

### ***Moses Recorded the Stages in Their Journey***

*Here are the stages in the journey of the Israelites when they came out of Egypt by divisions under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. At the Lord's command Moses recorded the stages in their journey. -Numbers 33:1-2*

For forty years, the children of Israel journeyed through the Sinai Peninsula “on their way” to the promised land. According to Numbers 33, there were forty-one different stops along the way. Some of their stops lasted only days. Others would have been years. Moses was told by the Lord to record the stages in this wilderness journey. For what purpose did the Lord command that it be done, and what might we gain from recording the stages of our “journeys?”

Recently, I took a three-week trip that included some family time, some ministry and some R & R. It seemed important to me to keep a journal of my experiences--especially of the time of ministry--to serve as a record of what had taken place. Now, three months later, I am able to look back at what was recorded and read some things that I had already forgotten about. The journal serves as a reminder, not only of the places and events on my itinerary, but more important, of the lessons learned and the inspiration gained along the way.

***Course correction cannot happen unless you have marked your course***

Our lives and ministries have “journey stages” that have everything to do with where we are going. We might be pleased or dissatisfied with where we are and/or where we are going. But to answer the questions, “How did we get here?” and “Where are we going?” we need to look at the stages of our journey. And it will be a whole lot easier to evaluate our journey and destination if we take the time to record the stages.

There are many ways to record the stages of the journeys our lives, families, careers, businesses, ministries and churches. Journals, logs, photographs, videos, financial records, minutes and prophetic words are a few. We all have “milestones” that mark our course and need to be recorded. Remembering where you have been helps you to know where you are going. Course correction cannot happen unless you have marked your course. You have to be able to see the stages of your journey--especially those where you knew God was guiding--to keep you, or put you, in the right direction.

So, take time to record the stages in your journey. It will help you to reach your promised land.

### ***You Have Not Lacked Anything***

*The Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything. - Deuteronomy 2:7*

God is such a father to his children. The Lord sets our lives in the context of families so we can learn more about his nature. When we experience life as a child, and then, perhaps, as a parent, we are being given a framework to understand God. Even if our earthly experience is lacking or flawed, what we know instinctively about family teaches us something very important about God.

In eight different places, the Scriptures describe the Lord as *slow to anger and abounding in love*. “Slow to anger” does not mean “never angry.” The people of Israel knew how to spill over the banks of God’s patience, and did it all too often. When it happened, there was discipline from the Lord. But God--the Father--never lost his heart to restore and bless his children, even when they were disobedient.

It is worth noting that immediately after declaring that his people would not enter the promised land for forty years, the Lord gives instructions about what they are to do when they get there (see Numbers 15). He is letting them know that he will not forsake them or leave them. Until then, they will be wandering. That cannot be changed. But they will not be doing it alone. God will watch over their journey, bless the work of their hands and provide for their every need until the time comes for the ancient promise to be fulfilled through their children.

It would have been far better had they not faced the specter of the vast wilderness for forty years. They missed God’s best but God was not about to abandon them. Likewise, we do not want to put the Lord our God to the test and boil the slow cooker of his anger. But even in his anger, he does not forsake. Like a good father, he disciplines and then continues to care for us. His continued kindness leads us to repentance and the restoration of his plans for us.

He provides for us, watches over us and blesses the work of our hands--even during the times when he is disciplining us. And isn't that what a Dad does?

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### ***Do Not Add to What I Command You and Do Not Subtract***

*Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you. -Deuteronomy 4:1-2*

To be faithful to the Scriptures is not easy. Really it is not. There are some tough choices if we are to be faithful to follow what the Bible tells us we should do. Too often we *add to or subtract from* what God has given us in his written word. "Did God really say that?" "Here's what that really means." "That won't work in today's world." "You need to be more tolerant than that."

Faithfulness to the Scriptures is more than sounding out the self-promoting claim that "we live by the Bible." It is to honestly seek the truth of the Scriptures and then to deliberately, despite the perceived consequences, actually do what you've discovered the Bible says that you should do. Do not add to what has been commanded and do not take away. Yes, there is the extremely important matter of *rightly dividing the word of truth* (2 Ti 2:15 KJV), but do not mistake adding or subtracting from what God has said for correct interpretation.

Adding to the command of God and subtracting from it is actually quite popular today. Churches and Christians from every persuasion are susceptible to this practice. It's not just the "liberals" who do it, either. So-called "Bible believing churches" can be really good at it. It is amazing what we leave out and what we put in to suit our fancy. And, it is awfully easy to do. Innovative teachers, the influence of current culture and "itching ears" to hear what we prefer make it easy to add. Pressure to conform and convenient oversight of the "hard sayings" make it easy to subtract.

There are tough personal choices that are found in the Bible: Love your enemy, forgive those who have wronged you, don't marry an unbeliever, give the first-fruits of your income, don't cheat the tax man, witness to your neighbor, stay faithful to your spouse, die to self--it's all in there. Jesus gave us the mandate to make disciples by "*teaching them to obey everything I have commanded . . .*" Nothing is to be left out and nothing is to be added. Remember Revelation 22:18.

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**Love the Lord Your God With . . .**

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. - Deuteronomy 6:4-5*

Jesus affirms Deuteronomy 6:5 as the greatest of all commandments. It is clear that the highest calling of every person on the face of the planet is to love God with everything that he or she is made of. What does it mean to *love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*? How do we love God with our heart? With our soul? With our strength? How would fulfilling this commandment translate into actual experience? Does it mean a particular feeling? Lifestyle? Commitment? Action? Whatever the practical answer to that question is, there is something more fundamental, more profound, that we should consider first.

I believe that God did not give us the commandment to love him with everything we are without first loving us with everything he is. God has not required us to love him with all our heart, soul, and strength without first loving us with all his heart, soul, and strength.

***God did not give us the commandment to love him with everything we are without first loving us with everything he is***

Imagine the immensity of the heart of God that created humankind in his image and longs for intimate relationship with every single man, woman and child. Think about the depth of the soul (the being) of God that not only designed the universe but encompasses everyone and everything in it with perfect holiness and justice. Envision the strength of God who with just the word of his mouth brought the vast expanse of the cosmos into being and with just a word will bring it to destruction in the twinkling of an eye.

What then is the result of God loving us with all he is? How does God's love for us translate into actual experience? The ultimate result of God loving us with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength is the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus is everything that God would or could give. All the fullness of God, including all his heart, soul, and strength, was given to us in Jesus, so that we in turn could finally fulfill the wonderful desire of God for us: To love him with all our heart, all our soul and all our strength.

**He Brought You Water out of Hard Rock**

*He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert . . . -Deuteronomy 8:15-16*

Earlier in Deuteronomy we find Moses reminding the people that for the previous forty years the Lord was watching over them, providing for them and blessing the work of their hands (Chapter 2). As Moses continues to exhort the people here in Chapter 8, he reminds them of how amazing that provision really was.

If there was ever a place to lose faith that you would have adequate provision, it would be in the desert. Where is there water to drink? Where is there food to eat? Nowhere. Not in the desert. But God is faithful. He will provide for you even when you are in the desert.

***If God can make a fountain out of a rock and deliver bread from the sky, surely he can provide for you in your time of need***

The people of Israel looked at their circumstances and they were appalled at their prospects for survival. There would be no possible way to subsist. Many times they thought they would have been better off to stay in Egypt as slaves than to come out to the desert to die for lack of the basic necessities of life. Was God willing to provide? Was he able?

What did God do? He led them *through that vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land*, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. And look how he provided. Think about it. Water out of a rock. Bread that came down from heaven. Clothes that never wore out. No wonder Jesus said don't worry about what you shall eat or drink or wear (Mt 6:25). The heart and the ability of the Father to provide for his own is beyond question.

So what desert are you in? It really doesn't matter. If God can make a fountain out of a rock and deliver bread from the sky, surely he can provide for you in your time of need. And despite the rebellion and hardheartedness of his people, he was still willing to provide for them.

The place you're in may be vast and dreadful. It may be thirsty and waterless. It may be crawling with venomous snakes and scorpions. God will provide. He is both willing and able.

### ***Nations Greater and Stronger Than You***

*You are now about to cross the Jordan to go in and dispossess nations greater and stronger than you.... The people are strong and tall--Anakites! You...have heard it said: "Who can stand up against the Anakites?" But be assured today that the Lord your God is the one who goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire... -Deuteronomy 9:1-3*

You have enemies that are greater and stronger than you. Make no mistake about your own ability to conquer the forces that are aligned against you and the ones you love. You need to know up front that you are weaker and they are stronger. This realization is the starting point for you to actively dispossess every force the world, the flesh and the devil have garnered to ruin you.

The nation of Israel was about to dispossess enemies that were greater and stronger than they. God's people had already heard about the Anakites: *Strong and tall, living in large cities with walls that reach to the sky.* People everywhere were saying, *"Who can stand up against the Anakites?"* The reality of the situation was that if there was any nation that could drive the Anakites from their territory and take it over it was certainly not the Israelites. And God was the first to tell them that. God intended for them to be free from delusion about their own strength. He also wanted to assure them that he understood their fears. Being free from both delusion and fear would put them in a place where they could trust in the God who promised to go ahead of them into battle as a devouring fire to destroy and subdue the Anakites and allow the people of Israel to drive out and quickly annihilate their enemies. The people of God also needed to understand that the Lord was bringing judgment on the wickedness of these nations. They were the enemies of Israel because they were enemies of the God of Israel--not just because they occupied the promised land.

We face enemies of all kinds. The ones we need to dispossess are greater and stronger than we are. Recognizing our inadequacies is the first step to seeing the victory of the Lord. Then we will be ready to depend on his presence and his great strength to drive out our enemies, who happen to be his enemies as well.

Don't worry that your enemies are greater and stronger than you. This realization provides a dependance on the Lord and a greater opportunity for the glory of his victory.

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### ***Every Three Years***

*At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites...and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. -Deuteronomy 14:28-29*

Now here is a plan to eliminate hunger. Every third year we take one tenth of all that's been produced and we bring it into storehouses for those in need. This was part of the "welfare system" that the Lord gave to Israel.

There were six practical elements that worked together to keep people from becoming disadvantaged: 1) The gleanings of the yearly harvest and the fallow year belonged to the poor (Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:10-22). 2) Israelites could hire themselves out to their own countrymen in servitude, but for no more than six years, after which they would be set free with generous compensation (Ex 21:2; Dt 15:12-14). 3) All loans among the Israelites were to be interest free (Ex 22:25; Lev 25:36-37; Dt 23:19). 4) Debts were to be canceled every seven years (Dt 15:1). 5) Every third year a tenth of all the produce would be collected and stored for the Levite, alien, widow and orphan. 6) The Lord would see to it that there was prosperity in the land (Dt 28:1-14).

This idea of collecting a tenth of the produce every three years and storing it up for the poor is intriguing. It was an ingeniously practical way to store up plentiful provision without a major hit on production. The people were accustomed to giving a tithe of the produce to the Lord anyway. It was his, and he decided that every third year this portion would go for the aliens the fatherless, the widows and the Levites. These designations are in line with what we know to be a principle found in both the Old and New Testaments of providing for those who can't, or aren't supposed to, provide for themselves.

I know that our public welfare system is complicated and ponderously bureaucratic and that a cursory study of Old Testament social welfare provisions will not fully equip a person to restructure the welfare state. But since it was God who set up this practical welfare strategy, there might be a few things that we can learn from it. The Lord knew what he was doing when he instituted these policies and procedures. As much as we can, we should learn the rudiments and rationale of these principles. God's way, after all, just may be the best way.

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### ***No Man Should Appear Before the Lord Empty-handed***

*Three times a year all your men must appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. No man should appear before the Lord empty-handed . . . -Deuteronomy 16:16*

Offering sacrifices was the mainstay of the worship of Yahweh. Always, the question was, “Will my offering be acceptable to the Lord?” Abel’s offering was acceptable. Cain’s was not. Aaron’s offerings were acceptable. Nadab and Abihu’s were not. David’s offerings were acceptable. In the end, Saul’s were not. In the New Testament, the Magi with their gifts, the widow with her mite and Cornelius with his gifts to the poor all brought acceptable offerings. In the tabernacle and temple worship, the Lord prescribed what an acceptable offering would look like as the people came before him in worship. It was inconceivable that anyone would attempt to appear before him empty-handed.

As a child, I remember the importance that I attached to giving my mom an appropriate Christmas present. Whatever it took, I needed to get a gift—one that she would like. It didn’t have to cost a lot, it just had to be special. I wanted it to be acceptable to her, and it always was. There was just no way that I would be without a gift for my mom at Christmas.

The Israelite men were to appear before the Lord three times a year. Never were they to appear empty-handed. The Lord was worthy of their offerings and their sacrifices of worship. It would have been a shameful thing to come before him with nothing to offer.

One day, sooner than most of us think, we will stand before the Lord. What will we have to offer? Will we appear before him empty-handed? Will we be like the unfaithful steward in Jesus’ parable of the talents who did not use what he was given and had nothing to offer upon the Master’s return? Will what we offer be revealed as gold, silver and costly stones, or will it be burned up like wood, hay and stubble? What will be *our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes?* Will it be the most precious offering of all: Souls purchased by the blood of Jesus and made ready for eternity through our service?

What will be the acceptable offering when we appear before the Lord? This is more than a performance issue. It is a stewardship issue. It is a worship issue. To appear before him empty-handed is unthinkable.

***Will we appear before him empty-handed?***

### ***Let No One Be Found among You . . .***

*Let no one be found among you...who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, and because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you. -Deuteronomy 18:10-12*

I decided to go see “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone.” Aside from its juvenile depictions and inane storylines, the movie was a flagrant violation of Deuteronomy 18. Most, if not all, of the above injunctions were breached in this portrayal of the apprenticeship of a young sorcerer. The movie, and the series of books from which it is derived, is a blatant mix of witchcraft and pagan mythology. Those who see it as innocent are spiritually ignorant. Those who see it as enlightening are spiritually dark.

The popularity of the Harry Potter movies and books indicates that spiritual ignorance and darkness are epidemic. In all the hoopla leading up to the release of the first movie, I did not hear one negative comment of review out of the mainstream media. Was it because the movie was that good? Please! It was because very few are willing and able to buck the spirit of the age. It is unpopular to knock the popular. More than that, the god of this world has a vested interest, perhaps even his ultimate interest, in sowing these prohibited occult practices among the populace. If the detestable practices of fortune telling, sorcery, omen interpreting, witchcraft, spell casting, channeling, spiritism and necromancy become inculcated in the culture, the culture becomes detestable to the Lord. And then we’ll realize how innocent Harry Potter really was.

“Harry Potter” is not the threat. It’s the popularity of Harry Potter that scares me. The word occult means “hidden things.” When occult practices become less hidden and more popular, we face real trouble. And the church cannot deflect responsibility for all this coming to pass where we live. Our own spiritual ignorance and lack of power in preaching the gospel have left the culture ripe for the picking. The ultimate solution is not in protesting against “Harry Potter.” It is in testifying for the Lord Jesus Christ.

By the way, if you ever want to know what to do with a sorcerer’s stone, read 2 Kings 10:18-27.

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**All Israel Will Hear of it and Be Afraid**

*If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother...his father and mother shall bring him to the elders...They shall say, "This son is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us.... all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil...All Israel will hear of it and be afraid. -Deuteronomy 21:18-21*

I remember the debate in university regarding whether stiffer penalties were a deterrent to crime. The majority opinion was “no”—that the criminal does not think about the “time” before he does the “crime.” It is hard to imagine, however, that this would have been the case in an Israel where they were consistent in exacting the law of Moses.

The Hebrew Scriptures are clear that severe penalties were indeed meant to be a deterrent to wrongdoing. When these serious judgments (i.e. stoning) were meted out, the result would be that

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*all Israel will hear of it and be afraid* (see also Deuteronomy 13:11; 17:13 and 19:20). Enticing others into idolatry, contempt for judges, malicious perjury and stubborn rebelliousness all were to be judged most severely to ensure that *the evil was purged from among them.*

The austerity of these penalties may be difficult to accept, but the reason for them was crystal clear. If Israel were to be a holy nation, serving a holy God, such things could not exist. Harsh penalties and severe judgments served as both a retribution and a deterrent. Just as fear seized the whole church when Ananias and Sapphira were punished, all Israel would hear about these judgments and “be afraid” of ever repeating the offense.

Now, concerning the stoning of the rebellious son—it would take some doing for a parent to come to the point of handing him over to be stoned. If by chance the son was actually not a *profligate and a drunkard* the elders of the town would know this and protect him from unjust punishment. The Lord instituted safeguards to ensure there would be discernment in these matters—a fact that separates the Israelite code from Islamic practice.

Am I advocating a return to stoning? No. More severe penalties for criminals? Perhaps. At the cross, mercy triumphed over judgment. Punishment has to do with fear, and perfect love drives out fear. But until the love of God is perfected in all people, there must be the fear of punishment to restrain wrongdoing. And for that restraint to be real, the punishment must be as well.

**And Bring Happiness to the Wife He Has Married**

*If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married. -Deuteronomy 24:5*

If you are like me, you do some wincing as you read through of the law of Moses because of the “punitive justice” decreed there. But we must remember that there is a whole lot of what may be termed as “mercy justice” found there as well. While the punitive justice shows the discipline of the Lord, the mercy justice shows his compassion.

Consider these examples from this section of Deuteronomy (23:15-25:19): A slave who has been mistreated and has fled for refuge to another place was not to be turned over to his oppressive

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master (23:15-16). An Israelite who needed to borrow was not to be charged any interest (23:19-20). Individuals who were hungry were allowed to enter into their neighbor’s grainfields and vineyards to eat. (23:24-25). A person’s means of livelihood (i.e., their tools) were not allowed to be taken as security for a debt (24:6). Entry into a person’s house to obtain security for a debt was forbidden (24:10-11). If a poor man offered his cloak as security for a loan, but was unable to repay by sunset, the cloak was to be returned as an act of kindness so that the poor man wouldn’t have to sleep without a covering that night (24:12-13). Wages were not to be withheld—even for a day (24:14-15). Aliens were not to be deprived of justice nor was the cloak of a widow to be taken in pledge (24:17-18). Crops were to be harvested only once so that the alien, fatherless and widow could glean for themselves what was left (24:19-22). An ox was not to be muzzled while treading grain so that it too could eat and be nourished (25:4). Weights and measures were to be consistent and accurate so that no one would be cheated (25:15).

One of my favorites is the stipulation that a man who was recently married was not to be sent off to war or have any other duty for one year so that he could be free to stay at home and bring happiness to his bride (24:5). Isn’t that great? During the first year of my marriage, the church that my wife and I were pastoring was very respectful of our time together and was intentional about keeping expectations at a minimum so that we could devote ourselves to each other as much as possible. I could concentrate on “bringing happiness to the wife I had married.” Did it work? It did, and the Lord gave us a wonderful first year of marriage.

### ***If You Fully Obey***

*If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God..... -Deuteronomy 28:1-2*

The kingdom was never designed for half-hearted participation. It doesn't really work unless we give it our all. Nothing less than full obedience is required if we want to receive the full blessing of God.

Here in Deuteronomy 28, the blessing of God was conditioned on Israel's full obedience. The Hebrew phrase usually translated "to obey" is "be qol shama," which is more literally rendered "listen to the voice" (shama=to hear; qol=voice). In verse one, the Hebrew phrase is "be qol shama shama," which, if you wanted to translate it literally, would come out something like "listen, listen to the voice"—thus, the translation, "fully obey."

When a coach or a teacher or a parent says, "Do you hear me?" they are not wanting to know if the physical sense of hearing is in operation. They are looking for the affirmation that

***We live lives of partial obedience and wonder why the full blessing of God has not come***

obedience to instruction is forthcoming. So, God is saying, "If you pay full attention to what I say, all these blessings will come upon you." He is looking for a people whose hearts are fully devoted to him and who really listen to him—not like the *double-minded man, unstable in all he does* (Jam 1:8), or lukewarm Christians who are in danger of being spit out of the Lord's mouth or partially obedient leaders like King Saul who have their kingdoms torn away from them and given to others because they will not fully obey.

Many of us live lives of partial obedience and wonder why the full blessing of God has not come. The kingdom does not work that way. To those who have, even more will be given because they are the ones who have proven themselves faithful in the small things. The motto of every great saint has been "no compromise." This is not a matter of legalistic perfectionism. It is a matter of heart devotion. Even though King David's fall was serious, he was known as a man after God's own heart who *will do everything that I want him to do* (Ac 13:22). It was not "some of what I want him to do," nor "most of what I want him to do," but "everything that I want him to do."

The kingdom of God is an "all or nothing" proposition. You can play church if you want, but the promise of his blessing is for those who will "hearken unto his voice" and fully obey.

### ***I Will Be Safe, Even Though I Persist in Going My Own Way***

*When such a person hears the words of this oath, he invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, "I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way." -Deuteronomy 29:18-19*

There will always be persons who count on some false safeguard of justification before God—some superstition that would belie the truth and fruit of who they really are. We all know that there are divine requirements, so many look for that invulnerable charm that becomes a fanciful safety net for their souls—some ritual, some formula, some world view that will allow them to do things their own way and pacify the God of their imagination at the same time.

The people of Israel were brought before the Lord to stand in his presence and hear the words of the covenant—an oath from the Lord himself that would invoke blessing not only on all those who stood to hear it but on

***Many look for that invulnerable charm that becomes a fanciful safety net for their souls***

all who would ever be part of Israel. The Lord warned that there would be those who would invoke upon themselves the blessing of this covenantal oath and think, "*I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way.*" In other words, "I can do whatever I want 'cause I'm covered."

People who do such things are fooling themselves. "He goes to church on Sunday and lives like the devil on Monday" is more than a cliché. It is how millions of people live. It could be going to church. It could be going to the mosque, the synagogue or the temple. Not everyone who attends religious services does so as an insurance marker against a self-indulged life, but in some religious assemblies it is all too true.

People who believe that they can count on their baptism to save them from their fruitless lives are deluded. None of the other "sacraments" will do it either. Being part of a certain religious community will not cut it. If being a child of Abraham wasn't good enough (see Luke 3:8), whatever church roll your name is on won't hack it either. Neither will your religious works, your repetitive prayers or the fact that you are primarily a "good" person (or, here's the latest—a "spiritual" person). And forget the doctrines of universal salvation and eternal security. Both will lead you to think, "I am safe," while you slip into hell.

Be assured that you will never be safe if you persist in going your own way.

### ***The Lord's Portion Is His People***

*When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel. For the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance. -Deuteronomy 32:8-9*

A six-hundred year-old promise for an inheritance was about to be fulfilled. The tribes of Israel were about to go into the land of their promised inheritance to take possession. The tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh had already received their allotment on the east side of the Jordan River. The rest of the tribes were eager to know and receive the portion of their particular inheritance that awaited them on the other side of the Jordan.

You may have received an inheritance at one time or another. There was a portion of an estate that fell to you. You may have known about it beforehand or it may have come to you by surprise. If you knew about it ahead of time you still had to wait to receive what had been willed to you—but it was your portion. And it may have been the case that the person from whom you were receiving the inheritance asked you if there was anything in particular that you wanted to receive as part of your inheritance—something that had sentimental or practical value.

As the Lord was about to assign portions to the different tribes, it was affirmed in the song that God gave Moses that it was the Most High who had apportioned the land for all the nations of the earth according to the boundaries he had set. Each nation had their own portion of the inheritance of the earth given to them by the Lord. After all, *the earth is the Lord's and everything in it* (Ps 24:1). And even though all creation is his, Yahweh chose a special portion for himself as his valued inheritance: His people.

Jacob was the allotment that the Lord had chosen for himself. What does God care about mountains, or plains, or rivers or oceans, or even galaxies for that matter? None of these are made in his image. What he wants is to have a people—a people to call his own, who call him by name and are known by that same name—a people of his inheritance, a treasured possession.

*The Lord's portion is his people. We are that portion.*

***What does God care about mountains, or plains, or rivers or oceans, or even galaxies?***

### ***Let the Beloved of the Lord Rest Secure in Him***

*About Benjamin he said: "Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him, for He shields him all day long, and the one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders." -Deuteronomy 33:12*

Moses is blessing the tribes of Israel before he take his last breath. He has various blessings for the different tribes. Under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, Moses encapsulates the history and future of each tribe into a few short phrases. Moses' blessing for the tribe of Benjamin is beautiful: *"Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders."*

Benjamin is called *the beloved of the Lord*. Say what you want about the firstborn—there is a special place in the heart of a parent for the last born. Benjamin certainly carried that place in the heart of his father, Jacob, and as the last of the twelve tribes that made up the Lord's treasured possession, it could have been that they found a special favor from God as well.

The first part of the blessing of Moses is that Benjamin would *rest secure* in the Lord, *for he shields him all day long*. Those who "rest secure" have no cares or worries about being harmed because they are in him. The Hebrew for "rest secure" is used to describe an "unsuspecting" army. The beloved of the Lord are like children who rest so secure, that they don't even know how to give thought to the threat of danger. They are "shalom, shalom," that is *in perfect peace* because the Lord shields them all day long.

The second part of the blessing is that they *rest between his shoulders*. The meaning of that phrase becomes clear when you compare it to the exact same Hebrew phrase in 1 Samuel 17:6 which says that Goliath's javelin was *slung on his back*. The picture that Moses is painting for the tribe of Benjamin is that of a father who carries his child on his shoulders. The entire blessing of Moses for Benjamin is consistent: A beloved son, oblivious to danger, protected at all times and carried along on the shoulders of his father.

This is a beautiful, comforting blessing that should you need to take hold of today, you can. Jacob gave his beloved son the name Benjamin, which means, "Son of my right hand." The Lord Jesus is "Benjamin" to the Father. He sits at the right hand of God to make intercession for we who are the beloved of the Lord—so that we might rest secure in him, being shielded all day long, resting between his shoulders.

***A beloved son, protected at all times and carried along on the shoulders of his father***

### ***Be Strong and Courageous***

*“Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous... Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” -Joshua 1:6-7,9*

*“Be strong and courageous.”* This was the Lord’s charge to Joshua. Joshua’s task was to lead the people into the land that, for generations, the Lord had promised would be their inheritance. They would face many challenges from the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites. But the biggest challenge they would face would be their own fear. To combat that fear, the people would need a leader who would be *strong and very courageous*.

The Lord’s pep talk to Joshua on the eve of his entrance into the arena east of the Jordan could not have been more encouraging. He says, *“As I was with Moses, so I will be with you.”* *“I will give you everyplace where you set your foot.”* *“No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life.”* *“I will never leave you or forsake you.”* *“The Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”* These promises would help Joshua to be strong and courageous.

***The Lord is calling. Our mentors are calling. And the people are calling.***

Seven times in the Scriptures Joshua is exhorted to *be strong and courageous*. The Lord tells Joshua to *“be strong and courageous.”* Moses tells Joshua to *“be strong and courageous.”* And, interestingly, in Joshua 1:18, the people respond to Joshua’s leadership by giving him the same exhortation. They say to him, *“be strong and courageous.”* The call for leaders today is still the same. The Lord is calling. Our mentors are calling. And the people are calling: *“Be strong and courageous.”*

Hebrews 10:38 says, *“My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.”* The worst thing that Joshua could do as he began to lead the people would be to “shrink back.” What the Lord and the people were looking for from Joshua was a strength and a courage rooted in a faith that God would accomplish all that he said he would. There would be no excuse for being timid because God’s call and his promise was clear. A spirit of timidity is never from God—humility, yes, but the timid will not find the favor of God. It is the strong and courageous who will take the land.

### ***Today I Have Rolled Away the Reproach of Egypt from You***

*Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.” So the place has been called Gilgal to this day. -Joshua 5:9*

Gilgal was a very important place in the history of the children of Israel. Some might mistakenly remember Jericho as the first place the children of Israel went after crossing the Jordan River into the land of promise. But it was Gilgal where they first set their feet, and it was at Gilgal where the Lord established—by a testimony of three witnesses—his intention for their future.

The first testimony was the twelve *stones* of remembrance that were taken out of the Jordan to remind future generations that it was near Gilgal that the Israelites entered the land across a miraculously dry river bed. The second was circumcision. None of the males who were born in the desert wanderings had yet been circumcised. But now at Gilgal, this sign of the Abrahamic covenant was commemorated en masse as the entire nation entered the land first promised to Abraham. Third, the very first Passover observance that Israel celebrated in the land of their inheritance was at Gilgal. All three signs made Gilgal a very special place.

And so, it was at Gilgal that the Lord *rolled away the reproach of Egypt from the people* (“Gilgal” sounds like the Hebrew word for “roll”). The national psyche literally changed at Gilgal. For more than four hundred years the descendants of Israel had borne *the reproach of Egypt*, and now the Lord was rolling it away. The insult, the humiliation, the contempt, the shame, the inferiority, and the disgrace brought on by generations of slavery was rolled away at Gilgal. The collective reproach of the people which sapped their faith the first time they were called, and failed, to enter Canaan was now history. Their dignity as a nation was established at Gilgal. They were in the promised land.

Oh, how we need our own Gilgal. That place that the Lord rolls away whatever reproach we bear. That place where the disappointment, shame and disgrace of the past becomes overshadowed by the fulfillment of his promise and a hopeful anticipation of what lies ahead. That place where our dignity and calling are authenticated.

No matter how deep your reproach may be, your Gilgal awaits. It is the place where, by the power of the cross, the Lord will say to you, *“Today, I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.”* Hallelujah!

***The national psyche literally changed at Gilgal***

### ***They Have Been Made Liable to Destruction***

*Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant...They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. -Joshua 7:11-12*

Sometimes things go wrong for a reason. Sometimes you have to ask yourself, “is there sin in the camp?” Granted, it is not always because there is some hidden sin that things go wrong, but to ask if the blessing of the Lord is being withheld because of some disobedience is the right place to start.

Joshua didn’t know what happened. Was it presumptuous that they tried to take the city of Ai with just a few men? He and the elders of Israel spent all day face down before the ark of the Lord, disheartened at the defeat of the Israelite army at the hands of Ai. Things had gone terribly wrong. They had every right to expect victory. The Lord had promised, and had delivered so dramatically at Jericho. What was the problem?

***Really, how could the Lord just overlook what Achan did?***

Then the answer from the Lord came: “*Israel has sinned.*” A man named Achan had disobeyed the word of the Lord and took for himself some of the plunder from the defeat of Jericho. One man sins and makes the whole nation liable to destruction. One man disobeys and the Lord says, “*Israel has sinned.*” How is it that one man’s sin can affect the whole community? Is the entire company only as good as its weakest link? Does one bad apple really spoil the whole bushel? Does just a little yeast leaven the entire loaf?

Achan was part of Israel. Achan sinned, so Israel sinned. If the guy had waited just one more battle he could have taken all the plunder that he wanted. But he, like King Saul later on, just couldn’t make sense of seeing all this good stuff devoted to destruction. But the Lord doesn’t call for our opinion about what sense it makes, he calls for our obedience.

The proviso the Lord gave Israel for victory was dependent on whether they would fully obey (see Deuteronomy 28:1). And really, how could the Lord just overlook what Achan did? Because of his action, it could not be said that Israel had fully obeyed. Thus, they were made liable to destruction.

Is the blessing of the Lord really that tenuous? Truthfully—I don’t know. I have seen the grace of God cover a lot of stuff. What I do know is that if you want the “full-meal-deal,” you will have to pay the price of obedience. The higher the stakes the costlier the mistakes—as Achan learned.

### ***They Sampled Their Provisions but Did Not Inquire of the Lord***

*The men of Israel sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the Lord. Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them to let them live, and the leaders of the assembly ratified it by oath. -Joshua 9:14-15*

The people of Gibeon knew they were in trouble. As all the inhabitants of Canaan were aware, a nation with the reputation of having a great God was poised not only to displace but destroy them all. While most of the others in the promised land were making preparations for war against Israel, the Gibeonites had different plans. They would resort to a ruse.

The ploy was a clever one. They would send a delegation that would appear as if they had journeyed from a distant land. Cracked wine skins, old food and worn clothes would make it appear as if they had been traveling for a long time. Saying that they had heard of the fame of the Lord, the Gibeonites delegation proposed a treaty. Joshua and the men of Israel checked out the provisions, but they did not inquire of the Lord. On the basis of what they

***While there can be an unhealthy skepticism born from unbelief, there is a healthy kind born from wisdom***

saw, Joshua made a treaty of peace and the leaders ratified it by oath, thus making the pact irrevocable. Imagine how they felt three days later when they heard through the grapevine that the Gibeonites were really their neighbours.

What do we learn from this? One, things are not always what they seem (some would say rarely). Two, there is more than one way to check out a story and wisdom says that we use multiple means. Three, it is possible to be too trusting, especially if there is unfamiliarity concerning circumstances or character.

While there can be an unhealthy skepticism born from unbelief, there is a healthy kind born from wisdom. Much more valuable than skepticism, however, is discernment. The biggest mistake that Joshua and the leaders made was that they did not inquire of the Lord. The Lord did not leave them without means of discernment. Joshua could simply have asked the Lord, or they could have inquired through the High Priest by means of Urim and Thummim. But they didn’t ask. Their trust in their own senses placed them in an unwanted situation that could not be reversed.

The Lord could have intervened, but he didn’t. He knew what was going on, but remained silent. He was waiting to be asked. Whatever decisions we have, no matter what things look like, we really need to inquire of the Lord. Sampling the provisions is good. Inquiring of the Lord is best.

### **Joshua Went and Destroyed the Anakites**

*At that time Joshua went and destroyed the Anakites from the hill country: from Hebron, Debir and Anab, from all the hill country of Judah, and from all the hill country of Israel. Joshua totally destroyed them and their towns. No Anakites were left in Israelite territory... -Joshua 11:21-22*

Remember the Anakites? These were the descendants of the Nephilim, those *heroes of old, men of renown* (Gen 6:4), the ancestors of Goliath. These giants were the reason that the ten unbelieving spies said it would be impossible for Israel to take the land of promise. They said, *“The people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there.... We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them”* (Nu 13:28,33). There was even a saying at that time among the people: *“Who can stand up against the Anakites?”* (Dt 9:2).

How anticlimactic then is the report of the defeat of the Anakites here in Joshua 11? “Oh, by the way *Joshua went and destroyed the Anakites.*” The story is hardly more than a footnote in the chronicle of Joshua.

**Remember the Anakites?**

Maybe the defeat of the Anakites was indeed anticlimactic to the Lord’s people. These tall and powerful men with legendary reputations as warriors were supposed to be invincible, and yet by the time Joshua and his forces meet up with them in battle, it really is no big deal. The Anakites were completely vanquished from Israelite territory. Nothing is said of a great battle against such a formidable foe. Just another day at the office.

The Lord had given Israel such success in battle that by the time it came to fight the Anakites, it was just another day at the office. What else could Israel expect than victory? What were the descendants of Anak other than mere men? Who cared how big they were? Forget the saying, “Who can stand against the Anakites?” The saying was now, “Who can stand against the Lord?”

If the Israelites had fought the Anakites early in their military push, it might have produced more of a headline. The fact that the Anakites were the last group to be conquered in Joshua’s very successful campaign was probably more than coincidence. Whatever the reasons, when the time came for Israel to fight against these men of renown, it was the Anakites who would have “seemed like grasshoppers” in the eyes of Israel, not the other way around.

### **Zelophehad ...Had No Sons but Only Daughters**

*Now Zelophehad son of Hopher, the son of Gilead, the son of Makir, the son of Manasseh, had no sons but only daughters, whose names were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. They went to Eleazar the priest, Joshua son of Nun, and the leaders and said, “The Lord commanded Moses to give us an inheritance among our brothers.”... -Joshua 17:3-4*

Zelophehad’s daughters had gumption, asked for their due and got it.

When Moses was counting all the men of Israel in order to know how to apportion the land of Canaan to the different tribal clans (this was before they crossed the Jordan River), the daughters of Zelophehad approached Moses at the Tent of Meeting (see Numbers 27). They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and said “wait a minute here.” They didn’t think that it was fair that just because their father had no sons that they should get no land and that the family name should vanish from posterity. They wanted to continue their father’s legacy. They wanted their own allotment of land just like the male descendants of the other clans.

Moses didn’t know what to do with this one, so he brought it before the Lord. The Lord said,

*“What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right. You must certainly give them property as an inheritance”* (Nu 27:7). And their resolve paid off. Not only did they get their inheritance, their initiative set a precedent, and the regulations for property rights were changed for future generations. So, under Joshua, when the time actually came to receive their inheritance, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah came forward and got it.

Obviously, there are implications in this story that are special to women. The action of the five daughters of Zelophehad is exemplary to other women who may be treated inequitably because of their gender. But their pluckiness in appealing for justice is a good model for us all. They didn’t come with a chip on their shoulder. Like the persistent widow before the unjust judge in Jesus’ parable and the Syro-Phoenician woman who came to Jesus for her daughter’s healing, they pressed in for what they needed, and got it.

*You have not because you ask not* (Jas 4:2 KJV). When an insurance salesman friend of Henry Ford’s read about a record setting life insurance policy that Ford had bought from a stranger, he asked him, “Why didn’t you buy it from me?” “Because you never asked,” was Ford’s reply. The daughters of Zelophehad asked, and they received.

**They didn’t think that it was fair that just because their father had no sons that they should get no land**

### ***The Priestly Service of the Lord Is Their Inheritance***

*The Levites, however, do not get a portion among you, because the priestly service of the Lord is their inheritance. -Joshua 18:7*

In the New Testament church, we are a kingdom of priests who serve before our God. The priesthood is made up of all who believe. Every one of us is *being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ* (1Pt 2:5).

That being said, there is still much New Testament precedent for those, who like the Levitical priests, are called to give themselves to service of the Lord in lieu of the pursuit of personal financial achievement. Jesus had no place to lay his head, yet that did not concern him. His “priestly service” superseded any earthly inheritance. Paul often set an example by working to pay his own expenses, but he often relied on the generosity of the church for his livelihood. It was he who said, “*Do not muzzle the ox*”(1Co 9:9), “*The worker deserves his wages*” (1 Tim 5:18) and, “*The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel*” (1 Co 9:14).

***Those, who like the Levitical priests, are called to give themselves to service of the Lord in lieu of the pursuit of personal financial achievement***

The Levites were not apportioned land *because the priestly service of the Lord is their inheritance*. And a goodly one it was. Likewise, the majority of us in full-time Christian work see it as a privilege to be able to pursue the calling to vocational ministry.

The Levites had a different inheritance than the other Israelites. Not one of land, but of service to the Lord. It is not that the Levites were to live in poverty. Not at all. All of Israel was to tithe directly to the Levites to support their ministry. Each tribe gave entire towns to the Levites to live in, with the outlying areas reserved for their livestock. The priests were also entitled to portions of animal and grain offerings to feed themselves and their families. They certainly did not lack or struggle financially, and that was the way it was meant to be.

The whole idea was that the Levites would be able to provide their service to the Lord and to his people without financial concern. If they were bogged down in providing for themselves, then they would not be able to fully devote themselves to this service of the Lord—which for them was a far better inheritance than the best that the land that flowed with milk and honey had to offer.

### ***They Built an Imposing Altar There by the Jordan***

*When they came to Geliloth near the Jordan in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an imposing altar there by the Jordan. And when the Israelites heard...the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them. -Joshua 22:10-12*

As I was reading the Scriptures in preparation for writing this particular devotional commentary, I have to admit not remembering the story of Joshua 22. This made it all the more dramatic for me to read it this time around. Because of not knowing the outcome (forgetfulness has its advantages) I was able, in a limited way, to enter into emotions that must have been felt in Israel during those days.

The men of the trans-Jordan tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh had fulfilled their commitment to the rest of their Israelite brothers to help finish the conquest of Canaan before they returned to their families who were already settled in the land east of the Jordan River. After giving them an exhortation to love the Lord and obey him with all their hearts, Joshua blessed the fighting men from these three tribes and sent them on their way.

***In all the failures of the people of Israel, it is encouraging to know that they didn't always blow it***

When I read that on their way they had built an imposing altar there by the Jordan, I found myself actually saying aloud, “Oh please—you gotta be kidding.” I had been thinking that they were doing very well. They had obeyed the Lord and he had given them victory on every side. And now, here they were ruining things by setting up some huge altar contrary to the Lord’s command. When the Israelites on the west side of the river heard about it, they had an even stronger reaction: They gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them.

Before they went to war, the western Israelites acted wisely by sending a delegation to confront their brothers. This act of “rebellion” was going to cause trouble for all of Israel. Imagine our relief (you know—Israel’s and mine) when it turns out that the setting up of this altar was not at all an act of rebellion for some idolatrous or unauthorized sacrifice. It was constructed as a witness to future generations that the tribes on the east side of the Jordan had the same share in the Lord as those on the west.

In all the failures the people of Israel had (and were going to have), it was encouraging to know that they didn’t always blow it. I was inspired to know that their motivation for building that altar was so that their descendants might never stop fearing the Lord. The altar would be called A Witness Between Us that the Lord is God. That kind of witness is always good.

### ***You Are Not Able to Serve the Lord***

Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you." -Joshua 24:19-20

Joshua summoned the people of Israel, with all their elders, leaders, judges and officials to assemble at Shechem. In his final address to the nation, Joshua tells them, "You are not able to serve the Lord." I don't imagine that it was the most encouraging thing that Joshua could have said as his final exhortation before he dies. What sense can be made of this negative formulation?

Matthew Henry gives four possibilities: 1) Joshua is speaking the words of others. He wants to fortify Israel's resolve by bringing to light the unholy suggestions of the "seducers" of Israel that serving the Lord was too difficult (kind of like a coach who, in order to get the team up for the big game, shows his team the headlines that they don't have a chance to win). 2) Joshua is expressing a godly and jealous fear that the good intention of the people to serve the Lord is vulnerable to failure. 3) Just as Jesus said that "the way is narrow," Joshua wants them to be able to know the "worst of it" so that they will count the cost. 4) Joshua goes the negative route in order to sharpen their resolve and elicit a positive response—something akin to reverse psychology.

***His requirements are too high  
and our propensity toward  
disobedience is too great***

Whatever truth there may be in any of these explanations, the fact of the matter is that Joshua was correct. Even though they renewed the covenant of the law there at Shechem, it was destined to fail. Joshua was speaking prophetically. As negative as it sounds, we simply don't have what it takes to serve the Lord. His requirements are too high and our propensity toward disobedience is too great. *There is no one righteous, not even one* (Ro 3:10). The law is *a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear* (Acts 15:10). Paul said, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature" (Rom 7:18). Jesus would not entrust himself to men, "for he knew all men...he knew what was in a man" (John 2:24-25).

Joshua does get a positive response from the people because it is in them—and us—to want to do good. We may have the desire, but we just don't have the ability. Who will deliver us from this body of death?

### ***I Will Never Break My Covenant with You***

The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me... -Judges 2:1-2

The Lord has never broken covenant with his people. He has kept every promise he has ever made. His part of the bargain has always been maintained. The problem is that his people have had trouble with their end of the deal. So what does God do? He allows them to pay the consequences for breaking covenant, but then he goes out and makes a new and better one. He does this because it is in the heart of God to be in covenant relationship with his people. He seeks for a people to be set apart for him.

Was there something wrong with the covenant that he made with Israel? Well—yes and no. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way: *If there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people* (He 8:7-8). There was nothing wrong with the covenant—per se. Paul says, "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Ro 7:12) but "the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death" (Ro 7:10). Why? Not because the covenant was imperfect, but the people were.

***The old covenant may be  
"perfect" but the new covenant  
is "better" because it accounts  
for our imperfection***

God's covenants have always been perfect, because he is perfect and he requires perfection. The old covenant may be "perfect," but the new covenant is "better" because it accounts for our imperfection. The old was actually a set-up for the new. It unequivocally taught us of our need for a Savior and that we needed his perfection to atone for our imperfection.

The Lord never did break covenant with Israel. And, he continued his covenantal relationship with them by establishing the new covenant, prophesied so cogently by Jeremiah. He would be their God and they would know him because he would forgive their sins and write his law on their hearts (see Jeremiah 31). Because of this new covenant the Lord has made with Israel, they can no longer appeal to the old. The new supercedes the old. The old is obsolete (He 8:13). Through Jesus, God continues to keep His covenant with Israel, and now, also includes those of us who were previously excluded.

### ***When the Princes in Israel Take the Lead***

On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song: "When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the Lord!..." -Judges 5:1-2

The "Song of Deborah" begins, *When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the Lord* (there is some question as to whether this verse should be translated thus, but both the NIV and NASB follow this tack). Deborah was a leader, a prophetess and a judge in Israel. She composed this song after the victory she and Barak won over the Canaanites.

It is interesting that Deborah would begin her song giving special praise to the Lord that the "princes" in Israel had taken the lead. This phrase indicates that perhaps this had

***These women are not  
aberrations in providential  
history***

not usually been the case in her experience. She was qualified to lead, but it certainly was not at all typical that a woman would rule in Israel. It could have been that her position of leadership had as much to do with the lack of qualified men as it did with her own abilities. Not that her abilities were negligible. When she gave Barak the prophetic word that the God of Israel was commanding him to lead the battle against Sisera and the Canaanites, Barak told Deborah that he would go only if she went with. Whatever she had, Barak did not want to go into battle without it.

Deborah made another statement that indicated that her desire was that the princes in Israel step up their leadership. When Barak said that he wouldn't go without her, she said, "*Very well,...but because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman*" (Jg 4:9). The implication is that a man should not let the honor of a military battle fall to a woman.

In my opinion, the greatest North American evangelist of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was Aimee Semple McPherson, and the greatest British Prime Minister of the last half-century has been Margaret Thatcher. These women, and many like them including Deborah, are not aberrations in providential history. They had a destiny and calling in God to become what they became. But the need for "the princes in Israel to take the lead" is still great. When they do, the people will willingly offer themselves, and the Deborahs will rejoice.

### ***If the Lord Is with Us, Why Has All this Happened to Us?***

When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." "But sir," Gideon replied, "if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?'" -Judges 6:12-13

How is it that Israel could strike such fear in the heart of its enemies and later find that their enemies do not even consider them worthy opponents? How is it that Christians can walk in such authority, confidence and power that the demons of hell tremble one day, and mock them the next? How is it possible that the people of the world sit up and take notice of us today, and tomorrow don't even realize we are here?

The explanation of why Israel had such an up and down legacy as rulers in the promised land is plain and simple. When the Lord was with them, they gained ascendancy in every way. When he wasn't they didn't.

And, of course, that presence was always dependant on their obedience.

I don't know if you have ever thought of the impact, or lack of it, that we as Christians are able to have both in the spiritual realm and on those around us. I'm talking about measuring our influence, not necessarily how bad or good things are going for us personally. We, like Paul, can be operating as a spiritual dynamo and find ourselves in prison. Great spiritual impact will sometimes result in opposition that brings personal hardship. We can't control whether they pork our chops, or give us pork chops, but we should be able to provide a noticeable witness to the power of the gospel of the kingdom.

The greatest insult the world could give the church would be to not notice us. The truth is that the church is being ignored by society to a large degree. We often reflect the sentiments of Gideon and say, "*If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?*" Why are we in such a state? Where is the church that we read about in the New Testament? Why is the Lord content to leave us to our inept devices?"

When the hand of God moved on Gideon, everyone began to notice. No longer were the people of God powerless to effect change in the land. And that is always the will of God.

***The greatest insult the world  
could give the church would  
be to not notice us***

***I Will Not Rule over You...The Lord Will Rule over You***

*The Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us--you, your son and your grandson--because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian." But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you." -Judges 8:22-23*

Theocracy. Maybe you've heard about this concept. Democracy is rule by the people. Autocracy is rule by a single person. Theocracy is rule by God. Is theocracy practical? Is it possible? Being both practical and possible, God's intention for Israel then, and the church today, is that he rule.

Before Israel had kings, they were led by "judges." Judges were leaders in Israel who usually gained notoriety by leading the people out from under the oppression of their enemies. The usual pattern was that the nation would fall into a collective idolatry of some sort, the Lord would hand them over to their enemies who would oppress them until they once again called out to the One who could save them. The Lord would then raise up a Deborah or a Gideon or a Jephthah—"judges" who would deliver them.

***What would you rather have,  
"God-rule" or "man-rule"?***

Judges were different from kings. Ideally, they were to carry more of a prophetic role in their leadership—that is, that they were to speak on behalf of God rather than themselves. The last and greatest judge that Israel had was the prophet, Samuel. It couldn't really be said that the judges "ruled" in Israel. The Lord was to rule. The judges made "rulings" according to the voice and established word of God.

This is why when the Israelites asked Gideon to "rule" over them, he said, "No." The Hebrew for "rule," "mashal," is different than the Hebrew for "judge," "shaphat." In their admiration for Gideon, the Israelites were asking him to "mashal,"—to govern, to be put in charge, to become master. But Gideon knew that this was not how God wanted it.

Now tell me, what would you rather have, "God-rule" or "man-rule?" The fact that the Lord claims the right of rulership of his people shows that he cares about what happens to us—that he wants to be directly involved in leading and guiding us. He will use prophets to speak his word, apostles to establish his church, shepherds to tend his flock and teachers to expound his precepts—but only he is qualified to rule.

Jesus is the Head of the church. The government is to be on his shoulders. Democracy does not belong in the church. Neither does autocracy. What then? Theocracy? Is it possible? Is it practical? Yes sir.

***And He Could Bear Israel's Misery No Longer***

*"You have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you..." The Israelites said, "We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us." They got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. And he could bear Israel's misery no longer. -Judges 10:13-16*

Who can blame the Lord for choosing not to bail out the Israelites? Time after time after time after time, Israel is enticed by the specter of some foreign god and they give themselves to the unholy illusion. The only real help they have is in the name of the Lord, so when trouble comes they cry out to him. And time after time the Lord bails them out—but not this time.

The Lord's response to the Israelites is penetrating: "Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!" Indeed. "You cast your lot with Baal, now let Baal save you." The problem, though, is that Baal never does. Of course the Lord knows that, and deep down the Israelites know that too. We all know that.

The Lord has two choices, to bail them out, or to leave them to their misery. At this point in Israel's sojourn, the Lord chooses to leave them to their misery. Those who are parents know the pain of this choice. The choice to not rescue their children can come out of supreme parental love and wisdom. When rebellion becomes chronic, the choice can be made from a battered and toughened heart. But if there is even a sign of repentance, the heart of a godly parent can easily become tender again.

So the Lord leaves them in their misery. But it doesn't last long. There are signs of repentance. The foreign gods are cast aside and the choice to serve the Lord is made. Like the prodigal son, they are willing to come back to the Lord on any terms. And like the loving Father that he is, the Lord can bear their misery no longer. It's not like it was ever easy for the Lord to see his people suffer. But if they don't want to be his people he will honor their choice.

However, *the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love* (Ps 145:8). *His mercy extends to those who fear him* (Lk 1:50). *Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love* (La 3:32).

***Though he brings grief, he  
will show compassion, so  
great is his unfailing love***

### **Why Do You Ask My Name? It Is Beyond Understanding**

Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the Lord, "What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?" He replied, "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding." -Judges 13:17-18

The angel of the Lord had appeared first to Samson's mother-to-be, and then to her husband, Manoah. Manoah's wife was sterile and childless but the angel came to her to tell her that she would conceive and have a son, that this son was to be a Nazirite (see Numbers 6) from birth, and that he would begin the deliverance of Israel (Jg 13:3-5). Akin to John the Baptist, Samson was announced by an angel, born to a previously barren woman and was to be a Nazirite for all his life.

When Manoah gets his interview with the angel of the Lord, he doesn't realize that he is speaking to an celestial being. He thinks that he is talking to a man of God and says, "What is your name so that we may honor you when your word comes true?" The angel's reply is fascinating: "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding."

***Though the Lord reveals many things to us by his Spirit, there are things that are beyond our understanding***

How did Manoah plan to honor the one he thought was a man of God? Would he give a tribute of money? Would he honor him in Israel as a prophet? Would he perhaps even name his son after him? (Although Manoah's wife, not Manoah, ended up naming the child.)

Who was this angel, anyway? So often, the identification of the angel of the Lord in the Hebrew Scriptures is blurred with the identity of God himself. Was this a theophony (see page 21)? Could this have been a pre-incarnate form of Christ and was that why Manoah would not have been able to grasp the meaning of his name? Or, was the name itself beyond understanding because it was in an non-interpretable language of angels?

Jacob received basically the same answer when he inquired of the name of the one with whom he wrestled (see Genesis 32:29). Here in Judges, the phrase "beyond understanding," is the same concept used in Psalm 139:6 when David says, "Such knowledge is too *wonderful* for me, too *lofty* for me to attain." Though the Lord reveals many things to us by his Spirit, there are things that are beyond our understanding: Things about himself, things about heaven, things about the future. Some things are beyond our understanding and better kept that way—until the proper time.

### **So He Told Her Everything**

With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death. So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man." -Judges 16:16-17

You think Samson would have learned. Did this scenario not seem strangely familiar? A Philistine woman he has fallen for begs and whines for information that would be used against him (Jg 14:16). The first time he gave in it cost him thirty sets of clothes. This time it would cost him everything.

Samson had a problem with women. His yen for Philistine women was a significant factor in his failure. The wrong woman has been the downfall of many a man, as has the wrong man been the downfall of many a woman. But for Samson, the problem went deeper than his indiscriminate choice of women. The problem was his resolve.

***The strength of a man is not only in his arms. It is also in his resolve.***

Samson had been given a unique destiny and calling. He was one of only a trio in the Scriptures who were called to be a lifelong Nazirite. John the Baptist was another, and the prophet Samuel was probably a third. Endowed with a supernatural physical strength that was directly connected to the presence of the Spirit of the Lord in his life, he was chosen and enabled by God to single-handedly subdue the Philistines.

But where he possessed fortitude in body, he often lacked it in will. There were signs along the way that Samson was not a match for his passions: Taking honey from a dead carcass, which starkly violated one of the three prohibitions for a Nazirite; gambling for a new wardrobe; having sex with a prostitute; possessed with a spirit of revenge; falling in love with foreign women. The strength of a man is not only in his arms. It is also in his resolve.

Yes, Delilah wore Samson out with her nagging, but should he have let her? Obviously not. He told her everything, which resulted in his demise. He thought perhaps that even after his hair was cut he could still take the Philistines. Not a chance. When the hair was cut, the Philistines were able to capture him and gouge out his eyes. The secret of Samson's strength was not in his hair, it was in the covenant he had as a Nazirite. That his hair had never been cut, was probably the only evidence left that he was a Nazirite. When that was gone, so was the blessing from the Lord. A blessing that he could have kept had he been a stronger man.