

GENESIS ROAD PRESENTS...



a look at the picture of God
in every chapter of
the 7th book of the Bible

Chapter 1

GOD HELPS US FIGHT .

The first chapter of the book of Judges chronicles more of the war conquests of Israel. And as I read the various accounts, I thought about how God helps us fight. Of course, these were accounts of *actual* fighting, and we may not find ourselves out on the battlefield, but God helps us fight in other areas of our lives. When we need spiritual help, God fights for us. When we need emotional help, God fights for us. And whenever we align ourselves with God's will, He helps us fight . . . and we always win.

With God's help, victory is a foregone conclusion. In fact, *we* are the only ones who can negatively affect the outcome. We see that, too, at the end of this chapter, as the author chronicles a number of partial failures on the part of the Israelites to drive out the heathen nations. And in every case where the Israelite tribes failed to drive out the heathens, they became slaves of Israel, but they also continued to live among the Israelites and influence them.

When Israel was unable to drive out the Canaanites, it was because they refused to carry out all of God's instructions. This caused a myriad of problems for the Israelites down the road, as they became more and more inclined to worship the false gods of the Canaanites. The Israelites are the evidence that God gives us the freedom *not* to follow His battle plan. But if we will choose to fully align ourselves with God and His plans for us, God will help us fight in every area of our life. And when God fights, He wins.

Chapter 2

GOD HAS NO GRANDCHILDREN.

This text shocked me: “After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.” (vs 10) What?! God *finally* had a generation of Israelites that He could take into the Promised Land . . . and it only took *one* generation to unravel it all. Unbelievable.

Really, I can’t get over this. How could this generation grow up not knowing God or what He had done for Israel? Didn’t their parents tell them the stories about the Exodus, about camping in the wilderness, about taking the land? Didn’t they recount the miracles? I’m sure they *must* have told their kids *something*. But, I think there were two major obstacles in the way.

First, the previous generation *didn’t* do what God told them to do when it came to driving out the heathen nations. Consequently, the Israelites ended up mixed in with the Canaanites—and all their false gods. Because the older generation of Israelites *tolerated* the false gods of the Canaanites, the younger generation of Israelites *embraced* them.

Along with that, the second major obstacle for this older generation to overcome was the fact that there is a huge difference between *hearing* something and *internalizing* it. Just because parents share their faith is no guarantee that their children will embrace it. And certainly, a watered-down faith that doesn’t even trust God fully translates tenuously, at best.

At the end of the day, we all stand equal before God. He has only children, not grandchildren. Though we may be influenced for the good or the bad by our parents, they don’t determine our salvation. We are not saved or lost by *their* choices; we are saved or lost by *our* choices. If the generation before us has been faithful to God, we can choose to throw that overboard and be unfaithful to Him. And vice versa.

We are not God’s grandchildren. We are His children. And to each of us, He gives the same opportunity to choose. So, may we not be like either of those Israelite generations—not the one that tolerated evil and certainly not the one that embraced evil. And no matter where we have come from, may we remember that those who would influence us for good or evil are no more God’s children than *we* are. God wants us to decide for ourselves which way we will go.

Chapter 3

GOD LETS US GET BURNED.

What would happen if you went in your kitchen right now, turned on the stovetop, and put your hand on the burner? You'd burn your hand, of course. And *how* do you know you'd burn your hand if you touched a hot stove? Probably because you or someone you know has had just such an unpleasant experience in the past. And that's how we learn that touching a hot stove is dangerous and can harm us.

Judges 3 describes a God who neither stops His children from touching the hot stove nor keeps them from getting burned when they do: "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that *he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim*, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them . . . Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and because they did this evil the Lord *gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel*. Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms. The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years." (vs 7-9, 12-14)

God had warned the Israelites about serving false gods. Idolatry is destructive. It's not destructive because God is jealous and wants to hoard the honor and glory for Himself. It is destructive be-

cause worshipping something other than our Creator will ultimately dismantle our reason, undoing us from the inside out. Thus, when the Israelites put themselves into the hands of other gods, God let them experience the consequences of that. He gave them up to the false gods, and they found out (time and time again) that the result was hardship and heartache.

When we choose something dangerous in our lives, God doesn't ignore it; nor does He supernaturally dissolve the consequences. Instead, He lets us get burned. *He* deals in reality, and He wants to help *us* learn to deal in reality also. And one of the best ways He does that is by letting us experience the painful consequences of our choices. If we're hell-bent on touching the hot stove, He'll let it burn us.

Chapter 4

GOD IS UNCONVENTIONAL.

This chapter bears an example of something I really love about God. Because of their idolatry, the people of Israel had been under the cruel oppression of Jabin (king of Canaan) and his commander, Sisera, for twenty years. They were worn out. They were beaten down. Verse three says they cried out to God for help.

And who does God send to deliver Israel out of the hands of the Canaanites? *Two women*. Did you find that funny? In Israelite culture, women weren't considered very important. In fact, the times when they are even named in the Bible are few and far between. No one paid much attention to women.

And that's why I *love* that God used women on this occasion to *once again* free Israel from the bondage of their idolatry. It was as if He was saying, "Yes, I am such a strong God, I can even empower a *woman* to deliver you!" I love this quality in God, this ability to do what is so unconventional in our eyes in the hopes of getting our attention. He has a thousand ways to reach us . . . even with all our foibles, misconceptions, and misunderstandings.

So, you may be able to call God a lot of things, but you certainly can't call Him conventional!

Chapter 5

GOD WORKS WITH WHAT HE HAS GOT .

In Judges 5, Deborah and Barak burst into song over their victory against King Jabin and Sisera. Tucked away into this rather interesting song is a rather interesting piece of information: some of the tribes of Israel ignored the call to go to war. Instead of aiding their Israelite brothers, they stayed home. “The rulers of Issachar came along with Deborah, and Issachar followed Barak into the valley. But the *tribe of Reuben* was no help at all! Reuben, why did you stay among your sheep pens? Was it to listen to shepherds whistling for their sheep? No one could figure out why Reuben wouldn’t come. The *people of Gilead* stayed across the Jordan. Why did the *tribe of Dan* remain on their ships and the *tribe of Asher* stay along the coast near the harbors?” (vs 15-17)

One-third of Israel’s tribes decided, for some reason, to not join the fight against Jabin and Sisera. That’s a lot of missing people! But once again, God proves that He is able to work with what He’s got. He rolls with the punches and keeps on going. I like that about Him. Although help was requested from these tribes, God didn’t *force* them to comply. When they decided to ignore Him, He went ahead with the ones who answered the call and proved that victory is with Him—even when we’re not.

A couple days ago, I mentioned that God wants to help us learn how to deal in reality. And this is one of the ways *He* deals in reality—by taking our choices seriously. He doesn’t force us to do things;

instead, He lets us decide whether we will opt in or out. Then, He proceeds to work with what He’s got. And, fortunately for us, He can do *a lot* with very little!

Chapter 6

GOD IS JUST A GUY WHO WANTS FRIENDS.

If you're one of the people who reads this blog every day but doesn't necessarily read the Bible chapter that goes with it, I *urge* you to read Judges 6. I am nearly beside myself with delight at the picture of God in this chapter. The Israelites are at their idol worship once again, when God realizes that there is a man—Gideon—who has a willingness to listen. Even though he has grown up in a home where his father worshiped Baal and Asherah, Gideon is apparently open in his heart to an audience with the Lord.

And, just like that, the Lord shows up at his house. He waltzes onto the family property and plops Himself underneath the oak tree where Gideon is threshing wheat . . . and He strikes up a conversation with him. Just like that. No fanfare. No pomp and circumstance. Just the Creator, come to hang out with one of His creatures.

He tells Gideon that he has the strength to liberate Israel, and Gideon doesn't believe Him. But, just in case, Gideon asks Him for a sign. He asks the Lord to wait whilst he prepares a meal for Him. And God simply responds, "I will wait." When Gideon returns some time later with a fresh meal, the Lord touches it with the staff in His hand and—*poof!*—a fire flares up and consumes it.

Of course, you probably know the more famous part of the chapter, where Gideon eventually asks the Lord for two signs involving a fleece . . . just to be sure that he was really supposed to head off to war. And, on an interesting side note, God grants

both of the signs. So don't ever think that faith means the absence of questions. God *loves* questions! Faith means a willingness to listen to the answers.

But, back to the first part of the chapter . . . God is just a guy who wants friends. It is striking to me that wherever He perceives a willing ear and an open heart, He'll show up out of the blue. Even just to sit for a while underneath the tree and talk to us while we work. If we ask Him to wait, He'll wait. If we ask Him for a sign, He'll give us one. At the end of the day, the most important thing to God is the opportunity to build a relationship. Maybe He really is just one of the lads.

Chapter 7

GOD KNOWS OUR WEAKNESSES.

God knows all about us . . . and still He loves us. There are a couple of beautiful little examples of that in this chapter. Gideon is getting ready to attack the Midianites. He starts out with 32,000 for the job, but God eventually whittles it down to 300. That's a little less than one percent of Gideon's original army. Yikes!

But God knows Israel well, and God tells Gideon right up front why He's reducing the size of the army: "You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has saved me.'" (vs 2) Oh, God knew those Israelites all too well. Anything less than an outright miracle on the battlefield, and they'd claim they did it on their own! This is a definite weakness on their part, but God knows it and heads it off at the pass.

Even better, though, is what God says to Gideon in verses 9-11: "During that night the Lord said to Gideon, 'Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands. *If you are afraid to attack*, go down to the camp with your servant Purah and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp.'"

I find this delightful. Maybe it's because I have a tendency to fear things, but I love the idea that God addresses Gideon's fears even before Gideon tells God that he's afraid. Hallelujah! God knows when we are fearful; He knows the weaknesses we have, and He doesn't ignore them or look at us in

disdain because of them. Instead, He provides just what we need to address those fears, to strengthen those weaknesses.

What a comforting thought that is (for me)—that God knows us through and through!

Chapter 8

GOD LOVES BLIND PEOPLE.

Chapters like this absolutely *floor* me. For the life of me, I can't understand what's wrong with these Israelites. And, as a result, I am left to wonder how many things there are in my own life that I am completely *blind* to. I have no illusions of moral superiority!

So, Gideon has just defeated an army of 120,000 people with his band of 300 men. All of Israel knows it; they've heard of the defeat. In fact, at the beginning of this chapter, the people from the tribe of Ephraim are upset because they weren't called in earlier on the deal. Let's face it, everyone likes to be on the winning team!

Still, Gideon and his men are continuing to pursue the last of the Midianites (the 15,000 cowards who had run away) and Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian. Capturing and conquering them will mark the end of this victorious defeat. Their pursuit takes them through the territory of the tribe of Gad, and—as Gideon and his men are exhausted—they ask the Gadites for some food. “But the officials of Sukkoth said, ‘Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your troops?’” (vs 6)

In other words, what they're saying here is, *what makes you think you'll be victorious?* They have to be kidding, right? *Three hundred* men just walloped *one hundred and twenty thousand*. That's a ratio of *four hundred* Midianites to every *one* of Gideon's men. And the men of the tribe of Gad still have doubts about

who's going to come out on top in this battle? They have to be completely blind! Later, after the land has had peace for forty years and Gideon dies, the Israelites go right back to their idol worship. Really, are they *capable* of learning?

I'm not sure if it should *inspire* me that God apparently loves and graciously works with people who are so totally blind . . . or if it should *frighten* me that, of all the people on Earth at this time, the *Israelites* were the best thing God had going. If the Israelites were the best of what He had to work with, I don't know how He didn't throw up His hands and quit a long time ago.

Well, actually I do. He didn't quit a long time ago because He desperately loves us all. Each of us is His precious child, and as the Bible says, He doesn't wish that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance—even those of us who engage in persistent blindness.

Can you see? God loves you, and He wants you to see even more. Are you blind? God loves you, and He wants to help you see! (And don't worry . . . He has many, many ways up His sleeve of bringing you the light!)

Chapter 9

GOD SAVES INDIVIDUALS.

Have you ever heard of collective salvation? It is how some people believe the human race is saved—not individually, but collectively; not personally, but as a community. If one is lost, all are lost. If one is saved, all are saved. I suppose it's a nice idea, but I think it would be hard to make the case that God looks at us as one, big communal organism and not as individuals. Certainly, He *wants* everyone to be saved, but He's not the only one who gets a say.

Gideon and his family are a great example of this. Back in Judges 6, we saw how God approached Gideon and recruited him to defeat the Midianites. We noted how Gideon was apparently willing to work with God—even though Gideon's father had set up altars to Baal and Asherah at home. God looked at Gideon as an individual, not holding his father's sins against Gideon, but giving him the opportunity to take a different path.

And, unfortunately, in Judges 9, we see that Gideon's son Abimelek was also not obliged to follow in his father's footsteps. His father had listened to God and brought peace to the land of Israel. Abimelek, on the other hand, selfishly grabbed at power by killing his 70 brothers in one day and throwing Israel back into chaos and strife.

God looks at us as, treats us as, and saves us as individuals. Just because the previous generation chose the good doesn't mean that the next generation can't choose evil. And just because the previous generation chose to turn away from God does-

n't mean that the next generation can't choose to return to God. Our salvation or destruction is not determined collectively, but individually. God gives you, yes *you*, the opportunity to make your own choice for or against Him!

Chapter 10

GOD SOMETIMES SAYS NO.

So, the Israelites are at it again . . . idolatry, that is. After the Abimelek fiasco, Israel enjoyed 45 years of peace—during which time, apparently, the Israelites began to feast at the buffet of Canaan’s gods. Finally, God gave up the Israelites *once again* to their idols, and they found themselves oppressed by the Philistines and the Ammonites.

And, once again, the Israelites decided they didn’t like the consequences of their wicked ways, and they cried out to God for deliverance. Only . . . uh oh . . . this time, God said *no*. “The Lord replied, ‘When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? But 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 when you are in trouble!’” (vs 11-14)

Wow. In fine Dr. Phil style, when the Israelites turn to God yet again, He steps back and says, “How’s that workin’ for ya?” And He *did not* rescue them. This could almost seem cruel. After all, the Israelites said they were sorry. They asked for forgiveness. But . . . how many times had they done this before? Why would this time be any different? Why wouldn’t they just turn their back on God again once they were out from under the thumb of their enemies?

Well, before you’re quick to judge God, check out verses 15 and 16: “But the Israelites said to the

Lord, ‘We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.’ Then *they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord*. And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer.”

That’s incredible! Even though (or maybe because) God didn’t jump to rescue them, they decided (at least for the time being) that their idolatry *wasn’t worth it*. They decided that it was better to serve God—even if they were serving Him in captivity. This was a much more important result than their liberation from the enemies. *Their* transformation was more important than a transformation of *their circumstances*.

Here’s an important life lesson: *The power of the gospel is not to transform your circumstances, but to transform you in the midst of your circumstances*. This is why God sometimes says no. The opportunity for personal transformation is sometimes greater if our circumstances remain the same—and God will *always* opt for transforming *us* over transforming our circumstances if leaving us where we are would be for our best good.

Sometimes God says no. Praise the Lord!

Chapter 11

GOD GIVES THE BEST .

My dad used to say this about marriage: “God gives the best to those who leave the choice with Him.” I can wholeheartedly attest to the truth of that statement. For those of you who know me and my husband, it may come as a shock, but when I met David, one of the first things I thought about him was that I could *never* date him. He just wasn’t “my type.” Or so I thought. As it turns out, God knew my type a lot better than I did! Go figure!

And over and over again in my life, I have seen that God truly does give the best gifts. So, that’s why this statement of Jephthah in Judges 11 really resonated with me: “Now since the Lord, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, what right have you to take it over? Will you not take what *your god* Chemosh gives you? Likewise, whatever the Lord *our God* has given us, we will possess.” (vs 23-24)

Jephthah was talking to the king of the Ammonites, who was determined to attack and conquer the people of Israel. When the king complained that the Israelites had taken land that rightfully belonged to the Ammonites, Jephthah responded that God had given it to them. And, he so appropriately added, *Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you?*

That’s my favorite part. And it really made me think about my life . . . and all the different “gods” who vie for my attention. Every god offers something, you know. The god of greed offers materialism. The god of lust offers sexual excitement. And

so on. Every false god under the sun promises something. What is your god giving you? Will you take what your god gives?

I don’t know about you, but I have discovered that no god can compare with the God of heaven. What He gives is absolutely the best, all the time. And He knows what’s best for us . . . even when we don’t. He knows what we need, and what we truly *want*, even if we don’t know ourselves as well as He does yet.

But even if we have decided to go with the God of heaven, we have to ask ourselves the same question Jephthah asked the king of the Ammonites: *Will you take what the Lord your God gives you?* Since God gives the best, it seems like the answer to that question would be a no-brainer. Of course we will take what He gives us! But what about when what He gives us isn’t what we think we want or need? What then?

Will we trust that God gives the best? Will we remember that He has always given us the best in the past? Are we willing to take what the Lord our God gives us?

Chapter 12

GOD WORKS WITH OUR MISCONCEPTIONS.

Jephthah . . . what can you say about a guy like Jephthah? This was the man God used to win a decisive victory over the Ammonites and to lead Israel for six years. The Lord was definitely with him, but he was so . . . flawed. I mean, in the previous chapter, it seemed that Jephthah thought he would have an easier time securing the Lord's favor if he "bribed" Him with a sacrifice—the first person who stepped out of the house on his return home. Unfortunately, that was Jephthah's daughter. He paid dearly for that misconception of God.

And in this chapter, he seemed to think that if the power of God was with him, then it was alright (heck, even sanctioned) to get some revenge on his fellow Israelites. He must have thought that's what God was like—someone who would strike back at those who weren't "on His side."

I don't know about you, but I know that this is a poor picture of God. If anything, the testimony of Jesus revealed that God doesn't require human sacrifice in order to bestow favor . . . nor does He get revenge on His enemies. So, if that's true, *why* would God's power rest with a man like Jephthah? How could He allow such a flawed person be His representative?

The fact is, *God meets us in our misconceptions*. I believe that there are many places in the Bible where God appears to someone as *they* think He is . . . in order that they will recognize Him, and then He can work to set the record straight. For instance, I think this is what God was doing at the end of the

book of Job. He came to Job in such a way that *Job's friends* would recognize Him as God. Then, they were in a much better position to hear the important truth: "You have not said of Me what is right, as my servant Job has."

Jephthah may have had a great many misconceptions about the kind of person God was, but it certainly didn't stop God from coming to him, choosing him, and using him to lead Israel. Jephthah's misconceptions about God apparently didn't render him unwilling to work with God, nor did they render *God* unwilling to work with *Jephthah*.

Paul once wrote that we currently don't see things as they are—as if we're trying to look through a thick, dark glass. I guess that means that, to one degree or another, we *all* have misconceptions about God. And that's why it's great news that misconceptions don't turn God off. He takes 'em and works with 'em!

Chapter 13

GOD KNEW YOU BEFORE YOU WERE BORN.

When it comes to God, one of the hardest things to wrap my finite, little mind around is the fact that He stands outside of Time. As creatures who are so attached to linear time, it is nearly impossible to discuss this aspect of God, because even the *words* we use to talk about it—*past*, *present*, and *future*—are all words that are irrevocably linked to linear time. God is outside of and above all of these things.

This is what I thought about when I encountered the story of how God came to Samson's mother in Judges 13. He said: "You will become pregnant and have a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from the womb until the day of his death." (vs 7)

Samson was only a twinkle in his father's eye at this point, but God knew all about his life—*from the womb until the day of his death*. Incredible! To think that God knows us *so* intimately even before we have been conceived! What comes as a revelation to us (as we're waiting for the two little lines on the pregnancy test) is no surprise to God. He knows us inside and out before that sperm and egg ever meet up.

As God said through the prophet Jeremiah:
"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I set you apart." (Jer 1:5)
And again through King David: "For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb." (Ps 139:13) It's clear, isn't it? The

miracle of birth isn't something that just happens between a man and a woman. It happens between a man, a woman, and God. A God who knows us before we make a home in our mother's womb.

There's no doubt about it: You are no accident. Your parents may not have planned on you. The world may not have planned on you! But *God* planned on you. He knew all about your life before anyone else—from your very first moments in the womb right up until the day of your death. He has a plan for you, and it's a plan that includes the opportunity for you to know *Him* as He has known *you*.

You are no ordinary person. And today is no ordinary day. The King of the Universe knew that you would be who you are, right where you are. And He has special plans for you!

Chapter 14

GOD DOES AND DOES NOT ACCEPT FAILURE.

I thought this was an extremely interesting chapter, in that it revealed two (seemingly opposite) things about God. First, God accepts failure. Second, God does not accept failure. How can both of those things be true?

First, let's look at how God accepts failure. Did you get the sense while reading this chapter, as I did, that God is *really* starting to scrape the bottom of the barrel here? I mean, it seems to be getting harder and harder for Him to find people of integrity in Israel. He once had people of great character, such as Moses and Joshua. Even Gideon (who certainly had considerable faults) seems like a man of perfect character when put up next to Jephthah and now Samson.

For all His efforts with Israel, it seems God is having a lot more *failure* than success. Just look at Samson. If he is now the best God has to work with, God is in trouble. Samson was supposed to be (and, by all accounts, was) raised as a Nazirite. The point of that type of upbringing was so that he would be separate, set apart by God for a special purpose. A sense of God's holy calling should have been permeating his life. Instead, he was ignoring this calling at every opportunity, doing things a Nazirite shouldn't have been doing—touching dead things, marrying heathen women, going to a vineyard. . . . God was definitely working in and through Samson, but it's clear that Samson's heart was divided.

So, when I say that God accepts failure, I mean that God accepts *our* failures. If we're not perfect, He doesn't leave us. If we're not totally committed to Him, He doesn't refuse to have a relationship with us. He takes us where we are, with all of our faults and flaws—just as He accepted the “best of the worst” that Israel had to offer.

On the flip side, however, it's clear that God *does not* accept failure. That is, even when *we* fail, *He* doesn't give up. How many times had He been 'round the mountain with Israel by now? Pursuing them whilst they ran away. Still coming after them, again and again. He was like that then, and He's still like that now. As we fail the 807th time, God is already formulating Opportunity #808. He accepts our failures, but never allows those failures to coax Him into giving up.

Chapter 15

GOD BELIEVES IN A GOOD OFFENSE.

If you like sports, you've probably heard the old saying that the best defense is a good offense. In other words, in the middle of a game, instead of trying to fight off an attack from the opposing team, you want to be on the offensive. You want to have to make *them* shut *you* down... not the other way around. The best defense is a good offense.

Nobody knows this better than God. And this chapter of Judges really drove home the point to me. Did you notice the pattern running through this sordid, little chapter? Samson goes off on a rampage against the Philistines because they gave his wife to someone else. So, they retaliate and come against the tribe of Judah in order to get revenge on Samson.

And both of them say the same thing. First, the Philistines tell the people of Judah, "We have come to take Samson prisoner . . . to do to him as he did to us." (vs 10) And when the men of Judah went to question Samson about the problem, he said he was justified in his actions because "I merely did to them what they did to me." (vs 11)

I will do to you what you did to me. That's a picture of defense. And a vengeful one at that.

It immediately made me think about Jesus, and His contrasting picture of a good offense: "So in everything, do to others *what you would have them do to you*, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Mt 7:12) I love how The Message Bible states

it, even more *offensively*: "Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them."

I will do to you what I would want you to do to me. That's a picture of offense. And a good one at that. That's the way God runs His kingdom. He doesn't "pay us back" for our evil. He doesn't go on the defensive. Instead, He is always on the offensive, initiating kindness to us, returning good for evil. He doesn't have to add anything bad to the already -destructive consequences of sin. Instead, where we allow Him, He works to heal the damage done.

God believes that the best defense is a good offense. As David said, "Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life." (Ps 23:6) While revenge is on our minds, goodness is on God's mind. The only thing He attacks us with is kindness!

Chapter 16

GOD IS WORKING OUT HIS PLAN, REGARDLESS...

Samson, Samson. What can you say about this guy? He was so *stupid*. He was so blind—both figuratively and (later on) literally. He was singled out to be God's leader in Israel, but he couldn't seem to keep to his Nazirite vow. When he wasn't marrying heathen women, he was sleeping with prostitutes. He did nearly everything wrong, including the big one—finally telling Delilah the secret of his strength. Why would he do that? Had he become so narcissistic that he believed his strength lay within himself and not in God?

Regardless, once the hair on his head was cut (yet another violation of the Nazirite vow), he lost his strength completely. Finally, the Philistines had the opportunity to capture him. They gouged out his eyes and took him into captivity.

Now, the interesting thing is that, in Judges 14, we were let in on what God was planning to do through Samson: "His father and mother replied, 'Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?' But Samson said to his father, 'Get her for me. She's the right one for me.' (His parents did not know that *this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines*; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.)" (vs 3-4)

God wanted to confront the Philistines, and Samson was His man. But Samson couldn't manage to stay true to his calling. I mean, who knows what

the original plan was? Who knows what would have happened if Samson had never shot off his mouth at his wedding reception and then gone off on a killing rampage? We'll never know. However, just because Samson may not have followed the original plan doesn't mean that God was unable to use him.

And in this chapter, we see that Samson—even for all his philandering—came to the point where, in the end, he accomplished God's will for his life. He not only confronted the Philistine power structure, he *demolished* it—wiping out all the rulers of the Philistines in one fell swoop.

It made me think of the nation of Israel and how God accomplished His purpose through them, even though they were not faithful to Him. His purpose for them was to witness to the heathen nations. Originally, the plan was that they would do this through their interactions with the nations—since occupying the Promised Land would mean that most of the region's trade would pass through their territory. However, the Israelites did not remain faithful to God long enough to even occupy the land, let alone become a shining beacon of God's truth.

Thus, God had to accomplish His purpose through the *opposite* outcome for the Israelites. As they were captured by their enemies and carried off into captivity, the knowledge of the God of heaven spread throughout the heathen nations. God was accom-

plishing His purpose through the Israelites, even though they had opted for Plan B instead of Plan A.

Here's the point: God is working out His plan, regardless of the circumstances. It was true in the case of Samson. It was true in the case of the Israelites. And it's also true for our lives. God is not limited by our circumstances. He is such a genius, He can work out His plan in any number of different scenarios.

So, don't you think it's time to stop worrying about your circumstances? Don't you think it's time to stop worrying about your mistakes? Instead, let us focus all our attention on God—this marvelous God who has a wonderful plan for us and is more than able to work it out, no matter how many mistakes we make. He is a genius and so worthy to be praised!

Chapter 17

GOD IS EXTRAVAGANT.

What a quirky little chapter. Out of the blue, there is a story about this guy named Micah. He was a thief—having swiped 1100 shekels of silver from *his mom*. (Who steals from Mom?) After he heard her pronounce a curse on whoever had stolen the money, he fessed up and returned it. In turn, she was so worried that the curse would follow her thieving child that she had some of it melted down and made into a little idol that Micah kept in his house. His “god” would hopefully protect him from the curse.

In time, Micah decided that he needed a priest to facilitate worship in his household. So one day, he nabbed a young Levite who was passing through town and offered to pay him ten shekels a year and give him clothes and food if he would be his personal priest. *Voila!* Just like that, Micah turned his house into a temple, with his very own god and everything.

Here’s what struck me: Micah offered to pay this Levite *ten shekels per year*. That wasn’t a very good deal. He had swiped a hundred times that from his own mother! Micah wasn’t very generous. What he offered was a slave’s wage compared to the extravagant provisions God offered the Levites for their work in the temple. As priests, they were entitled to a tenth of the entire income of Israel—not to mention cities dotted throughout the entire nation.

So what made this Levite want to sell out for ten shekels and a shirt? Perhaps in their neglect of the

worship of God, the Israelites were also neglecting the Levites. And perhaps the Levites weren’t doing very much to lead the people to God. What a shame! Even from a purely greedy standpoint, the Levites weren’t going to find better treatment anywhere outside of the temple. *Nobody* is more extravagant than God! He gives the best gifts, He pays the best wages, and He provides more than we could ever need. He doesn’t know how to stop giving.

With God, *nobody* ever has to settle for ten shekels and a shirt!

Chapter 18

GOD DOES NOT OVERPOWER US.

Judges 18 begins with a mantra that will repeat through the last several chapters of the book: “In those days Israel had no king.” As you will discover (if you don’t already know what’s ahead in the next few chapters), this isn’t a good declaration. This isn’t a statement of freedom. Rather, it’s a statement of spiritual slavery. Israel had no king, no spiritual leadership, no direction, no moral compass. Everybody just did whatever they saw fit . . . and that always makes for a *very* scary scene.

How interesting, then, to discover that God *was* in Israel the entire time. At the end of this chapter, it says, “There the Danites set up for themselves the idol, and Jonathan . . . and his sons were priests for the tribe of Dan until the time of the captivity of the land. They continued to use the idol Micah had made, *all the time the house of God was in Shiloh.*” (vs 30-31)

Wow. While all the idol worship and wickedness was going on, the house of God was in Shiloh. God was right where He said He would be, right in the midst of His people. Yet the historians recorded that “in those days Israel had no king.”

What does this tell us about God? *He does not overpower us.* He leaves us free to make our own choice—even the choice to reject Him to His face. Even with His presence in our midst, we are not overwhelmed into choosing *for* Him. We are not compelled to listen to Him; we are not compelled to behave. This is borne out by the fact that sin itself began in God’s very presence. Being in a per-

fect environment in the presence of a holy God did not deprive Lucifer of the freedom to make an evil choice.

To me, this is one of the most incredible things about God. With Him, we *really are free!* And this freedom can’t be found outside of Him. The further we travel from Him, the more enslaved we become. (Do we not see this principle at work in our own society?) But the closer we come to Him, the more we will experience what it means to be free. For God does not *overpower* us; He *empowers* us with freedom!

Chapter 19

GOD EMBODIES GOODNESS.

I was amused when I heard about a Christmas ad campaign that ran in Washington D.C. last year. It featured signs on buses that said: “Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness’ sake.” I thought that was so odd, because what people don’t understand is that without God, *there is no goodness*. Without Him, we have absolutely *no* idea what goodness is. And my own personal belief is that people who practice goodness are manifesting the Spirit’s work in their lives—whether they believe in God or not. Outside of Him, there is no concept of goodness. He is the one who brought the idea of goodness to this world.

How do I know that there is no goodness outside of God? Did you read Judges 19? Anything in there sound familiar to you? If not, go back and read Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. You’ll find that the stories are almost *identical*. How can it be that the Israelites had fallen this far?

In both stories, we see that the absence of God from daily human life led to depravity, sexual brokenness, and an utter disregard for the treatment of fellow human beings. And not only did the men of the city demand another man (and finally consent to using a woman) for sex, but in both cases, the hosts in the house offered up *their own children* for such brutal treatment. It really boggles the mind.

This is what happens when we reject God in our lives. As we indulge our sinful selfishness, we turn inward, seeking only to satisfy our desires, willing to use any means necessary to get what we want.

Other people become *objects*—means to an end. And in the process, we lose our humanity. This potential is *in all of us*. That’s one of the reasons I believe Judges 19 is in the Bible—to serve as a warning to us, to let us see exactly what we become when we reject God.

Only God embodies goodness. Only in *Him* can we find the picture of true love—of what it means to not only love others but to appropriately love ourselves. And whenever we try to meet the desires of our hearts in any other way or in any other place, we do so at our own peril. It’s frightening to see just what we can become without Him.

Chapter 20

GOD GETS A BAD RAP.

I think this chapter is a great example of how God often gets a bad rap for things *we* decide to do. In this instance, the men of the tribes of Israel gathered to go up against the Benjamites. At first, they asked the tribe of Benjamin to hand over the men who had raped and killed the Levite's concubine. They refused and, in turn, geared up for the fight.

Next, the Israelites (*surprise, surprise!*) actually consulted God about what to do! They asked about which of the tribes should go up to meet the Benjamites first, and the answer came back: Judah. In the first two days of battle, the Benjamites routed their fellow Israelites, and at the end of each day, the Israelites went back to the Lord and asked Him if they should continue. And both times, the answer was yes.

For me, though, here's where the rub comes. On the third day, the Israelites beat the Benjamites. They defeated them in battle, striking down all their warriors. But then, the Israelites went crazy. They went through all the towns of the tribe of Benjamin, killing *everyone* and burning the cities down to the ground. Whoa. That wasn't in the battle plan that God laid out! If it hadn't been for 600 Benjamite men who escaped and hid for several months, the entire tribe would have been wiped out that day.

God may have sanctioned the Israelites to go after the wicked men in the town of Gibeah and, then, the men of Benjamin when they wouldn't give them up . . . but there was no command to kill the

women, children, and livestock nor burn down their towns. And since the Israelites decided to do all of that anyway, I think *our* tendency is to look at that and attribute all of it to God. And all of a sudden, we're trying to grapple with the image of a God who would order the killing of innocent children because some men raped a woman.

God sometimes gets a very bad rap because of things we decide to do that are outside of His plan. And what is even more amazing to me is that God *allows* this to go on. He allows His own name to be tarnished. He allows Himself to look *really* bad at times when His representatives on Earth aren't doing such a great job. How many of us would leave our reputations in the hands of others like that? I'm pretty sure I wouldn't. (*sigh*) I guess I still have a lot more to learn about what it means to be like God!

Chapter 21

GOD HAS THE ANSWERS.

You might think that's a funny title to describe a chapter of the Bible in which God never speaks. But, for me, that's precisely the point, so I thought we'd get right to the point today. Did you notice God's lack of participation in the dialogue of this chapter? The Israelites were asking a lot of questions, but they never received an answer.

I suppose that could mean several things. Perhaps God's silence *was* the answer to their questions. Perhaps He was ignoring them. Or perhaps they didn't wait long enough to get an answer at all. That's what I think was going on. After all, God wasn't in the habit of ignoring the Israelites. When they came to Him for help, He always engaged with them. They may not have always liked what He had to say, but He always answered them.

This time, however, I don't think they were waiting for answers. They realized that they had thrown themselves into a predicament, and they were frantic to figure out how they were going to solve it. And although they *asked* God for answers, they didn't *wait* on Him. Instead, they came up with their own solution. And it was a solution that involved more killing, kidnapping, and forced marriage.

Don't you wish they had actually waited for God's answers? What do you think *He* would have said? What would His solution have been to the problems Israel had created? I guess we'll never know. And it really makes me wonder how many times in my own life I run ahead of God. How many times

have I taken charge of a problem without waiting for God to tell me what would be best? How many times have I thought I could just solve it on my own?

When we begin adding to God's advice (as the Israelites did in Judges 20), the next step is likely to be our impatience to wait for or even unwillingness to listen to His answers. And then, it may not be long before what was said of Israel is said *of us*: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." (vs 25) Let's not follow in Israel's footsteps. We know that God has the answers! And because of the record of evidence provided in the Bible, we know that when we seek Him, we will find Him. When we come to Him with a problem, He will provide the solution!