp. Meanwhile, the other two companies positioned themselves at opposite sides of the camp.

At the beginning of the middle watch (about 10 p.m.), Gideon gave a signal—then all 300 men blew loudly on their trumpets and broke the pitchers, which had covered the light of their torches.

The sleeping Midianites sprang up, frightened by the sound of the trumpet blasts, which they knew was the signal for war.

"We're under attack! The camp is under attack!"

Seeing their camp surrounded by torch lamps on three sides, the Midianites thought that tens of thousands of Israelite soldiers were about to swoop down upon them.

"That dream has come true!" some shouted. "Israel is about to overtake us—we're all doomed!"

Stunned and confused by the chaos of sound and lights, the Midianites scrambled for their weapons. In the darkness and confusion, the soldiers panicked, thinking that they were outnumbered. God caused each man to believe that his comrade was an Israelite. Midianite clashed swords with Midianite, while others fled for their lives. They used their swords to slash through a way of escape, killing their fellow soldiers by mistake.

The survivors headed back for the Jordan River. Encouraged by this mighty miracle of God's intervention, soldiers from the tribes of Naphtali, Asher and all of Manasseh chased after them.

Meanwhile, Gideon sent messengers to get help from the people of Ephraim, who dwelt up in the mountains. They all responded to his call, gathering together and seizing the watering places to cut off the Midianites' retreat in the Jordan Valley. The Ephraimites knew that they must keep their enemies from crossing over the Jordan River.

In their zeal, they managed to capture Oreb and Zeeb, two Midianite generals. Oreb had hidden himself in a cavern of rock, while Zeeb tried to hide in the vat of a winepress. Both generals were executed; the Ephraimites brought back their heads to Gideon as proof of their death (Judges 7:16-25).

Gideon the Diplomat

Despite the victory God had delivered to Israel, the Ephraimites were angry. Their leaders confronted Gideon, pointing their fingers, and said, "Why didn't you invite us to join you in battle from the very first? Are you trying to keep all the glory for yourself?"

Gideon could have answered sharply. His lieutenants and other soldiers certainly wanted him to. But Gideon refused to give a rash response. He decided to apply godly wisdom and use diplomacy instead.

He calmly said to them, "What have I done in battle in comparison to you? Has not God delivered Oreb and Zeeb into your hands, not mine? You have the greater glory."

The men of Ephraim appreciated Gideon's compliment and let their anger turn to joy (Judges 8:1-3).

Gideon had applied a godly principle of diplomacy found in Proverbs 15:1, which reads, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." The book of Proverbs is filled with godly wisdom, which you can apply whenever you face problems.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

REVENGE AT SUCCOTH AND PENUEL

Gideon and his 300 soldiers were in hot pursuit of the enemy, crossing the Jordan River and into the eastern territories. By the time they came to the city of Succoth, which belonged to the tribe of Gad, every man was exhausted and in need of food and rest.

They entered the town of their fellow Israelites and asked the citizens for help. “We’re tired and we need food. Please give us bread—we have been chasing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian, and their troops.”

But the elders of Succoth found Gideon’s story hard to believe.

“What? With only 300 men you are chasing after the army of Zebah and Zalmunna? You must think us fools!”

Gideon tried to use diplomacy, telling them of their recent victory over the Midianites and their allies. “God delivered 120,000 enemy soldiers into our hands,” he explained, “and He will deliver the 15,000 we are now pursuing. But first we need to refresh ourselves. Help us.”

The elders and townspeople of Succoth laughed and jeered. “How could you possibly conquer the Midianites with only 300 men? Go away from here and take your lies with you. Until you cut off Zebah and Zalmunna’s hands and show them to us as proof that you killed them, we will give you nothing!”

Unfortunately, the people of Succoth refused to believe that God could use only 300 men to wipe out the Midianites. And they were afraid that if they helped Gideon and his men, the kings of the Midianites would seek revenge.

Gideon was hot with anger! “Very well,” he said. “When God delivers the two kings into my hand, I will come back and tear your flesh with thorns and briars!”

As Gideon and his men departed, one of the elders shouted, “If you do come back, you better have more than 300 men with you!”

Everyone in Succoth laughed and hurled insults, thinking they had seen the last of Gideon (Judges 8:1-7).

Another Town Refuses to Help

Gideon and his men went to another town that was nearby, the city of Penuel, the place where Jacob had wrestled with God many centuries earlier. Like he did at Succoth, he asked the citizens of Penuel for bread. And, like Succoth, the elders and townspeople refused.

“And don’t try to take our food by force, either,” said one leader. He pointed to a tower, which was fortified with soldiers and weapons. It was the source of Penuel’s pride and military strength. “One false move and you will breathe your last breath.”

Again, Gideon tried to be diplomatic: “But we are your brother Israelites. We both share a common enemy—the Midianites.”

“We’re not worried about them. Our tower protects us. Now move along. Go away.”

Gideon was boiling mad! He was fighting for Israel’s freedom—yet his fellow Israelites would not help him.

Frustrated, he pointed to the fortified tower of Penuel and said, “When I come back, I will tear your tower to the ground!”

The elders and townspeople laughed and jeered as Gideon and his men departed. They too were confident that they had seen the last of them (Judges 8:8-9).

Return to Succoth and Penuel

Gideon’s army finally caught up with the enemy, encamped at Karkor. As the Midianites rested and felt secure, Gideon and his men swooped down upon them. With God intervening, the 300 men utterly destroyed the enemy.

The two kings tried to escape, but Gideon chased them down and caught them.

He said to his lieutenants, “Now that we have Zebah and Zalmunna, we have business to take care of in Succoth and Penuel.”

On the way back to Succoth, Gideon and his men captured a young man, whom they remembered seeing before.

“I remember his face,” said Gideon. “He was among the crowd who laughed and taunted us as we left the city.”

The young man was wide-eyed and shaking with fear.

A lieutenant said, “It doesn’t look like he’s laughing now.”

Gideon and his men grilled the man with questions about Succoth. “Write down the names of Succoth’s elders and leaders.”

The young man quickly provided Gideon with a list of 77 names.

Satisfied with the information, Gideon and his men headed for Succoth, bringing the two kings of the Midianites with them.

The elders and townspeople were stunned to see Gideon's army return. They were so sure that they would never be seen again.

Gideon had the two kings brought before the elders. He said, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, the men you ridiculed me about." The elders looked at the two kings, who were clearly frightened and humiliated.

The elders said, "But we thought—"

Gideon did not allow them to finish their words. At his signal, his men gathered all the elders and leaders of Succoth—the 77 men whose names were on the list. They dragged the men with heavy weights over thorns, which painfully tore and shredded their flesh.

After this, Gideon's army came to Penuel, killing all of its men and tearing down its tower (Judges 8:10-17).

A Vicious Rumor

Gideon came to hear a vicious rumor: While he had been away fighting the Midianites, Zebah and Zalmunna slaughtered a family of brothers living in Tabor. This was partly why Gideon so desperately wanted to capture these two ruthless men.

He asked them about the rumor: "The men you murdered at Tabor—what kind of men were they?"

The kings said, "They looked like you. Each one resembled the son of a king."

Gideon then realized the truth: "The men you butchered were my brothers!"

The two kings were speechless, shocked by the news and the boiling rage seen on Gideon's face. They had reasoned that since Gideon had captured them alive, they would be safe. But now, they knew otherwise.

Gideon said, "Had you let my brothers live, I would have let you live."

He turned to his eldest son, Jether, and said, "I give you the honor of killing these enemies of God and Israel."

But Jether, who was still a youth, was inexperienced with war and killing. He was too afraid to act.

Meanwhile, Zebah and Zalmunna did not want to die at the hands of a mere boy. For them, that would be a disgrace. They said to Gideon, "Slay us yourself! Don't send a boy to do a man's job."

Gideon did not hesitate to fulfill their request.

After he executed the two kings of the Midianites, he took from around the necks of their camels some crescent-shaped ornaments, which the pagans used to worship the moon.

Gideon did not plan to use the ornaments for idol worship. He planned to have the metal melted down to use for something else (Judges 8:18-21).

Good Intentions Gone Bad

Gideon and his 300 soldiers returned home to feasting and celebrating. The Israelites were excited and overjoyed—at last they were free from the Midianites’ constant oppression. They no longer needed to hide in caves or cower at the sight of invaders. Everyone was grateful for Gideon—in fact, they were too grateful.

A crowd of people surrounded him and shouted, “Rule over us, Gideon, and be our king! Let your son and grandson rule after you. May you and your descendants be kings over Israel, for you have delivered us from the Midianites and their allies!”

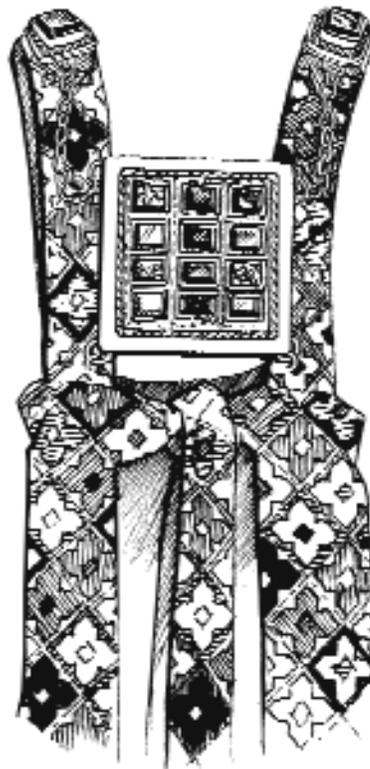
Though the people meant well, what they asked for was a sin. Only God was to be Israel’s king. But the Israelites longed to be more like the kingdoms of the world, and have a human king—one that they could see and touch.

Thankfully, Gideon had remained humble. He did not let the people’s praise and thanks go to his head. He never forgot that it was God who had given him success. He refused to take credit for God’s victories.

He addressed the growing crowd, saying, “I will not rule over you, nor will my sons after me. The Eternal God is your King. He shall reign over you. God is the One who delivered Israel, not me.”

The people were disappointed, though still cheerful about their freedom.

Then Gideon said, “But there is something you may give me: Let



each soldier give me the golden earrings taken as spoils of war from the fallen Midianite soldiers and their allies.”

The Israelites were happy to oblige. Each man threw his share of golden earrings onto a blanket. When all had been collected, Gideon’s bounty came to about 42 pounds of gold, in addition to crescent-shaped ornaments, pendants, chains and purple robes made of fine materials.

Gideon used the plunder to make an ephod (a special breastplate), and set it up at Ophrah, his home town. He meant the ephod to be a symbol of government and order (which, when God is involved, always brings peace).

However, some time later, the Israelites forgot about Gideon’s original intent and used the ephod as an idol, worshipping it. The ephod became a snare to Gideon and a troublesome thorn for his family after him (Judges 8:22-27).

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

THE FRUITS OF TREACHERY

Midian had been completely subdued; no more of their kings came to power to seek revenge. Under Gideon's 40-year leadership as judge over Israel, the people enjoyed peace and security throughout the land.

Though Gideon truly was a righteous man and faithful servant of God, he was still human. He sometimes sinned, due to human weaknesses. One of his sins was that he was married to several wives. God never intended for men to have more than one wife; He designed marriage to be between one man and one woman. God knew that this was the only way for marriages to be happy.

Because he had many wives, Gideon also had many children born to him. Among them were 70 sons. In ancient times, having so many sons was considered a sign of wealth and power.

In addition to his many wives, Gideon also had a concubine in the city of Shechem, a woman with whom he had a marriage-like relationship. This too was a sin.

Through this woman, he had a son, named Abimelech. His name meant "my father is king." (His mother may have named him this because she wanted Abimelech to seek to become a royal leader and claim the offer of kingship that his father Gideon had turned down.)

Because Abimelech was not born to one of Gideon's wives, he had no legal right to inherit his father's wealth. Legally, his brothers came first (Judges 8:28-31).

Abimelech Rises to Power

Gideon lived to an old age before he died. His body was buried in his father's tomb in Ophrah.

As before, without a strong human leader to set the right example, a new generation arose in Israel that rejected God and sought after the false Canaanite god Baal-Berith. They gave him and his carved

images credit and praise for their freedom and prosperity—which had come from the Eternal!

They also stopped being kind to Gideon’s children and grandchildren. Like rotten, spoiled brats, the Israelites felt no need to be grateful for anything (Judges 8:32-35).

Immediately after Gideon’s death, Abimelech attempted to gain power for himself. He did not trust in God to do so; he only trusted in himself.

Abimelech spoke before an assembly of his uncles (brothers of his mother) and the whole family of his mother’s father’s household. They were counted among the most important people of Shechem.

In his address, Abimelech said, “My father Gideon is dead. He was a good and kind leader. And now his 70 sons will want to reign over you—sons who came from Ophrah, not Shechem. Which is better for you?—that all 70 sons of Gideon rule over you, or shouldn’t only one rule over you, a man like myself, who is your own flesh and blood, unlike these outsiders?”

His crafty words appealed to his relatives. They understood that if they helped Abimelech rise to power, Shechem could become Israel’s new capital. And their family would become a dynasty, a royal family of lords, princes and kings.

So his uncles and other relatives presented Abimelech’s proposal to the townspeople and leaders of Shechem. The people agreed to support Abimelech, giving him 70 pieces of silver from the treasury of the temple of Baal-Berith.

Abimelech knew that he had to act fast. To get rid of potential competition for rulership over Israel, he hired lowly and down-and-out men who had nothing to lose—personal soldiers for hire. With their help, Abimelech captured 69 of his half brothers at Ophrah. Then he slaughtered them, one by one, like they were animal sacrifices (Judges 9:1-5).

Unfortunately, throughout history, people have assumed positions of power, such as kings and emperors, by murdering their entire families and other potential heirs to the throne. But such corruption will not happen when Jesus Christ sets up His throne on the earth.

Jotham’s Parable

Jotham, Gideon’s youngest son, hid himself and escaped from Abimelech’s killing spree.

Meanwhile, the townspeople and leaders gathered together at Shechem and hailed Abimelech as their new king. “And soon, you will be king over all Israel!” they cheered.

When Jotham heard what had happened, he climbed atop Mount Gerizim, which towered over Shechem. From there, he shouted down to the people.

“Listen to this parable, men of Shechem, so that God may listen to you: Trees sought to anoint a king over them. They said to an olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’ But the olive tree refused. Next, the trees said to a fig tree, ‘Come reign over us.’ But the fig tree also refused. Then said the trees asked a vine to reign over them. But the vine also refused. Then, all the trees came to a bramble and asked it to reign over them. The bramble said unto the trees, ‘If you anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow. If not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.’”

In this parable, Jotham showed that, for a long time, the Israelites desperately wanted a king ruling over them. Now they had come to accept an inferior person to be their ruler, someone who would do more harm than good.

But Jotham had more to say: “If you have made Abimelech your king with truth and sincerity, and have treated my father’s household with proper respect—for Gideon risked his life to deliver you from the Midianites—then rejoice in your new king. And let Abimelech rejoice with you.

“But if you have risen against my father’s household this day, killing all his sons born from wives, then you have made Abimelech, an illegal heir, king over Shechem. Why?—because you and he seek to gain from this treachery. If what I speak is true, let fire come from your new king and devour you men of Shechem! And let fire from you devour your new king! May you destroy each other for the evil you have done to my people!”

Abimelech and the men of Shechem were outraged. They sent soldiers to climb up the mountain and bring back Jotham. But Jotham fled before they could catch him. He came to settle in Beer, fearing that Abimelech would murder him, too (Judges 9:5-21).

The Perfect Opportunity

Abimelech reigned over Shechem and surrounding cities and regions of Israel for three years. He was an evil and selfish ruler, whom God did not place into power. Therefore, God decided to remove him and teach the Israelites a sore lesson. Since Abimelech came into power through treachery, God decided to use treachery against him.

First, He sent a spirit of ill will to cause jealousy, mistrust and hatred to come between the leaders of Shechem and their king.

(God is love. His attitudes, thoughts, desires and motives are all based on love and outgoing concern for others. God used Satan the devil—the “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2), who broadcasts bad attitudes and wrong thoughts to all humans—to create ill will.)

Though he ruled over the region from Shechem, Abimelech, accompanied by an entourage of faithful soldiers, bodyguards and servants, often traveled to Ophrah. He wanted to make certain that Gideon’s other relatives (from his father and brothers’ side of the family) did not try to seize power.

One day, after departing for Ophrah, the leaders of Shechem decided that this was the perfect opportunity to get rid of Abimelech. They posted assassins to wait in ambush against him up along the mountain pass. These cutthroats were so wicked that they robbed and plundered anyone who dared to pass through. Reports of their evil soon reached Abimelech (Judges 9:22-25).

Gaal Versus Abimelech

A man named Gaal, who was a son of Ebed, heard about the jealousy and distrust that the people of Shechem had for Abimelech. Yearning to gain power and desiring to make a name for himself, Gaal, along with his brothers, came to the city to see if he could gain the leaders’ trust.

He joined them as they celebrated their plan of setting up assassins to lie in wait for their king.

“Good riddance. I hope Abimelech never comes back.”

“I hope that he does—his head would make an excellent trophy in my home!”

Everyone laughed and drank. They were celebrating with freshly-made wine, which had just been produced from the vineyards.

Gaal said to them, “Who is this Abimelech, that he should be your king? And why should the city of Shechem serve him? Is Abimelech really of this place—is he not Gideon’s son, who came from Ophrah? Why does Abimelech spend so much time over there? Perhaps he wants to make Ophrah his new capital, replacing Shechem. And what about Zebul, Abimelech’s governor over this city—why should the good people of Shechem be loyal to Zebul when clearly he is Abimelech’s loyal servant? If only this people were under my authority! Then I would remove Abimelech and all would be right in Shechem.”

The people hooted and cheered, especially when Gaal pronounced a challenge to Abimelech: “Increase your army, Abimelech, and come

out to fight, if you dare! The city of Shechem shall serve you no more!”

Later, spies told Zebul what was said, and it angered him. He quickly sent secret messengers to tell Abimelech about how Gaal and his brothers were uniting the city against the king.

While the messenger rode away, the people of Shechem fortified the city, under the pretext that they were repairing the walls and towers. They intended to seize power the moment they saw Abimelech ride in.

Receiving Zebul’s message, Abimelech followed the governor’s plan to quietly arrive at Shechem by night. The king and his soldiers then divided into four companies and surrounded the city. This gave them a better chance of going undetected by the townspeople, and it allowed Abimelech’s forces to attack Shechem from all four sides.

Next morning, Gaal, Zebul and other men went to the city gate to see if Abimelech was on his way.

Seeing nothing but fields and a mountain landscape, Gaal said to Zebul, “I see that your master Abimelech has not taken up my challenge.”

Abimelech and his soldiers, who were lying low in ambush, moved closer to the city wall. They wanted Gaal and his men to step out from the city.

Gaal, who caught glimpses of their movement, said, “Look! People are out there, coming down from the mountains!”

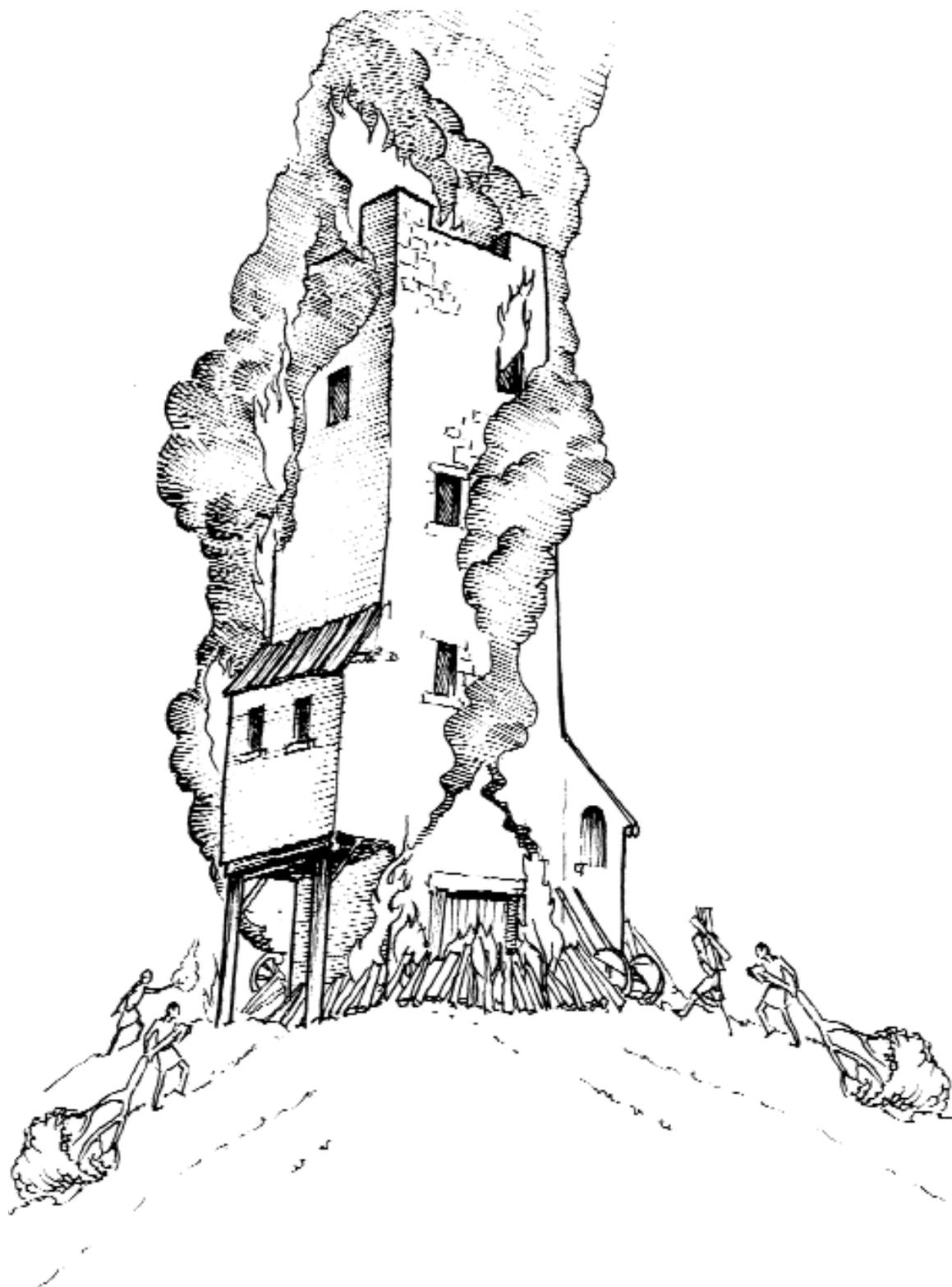
But Zebul tried to convince him otherwise. “No, what you see are the shadows of the mountain’s natural surroundings, not men.”

Then Gaal saw flashes of movement again. “No,” he said. “I know I see men coming down from the center of the land. Another company is coming from the Diviners’ Terebinth Tree.” This was a tree used in pagan worship. History shows that men have foolishly worshipped the creation (such as trees, animals, etc.), instead of the Creator God.

Zebul said, “It looks as though Abimelech has taken up your challenge after all. Well, what are you waiting for? You challenged Abimelech to a fight—where is your mouth now, Gaal? Aren’t these the men you despised and spoke against?”

Not wanting to be seen as a coward, Gaal led the men of Shechem out of the city to fight...but Abimelech’s troops cut down many of them, chasing Gaal and his brothers back into the city and wounding many others on their way back in.

Now that the city gates were shut, Abimelech decided to move his men to the town of Arumah, which was about eight miles away. There, they could rest and stock up on food and supplies.



Meanwhile, Zebul managed to drive Gaal and his brother out from Shechem. Gaal would have to look elsewhere to make a name for himself (Judges 9:26-41).

Fulfilling Jotham's Curse

The next day, the citizens of Shechem opened the city gates and went out to the fields to gather food. Spies told Abimelech about this. He divided his soldiers into three companies and quietly headed back to the city. As they drew near, the three companies lay in ambush and waited for the citizens to come back out to the field. When they did come out, two of Abimelech's divisions attacked them, slaying them where they stood.

Meanwhile, the king led the other company into the city. All throughout the rest of the day, Abimelech and his men fought against Shechem, killing everyone they could find. (The Bible does not say what happened to Zebul.)

Abimelech then destroyed Shechem and poured salt all throughout its ruins. He did this to pollute the soil and water so that no one would build another city there. Abimelech meant this as a symbol of desolation for rebelling against him.

Though the city was destroyed, its tower still stood. Inside, about 1,000 men and women hid in the stronghold of the pagan temple of Baal-Berith.

To deal with them, Abimelech led his men up Mount Zalmon, which stood next to the tower. They used axes to chop down trees. Then Abimelech said, "Do as I do."

Following his example, they used the wood to burn down the tower stronghold. Everyone inside died. Jotham's curse—that fire would come from Abimelech and destroy the men of Shechem—came true (Judges 9:42-49).

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

JEPHTHAH THE WARRIOR

As he gazed at the ruins of Shechem, one of Abimelech's scouts gave the king some bad news: "My lord, we've just received reports that a rebellion is taking place at Thebez."

Abimelech turned to face his soldiers and said, "Well, what are we waiting for? Thebez needs to be taught a lesson."

The king and his troops marched to the city of Thebez, which was about ten miles away. Just as with Shechem, the city was conquered. Those citizens who managed to survive the onslaught fled into a tower stronghold, shutting themselves in and climbing up to the top.

Abimelech and his men attacked the tower, intending to set its doors on fire. From above, the survivors of Thebez frantically fought to defend themselves from the attack. While the men rained arrows and spears upon Abimelech's men, the women dropped stones and other heavy items.

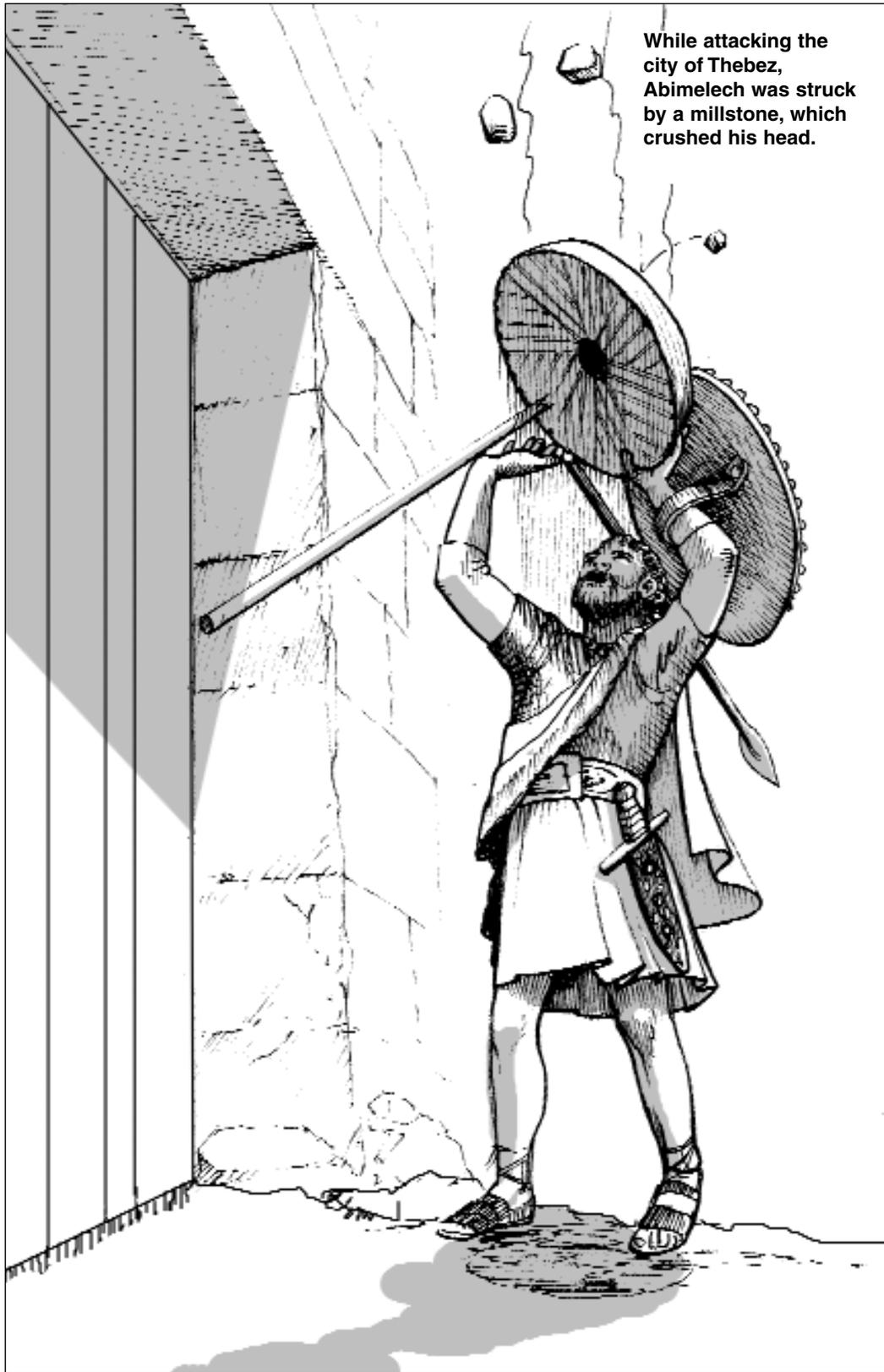
But the stubborn king still would not give up. As he drew near the base of the tower, a woman dropped a large millstone (a stone wheel with a hole in the middle), which struck Abimelech's head, crushing his skull.

Knowing that he was near death, Abimelech did not want to die by the hand of a woman; he considered that to be humiliating. The king was also afraid of falling into his enemy's hands, since he would be too weak to escape.

So he called for his young armorbearer, and said to him, "Take your sword and slay me. I don't want men to boast that a woman killed me."

The young man nodded, and then carried out his master's command.

When the soldiers saw that their king was dead, they halted their attack and departed, each man returning to his home. Without a strongman to follow, they were leaderless (or so they thought; the Israelites should have been looking to the Eternal as their ultimate Leader).



While attacking the city of Thebez, Abimelech was struck by a millstone, which crushed his head.

God had repaid Abimelech for his treachery (that of murdering his half brothers), and He made certain that Jotham's curse on the leaders of Shechem came to pass. Those who continue to stubbornly defy God and seek to do their own will cannot escape His punishment.

Fortunately, Abimelech's cruel reign of terror only lasted for three short years—yet it still resulted in a civil war (Judges 9:50-57).

Tola and Jair

Now that the king was dead, God raised a faithful servant to be His judge over Israel. This man was Tola, who was from the tribe of Issachar. He lived in Shamir, in the mountains of Ephraim. As God's righteous agent, Tola faithfully judged and guided the Israelites for 23 years. The Bible records nothing more about him.

After Tola's death, God replaced him with another faithful servant—Jair. He was from Gilead, a region east of the Jordan River, located in the territory of the half-tribe of Manasseh.

Jair had 30 sons, who each ruled a town, serving the people and keeping the peace. Together, these 30 towns of Gilead were called Havoth Jair, when means "villages of Jair."

After 22 years of loyal service and leadership, Jair died (Judges 10:1-5). As with Tola, the Bible records nothing else about Jair.

God Has Compassion

Once again, a new generation of Israelites arose, forgetting the God of Tola and Jair. This wicked generation sought after all the so-called gods of the surrounding nations—the false gods and idols of Syria, Sidon, Moab, Ammon and the Philistines. The Israelites foolishly embraced the customs, traditions and religious rituals of these pagan nations—in fact, they seemed to go out of their way to do evil!

Angry with such outright rebellion and ungratefulness, God delivered Israel into the hands of the Philistines, who ruled over city-state strongholds in the west, and the Ammonites, who resided in the east.

The Ammonites viciously attacked the people of Gilead, then crossed over the Jordan River to fight against the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim. Without God as their Source of protection, Israel suffered greatly. The Israelites were constantly harassed and oppressed by the Philistines and the Ammonites for 18 long years.

Finally, Israel began to put aside their foreign gods and cried out to the Eternal. In tears of anguish and remorse, the people admitted that they had sinned against God by serving Baal and other false deities.

Using a faithful servant, the Eternal revealed His will to the Israelites. The man said, “Thus says the Eternal: ‘In the past, did I not deliver you from the Egyptians, and from the Amorites, the Ammonites and the Philistines? The Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Midianites also oppressed you; when you cried out to Me, I delivered you out of their hand. Yet you have forsaken Me to serve other gods—which are not gods. Therefore, I will deliver you no more! Go and cry unto the false gods you have so foolishly chosen—let them deliver you in the time of your trial and tribulation!’”

But the Israelites pleaded with God, saying to His servant, “Tell God that we fully admit our sins. We have been rebellious and foolish! Tell Him to punish us as He sees fit—only let the Eternal deliver us once again. He is our only hope!”

The Israelites worked diligently to put away all the idols of foreign gods and wholeheartedly sought God and His ways.

God watched carefully as they strived to serve and obey Him. And the Eternal was moved with compassion. He cared so deeply for His people that He decided to intervene on their behalf (Judges 10:6-16).

Jephthah the Warrior

Trumpeting the cries of war, the army of Ammon assembled and encamped at Gilead. Hearing of this, the Israelites also assembled, encamping at Mizpah.

Though they were determined to fight to the death, this new generation of Israel lacked experienced, battle-tested leaders.

The elders of Gilead worried about this. After much discussion, they made a pronouncement to the people: “Who will lead us into victory over the Ammonites? Who should be our general? The man who accepts the challenge will be made head over all of Gilead” (Judges 10:17-18).

What the elders and people of Gilead did not know was that God had already raised up a man from among them. His name was Jephthah. Like Gideon, he was a strong and bold warrior. Jephthah was also the son of a harlot, which meant that he was a social outcast among his people.

Jephthah’s father (who happened to be named Gilead) had several sons by his wife. These sons were legal heirs to their father’s wealth, and had no intentions of sharing it with their half-brother. So they drove Jephthah away, telling him, “Get out of our sight! You’re the son of another woman—a harlot at that! You have no legal right to the inheritance in our father’s house! Get away from here!”

Ridiculed and rejected, Jephthah fled from his brothers and came to live in the land of Tob. There, he became a natural leader among other social outcasts, those whom society considered to be poor and worthless. He led his band of men on raiding parties against the Ammonites and other enemies of Israel. Eventually, Jephthah's leadership skills and warfare tactics became famous.

When the elders of Gilead learned of him, they journeyed to meet with him. They asked him to lead their army against the Ammonite army that had assembled against them.

But Jephthah said, "So the people of Gilead need my help. Yet they have hated me from my birth. Where were they when my brothers forced me out from my father's house and drove me out of Gilead? You did not help me then—why should I help you now?"

"We admit that we made mistakes. But surely you will not let all of Gilead be destroyed by the hand of these pagans. Your reputation is great; there is none like you. Your skills in waging war are unmatched. That is why we turn to you now. Please command our army and fight against Ammon. If you do, you shall be head over the entire region of Gilead."

Jephthah thought hard about their proposal. Then he said, "If I agree and God delivers the Ammonites into my hand, I shall be Gilead's civic leader?"

The elders shook their heads, and said, "Yes. May the Eternal be a witness between us if we fail to keep our promise."

"Alright then," Jephthah said, "I shall go back with you and lead your army into battle."

He traveled back to Gilead with the elders. Once there, a special ceremony was held, officially making Jephthah head of Gilead and commander of its army (Judges 11:1-11).

Jephthah Tries Diplomacy

Just as Gideon had done in the past, Jephthah decided to first use diplomacy. Though he was not afraid to do battle, he wisely chose to find out if the threat to Gilead could be resolved without needless bloodshed. So Jephthah sent messengers to the king of Ammon to ask him why his army was assembled against Gilead.

From his throne, the king sneered at the messengers, and said, "When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land, from Arnon to Jabbok, and from the wilderness to Jordan. Go tell Jephthah that the people of Ammon want it back. Give it to us!"

(Generations before, Israel took possession of lands occupied by

the Amorites, who had taken it away from Moab and Ammon, the descendants of Lot. To keep a promise Abraham had made to Lot, God forbade Israel to take any of Moab and Ammon's territories. However, they were allowed to take the land they had already seized from Canaanite nations.)

With a wave of his hand, the king of Ammon dismissed Jephthah's messenger, who were then escorted away by the palace guards.

When he heard what the king had to say, Jephthah sent another message, only this time it was more detailed:

"Israel did not take the land of Moab or Ammon. When our fathers came up from Egypt and walked through the barren wilderness, they encamped at Kadesh.

"From there, Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Please let us pass through your land.' But the king refused to listen. Israel also sent the same message to the king of Moab; he, too, would not consent. So Israel dwelt for a while in Kadesh.

"Then they went along through the wilderness and journeyed around the territories of Edom and Moab in peace. When they came to the eastern side of Moab and encamped on the other side of Arnon, Israel did not cross over Moab's border, for God would not allow it.

"Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites and the king of Heshbon. They said, 'Please let us pass through your territory into the land promised to our forefathers.' But Sihon did not believe that Israel would pass through his land peaceably. So he gathered all his people together and encamped at Jahaz. Then he launched an attack against my people.

"But the Eternal God of Israel delivered Sihon and all his people into our hand; they were utterly destroyed. So then, Israel came to possess all the land of the Amorites—including all their coasts, from Arnon to Jabbok, and from the wilderness to Jordan. Since the Eternal took the territory away from the Amorites and gave it to His people, why should you possess it?

"You believe that the territories you already possess were given to you by your god Chemosh. In the same way, whomsoever the Eternal our God shall drive out from before us, we will possess their land.

"Are you any better than Balak, king of Moab? Did he ever strive against Israel—did he ever fight against them? Israel has dwelt in Heshbon, Aroer and all of its villages, and in all the cities that are along the coasts of Arnon, for 300 years. Why then did you not recover these lands within that time?

"I have not sinned against you, but you have wronged me by preparing to make war against me! The Eternal shall be Judge this day

between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon.”

The king did not like Jephthah’s message, and set his mind to wage war (Judges 11:15-27).

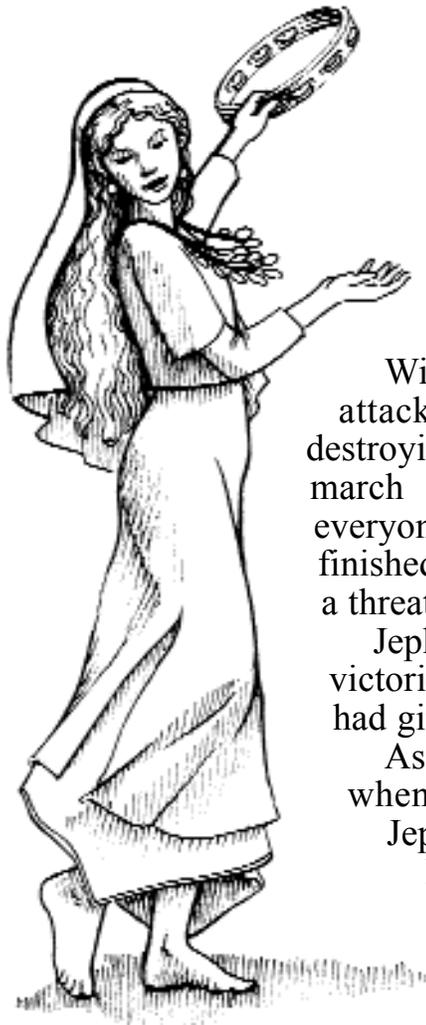
CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

AN UNWISE VOW

God's Spirit came upon Jephthah, enabling him to be more effective in God's hands. Then Jephthah rallied his troops to confront Ammon's massive army.

Before he launched his attack, Jephthah decided to make a vow to God: "O Eternal, deliver the Ammonites into my hand and I will sacrifice to You whatever comes out of my house to greet me when I return home victorious. It shall be a burnt offering to You."

Though Jephthah had God's Spirit working with his mind, he was still human, and capable of making bad judgments and mistakes. In the vow, Jephthah had meant to offer an animal sacrifice to God. However, he failed to specifically say that. Jephthah's vow would soon become a horrible snare to him and his family (Judges 11:29-31).



Fulfilling an Unwise Vow

With God on their side, the Israelites attacked the soldiers of Ammon, utterly destroying them. Then Jephthah led his army to march against 20 Ammonite cities, slaying everyone in their path. When the onslaught was finished, the people of Ammon were no longer a threat to Israel (Judges 32-33).

Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah victorious, thrilled with all the success God had given him.

As it was the custom for women to do when men returned victorious in battle, Jephthah's young daughter came out from his house to greet him, dancing and playing timbrels.

At first, Jephthah was happy to see her. Then suddenly, he realized that she was the first thing that came out of his house to greet him—Jephthah was stunned!

“No!” he cried. But he knew that it was too late. Jephthah had to fulfill his vow to God and offer his daughter—his only child—as a burnt offering!

In a flood of tears, Jephthah explained to his daughter what he had done. “To go back on my word would be a sin against the God who has delivered us,” he said.

She calmly replied, “I understand, father. You have given your word to the Eternal, and you must honor it. God has already done His part in avenging you of your enemies.”

Jephthah hugged her and cried even more.

Then she said, “Before I die, all I ask for is two months to go through the mountains and lament with my friends. For I will not get the chance to grow up with them or someday marry and have children.”

Jephthah looked down on her, shaking his head. “Yes, you may have your request.”

At the end of the two months, Jephthah’s daughter returned and submitted herself to become a burnt offering to God. It was the saddest, most bitter day of Jephthah’s life. (Yet, he did prove to be a man of godly character, because he fulfilled his promise even though it hurt.)

For many years after this sad event, it was an annual custom for young Israelite maids to lament Jephthah’s daughter for four days (verses 34-40).

Many centuries later, Jesus Christ, when He was a human being living on the earth, taught that it is far better not to make vows or oaths (Matthew 5:33-37). Jephthah’s tragic example teaches us today that making unwise vows can end with disastrous results.



Another Civil War

As they had done with Gideon, the tribe of Ephraim grew jealous of Jephthah's fame and success. They also worried that Gilead would become too powerful.

So the people of Ephraim gathered their troops and crossed over the Jordan River. Jephthah and his fellow citizens of Gilead were taken aback upon seeing brother Israelites taking up arms against them.

The leaders of Ephraim confronted Jephthah, and said, "Why did you fight against Ammon and not call us to join you in battle? Was it to keep all the spoils of war and glory for yourself? We will burn your house down for this insult!"

Like he did with the king of Ammon, Jephthah wisely decided to use diplomacy to get his brother Israelites to listen to reason.

"Yes, my people and I were at odds with the Ammonites. But when I sent for you, none of your troops came to help us. That was when I decided to put my life in my hands and attacked Ammon—yet it was the Eternal who actually gave me the victory. You men of Ephraim had your chance—why then do you come here today to fight against me?"

The Ephraimites would not listen. Instead, they hurled insults, saying, "Gilead is nothing more than lowlifes and outcasts of Ephraim and Manasseh. We are superior to you!"

Seeing that their Israelite brothers were bent on waging war against them, Jephthah assembled the men of Gilead and confronted Ephraim's troops. The Ephraimites were soundly defeated.

Then the soldiers of Gilead seized control of the fords of the Jordan River, cutting off fleeing Ephraimites from escaping back to their own territory.

Whenever strangers tried to cross the river, the Gileadites would ask if they were from Ephraim. If the strangers said "No," then they would be made to pronounce the Hebrew word *shibboleth*, which means "a flowing stream." Because they had been raised to speak with different accents, the Ephraimites would always mispronounce this word, and end up revealing their true identity.

By the war's end, 42,000 Ephraimites had been killed (Judges 12:1-6).

Righteous Judges, Rebellious Israel

Unlike previous judges, Jephthah did not judge Israel for very long. He only served his people for six years until his death. Afterward, God

provided Israel with several deliverers, one right after another.

Ibzan, who came from the town of Bethlehem, judged Israel for seven years. Next was Elon, who came from the tribe of Zebulun; he judged for ten years. Then there was Abdon, son of Hillel. He judged Israel for only eight years. In all, Israel had 31 years of being led by faithful and godly judges (Judges 12:8-15).

Yet, once again, a new generation of Israelites arose. They rejected God and ignored His laws and holy days. Instead, they served idols and prayed to gods that did not exist.

The Eternal decided to punish His people with the oppressive rule and persecution of the Philistines. This lasted for 40 years (Judges 13:1).

Prepared From the Womb

In the town of Zorah, the Messenger of the Eternal visited the wife of Manoah the Danite.

The Messenger said to her, “Behold, God is aware that you are barren and cannot have children. But I am here to tell you that you shall conceive and bear a son. But, from this very moment, you must not drink wine nor any strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. For indeed, you shall conceive and bear a son. However, no razor is allowed to cut his hair, for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb. He has been set apart to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.”

Excited by the news, she ran to tell her husband about the Messenger of the Eternal and what He had said. However, she did not know with whom she had been speaking, so she described God’s Messenger as “a man of God.”

Both Manoah and his wife looked for Him, but He could not be found. So Manoah prayed to God. He said, “Please send the man of God again and teach us what we shall do for our soon-to-be-born child. We need to know everything we can about our son’s special calling” (Judges 13:2-8).

Back when Israel was marching through the wilderness on their way to Canaan, God gave to His people the law of the Nazarites (Numbers 6:1-21). The word Nazarite means “to separate.” A Nazarite could be a man or woman who made a special vow to separate himself to better serve God. Once the vow was taken, a Nazarite could not drink wine, vinegar or grape juice; nor was he allowed to eat grapes or raisins. And he was not permitted to cut his hair, or go near a dead body.

A Nazarite vow could last several weeks, years—or even an entire lifetime! For example, the apostle Paul took the vow for a short time (Acts 18:18). But some of the greatest servants of the Bible, such as Samuel and John the Baptist, were Nazarites their entire lives.

Was Jesus Christ a Nazarite?

Today, many people (who were never taught the truth about God or His ways) mistakenly believe that Jesus Christ was a Nazarite, because they think He had long hair and never drank wine. This is but one of the many lies that the devil uses to confuse people about who Jesus really was.

Christ was not a Nazarite—He was a Nazarene! He grew up in the town of Nazareth. People who come from the United States of America are called Americans. People from Canada are called Canadians. Those from Britain are called British. In the same way, Jesus was called a Nazarene because He was raised in Nazareth.

Besides this, Jesus' hair was short, not long; and He did drink wine (but always in moderation). In fact, Christ's first biblically-recorded miracle was done at a wedding party, during which, at the request of His mother, He turned water into wine!

Jesus Christ was a Nazarene—not a Nazarite.

Offering Accepted

God answered Manoah's prayer by sending His Messenger. As Manoah's wife sat alone in a field, thinking about what God had in store for her unborn child, the Messenger of the Eternal came to her.

Delighted, she ran to get her husband. Upon returning, they warmly greeted Him.

Cautiously, Manoah said to Him, "Are you the man of God who spoke to my wife?"

"I am."

Manoah did not realize that he was in the presence of "I AM"—the One who had spoken to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-4).

The Messenger of the Eternal repeated what He had told Manoah's wife.

Gladdened by what he heard, Manoah asked his visitor to stay so that he might prepare Him a special meal.

The Messenger said, "I will stay, but I will not eat. Offer your food as a burnt offering to God."

Manoah then asked Him for His name, “that I may know who to honor when your promise is fulfilled.” He thought that God’s Messenger was a human prophet.

The Messenger said, “Why do you ask for My name, seeing that it is secret and wonderful?” In the prophetic book of Isaiah, the One who would become Christ is called “Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace...” (Isaiah 9:6).

Manoah presented his offering to God (a young goat and a grain offering) upon a rock. As he and his wife watched, flames flared up from the rock and consumed the offering! And as this happened, the Messenger of the Eternal ascended above the flame!

The couple dropped to the ground and worshipped God with awe. Noticing that his Visitor had departed, Manoah suddenly realized that they had been visited by God.

“We’ve seen God face to face!” he shouted. “We shall surely die!”

But his wife tried to calm him down. She said, “If the Eternal desired to kill us, He would not have accepted our offering. Nor would He have shown us this miracle or told us about the child we will have.”

Sometime later, she gave birth to a baby boy. She named him Samson, which comes from a Hebrew word that means “to serve.”

Samson grew up to be a strong and healthy Nazarite, for God was blessing him. The Holy Spirit came upon Samson at an early age, causing him to take note of his people’s suffering. Samson strongly desired to deliver his people from the Philistines’ tyranny (Judges 13:9-25).

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

THE MIGHTY SAMSON

One day, after he had become an adult, Samson visited Timnah, a town that belonged to the Philistines. There he spotted an attractive Philistine woman. Samson desired her so much that he raced home to plead with his father to acquire her to be his wife. (As head of the family, fathers used to exercise authority in nearly all matters; this often included choosing wives for their sons.)

But Samson's parents said, "Why don't you marry a nice Israelite girl? There are plenty for you to choose from. You don't need to get yourself a wife from these pagan Philistines."

What Manoah and his wife said was wise. Long ago, God forbade His people to marry outside their race and religion. Yet many Israelites ignored what God had commanded; they married into the pagan nations of the Canaanites, and ended up serving their false gods.

But Samson would not listen to reason. He said, "Get her for me. She looks like the right girl for me." Unfortunately, Samson was judging this woman solely by her attractive features and personality when he should have taken a close look at her character.

God knew that Samson had a weakness for being attracted to foreign women, especially those who had ungodly character. If Samson did not overcome this, it would lead to a lifetime of misery, suffering and ultimately death. All sin follows this path.

God is so wise and powerful, He is able to take a person's weaknesses and use them to fulfill His purpose. In Samson's case, God decided to use His servant's weakness for foreign woman as a means to punish the Philistines, delivering Israel from their hand. Samson's parents did not yet understand this (Judges 14:1-4).

Betrayed!

Giving in to Samson's insistence, his parents accompanied him down to Timnah so that he could get the Philistine woman for a wife. Along

the way, they came to the famed vineyards of Timnah, which was in the Sorek Valley.

Suddenly, a roaring lion sprang from the brush. Poised to attack, the beast sought to rip Samson to pieces. But God's Spirit came upon Samson, giving him supernatural strength and power. He tore the lion apart!

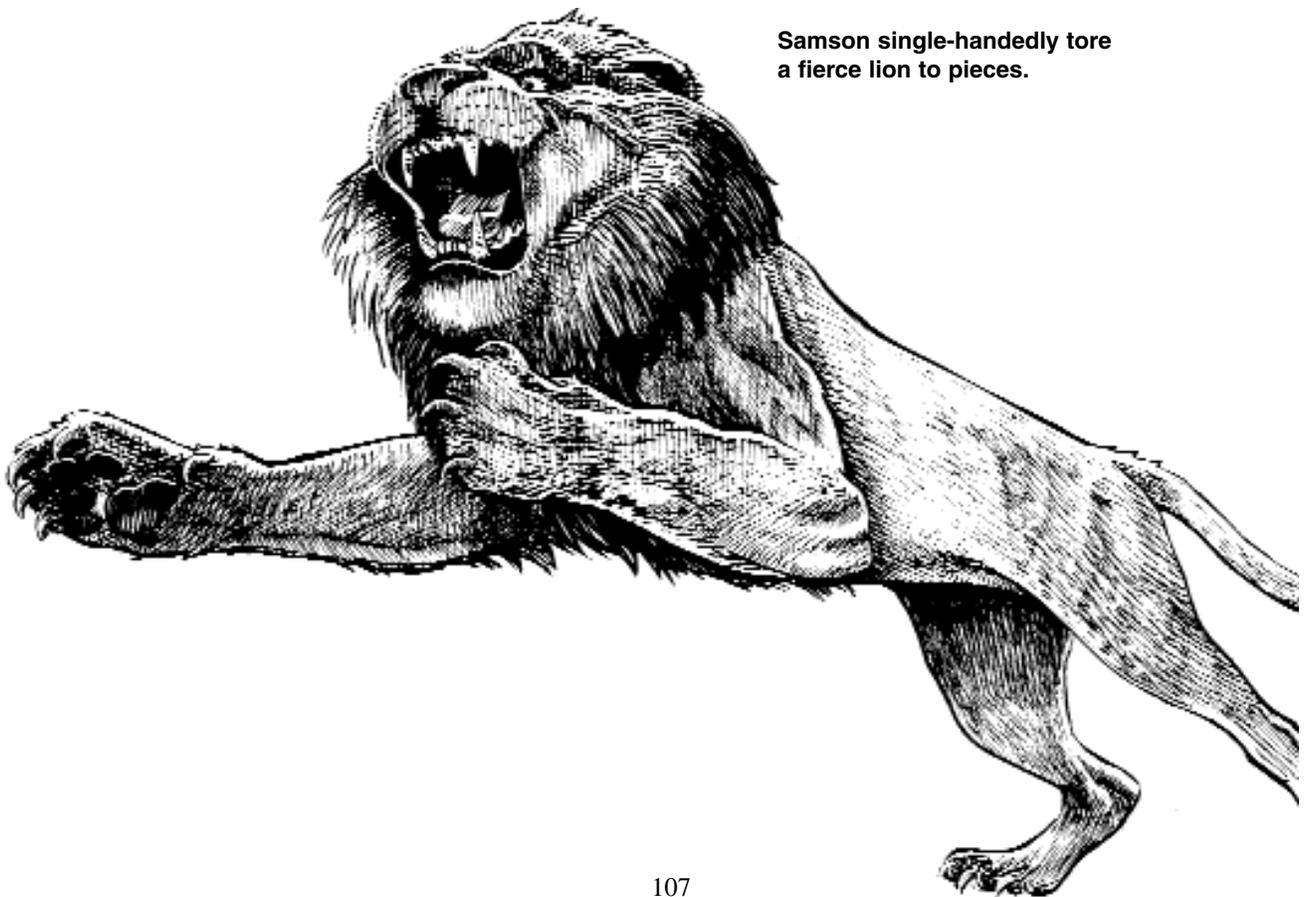
(But Samson's parents did not see this happen, for it took place away from their sight.)

At Timnah, Samson courted the woman for marriage. In his eyes, she appeared to be the perfect woman for him.

According to the custom of the day, a year may have passed before Samson and his wife-to-be would get married. Whatever the length of time, when it had passed, Samson traveled back down to Timnah for his fiancée.

On the way, he heard the sound of buzzing coming from the side of the road. Curious, he followed the sound until it led him to the carcass of the lion he had slain previously. Now it was just bones. Samson notices that a hive of bees had made their home inside the lion's skeleton. Urged on by hunger pains, Samson reached in with his hand and took some honey to eat along the way to Timnah.

Once again, he kept what happened to himself.



Samson single-handedly tore a fierce lion to pieces.

With his father's reluctant permission, Samson and his fiancée were married. Then Samson held a grand wedding feast, celebrating for seven days. Among the guests were 30 companions—Philistine guests of the bridegroom—who were to protect the wedding party from invading marauders.

The telling of riddles at feasts and special occasions was a popular amusement back then. So Samson posed one to his 30 wedding companions:

“If any of you can answer my riddle within the seven days of the feast, I will give you 30 sheets and 30 changes of fine garments. But if you cannot give the right answer, then you shall give me 30 sheets and 30 changes of garments.”

These Philistine men said, “We accept. Present your riddle.”

Samson said, “Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness. What is the answer?” The riddle was about the lion Samson had slain (“Out of the eater...out of the strong”) and the honey he ate (“came forth meat” and “sweetness”). Samson never told anyone about them—not even his parents.

For three days, none of the 30 guests could explain Samson's riddle. So they pressured Samson's bride to reveal it to them.

They said, “Seduce your husband and get the answer to his riddle for us, otherwise we will set you and your father's house ablaze. Have you invited us to your wedding feast so that you might take whatever belongs to us?”

Bowing to their pressure, the woman later wept in Samson's arms, crying, “You don't truly love me—you hate me! Why else would you pose a riddle to my fellow countrymen and not share your answer with me, your beloved wife?”

But Samson said, “I haven't even told my own parents, so why should I explain it to you?”

Again and again, his bride pestered him for the answer, weeping in his arms throughout the remainder of the feast. By the seventh day, Samson gave in to her emotional manipulation and told her what she wanted to know.

Later, the 30 companions of the bridegroom came before Samson to answer his riddles. Samson noticed the men were very confident, even cocky. Right then, he suspected that something may be wrong.

They smirked and said, “Here is the answer you have been waiting for: What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?”

Samson knew they had cheated. He also knew that they had help.

“If you had not cheated,” he said, “you would not have discovered the answer to my riddle.” What Samson was saying was that his wife

was unfaithful, revealing his secrets to these men. The woman's betrayal allowed Samson to see past her beauty and catch a glimpse of her weak character. He began to realize that she was more interested in pleasing these men than in being loyal to her husband. This should never happen in a marriage.

Samson said to the cheaters, "Though you have undoubtedly cheated, I will keep my word and give you what was promised."

Then, with God's Spirit motivating and empowering him, Samson went to Ashkelon, one of the five major Philistine strongholds. There he killed 30 Philistine men, taking with him their fine clothing, and giving them to the 30 wedding companions.

But Samson's anger would not go away. He went back to his father's home, leaving his wife behind in Timnah. Neither she nor her father knew whether or not he would come back for her (Judges 14:5-20).

Revenge Spawns More Revenge

After some time had passed, Samson's anger left him, and he desired to be reconciled with his Philistine wife. He journeyed down to Timnah during the wheat harvest (which took place every year during late May/early June). He was certain that he could visit his wife in safety because most of the Philistine men would be busy doing farm work. Samson brought with him a young goat, a gift showing that he was no longer angry with the woman he loved.

Arriving at her home, he said to his father-in-law, "I'm here to claim my wife. Let me see her."

But the woman's father said, "When you abandoned her, I thought that you had despised my daughter, Samson. Therefore I gave her to the one who was the best man at your wedding. I'm sorry, my son. However, what about her younger sister—do you not find her even more attractive? If so, please take her instead."

In a rage, Samson shouted, "You Philistines have betrayed me for the last time! Now I shall be blameless of any Philistine I may harm!"

And then he stormed away.

Samson immediately went to work to avenge himself: He caught 300 foxes and tied them together into pairs. Next, he tied a slow-burning torch to each pair, and then sent the foxes down the hills to run through the fields of the Philistines. Since it was harvest season, the standing grain was very dry; they were easily consumed by fire. So too were the vineyards and olive groves. This was a tremendous loss for the Philistines.

The Philistines soon discovered who had been the author of this disaster: “Samson did it! He was enraged because his father-in-law took away his wife and gave her to the best man of the bridegroom. And our people ended up suffering for someone else’s foolishness!”

The crowd of people quickly turned into an angry mob bent on revenge. Since Samson was nowhere to be found, they went after his wife and father-in-law instead. They were burned alive (Judges 15:1-6)!

Arrested by Fellow Israelites

Upon learning what had happened, Samson let it be publicly known that he would seek revenge for the lives of his wife and father-in-law. He went on to execute a great slaughter upon the Philistines, causing them to fear and tremble at the mere mention of his name.

Throughout the cities and territories of the Philistines, Samson was considered a notorious criminal who was wanted dead or alive. For his protection, Samson lived in the cleft of a rock at Etam, which served as a type of fort.

The Philistines launched a massive manhunt for Samson. They sent troops into the territory of Judah and surrounded a place called Lehi.

This did not sit well with the Israelites. The leaders of Judah confronted the officers of the Philistine army, and said, “What are you doing here? Why do you harass us this day?”

The officers said, “We’re here to find Samson and to tie him up. Then we shall do to him as he has done to us.”

“Samson is not of Judah. He is not our concern.”

“He is now. We’re not leaving here until he is in our hands.”

Later, there was much discussion and debate among Judah’s leaders: “Who is this Samson—why should we care about him?”

“He’s a brother Israelite, that’s who. We shouldn’t give in to these Philistines.”

“Easier said than done. I say we bring Samson in ourselves. After all, no one told him to attack the Philistines and then hideout in our territory. His presence is putting all our families in jeopardy! Let’s get rid of him.”

Eventually, they all agreed.

Then one leader said, “Hold on. Samson’s great strength and power is known throughout the land—how are we supposed to deliver him to the Philistines?”

It was a question that brought much fear among the men. So they decided to send 3,000 of their warriors to Samson’s fort.

Confronting him, the leaders said, “What is this you have done to us? Because of you, Judah is being overrun with hordes of Philistines. They are searching throughout our territory and harassing the people about your whereabouts. Don’t you realize that the Philistines control this land? Your constant attacks against them cannot change that. You are only making matters worse for our people.”

Samson replied, “I am only doing to them what they have done to me. I’m paying them back for their treachery.”

“That may be, Samson, but your actions are endangering our lives. It’s bad enough that the Philistines have garrisons and troops stationed in Israel. The last thing we need is to make them angry at us.”

Samson looked carefully at the men, taking note of their faces, which were filled with worry and anger. Then he said, “Why are you here—and why did you bring all these thousands of men with you? Obviously, you are not here to join me in fighting the Philistines.”

“We are here to arrest you. Afterward, we will deliver you to the Philistines.”

Samson slowly nodded. “Alright then,” he sighed. “But before you arrest me, swear that you will not kill me yourselves.” Samson knew that if he was forced to defend himself against his fellow Israelites, he would end up killing many of them. He did not want that to happen.

The men said, “We promise. All we will do is bind you with rope and deliver you to the Philistines.”

Samson turned himself in (Judges 15:7-13).

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

SAMSON'S ULTIMATE BETRAYAL

The Philistines rejoiced when they saw Samson being delivered to them, bound by ropes. Every soldier shouted and jeered.

“So this is the great troublemaker! Now we will make trouble for you!”

The laughter and shouts from the troops were as the roaring of lions. For the Philistines, the sight of Samson's capture was cause for great joy and celebration.

However, as the officers and their troops shouted and hurled insults, the Spirit of God suddenly came upon Samson. God's power enabled him to break free from his bonds as though they were strands of straw made brittle from fire. Spotting the jawbone of a donkey lying in the dust, Samson grabbed it and used it as a deadly weapon. Though the Philistines were armed with swords and spears, they were no match against God's awesome power, which was flowing through His servant.

With the jawbone in his hand, and surrounded by 1,000 dead Philistine troops lying on the ground, Samson said to Israelite onlookers, “With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men.”

Then he threw the jawbone to the ground. From then on, that place was called Ramath-Lehi, which means the “height of a jawbone.”

Samson's miraculous one-man battle made him feel drained and thirsty. Though he had superhuman strength, he was still a mortal human being; he was capable of dying or being killed.

In desperate need of water, he cried out to God: “O Eternal, You have given this great deliverance into the hand of Your servant. But shall I now die of thirst, and fall into the hand of these idol-worshipping Philistines? Please quench my thirst.”

God answered his plea. He miraculously split open a hollow place, and out came cool, fresh water. Samson rushed to drink in as much as he could, until he was fully refreshed. Later, the place where this mir-

acle occurred came to be called “En Hakkore”—“spring of the caller.”

News of what Samson had done at Lehi struck fear in the minds of the Philistine people. It also became a witness to the people of Judah, clearly signifying that God was using Samson as His servant. For the next twenty years, God used Samson to judge Israel and deliver them from Philistine oppression (Judges 15:15-20).

Outsmarting an Ambush

Though Samson was blessed with miraculous physical strength, he lacked spiritual strength (godly character) when it came to overcoming his weakness for foreign women—especially those of bad character.

At one point, he got involved with a Philistine harlot. She resided in Gaza. As one of the five major strongholds of the Philistines, this city was a commercial seaport along the Mediterranean Sea.

The men of Gaza soon found out about Samson’s frequent visits to this harlot’s home. They decided to lay a trap for him. That night, they shut up all the streets, secured the city gates, and secretly surrounded the woman’s home, waiting for Samson to show up. They planned to kill him when he departed from the harlot’s home the next morning.

But Samson was aware of the ambush. He laid low until midnight, then quietly slipped out and headed for the city gates. Then, empowered by God’s Spirit, Samson grabbed hold of the towering doors, pulling them up, along with two adjoining gate posts. He then carried them away on his shoulders and dropped them on top of a hill that faced Hebron, over in Judah—about 38 miles away!

This embarrassed the Philistines, who thought they could outsmart Samson. It also enraged them even more. The Philistine people were now more determined than ever to get rid of Samson (Judges 16:1-3).

Hiring a Seductress

Sometime later, the overlords of the Philistines learned that Samson had fallen madly in love with a Philistine woman named Delilah, who lived in the Valley of Sorek.

Unfortunately, Samson’s latest unwise romance would bear the rotten fruits of betrayal, extreme humiliation and misery. Sin always produces bad results.

The five Philistine overlords made Delilah a proposition: “Seduce Samson for us, and discover the secret to his great strength and how we can defeat him. We intend to bind up this Hebrew and afflict him.



Samson was taken in by Delilah's beauty. This would ultimately cost him his life.

In return for your services, each of us will give you 1,100 pieces of silver.”

The overlords did not want to kill Samson right away. They wanted to take their revenge through torture and humiliation.

Also, they may have thought that Samson was using some kind of “good luck charm.” Many people today put their trust in so-called charms rather than in God.

“Eleven hundred pieces from each of you?” said Delilah. “That comes to 5,500 pieces of silver!” She did not hesitate to accept their offer. Delilah found something she valued far more than Samson’s love: Money!

Samson should have trusted God to provide him with the right woman to love and marry. As our Creator, God knows us better than we know ourselves (Matthew 10:29-31; Luke 12:6-7).

Delilah did not waste time putting her scheme into action. When she and Samson were alone, she said to him, “Tell me, dear, what is the source of your great strength? And what would it take for someone to bind you so that he could afflict you?”

Samson said, “If someone managed to bind me with seven fresh bowstrings, not yet dried, then I would be weak, as normal as any other man.”

(Samson’s strength came from God—and God would continue to

give it to him as long as Samson did not break his Nazarite vow.)

He lied to Delilah because he did not fully trust her. Yet, by being intimate with a woman he suspected of being untrustworthy, Samson was playing with fire. He was bound to get burned!

Samson decided to play a kind of “lying game” with Delilah—but such games only end with bad results (Judges 16:4-7).

Succumbing to a Nagging Woman

That evening, Delilah playfully tied Samson with seven fresh bowstrings, which had been supplied by the Philistine overlords. Samson was unaware that Philistine soldiers were hiding in the room, waiting for Delilah’s signal to attack.

When she was certain that Samson was bound tight, Delilah yelled, “Samson, look out! The Philistines are upon you!”

Suddenly, Samson broke free from the bowstrings as though they were but a single strand of yarn. He laughed, happy with the little “game” he was playing.

But Delilah was far from pleased. She said, “You’ve mocked me and told me lies! How can I trust you if you don’t trust me? Now tell me what it would take to bind you up.”

Samson continued to toy with Delilah with more lies: “If I was bound with new ropes that had never been used, then I would become as normal as any other man.”

So Delilah waited when he was caught off-guard and bound him with new, never-used rope. Then she yelled, “Watch out, the Philistines are upon you!”

However, the Philistine soldiers lying in wait did not reveal themselves—which was fortunate for them. Samson easily broke free from his bonds as though they were thread!

Delilah was furious! She said, “Why have you mocked me so, and told me lies? What is your secret, Samson—if you loved me, you’d tell me!”

Samson said, “If the seven locks of my head were woven into the web of a loom, then my strength would be gone.”

As a Nazarite, Samson had very long hair, which had never been cut. But, he did not look like a “wild man,” the way some rock stars and entertainers appear today; Samson’s hair was tastefully gathered into seven long locks.

After she had waited for Samson to fall into a deep sleep, Delilah tightly wove his hair into the web of her loom. Then she yelled, “Wake up, Samson! The Philistines are here!”

Samson jumped up and pulled his hair out of the loom with ease. And Delilah saw that he was just as strong as ever.

She said, “How can you say that you love me when obviously you don’t trust me with your heart? You have made a fool out of me three times—and you still haven’t shared your secret with me!”

From then on, Delilah pressured, begged and nagged Samson day after day, night after night, hour after hour—she would not give him a moment’s rest.

One day, Samson’s patience finally ran out: “Alright, alright! Here is my secret: A razor has never so much as touched my head, for I have been a Nazarite, separated to serve God, from my mother’s womb. If my hair was shaved off, my vow would be broken and my strength would leave me. I would become weak. I would become just like any other man. Now stop pestering me!”

Incredibly, Samson had just handed Delilah the key to his destruction!

She looked into his eyes and was convinced that he had finally revealed the truth. Later, she called for the Philistine overlords, telling them, “Bring me my pieces of silver. Samson shall soon be delivered into your hands” (Judges 16:8-18).

Delilah Betrays Samson

With the money in tow, the overlords and their men quietly came to Delilah’s home and hid.

Then Delilah lulled Samson to sleep in her arms. Next, she signaled for a soldier to sneak over to them and cut off Samson’s hair. Immediately, Samson’s superhuman strength left him as he continued to sleep. To find out if he had told the truth, Delilah bound his hands and then screamed, “Wake up, Samson! The Philistines are about to attack!”

Samson woke up. Seeing that Delilah had bound him again, he thought to himself, “I’ll just break free like I did before.”

That was when Samson realized that something was wrong. “I can’t break free! What has happened to me?”

He looked down and noticed that his long locks of hair were lying on the floor—that was when Samson finally knew he had been betrayed!

As he continued to struggle against his bonds, the Philistine overlords and their troops came out of hiding. They shouted at Samson and took hold of him, beating him.

And then Samson looked on as the overlords handed their pieces of

silver to Delilah. It was the last thing he ever saw—for the Philistines had Samson’s eyes put out (Judges 16:19-21)!

Captured, beaten and made blind, Samson was brought to Gaza and paraded before jeering crowds of Philistines, who spat at him and mocked him.

Thrown into prison, Samson was put to work grinding grain. This was considered woman’s work—too lowly for men to perform.

Even though his hair began to grow long again, the Philistines did not fear that Samson would get his superhuman strength back. Now that he was blind and bound in bronze fetters, the overconfident Philistines did not believe that he would ever be a threat to them again (Judges 16:21-22).

God Avenges Samson

One day, the five overlords of the Philistines held a great feast at one of their temples. It was a special celebration, a great sacrifice in honor of their false god Dagon, whose carved imaged portrayed him as being half man, half fish.

At the ceremony, the overlords addressed the people: “Our god Dagon has delivered the once-great Samson, our enemy, into our hands.”

Everyone attending the assembly, including many Philistine rulers and dignitaries, praised their false god, saying to its carved image, “You, Dagon, have delivered into our hands our enemy—the destroyer of our country—the one who slew so many of us.”

They were all drinking strong drink and making merry, and called for Samson to be brought before them. “Bring out this Hebrew” they chanted, “that he might perform for us!”

The entire audience was amused to see Samson brought before them. He blindly groped around as he was led out by a lad and positioned between two giant pillars. Samson listened to the Philistines laugh and jeer and mock him. Then he was forced to perform tricks for their amusement, like a dog at a dog show.

With every insult, he regretted having allowed his character weaknesses to lead him to such humiliation and despair. He repented of his sins and hoped that God would use him just one more time.

Samson said to the lad, “Help me place my hands on the pillars so that I may lean upon them.”

The lad thought about it, and then, thinking there was no danger to fulfilling his request, he did what Samson had asked of him.

With his knowledge of Philistine culture, Samson remembered that

these two pillars were part of the foundation of the temple. If he could knock down the pillars, the temple would fall.

He was now positioned between the two towering pillars.



Then Samson softly prayed to God: “O Lord Almighty, I pray that You please remember me, and that, in Your great mercy, You strengthen me only this once. Please, O God, allow me to have revenge upon the Philistines for taking away my eyesight.”

He then took hold of the pillars, which supported the temple’s roof, and braced himself, saying, “Let me die with these Philistines!” And then Samson pushed.

God answered his prayer. Samson felt superhuman strength flow through him once again as he pushed the pillars apart. They tumbled over and collapsed, bringing down the entire temple upon the five overlords and their guests. Three thousand Philistines were dead—more than Samson had ever killed before!

Afterward, Samson’s family members boldly came to take his body to bury it in his father’s tomb (Judges 16:23-31).

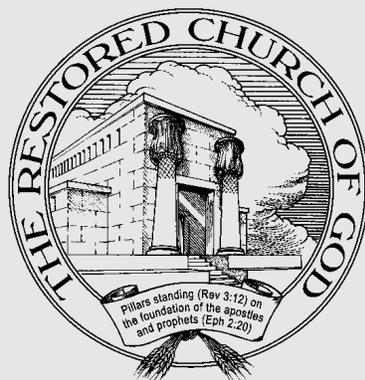
Though he had some shortcomings, Samson was truly a great servant of God. In fact, the Bible lists him among the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11:32).

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