

Bible Study

Judges

A black and white photograph of a barbed wire fence. The fence is made of several strands of twisted wire with sharp barbs, running across the frame. In the background, there is a wooden post and some foliage. The overall mood is somber and restrictive.

JUDGES

**Additional
Leaders'
Notes**

Contents

Studies

1. After the death of Joshua... (Judges 1:1-3:6) Page 1
2. Ehud: the deceptive judge (Judges 3:7-31) Page 3
3. Barak: the dishonoured judge (Judges 4-5) Page 5
4. Gideon: the weak judge (Judges 6:1-8:28) Page 1
5. Abimelek: the man who would be king (Judges 8:29-9:57) Page 9
6. Jephthah: the bargaining judge (Judges 10-12) Page 11
7. Samson: the rebellious judge (Judges 13-16) Page 14
8. There was no king in Israel (Judges 17-21) Page 17

Appendices

Page 19

After the death of Joshua...

Judges 1:1-3:6

Getting started

The 'getting started' question is designed to get people thinking about the concept of the cycle of sin and how people are helpless to get themselves out of it. Many of us have gotten into unhelpful spirals of behaviour - bad habits, wrong ways of thinking, etc - that we've only been able to get out of because someone us helped out of them: a friend, pastor, etc. This is the situation Israel is in - caught in a spiral of sin and needing help to get out of it - and so this question helps us relate to them.

Light from the Word

Read Judges 1

1. They ask the Lord which of the tribes is to go up first to fight the Canaanites. In the past, it was obvious who was to lead them in these battles: Joshua. But now Joshua is dead, they need to know who will lead them. The fact that they ask God is a good sign: they are still being obedient to him and recognising his authority.
2. This is exactly what they are meant to do. God has given them the land and ordered them to destroy its inhabitants. The destruction must be total: they must make no treaty with them, show them no mercy, not intermarry with them, and smash their idols (Deuteronomy 7:2-5). The reason for this is that, if they don't, the Canaanites will quickly tempt them to idolatry and they will lose their distinctiveness - the very reason God wants to settle them in the land in the first place.

It has often disturbed Christians that God ordered the Israelites to 'totally destroy' the Canaanites. How could a good God ever command such a thing? You or people in your group may have the same question. If that's the case, Appendix 1 at the end of this study helps answer that question.

3. The results are mixed for the Israelites, both in the south and the north.
 - a. South (1:2-21). Judah is largely successful in driving out the Canaanites, but not entirely. They can't drive out the people of the plains because they have superior weapons - chariots fitted with iron (1:19). This is surprising, given God has already promised to drive the nations out before Israel, regardless of how strong they are (Jos 23:1-5). He's even told them not to worry about the iron chariots! (Jos 17:18). As readers, this makes us wonder if there is something else going on which is stopping the Israelites from carrying out their mission to destroy the Canaanites.

- b. North (1:22-36). The northern tribes also have some success in driving out the Canaanites, but also some failure, and much more so than the southern tribes. Note the repetition of 'did not drive out': 1:27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33. This again makes us ask: 'If God has promised to drive the Canaanites out before the Israelites, what has gone wrong?' The next chapter tells us.
4. Israel blames the Canaanites' superior hardware (1:19) and determination (1:27) for why they can't drive them out of the land.

Read Judges 2:1-5

5. God gives a different reason for why Israel *hasn't* driven out the Canaanites. 2:1-5 gives us some background information we didn't know before: Israel hasn't been following God's command to destroy the Canaanites' altars, and so has opened up the risk of falling into idolatry itself. Therefore, God now promises not to drive the Canaanites out, and that the Israelites *will* fall into idolatry (2:3). The real reason for Israel's *military* failures is its *moral* failures.

Read Judges 2:6-3:6

6. Having summed up Israel's disobedience and God's response, 2:10-19 now fleshes out what this will look like in the rest of Israel's life. A cycle will emerge: Israel will sin (2:11-13), God will oppress them via a Canaanite nation (2:14-15); Israel will cry out under that oppression (2:18); God will respond by sending a 'judge' (not a judicial figure, but a leader) to save them (2:16); Israel will have peace for a while, until the judge dies (2:18); and then Israel will fall back into sin (2:17, 19), and the whole cycle will repeat itself.
7. God responds by promising *not* to drive out the Canaanites any more, but rather to leave them there as a test of Israel's faithfulness.

Read Judges 5:6-8

8. Romans 5:6-8 says we were in a similar situation to that of the Israelites in Judges. We were sinners (5:8) and powerless to get out of our sin (5:6).
9. But, like in Judges, God intervened, this time not by sending a judge, but by sending his own Son, Jesus, to die for us.

To finish

This question is designed to get people thinking about the twin themes of the study: that God's people can fall into idolatry, and that only God can break them out of that cycle.

Give thanks and pray

Ehud: the deceptive judge

Judges 3:7-31

Getting started

In our eagerness to see people come to faith, Christians can sometimes be a bit 'tricky' in our evangelism. We play down how much gospel content will be in the evangelistic event we're inviting our friend to; we talk down the 'nasty' bits of Christianity - sin, judgment, hell - and talk up the 'nice' bits - grace, forgiveness, heaven. We make it vaguely clear that our friend will have to change their lifestyle if they become a Christian, but don't tell them the full extent of what 'taking up their cross' will look like, particularly if we know it will mean big changes for them. Clearly, all this is bad (though understandable). This question is designed to get at some of these tendencies.

Light from the Word

Read Judges 3:7-11

1. Othniel's story fits the cycle of Judges perfectly: Israel sins (3:7); God judges them by handing them over to their enemies (3:8); they cry out to God (3:9a); God saves them by raising up a judge, Othniel (3:9b-10); the land has peace (3:11).
2. The story itself tells us nothing about Othniel, other than that he is the son of Kenaz and the nephew of Caleb, who together with Joshua led Israel into Canaan. 1:12-15 gives us more detail, and it is all positive. He is a war hero: he led a successful campaign to take a town, Kiriath Sepher (1:12), during the initial wars of conquest. He is also a model Israelite: where everyone else is marrying Canaanites - in direct contravention of God's command to only marry Israelites - he gets married to the daughter of Caleb, one of Israel's leaders: you can't get more Israelite than her! The point is, Othniel is a model Israelite and under him the cycle of God's redemption works perfectly: Israel sins, God punishes them, they cry out, and God sends them a great man like Othniel to be their judge.
3. The Spirit of the Lord 'came on' Othniel 'so that' he became Israel's judge and went to war. That is, God chose and empowered Othniel to be Israel's saviour by giving him his Spirit. This is a pattern we see repeated all through *Judges*: it is only by the Spirit's empowering that a judge is capable of saving Israel. Othniel may be a great man, but it's only because of God's intervention in his life that he can be a saviour.

Read Judges 3:12-31

4. Ehud's story also fits the pattern so far established for judges: Israel sins (3:12a); God gives them over to their enemies (3:12b-14); Israel cries out

(3:15); God gives them a judge, Ehud, who rescues them (3:15-29); and there is peace (3:30).

5. However, Ehud seems like a very different man to Othniel. Othniel seems squeaky-clean; Ehud is sneaky. Immediately, he is marked out as unusual and possibly un-trustworthy by the fact that he is left-handed (3:15; no offense to left-handers, that is just how they were viewed!) The story unfolds with Ehud tricking his way into a secret meeting with Eglon, the Moabite king, and then assassinating him. He then escapes by the back door and leaves Eglon's servants waiting outside, wondering if their boss is taking so long to come out because he's on the toilet! It all seems a much earthier, down-and-dirty story than that of Othniel, the Israelite knight. But at the same time, there are similarities. Both are raised up to be Israel's judge by God. Both defeat formidable enemies (Moab had oppressed Israel for 18 years). And both only succeed because God helps them: Othniel, because he's empowered by the Spirit; Ehud, because his hidden dagger is also 'a message from God' (3:20).
6. The point of this question is to get across what a devious man Ehud is, as well as how stupid God's enemies are once they have served his purpose and can now be dispensed with.
7. Despite all the trickery, God uses it to save Israel.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

8. The point of the next two questions is to show how differently God deals with his enemies now, in the New Testament era. Now, God wants to save his enemies, not destroy them, and he calls believers into this mission. It is by God's mercy that Paul has his ministry (4:1), and it is mercy he offers to others. For precisely this reason - that we are trying to help people, not hurt them - Christians must not use tricks in their evangelism (4:2). We have nothing to hide! If anyone does not believe the gospel, it's not because we've hidden it from them but because they are 'perishing,' i.e. never chosen to believe in the first place.

To finish

Sometimes Christians can be tempted to be 'sneaky' in our evangelism, or not entirely up-front, because we're simply overeager to get our friends to an event or see them come to Jesus and so we don't want to put anything in their way that may put them off. Sometimes, however, it may be because we're secretly ashamed of bits of the gospel - particularly the hard bits - and so downplay them so as not to cause embarrassment to ourselves. There may be other reasons too. The point of this question is to get at the heart of why we may sometimes fall into not being entirely 'above board' in our evangelism.

Barak: the dishonoured judge

Judges 4-5

Getting started

This question is to get people thinking about the relationship between God's honour and our own. Christians are rightly cautious about receiving honour. After all, all honour is to go to God. But at the same time, God does say that he will honour those who honour him, that is, recognise his authority and do what he says. The story of Barak will illustrate this tension beautifully.

Light from the Word

1. The 'cycle' of *Judges* is repeated here again like clockwork: the Israelites 'do evil in the eyes of the Lord' (4:1); God sells them into oppression under Jabin, king of the Canaanites (4:2); and after 20 years the Israelites cry out to the Lord for help (4:3). (Note again the reference to iron chariots: the Israelites see this as a problem, but if they'd been obedient it wouldn't be, because God had promised to drive out the Canaanites regardless, iron chariots or not: Jos 17:18).
2. Deborah is:
 - a. a *prophet* (4:4). This is unusual in that she is a woman, but is not completely unheard of in Israel (e.g. Miriam, Ex 15:20). A prophet wasn't someone who necessarily told the future, but simply someone who spoke on God's behalf.
 - b. a *judge* (4:4) ('leading' Israel is literally 'judging' Israel). This is much more remarkable, as Israel had never had a female judge before and never would again. It should be noted that Deborah's brand of judging was not military, as with the other judges: when the need for war arose, she called on Barak (4:6). Rather, Deborah was a judge in the more usual sense of the word, i.e. a judicial figure who resolved disputes. This explains why she could 'judge' Israel *during* their oppression rather than *as a way to end it*: it wasn't that sort of judging. Having said that, Deborah was also a leader more generally, and her rank and authority in Israel should not be downplayed.
3. The Lord responds to Israel's cry for help (4:3) by sending Deborah, his prophet, to tell Barak to fight against Jabin's army and to promise that he will win.
4. Barak responds by saying that he will do it, but only on a condition: that Deborah comes with him. We don't know why sets this condition. Perhaps, since he knows Deborah is a prophetess, he wants her on the battlefield so that, if he needs to hear from God again, she can be his 'hotline.' But whatever the reason, it is unusual. God has already promised Barak he will win without Deborah, so it is odd that he feels the need to 'hedge his bets' in this way.
5. Deborah is taken aback. She is taken aback because she shouldn't have to go into battle: she is a judge of Israel, but not that sort of judge. But she is also taken aback because of Barak's behaviour: he is effectively putting an ultimatum to her and, by extension, because she is God's prophet, God himself.

As a result, she agrees to his request, but explains there will be consequences. Israel will still win the battle - it is God's battle, after all - but the honour that would otherwise have gone to Barak for leading it will now go to another. In fact, not just another, but a woman, which for ancient, patriarchal Barak would have been doubly humiliating (whatever we may think of that assessment).

6. Verses 8-9 really are the hinge of the whole passage: everything now turns on how Barak will be dishonoured because of his bargaining with Deborah (and God). His army wins the battle, but Sisera escapes (4:10-15). Considering it is Sisera whom God says he will deliver into Barak's (and now someone else's) hands, the battle is not really over until Sisera is dead. As it turns out, it is a woman who kills him, but not the one we expect. From 4:8, we expect it will be Deborah. But in the end, it is Jael, the pagan wife of the pagan tribesman who, up until recently, has been Jabin's ally. For Barak, it is one thing to have your honour taken by a woman, but a pagan woman?! His humiliation is complete. All he can do is turn up late and stare at the dead body in the tent.
7. After the battle, Deborah and Barak sing a song. It is to commemorate their victory, and all the main characters get a mention: Barak (5:12, 15), Deborah (5:7, 12, 15), and even pagan Jael (5:24-27) (in fact, she gets the longest and most complimentary write-up). But it is the Lord who is ultimately honoured as the winner. Note how the fighting is described in *cosmic terms*: the stars fight from heaven and the River Kishon from earth (5:19-23). In fact, the human element of the battle is so utterly overwhelmed that, in the description of the actual battle, Barak and his army aren't even mentioned! (5:19-23). This is God's victory.
8. Yahweh.
9. This has parallels to what is being taught in Judges 4-5. Jesus' attitude to his Father is one of obedience: he will die (Jn 12:24) and, although his soul is troubled, he will still obey his Father so that he might glorify him (Jn 12:27-28). The result of Jesus' obedience is that his Father will glorify him (Jn 12:23). There are no ultimatums issued here! Jesus will obey his Father and, as a result, his Father will honour him.
10. Our attitude towards Jesus (and hence the Father) should be the same. We too are to obey Jesus, by serving him, even to the point of death (Jn 12:25-26a). If we do, God will honour us (Jn 12:26b).

To finish

The point of this question is to take a common occurrence - someone thanking someone at church - and digging into the issues it raises. On the one hand, we are reluctant to accept such praise because it seems to be aimed in the wrong direction: people, not God. But on the other hand, it seems obvious that we should be grateful for what people do, and show that gratitude by thanking them. Hopefully, the study will have given a way to think about this: it is good to honour people who honour God. Of course, people who honour God are also those who don't seek honour themselves, which is also entirely as it should be.

Gideon: the weak judge

Judges 6:1-8:28

Getting started

This question is meant to introduce people to the idea of God using our weakness for his glory. Exactly how that works is the subject of this study, so this should be a good lead in.

Light from the Word

Read Judges 6:1-10

1. The Lord gives the Israelites into the hands of the Midianites. It's worth noting that this round of oppression is worse than before. Every year, the Midianites raid the Israelites' crops and herds and 'ravage' the land. It is so bad that the Israelites have to hide in caves and mountains when they invade; they are incapable of defending themselves. For the first time, we get the idea that the Israelites may get wiped out by the Canaanites unless something happens.
2. Again, the reason for the Israelites' woes is theological: they 'did evil in the eyes of the Lord' (6:2). The prophet's message in 6:8-10 fleshes out what this was: despite everything the Lord had done for them, they worshipped the gods of the Amorites. The Midianite oppression is God's response to this idolatry.
3. Again, they 'cry out to the Lord' for help (6:3).

Read Judges 6:11-32

4. God visits a man named Gideon and tells him to save Israel from Midian (6:12, 14).
5. This is a general question designed to get people to read the story and get a picture of who Gideon is. Basically, he seems a very unlikely candidate for Israel's saviour. Religiously, he comes from an Israelite but idolatrous family (6:25), and personally is bitter towards the Lord, feeling that he has abandoned Israel and that their glory days are therefore in the past (6:13). Temperamentally, he is cautious. He hides in a winepress to thresh grain, so he won't be found by raiders (6:11); he is sceptical of the claim that God is with him (6:13); he questions how he can save Israel given his lowly status (6:15); he asks for multiple proofs that the man speaking with him is God (6:17-24); and he destroys his family's pagan shrine at night-time because he is afraid of them (6:25-27). None of this makes Gideon a coward. All of his actions are reasonable. But it does make him cautious, and not the 'man of action' we have come to expect so far of judges.

Read Judges 6:33-7:25

6. 6:33 brings us back to the Midianite threat, and the fact that it has now gotten even worse. The Midianites have now gathered their allies and are preparing for what looks like a decisive strike. If Israel doesn't win this battle, they're finished.
The unusual tactic God adopts in the battle is to massively reduce the numbers of the Israelite army, from 32,000 to 300.
7. The reason is that, if God lets the Israelites fight Midian with too big an army, when they win (which they will, because God will make sure they win), the Israelites will think it was their own strength that won it, not God's (7:2). Therefore, God has to radically reduce the Israelite's numbers to make clear that, when they do win the battle, it was only because God was with them.
8. Gideon and his men win the battle (although note that in the end not even the 300 men kill anyone - the Midianites kill each other!) This was clearly a victory for the Lord (7:9, 22).

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

9. Bringing it into the New Testament, we see that the principle of God being glorified through human weakness is still relevant. Like Gideon, Paul is also on an offensive: not militarily, but spiritually, as he preaches the gospel. But also like Gideon, Paul adopts an unusual tactic: rather than making his preaching as humanly impressive as possible (1 Corinthians 2:1), he comes instead with the message of a crucified saviour 'in weakness and great trembling' (1 Corinthians 2:2-3).
10. The reason he does this is the same reason God prevents Gideon from fighting with a big army: so no one will be able to think the victory comes from themselves, but only from God. Paul doesn't preach with wise or persuasive words so that people's faith will rest not on human wisdom but on God's power (2:5).

To finish

This is a deliberately open-ended question and there are lots of answers that people could give. As a base-line, the 'God's-strength-through-my-weakness' principle must mean that we can never do a ministry to make ourselves look good. It must also mean that, when we have done our best in a ministry we are gifted in, we shouldn't worry about all things we didn't get right, because God can still use our weak, best efforts. On the other side, it might also be worth pointing out that this concept is not an excuse for sloppiness in ministry or that we should pay no attention to giftedness (or otherwise). We still need to do our best in ministry and do not need to deliberately put ourselves in positions of weakness; we are weak enough as it is without having to make ourselves deliberately so!

Abimelek: the man who would be king

Judges 8:29-9:57

Getting started

This question is meant to get people thinking about the risks of power, which are so richly illustrated by the story of Abimelek.

Light from the Word

Read Judges 8:29-9:6

1. As soon as Gideon dies, Israel does two things: *forget God* (and establish a fake god in his place, 'Baal Berith') (8:33-34); and *forget Gideon*, despite all the good things he did for them (8:35). That is, they start the cycle all over again.
2. The first break in the cycle is that God does not immediately punish the Israelites for their sin by sending the Canaanites to oppress them. The second break is that, since they're not being oppressed, the Israelites don't cry out for a saviour. Rather, they choose a king, Abimelek. This break in the cycle makes us ask: What does this mean? What will happen next? The answer is: God doesn't need to oppress Israel via the Canaanites, because he is going to do it instead from within, by their king.
3. Israel should have already known the dangers of appointing a king because of their previous experience of kings with the Canaanites, all of whom treated them badly. The difference between a 'judge' and a 'king' is one of succession. Both judges and kings ruled over all of Israel and performed much the same function, i.e. ruling on disputes and making laws (e.g. Deborah, 4:4) and saving them from oppression by fighting (e.g. everyone else). But judges were just once-off leaders. As soon as they died, there was no clarity as to who would succeed them and the process of finding a new leader had to start again. By contrast, a king is, by definition, a leader whose son succeeds him as leader once he dies. There is no question about who will lead the nation once he's dead: his son will, and his son will lead after he dies. As such, a king is a much more powerful figure than a judge. This raises bigger questions about the place of kingship in Israel and whether it is a good or a bad thing. For more details on that, see Appendix 2.
4. Abimelek is a dreadful king, every bit as brutal as the Canaanite kings. He is violent (the judges killed Canaanites, he killed his own family!); he is idolatrous (he takes a pagan god as his financial patron, 9:4); and, worst of all, he is permanent (as king, his tyranny won't now just last a lifetime, but forever). Abimelek becoming king is the greatest threat Israel has ever faced.

Read Judges 9:7-21

5. The parable is a lovely bit of political satire. In it, three useful plants (olive, fig, and grape) are all asked to be king but decline. Then, one useless plant (thornbush) is asked and accepts. Clearly, Abimelek is meant to be the thornbush! Jotham's point is clear: Israel have made a bad choice in asking Abimelek to be king. He is an evil man (9:16-18). If they did it in good faith (it's a big 'if!'), then Jotham wishes them all the best together. But if not, then: *'let fire come from Abimelek and consume you: the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo and consume Abimelek.'* (9:20) If they chose Abimelek not because they thought he would be a good ruler but just because he's a relative, then let them reap the consequences and be burned up by him when he inevitably self-combusts. Having told his parable, as readers we are now waiting to see if his prediction will come true. We won't have long to wait.

Read Judges 9:22-57

6. The short version is: Abimelek and the people who made him king, the citizens of Shechem, turn on each other and go to war. The longer version is below.
7. Jotham's curse in 5:20 is that Abimelek will 'consume' Shechem and Beth Millo and Shechem and Beth Millo will 'consume' Abimelek, i.e. they will destroy each other. In the rest of this chapter, this is exactly what we see:
- 9:25-29: Shechem 'consumes' Abimelek.
 - 9:30-49: Abimelek retaliates and 'consumes' Shechem.
- By 9:49, it looks like Jothan's parable hasn't come true. Abimelek and his enemies haven't consumed each other; if anything, Abimelek has come out of the encounter even stronger. But then he attacks Thebez and it is all over (9:50-55). Just like that, the man who would be king is dead.
8. Because God is just and will not let the tyranny of Abimelek and the city that made him king go unpunished.

Read Mark 10:42-45

9. By the time of Jesus, nothing has changed about human leadership: left to our own devices, we still naturally use authority to dominate others, not serve them.
10. Jesus models a completely different sort of leadership, both from the rulers of the Gentiles and Abimelek. He came not to be served, but to serve, even to the point of giving his life as a ransom for many. As Christians, we are to follow his example.

To finish

This is meant to get people thinking practically about how they can keep ministry leaders accountable, e.g. ensuring they have appropriate oversight, that it is clear who someone can go to if they have concerns about a leader, etc.

Jephthah: the bargaining judge

Judges 10-12

Getting started

This question is designed to get people thinking about the concept of bargaining, and in particular what's essential to it: having something the other person needs. Of course, this makes bargaining with God pointless: he needs nothing. The story of Jephthah is all about a man who bargains his way through life, including with God, with tragic results.

Light from the Word

Read Judges 10:6-16

1. The cycle of Judges is repeated in the same pattern as always: Israel sin (10:6); the Lord oppresses them via the Canaanites (10:7-9), and then Israel cries out (10:10). However, the cycle is different in two important ways:
 - a. Everything is getting worse.
 - i. Israel's apostasy is getting worse. 10:6 lists the gods of every nation around them; Israel is worshipping literally every god but the Lord.
 - ii. The oppression is getting worse. Israel is not just 'oppressed' by the Philistines and Ammonites; it is 'shattered and crushed.' More than that: for 18 years the Ammonites control only the eastern side of the Jordan. But in the 18th year, they cross the Jordan and invade Israel's heartland (10:8-9). Israel's very existence is now threatened. It is no wonder that Israel is in 'great distress.'
 - iii. God's response to Israel's cry is much more severe. For the first time ever, God refuses to answer their cry. He is sick of their sin and their short-term repentance. He has seen it all before. As such, he will not help them. When Israel insist they really are sorry this time, it says that God 'could bear Israel's misery no longer.' (10:16). This sounds like he takes pity on them but it is better taken to mean exasperation than pity (e.g. 'he became impatient over the misery of Israel', 10:16, ESV).
 - b. God doesn't send a judge (at least, apparently). He does not answer Israel's cries. It seems that, if Israel want a judge, they are going to have to find one themselves.

Read Judges 10:17-11:3

2. In the absence of God giving them a judge, the Israelites start organising their own. Their leaders meet and work out how to attract one: by offering him the leadership of Gilead (10:18). Note 10:3-5 and what it says about how attractive this offer may be: it was a region of thirty towns, wealthy enough to support thirty well-equipped rulers (as signified by the fact that they all have their own donkey - that might not sound like much to us, but this was

2nd Millennium BC Canaan!).

3. Jephthah is introduced as someone who might naturally be attracted to what the leaders of Gilead have to offer. On the one hand, he is a Gileadite (so much so that his father is simply called, 'Gilead'), and so someone who might feel drawn to rule it. He is also a 'mighty warrior', and so also someone who might be able to rule it. On the other hand, he is a bastard son and reviled by the rest of his family. If there was anyone who had a score to settle by taking back from his family what he felt was rightly his, it is Jephthah! He also has a heavily-armed band of warriors to help him do it. The stage is set for Jephthah to rise as Israel's next judge.

Read Judges 11:4-40

- a. The parties are Jephthah and the leaders of Gilead. What they're bargaining about is the leadership of Gilead. The leaders offer Jephthah the leadership. Jephthah responds by pointing out how desperate they must be: they hate him, but they're still willing to offer him the leadership? They must really be in strife! Of course, this is a bargaining tool: it highlights their weakness. The leaders know it and avoid the question, just repeating the offer (11:8). Jephthah presses his advantage in 11:9. What he says in effect is, 'You know that if I win it will be because the Lord has willed it, don't you, which means he's on my side? So once I've beaten our enemies, you won't dare back out our deal, will you?' The leaders meekly reply, 'No.'
- b. The parties are Jephthah and the Ammonite king. What they're bargaining about is the Ammonites' surrender. Jephthah gives the king a history lesson and says that all this land was given to Israel by God, so the Ammonites had better give it back. The Ammonite king pays no attention. War is declared.
- c. The parties are Jephthah and God. Jephthah bargains for victory against the Ammonites. He does so by making a very risky vow: promising to sacrifice the first thing he sees come out of his front door when he comes home from battle (11:30-31). The bargain, as it turns out, is pointless. Up until now, we haven't known whether Jephthah is God's choice as well as Israel's choice for judge. God has been quiet since 10:16. Now we find out: the Spirit of the Lord comes on Jephthah and he advances on the Ammonites (11:29). God has been with Jephthah all along; there is therefore no need to bargain with him for victory, it is already assured. But only we as readers know the Spirit has come on Jephthah; he doesn't. As such, he makes his risky bargain. The result is tragic. The first thing that comes out of his door to meet him is his only daughter. He fulfils his vow and sacrifices her, not only ending her life but also blotting out his own name from posterity: she is his only daughter, and she dies without children.

Study 6

Read Judges 11:33-36

5. God is in complete control of all things: he made them and they are all for him. He is in complete ownership of the universe.
6. Therefore, if one were to bargain with God - give to him and expect to be repaid - that would be pointless. God owns everything, and so there is nothing we can offer him by way of bargain that he doesn't already have.

To finish

People often bargain with God, in various ways. It might be explicit: 'If you give me what I want, I'll serve you forever.' It might be more subtle: praying really hard for something, and then feeling cheated by God if he doesn't give it to you because you put so much work in to asking for it. This question is meant to get people thinking about the ways they might sometimes try and manipulate God, and to instead approach him with faith.

Samson: the rebellious judge

Judges 13-16

Getting started

This question is to get people thinking about the cost of discipleship and living differently from the rest of the world. The great tragedy of Samson is that he is someone who is called to be different from the world around him and set apart for a particular mission, but who spends his life shunning this mission and just trying to be like everyone else.

Light from the Word

Read Judges 13:1-5

1. Israel has done evil in the eyes of the Lord, again. So, God gives them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.
2. a. A Nazirite. Nazirites were people who made a vow of special dedication to the Lord for a period of time. To mark their dedication, they refrained from drinking any alcohol or fermented drink, didn't cut their hair for the period of the vow, and weren't allowed to touch or even go near a dead body. The growing of their hair was the key symbol of their dedication: Nu 6:9. In the case of Samson, no vow is involved; he never gets a choice in the matter, he is a Nazirite from birth. He is also a Nazirite for life, rather than a particular period of time. Both these facts make Samson a special case; he is especially dedicated to the Lord (for what purpose, we will be told in 13:5).
b. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines

Read Judges 16:1-5

3. The greatest problem for the Philistines about killing Samson is his strength. He is able to tear city gates from their hinges and carry them up mountains! (16:3). This is clearly a supernatural strength. While he still holds it, he will be unstoppable.
4. The Philistine's solution is to get to Samson through his heart. He falls in love with a Philistine woman, Delilah. The Philistine rulers quickly seize on this fact and pay her to get him to betray the secret of his strength (16:4-5).

Read Judges 16:6-22

5. Each time Delilah tries to trap Samson, she fails. It may seem odd to us that Delilah would ask him so directly each time - it hardly seems a good way to trick someone! But when you think about it, it makes sense. Samson is besotted with Delilah, and she knows it. Samson already knows that the Philistines want to know the secret of his great strength but that none of them do. So, when Delilah asks him for it, what she is really asking him to do is tell him something no-one else knows; to be her soul-mate and confidant. For someone as in love with Delilah as Samson is, this sort of teasing love-play is attractive. On the other hand, Samson also knows what danger he will be in if the wrong people find out his secret, so he holds out (although note how close he gets to telling Delilah the third time when he draws attention to his hair. He is weakening).
6. Delilah finally succeeds by appealing directly to Samson's claim to love her: surely if he really loved her, he would tell her his secret. The implication is that, if he does not tell her, he does not love her, and then it will be over between them. Combine this with Delilah's sheer persistence (16:16) and eventually she wears him down. As a result of Delilah's success, Samson is captured and then blinded.

Read Judges 16:23-31

7. The story ends with Samson being taken to a party in honour of the Philistine god, Dagon. He is brought out to entertain the guests and propped between two pillars. Samson cries out one last time to God for strength to destroy the Philistines. His hair now having grown back (16:22), he pushes the pillars over, brings the temple down, and kills both himself and the more than 3000 Philistine revellers there.
8. On the one hand, he is a failure. He is violent, a womaniser, and continually rebels against God. Even his last prayer - to bring down the temple and kill the Philistines - is motivated by revenge rather than piety. But on the other hand, he is a success. God set him apart, via his Nazirite vow, to defeat the Philistines (13:5). By the end of his story this is what he's done (16:30), even if not in conscious obedience. The man who spends his whole life fighting against his specialness finally does his job.

Read Hebrews 11:32-33

9. It is surprising because of how positively it portrays them: Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, who we have all come to know as deeply flawed people, are praised as heroes of the faith, on a par with David, Samuel and the prophets, and everyone else in this list (Heb 11:1-12:2). How can this be?

Study 7

10. Because at their best, all the judges were still people who lived by faith (Heb 11:3). Gideon puts his faith in God entirely for his victory, letting him strip him of almost his whole army before going into battle. Jephthah recognises that the result of his battle with the Ammonites is in God's hands (11:24). Samson recognises that he is God's servant (15:18) and, in his last breath - even though motivated by revenge - asks God to do for him what he cannot do himself, destroy the Philistines. That is faith. In this sense, it is appropriate that the judges appear in a list that reaches its climax in Jesus, the perfectly faithful one (Heb 12:1-2). In fact, they totally belong here: if Jesus is the 'perfecter' of faith (12:2), it implies that the faith of those who came before him was less than perfect. That is certainly true of the judges! But it was faith nonetheless.

To finish

We can remember that it's futile to resist God's plan for our lives as Christians: if we have been called to be different from the world around us, then we will only be miserable if we try and resist that call. We can also remember that the Christian life, as hard as it can be sometimes, is genuinely the best way to live.

There was no king in Israel

Judges 17-21

Getting started

This question is designed to get people recognising that without governments our nations would quickly fall into chaos. During the time of Judges, during which there was no stable, permanent government - just a series of periodic judges - there was chaos. By introducing a refrain in this section, 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit' (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), Judges acknowledges that this state of affairs can't go on. To resist both its external and internal threats, Israel will need a king. This paves the way for the kings of Israel who will emerge in the books of 1 & 2 Samuel and also for the ultimate king, Jesus. This is where this study is headed.

Light from the Word

Read Judges 19

1. So many bad things happen in this chapter. It is the grizzliest chapter in the Bible. Here is a list of the awful things that happen: a Levite takes a concubine (v.1); she cheats on him and leaves him (v.2); when he goes to patch it up with her and they return home, none of the citizens of Gibeah show them any hospitality (in contrast to the over-the-top hospitality shown to the Levite by his father-in-law in vv.3-9) (v.15); when they are finally taken in by someone, some wicked men from the city surround the house and demand to be allowed to pack-rape the Levite (v.22); the Levite's and his concubine's host tries to save the Levite by offering to send out his virgin daughter and the concubine so the men can rape them instead (vv.23-24); the Levite sends out his concubine and the men pack-rape her all night until she is almost dead (vv.25-26); the Levite loads the concubine onto his donkey and, when he is back at his home, cuts her up into twelve pieces and sends them into all Israel (vv.29. Note: we are not even sure she is dead when he does this. He later says she was already dead, in 20:5-6, but the actual account simply says she did not answer him when he told her to get up: 19:28. As such, we are left with the possibility that the Levite dismembered her alive.) All the people of Israel who see the body parts say this is the worst thing that has happened in Israel's history (v.30). It is easy to believe them.

Read Judges 20

2. Chapter 20 describes the fall-out from this atrocity. Incensed at the brutality of the citizens of Gibeah - and by extension the tribe of Benjamin, where Gibeah sits - the rest of Israel meets at Mizpah, hears the full story of the atrocity, and declares war on Benjamin. Israel fights them and wins, with tens of thousands killed.

Study 8

3. Israel's original objective was to destroy the Canaanites. They start Judges unified in that goal: they all go up to the Lord and ask, 'Who of us is to go up first and fight against the Canaanites?' (1:1). By 20:18, they are asking exactly the same question, but this time about fighting the Benjamites. Israel were meant to fight the nations. Now, they are just fighting each other.

Read Judges 17:6 and 21:25

4. Everyone did 'as they saw fit' in those days. In context, 'as they saw fit' is evidently bad: it is a summary of all the evil these chapters (and the whole book) describes.
5. The reason they were able to do it is because Israel had no king in those days. The implication is that if Israel did, people would not have done all this evil, and hence Israel needs a king.
6. The fact that 'everyone' did as they saw fit at this time explains that these examples of evil were not isolated incidents; everyone behaved like this at the time. Evil was the norm. Israel's problem at a micro level was its extreme individualism. Israel's problem at a macro level was that there was no king to contain this individualism. Therefore, Israel needs a king.

Read Acts 13:16-23, 32-39

7. In his sermon summarising the Old Testament, Paul gives a blink-and-you'll-miss-it summary of the book of Judges: 'After this, God gave them judges.' (13:20b). The next thing he says is that God gave them what the end of Judges said they needed: a king. Saul was a false start, but after removing Saul God made David king, and he was the king Israel needed. Notably, he was someone who would 'do everything I want him to do' (13:22) rather than 'do as he sees fit' (Judges 21:25).
8. Jesus was David's descendant (13:23). But unlike David, Jesus can live forever. One of the great problems of the judges was that they were only able to bring peace for as long as they lived; as soon as they died, Israel descended into chaos again (Judges 2:18-19). David, as big an improvement as he was on the judges, also died: he could only rule and bring peace to Israel for so long. But Jesus does not die: he died once, but then was raised to life. As such, the promise made to David was kept in Jesus: he will 'will never see decay' (13:34-37). As a result, he can offer forgiveness of sin to everyone who believes in him (13:38-39). He is the king whose appointment to the kingship really fixes the problem of sinful independence ('everyone did as they saw fit'), because he can pay for it and forgive it.

To finish

Even though there is still injustice in the world, God has done something about it in Jesus. He has appointed a ruler who will one day bring an end to the moral chaos and who now, in the meantime, is offering forgiveness and transformation to its perpetrators.

Appendices

Appendix 1

How could a good God order the destruction of an entire race of people, including women and children? Given the limitations of space, we cannot give a detailed answer to this hard question. However, the following points are helpful in understanding why God does what he does here.

1. First, we must admit this is a horrible command: death and violence are part of the fall and so we are right to recoil from them, as God does himself. Though he is still completely just to punish sinners, the Bible insists that judgment is God's 'strange work' (Isaiah 28:21), i.e. it does not come naturally to him.
2. God's command to wipe out the Canaanites was unique in the history of the world and he will never issue it again.
3. The Canaanites were an evil civilization even by ancient standards: idolatry, child sacrifice and cultic prostitution were the norm. And yet God kept Israel enslaved in Egypt (which was no picnic itself!) for 400 years until the Canaanites had done enough to deserve their destruction. Although terrible, the judgment of God on the Canaanites was therefore proportional.
4. The Bible teaches that all people are guilty of sin and therefore all people deserve God's punishment in death. The fact that anyone - Canaanite, Israelite or us - is still alive is not a sign of God's justice but his mercy. It is only when we understand this that we can understand God's patience toward us in the gospel: that in waiting as long as he did to send Jesus to die for us, 'in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins' (Romans 3:25b).

Appendix 2 - The role of kingship in Israel

It is important to note that kingship per se in the Bible is not bad. Although God himself is Israel's 'king' (1 Sa 8:6), he is not against Israel also having human kings. As far back as Genesis, Jacob/Israel is told that 'kings will be among your descendants' (Gen 35:11). In Deuteronomy 17:14-20, God foresees that Israel will want a king and says that's alright, so long as they pick the right one. What makes 'the right one' is someone who rules under God's authority, not instead of it. 'When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.' (Deuteronomy 17:18-20) The reason God has to be so clear about this, even back in Deuteronomy, is that once Israel enters the land they will be very tempted to appoint a king 'like all the nations around us' (Dt 17:15). As we've already seen with the Canaanite kings, these sorts of kings are disastrous. Moreover, they would quickly lead Israel into idolatry and so totally defeat the purpose of Israel being in the land in the first place: to be a distinct nation, under God, who the rest of the world can look in on and say, 'So, that's what life under the Lord looks like! I'd love to live like that!' However, in appointing Abimelek, Israel appoint a king just like 'all the nations around us.' This is why he is such a disaster: not because he's a king, but because he's exactly the opposite to the sort of king God would chose to rule over his people.

This puts in context the refrain in the final chapters of Judges: 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.' (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Here, kingship is seen as a positive thing, as something that can bring an end to the chaos. But it will have to be the right sort of king, one who will rule under God, not instead of him. This is why Israel still fails even when kings are appointed in the books of Samuel and onwards. They have kings, but they fail to rule as they should, and Israel suffers. It will not be until Jesus Christ (lit. 'King Jesus') comes that Israel - and the world - will have a king who can really be trusted to rule properly.

