The Sum of It All

“Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them” (Judges 2:18-19).

Week 13, Day 1

JUDGES 9–11

Not all of the judges were powerful or dramatic figures. Some, like Tolah and Jair (10:1-5), and later Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8-15), are disposed of in just a few lines. And as far as Jotham was concerned, his half-brother, Abimelech, ought to have been in the same category. In a masterful parable, Jotham identified Abimelech’s main qualification as his availability. Unfortunately, Jotham’s parable sometimes seems equally appropriate to the political scene in our own times.

And then there is Jephthah. In his life, achievement and tragedy are inextricably intertwined. He was born in a setting of shame, the product of his father’s relationship with a prostitute. He was brought into his father’s home, but in time this proved an impossible situation and his half-brothers forced him out. One wonders how much Jephthah’s drive for success was a result of his feelings of rejection. In any event, in time he is asked to lead Israel against the Ammonites. With an admirable sense of statesmanship, he tries first to negotiate peacefully, but without success.

With his passion to win, Jephthah vowed to God that for victory he would sacrifice whatever came from his door to greet him on his return. It was a rash vow, appropriate to the pagan religions around him but not to Israel’s faith.

The price turned out to be his daughter; and intense as he was, he didn't see the grace that would have allowed the vow to be altered.
PRAYER: If I make a vow, O God, let me see your grace. Amen.

How would you apply Jotham's parable (Judges 9:7-15) to a contemporary political scene?

Week 13, Day 2

JUDGES 12–14

The powerful leadership of Jephthah was followed by three judges who are remembered only marginally, two of them for the size of their families. Along the way Israel again wandered from God's plan and found itself once more captive to the Philistines. That brings us to perhaps the most dramatic and the most unpredictable of the judges, Samson.
Like several other key biblical personalities, Samson was chosen by God from before his birth. In his case, he was also put under a special commitment as a nazirite, a person separated and consecrated to God (Numbers 6:1-21). A particular factor in Samson's separation was that a razor should never come to his head.
The heroes in the early part of this story are Samson's parents. When their quiet, pastoral lives are interrupted by a heavenly visitor, they courteously offer hospitality; and when they discover the true nature of their guest, they're sure their lives are gone (13:22). They maintain their portion of the nazirite vow in preparation for Samson's birth, and they must surely have watched with awe and uncertainty as their son began not only to mature but to be touched by the Spirit of God. It couldn't have been easy being Samson's parents.
The first dramatic event in his life brings together what will prove to be the continuing issues throughout his life—his extraordinary physical prowess and his distressing lack of moral restraint.

PRAYER: O Lord, I marvel again at your readiness to use unlikely people. I guess I'm unlikely, too, in my way. Please use me. Amen.

I'm always interested in the relatively unknown heroes behind the scene. Ponder the experience of Samson's parents in this regard.

Week 13, Day 3

JUDGES 15–16; PSALMS 58–59

From all that we're told in Judges, Samson was anything but a conventional leader. He was not a statesman, nor was he a true military leader; in a sense, he was a kind of one-man wrecking crew. Yet he was probably just what Israel needed at the time. A people who had been physically and psychologically dominated for over a generation must have found a whole new self-image in each new Samson episode. One can imagine the glee with which the stories of his bizarre victories were passed from village to village. A more conventional leader could never have made such an impact on the pride of the Israelites—nor proved such an embarrassment to the Philistines.

But at last, Samson's weakness destroyed him. Erratic as he was, he nevertheless kept his nazirite vow until one day when Delilah's attractiveness and pleading broke him down. But, of course, this would not have happened if Samson had not put himself constantly in the path of temptation. If we insist on walking at the edge of peril, we will eventually fall over. So it was with Samson.

Samson's story ends, however, with an act of grace. After he was blinded and humiliated by his enemies and forced to work like an animal, "the hair of his head began to grow again" (16:22)—a symbolic way of saying that he would have another chance. When the opportunity came, Samson conquered more at his death than in his life (16:30).

PRAYER: Lord, teach me something that Samson learned too late: to keep a wide distance between myself and temptation; in Christ. Amen.

What three or four lessons, negative and positive, do you learn from Samson's life?

Week 13, Day 4

JUDGES 17–19

I had a teacher long ago who said that the Book of Judges was the story of Israel's Wild West days. He took that theme from these words: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (17:6)—a verse that appears not only at this point but also as the conclusion to the book, as if to say that we will understand the crude and violent history only if we see that this was a people who had no structured restraints.

The story of the plundering delegation from Dan, which robbed Micah of both his idol and his priest, demonstrates a world where people were taking the law into their own hands (Chapter 18); and the brutal story of the Levite and his concubine (Chapter 19) makes the point even more forcefully. The Levite used a ghastly object lesson to tell the people that such conduct had never before occurred in Israel (19:30). The people were shocked; but as we shall see, they didn't allow the shock to bring about any continuing moral change.

It's quite possible that the Book of Judges was trying by this recital of outrageous conduct to indicate how badly the nation needed a king, since the phrase "there was no king in Israel" occurs several times. But with Levites selling themselves to highest bidders and idols taking the place of true worship, they needed most of all a new birth of faith in the Lord God.

PRAYER: Some days, dear Lord, our culture seems as unrestrained as in the times of the judges. Make me an instrument of peace. Amen.

These chapters show the degree of lawlessness that had come to the land. Describe a period in a nation's or a region's history that might be compared to what you have read.

Week 13, Day 5

JUDGES 20–21; PSALM 60

It is usually said that World War I began with a single assassin's bullet. Here a bloody civil war begins with the irresponsible behavior of a raping party of young bullies and the failure of their own people to discipline them. It is a tragic story of thousands of lives being lost to no good purpose.

But now the united tribes find themselves caught between their own stubbornness—that they will not allow their daughters to marry Benjaminites—and their loyalty to the totality of their nation ("why has it come to pass that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?" [21:3]). They "had compassion for Benjamin their kin" (21:6), but their solution was an act of violence on a neighboring people and then a kidnapping at a festival; and in all of this, of course, the women involved were treated simply as objects of plunder. And all because of a failure on Benjamin's part to deal with evil in their midst, and a stubborn insistence on the rectitude of a vow (21:18).

Probably Hollywood could make a musical of the story, in a kind of massive Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, but it's still a sad story. These were frontier days, indeed, in which people responded to issues with tribal loyalties and misapplied commitments, though always with a very real earnestness. And, of course, it's easier for us to judge them from a distance than to find solutions to the troubles of our day.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, when I see how others deal with their problems, give me charity; and in my own problems, give me wisdom; in Christ. Amen.

The closing verse of the Book of Judges (which also appears in Judges 17:6) seems to be a summary of the nature of the times. How might we also read it as the writer's perhaps justifying the eventual raising up of a king?

Week 13, Day 6

RUTH 1–4

Someone long ago told me that the Book of Ruth is God's silver lining to the Book of Judges. Certainly when we left Judges yesterday, the mood was heavy and foreboding; but as Ruth opens, the prospects seem even dimmer, for "there was a famine in the land" (1:1). So great a famine, in fact, that Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons took a solution that was almost unthinkable; they migrated to Moab, a nation so hated by the Jews that a Moabite was not to be accepted into the assembly of the Lord "even to the tenth generation" (Deuteronomy 23:3).

Misfortune continued. Elimelech died, then the sons married Moabite girls (again, unthinkable), and then they died. But now a ray of very special light, as a Moabite girl, Ruth, pledges dramatic loyalty to her mother-in-law. Leaving her homeland, she goes with Naomi to what promises to be a hostile environment.

And there the light of beauty grows. Ruth catches the eye of the aged Boaz, and with her mother-in-law's counsel, receives his pledge of love. When the baby is born, the women of the community think of it as Naomi's child, while telling her that her daughter-in-law (Moabite though she may be) is "more to you than seven sons" (4:15).

But there's more. The closing genealogical lines reveal that this child will be an ancestor of Israel's greatest king, David—which means that later he will be in the line of the Messiah (Matthew 1:5-6).

PRAYER: As I finish this reading, O Lord, I marvel at your grace, even in the midst of hard times. Thanks be to your name! Amen.

List three or four qualities of character in Naomi and in Ruth that are instructive.

Week 13, Day 7

1 SAMUEL 1–3

The scene in Israel was gloomy as the Book of Judges ended, but God was at work backstage. So far backstage that only the person of great faith would believe that anything was happening, and only a future generation would see the proof. Now we have a family scene in the household of Elkanah and his two wives, one of whom, Hannah, has been unable to bear children. As she cries out to God in her distress, her prayer is answered, with more ramifications than she could ever have dreamed. She prayed for a child; in answer to her prayer, a watershed leader was born to Israel.

Her son, Samuel, was dedicated to God from before his birth and was given to service in the house of the Lord, under Eli. He arrived at a crucial time. Though Eli was a good and honorable man, his sons were not following his example: "they had no regard for the LORD or for the duties of the priests" (2:12-13). Meanwhile young Samuel grew "both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people" (2:26), until one night he received a message from God for Eli. Samuel was afraid to deliver the harsh word (I think God rarely trusts messages of judgment to anyone who enjoys delivering them), but Eli insisted on knowing; and when Samuel reported, Eli showed the depth of his character by accepting the message graciously. So it was that in tumultuous days God was at work in ways that no one at the moment would ever have recognized.

PRAYER: I am tremendously reassured, O Lord, by the knowledge that you are at work in my life and in our world at this very moment. Amen.

Speaking of unsung heroes, as we did earlier with Samson's parents, what qualities of strength do you see in Samuel's mother, Hannah?

Week 13 Reading Schedule

Prayer Time
I will pray daily for these people in positions of prominence, that they will not stumble by their own sense of importance:

I will pray daily for these in hidden places, that they will love their calling:

I will pray daily for myself, that I will know more of who I am, and be glad of it.

How the Drama Develops JUDGES 9—1 SAMUEL 3
The human drama, like the stage dramas we build on the pattern of our human drama, has its dark periods. They are like tunnels that must be passed through if we are to get to the other side of the mountain. They are often enough of our own making, products of our sins or of errors in judgment, but that doesn't relieve the fact of their pain. Sometimes, in fact, it makes the pain even worse. The Book of Judges not only has many such periods; in total it seems primarily to be such a period. Not that there aren't many bright spots. Deborah, Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson all provide periods of light—and some periods of laughter too, if you have the kind of sense of humor that finds its laughter in human perversity and error. But the Book of Judges records more of darkness than of light.

But the darkness is not inevitable. We make it by our decisions. And part of the value of Judges is that it demonstrates that fact so clearly. Reading the story from our vantage point centuries later, we find ourselves wanting to say, "There you go again! Why do you insist on making trouble for yourselves?" Would that we were so sensitive in analyzing our own situation!

I am intrigued (and perhaps gratified) to see the unlikely people God uses in bringing light to the dark periods. Take Jephthah. He surely had everything against him. Son of a prostitute, rejected by his half-siblings, he seemed to use the very stuff of his pain to develop toughness of character, so that in time he became a deliverer for Israel.

And Samson! As I search his story, I see virtually no evidence of spirituality. He strikes one as a completely sensual person, at his most typical pose when he is striding down the road eating honey and thinking of the woman to whom he is going. Spiritually, he is surely more the descendant of Esau than of Jacob. I don't find any instance in his story when he seems to acknowledge God except when he explains to Delilah that he was dedicated to God from before his birth (Judges 16:17), nor that he prayed until at the last he pleaded to God for strength "only this once" so that he might destroy the Philistines (16:28). And yet, this good word must be said for him, that with all of his apparently undisciplined living, he maintained his nazirite vow—one made for him, after all, by his parents, and not chosen of his own wishes—until the day he revealed it to Delilah. In that crucial measure, he "kept the faith," so to speak.

The concluding chapters of Judges are so dismal one can hardly endure them. We're ready then for the magnificent story of Ruth and Naomi, and of the grace of God that bursts upon their lives. How could grace have come at a bleaker time? Not only was it the period of the judges; there was famine in the land, a retreat to the forbidden land of the Moabites, marriage across lines that had seemed utterly sacred, then a series of deaths, leaving us with three widows. And then, a baby from whose line the beloved David will come—and in time, the Messiah!

After that, the story of Hannah and her extraordinary faith may seem an anticlimax. But it is the continuing story of faith, and it is particularly crucial to the unfolding drama of the Israelites. Because Samuel will be not only the last

great judge of Israel but also the bridge by which the nation enters the period of the kings.

Seeing Life Through Scripture

Yes, I'm taken with hidden heroes. With the father of Gideon, who when his son was afraid to do his work in the daylight, dared to challenge the apostate people of his community (Judges 6:25-32). And the parents of Samson, who took a vow, then raised their child so that he would fulfill it—and I venture Samson wasn't an easy child to raise! And Hannah, who gave her son to the work of God and provided him with a little coat each year—her only opportunity to show her maternal love to him.

And Boaz, who is easily lost behind the dramatic figures of Ruth and Naomi. But let it be said that Boaz dared to befriend the Moabite girl, then to contest with a nearer kin in order to claim her. And how exactly did he feel when Naomi took over his son as if it were hers, laying claim to the baby in a sense in the names of her deceased sons? So many backstage heroes, so many people who might easily be lost in the scenery.

Now how do we fit into God's plan? The writer of Second Timothy said that in a great house there are vessels of all kinds—silver and gold, wood and clay. The secret, I'm sure, is to be glad to be a vessel, whatever the material and the purpose. But how long does it take to become glad to be clay, for disposal purposes, if that be our calling?

Kalas, E. J. (2016). The Grand Sweep: 365 Days From Genesis Through Revelation. Abingdon Press.