



Fear in the new year

Was your new year happy, or utterly stressful? If the latter, how can you bring this honestly to God in prayer? And how can we talk to the Lord about the year ahead?

Anguish

Read Psalm 55:1-8

- ❓ *What is the psalmist asking God to do (v 1)?*
- ❓ *How does he describe his feelings (v 2, 4-5)?*
- ❓ *Note the different images. What does this suggest to you about his state?*
- ❓ *What has caused these feelings (v 3)?*
- ❓ *What does he long to do (v 6-8)?*

Lament

Lament psalms arise out of difficult situations. In them, the psalmist honestly expresses his feelings and problems to God, sometimes in extreme ways. In this psalm we see someone who is on the edge; their mind in overdrive, restless and confused, hypersensitive—what one writer describes as an extreme anxiety attack. The amazing thing that laments like this show us is that we can bring all of our thoughts, feelings and worries to God—*all of them!* It's ok to tell God that I'm not ok.

TIME OUT

Read Psalm 139, especially v 1, 4, 22-23. Amazingly, knowing all this about us, he still loves us, and *will* still love us if we tell him exactly how we feel. God loves the truth.

Betrayal

Read Psalm 55:9-14

The reason for David's anguish is that someone is verbally attacking him (v 3, 9, 12).

- ❓ *Who is this attacker, and why would this be particularly painful (v 12-14)?*

Even Jesus was betrayed by a close friend (see Matthew 26:47-50). He knows how this feels. The words of this psalm may have particular resonance with anyone who has been abused or betrayed by a partner, friend or family member. It could be a way to express their anguish and to reach out to God.

Apply

- ❓ *Have you ever felt like this? If not, do you know someone who has?*
- ❓ *How might this psalm encourage you in such a situation?*

Pray

Honestly express to God how you are feeling right now. Don't hold back. Feel the freedom to pour it out before your Father who knows and loves you.

And pray on behalf of others. As I write this, Ukrainian cities are being destroyed, and African churches burned out. Stand alongside them in anguish before the Lord, who listens and loves.



An unburdened future

As well as pouring out our feelings about difficult situations to the Lord, we can also plead with God to act. This is what the psalmist does in the rest of this psalm.

Read Psalm 55:15-23

Lament flows from faith: the conviction that God is relevant to every situation. He loves us, and he can make a difference. This is why we plead with him to act. Lament is not the sign of a weak believer. David, Jeremiah, Job and other heroes of faith lamented.

He asks for *what*?

- ❓ *What does the psalmist ask for (v 15)?*
- ❓ *Would you be comfortable asking God to do this?*
- ❓ *Where and how do you see the psalmist expressing trust in God in these verses?*

This request may shock us. We need to remember that this imprecation (a spoken curse) is part of a lament spoken by someone in the depths of anguish, honestly expressing a desire for vengeance. By expressing this desire, the psalmist is choosing to hand his vengeance over to God, rather than taking revenge himself—for example by answering verbal attack with verbal attack. Note that in verses 19-23 it is *God* who is asked to act. Strangely enough, this is part of trusting in God, the God who is totally just, and powerful, and ultimately will see justice done.

TIME OUT

Read Romans 12:14-21

- ❓ *Where is the “handing over” of vengeance in this passage?*
 - ❓ *What can this lead to (v 14, 20-21)?*
-

This imprecation is not an excuse for us to be negative about others when we are feeling fine. However, in horribly difficult times it is a way to hand over our existing feelings to God, helping us to live in God's love.

Casting burdens

Read Psalm 55:22 again

- ❓ *What commands and promises are there in this precious verse?*
- ❓ *What is involved in “casting burdens” do you think?*

Pray

Do you have any deep-seated desires for revenge that you need to hand over to God? Then do it now.

What burden are you carrying into 2023 that you can now cast on him?

Give yourself enough time to do this. Neither of these things are easy.

And pray for those you know who are wrestling with the pain of injustice, or bearing crushing burdens, that they would be able to know the reality of God's care for them and trust him with their deepest hurts.





Who will you fear?

This is a psalm that holds fear and trust in tension. The psalmist fears humans, but trusts in God. How does this apply to you as 2023 starts?

Fear and trust

Read Psalm 56:1-13

- ❓ *What exactly is the psalmist afraid of?*
- ❓ *What exactly is the psalmist trusting in?*

The repeated refrain in verses 3-4 and 10-11 contains some key truths. Trust is not just for when things are going well (that's easy), but also for when things are difficult. We can still trust when we are afraid because we trust in the ultimately trustworthy God. But this trust isn't a passive thing—it requires us to call out to God for help (v 1, 7-9).

Word and promise

Many people view prayer as an act of weakness or desperation—whispering or shrieking our hopes to the silent heavens.

- ❓ *How is Christian prayer different (v 4)?*

The psalm gives us one clue — see “whose word I praise”. We can trust God because he gives us his word, and he has demonstrated time and time again how he keeps his word and his promises.

..... TIME OUT

God gives many immediate promises in the Bible. However, he also gives long-term promises which form the basis of his relationship with his people.

He promised Abraham descendants, land,

a relationship, and blessing for all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). He promised David that one of his descendants would always rule (2 Samuel 7:8-15). Both promises were ultimately fulfilled in Jesus (Galatians 3:8, 14; Acts 13:32-34). If you want to learn more, look for books that explain the big story of the Bible. One example would be Vaughan Roberts' *God's Big Picture*.

What can mere mortals do to me?

Read Psalm 56:10-13

- ❓ *What assurance does he come to?*
- ❓ *What commitment does he make (v 13)?*

In one sense, mortals can do quite a lot to us, and the psalmist knows it first-hand (v 1-2, 5-6, 8)! How, then, can he say, “What can mere mortals do to me” (v 4, 11)? The truth here is that humans can do nothing about what ultimately matters—our relationship and destiny with God.

^ Pray

Thank God for his promises to all believers, and the security that we have in him, even when we are struggling with painful things.

Resolve before the Lord to walk before God in the light of life this year.

JUDGES: Light in the dark

Life for believers in a broken world can often feel very dark—but even in those times God is at work.

Getting our bearings

The book of Judges is a treasure trove of gripping stories. Many of its characters are well known—people like Gideon, Samson, Deborah; others like Shamgar, Othniel and Tola are not. Judges describes glorious rescues, dramatic exploits, but also terrible events. Some of the darkest episodes in the Bible are found in this book.

Read Joshua 24:14-15, 21 and Judges 21:25

- ❓ *What do the people commit to at the end of the book of Joshua?*
- ❓ *What are the people like by the end of Judges?*

The book of Judges tells the story of God's people after the death of Joshua, when they have started to settle in the promised land, and before the arrival of Samuel, roughly 300 years of history. Sadly, the book describes a downward spiral into deeper sin by God's people as they forsake their God. But through it all, God is faithful to his people, even in their sin. Light shines even in the darkest times.

A promising start

Read Judges 1:1-8

- ❓ *What do the Israelites plan to do?*
- ❓ *What is good about how they do it?*
- ❓ *What does the writer say is the real reason for their victories (v 4)?*

Apply

The death of Joshua left a huge hole in the leadership of God's people.

- ❓ *But what do these opening verses teach us about where true leadership and security is to be found for God's people?*
- ❓ *How might this help us when godly leaders die or move on; or when leaders let us down and fail?*

God is faithful to his promises in Judges 1.

- ❓ *Where can you see God's faithfulness to his promises in your life, even in dark times?*
- ❓ *How might that encourage you today?*

More success! But...

Read Judges 1:9-21

- ❓ *What successes do God's people achieve in these verses?*
- ❓ *Again, what is the key to their success (v 19)?*
- ❓ *What warning notes are sounded in verses 19 and 21?*

Pray

Pray that through these studies in Judges, God would encourage you and teach you about his faithfulness and commitment to his people.



Where it all went wrong

What happens when we compromise on obedience to God's commands? Judges 1 shows us the sad consequences...

Judges begins with life after Joshua. And it started well. Enemies defeated, land taken, the people united and dependant on God for victory. But it's not long before things begin to go wrong.

throughout all the nations of the world. Our job is not to bring judgment through the sword; we are instead to bring the gospel of Jesus so that the nations will be spared the ultimate judgment of God!

Danger of compromise

Read Judges 1:22-36

- ❓ *What is the consistent pattern in these verses as the different tribes try to take the land?*
- ❓ *What different ways does the writer use to describe the relationships between the Israelites and the various peoples of Canaan?*
- ❓ *How would you sum up the situation in the land at the end of chapter 1?*

Look up Deuteronomy 7:1-6

- ❓ *What were the people to do to the nations in the land?*
- ❓ *What reasons did God give for this?*

These commands might feel wrong to us today. But God's people in the Old Testament were a specific nation in a specific place. God used his people to bring his judgment on the inhabitants of the land. Previously he'd been merciful and allowed these nations to thrive; and some individuals had even trusted in God! But now his just judgment was to be meted out through his people. This is very different for God's people today—we're a people scattered

Apply

In not doing what God commanded, Israel compromised, and the polluting nations remained among them, causing God's people to be led astray. The rest of the Old Testament, including Judges, tells the story.

- ❓ *How might you be tempted to compromise when faced with difficult commands?*
- ❓ *How do the views of the world around you affect your thinking and actions?*

God's verdict

Read Judges 2:1-5

- ❓ *What had God promised the people? What did he want them to do?*
- ❓ *What is God's response to their disobedience?*
- ❓ *How do the people respond? Why aren't tears enough? See 2:11-13!*

Pray

Ask God to help you to be faithful to him, and repent of your sinful compromises honestly and wholeheartedly.

The pattern is set

The choices one generation makes have consequences for the next. Is there any escape from the cycle?

We saw in chapter 1 that the people of God started well in seeking to settle in the land. They drove out some of their enemies whilst seeking God's guidance. But chapter 1 also showed how the people compromised with the nations. They failed to drive out many of the people, and ended up living side by side with them. Chapter 2 shows the consequences with an overview of the years ahead. Chapter 2 sets the pattern which the rest of the book follows.

Sin has consequences

Read Judges 2:6-16

- ❓ *How did the people behave in the lifetime of Joshua (v 6-9)?*
- ❓ *How do the next generation behave (v 10-13)?*
- ❓ *What is at the heart of this behaviour according to the writer in verse 10?*
- ❓ *How does the writer highlight how serious this is in verses 12-13?*
- ❓ *What is God's reaction (v 14-15)?*

Apply

These verses highlight how quickly God's people can forsake him through compromising with the world around and forgetting him.

- ❓ *Why is forgetfulness so dangerous for Christians?*
- ❓ *What Bible truths are you in most danger of forgetting at the moment?*

- ❓ *What do you think it means to "know the Lord" in verse 10? How is knowing God and growth in him vital for spiritual health and protection?*

One issue for Israel seems to have been that they were not teaching the next generation about the Lord.

- ❓ *Why is it vital we teach our children and young people at home and in church about the Lord (for help look up Deuteronomy 6:20-25)?*
- ❓ *Judges 2:16 is a ray of hope. What does this verse teach about the Lord, despite human sin?*

Down, down, down...

Read Judges 2:17 – 3:6

- ❓ *How do these verses set the pattern for God's people for the years to come?*
- ❓ *How does God use the presence of the nations in the land (2:22 and 3:1, 4)?*
- ❓ *Do you think Israel passed or failed the test (3:5-6)?*

Remember Deuteronomy 7:3-4 for how serious this is!

Pray

Pray for God's grace to know him better and to fight sin. Pray for children and young people in your family and church to come to know the Lord and stand for him.



God is the hero!

Think of the most exceptional leader you know of. What are their qualities? What are their limitations?

Who's in charge?

Leadership is a big issue in the book of Judges. The book begins with the death of a gifted leader, Joshua (1:1), and ends with the comment that people did what they wanted because they had no obvious leader (21:25).

Judges weren't law-court officials as we know them—they were people raised up by God to lead God's people and rescue them from their enemies. But behind each of them was God himself. We're not meant to see the judges as examples for us. Some of them lived very messy lives and made very bad decisions! Rather, they teach us about God—the real Saviour. The book of Judges shows us our sin and points to our need for a Saviour.

A model judge

Read Judges 3:7-11

- ❓ *Looking at the passage as a whole, what pattern can you see in the story that we first noted in chapter 2?*
- ❓ *In Judges 3:7-8, what did the Israelites do and how did God respond?*
- ❓ *What are the next stages of the cycle in verses 9-10?*
- ❓ *What do we learn about Othniel here? Why might it be significant that he is the first judge?*
- ❓ *Remember Judges 1:9-13. How had Othniel resisted the temptations of 3:6?*

- ❓ *What is the result of the rescue (v 11)?*

The model Saviour

We might at first think Judges 3:7-11 is all about Othniel, but in fact Othniel is simply the Lord's instrument to save his people.

Read Judges 3:7-11 again

- ❓ *What do you learn about God's reaction to sin?*
- ❓ *How do you see his mercy and grace at work?*

Notice in verse 10 the first mention of the Spirit of God in Judges. We'll see later that God often gives the judges his Spirit to empower them to save his people from their enemies.

Apply

We learn little about Othniel, but much about God. And Othniel points us to Jesus, our perfect Saviour.

- ❓ *As you consider your own life, what do these verses teach you about the danger of sin in verse 7?*
- ❓ *And what do they teach you about how God delights to rescue sinners like us?*

Praise God for his mercy in Jesus!



Faithful refuge

When disaster strikes, where do we find refuge? For the psalmist, it is God—the ultimate source of rest and security.

Read Psalm 57:1-11

- ❓ *Where does the psalmist take refuge and why (v 1)?*
- ❓ *How does he describe God (v 2-3, 10)?*
- ❓ *How does he describe his enemies and their acts (v 3, 4, 6)?*
- ❓ *Beyond his plea in verse 1, how will he respond to all of this—(v 7-9)?*

The psalmist has to live among people who act like wild beasts, whose words are as dangerous and hurtful as weapons of war (v 4). Yet, he has a refuge in God—the God who will vindicate him (v 2) and turn the violence of his enemies back upon them (v 6).

Sticks and Stones?

Look back at the attacks in Psalm 55:3, 9, 12, and in Psalm 56:5. Many of them are verbal (as here). The Bible doesn't agree that "words will never hurt me". Instead, it recognises the anguish that they can cause. Therefore, it also warns us to be careful how we speak.

TIME OUT

Read James 3:1-12

- ❓ *How does this passage describe the tongue?*
- ❓ *How does this challenge Christians about the way we speak?*

Pray

Ask God to help you and all Christians to speak truthfully and with kindness.

Loving, steadfast, faithful

Why can the psalmist be confident that God will be his refuge? Because of God's character. This psalm uses two words to describe this: "love" and "faithfulness" (v 3, 10). The first includes the ideas of love, steadfastness, loyalty. The second includes the ideas of truth and faithfulness.

This is why the psalmist can be steadfast even under attack (v 7). This is why he will praise his God even at night (v 8) and among the nations (v 9). We remember Paul and Silas singing to God in the Philippian jail, (perhaps this very psalm?) because they knew what the psalmist knew. They knew that the God who is above all creation (v 5, 11) acts within creation (v 3). And we remember how God acted on that occasion—truly their refuge (see Acts 16:22-26)!

Pray

Thank God that he is our refuge, that he is full of steadfast love and true faithfulness. If you need it, seek him as your refuge now. If you don't, pray for those who do.





An unlikely saviour

Sometimes, Bible rescues are achieved through the most surprising of people.

A tragicomic tale

In Judges 3 we meet Eglon and Ehud. Lots of the stories in Judges are dark and sad, but the way this narrative is told is surely meant to make us smile. But at first, the story is deadly serious.

Read Judges 3:12-31

- ❓ *What familiar cycle is described in verses 12-15?*
- ❓ *Why is it significant to read in verse 12 that God “gave” Eglon power over Israel (remember 3:8)?*
- ❓ *What does this cycle remind us about the state of the human heart and the need for God’s grace and mercy?*
- ❓ *What does it teach us about God’s view of sin and its consequences?*

Ehud is an unlikely saviour. Verse 15 describes him as left-handed. Soldiers traditionally fought right-handed, and this was their strength. To be left-handed was thought to be a disadvantage, even weak. Ehud was also from the tribe of Benjamin, one of the weakest tribes and already a military failure (1:21). But he is God’s choice, and that is what makes the difference.

- ❓ *What elements of the story in verses 16-26 are surprising and unexpected?*
- ❓ *What overall picture do we get of Eglon?*
- ❓ *How does this highlight the tragedy of Eglon ruling over Israel for 18 years?*

- ❓ *How does the end of the story in verses 27-30 highlight God’s judgment and power over his enemies, and God’s grace to his people?*

A surprising saviour!

Ehud (and indeed Shamgar in verse 31) is a surprising saviour. But like all the judges, we’re not meant to copy him. He’s flawed and weak. These judges keep pointing us forward to a better Saviour—Jesus! But Jesus, too, is an unlikely Saviour.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

- ❓ *Why is the message about Jesus such foolishness to ears of the world?*
- ❓ *Why is the cross the power of God, according to Paul (v 21)?*

Apply

- ❓ *How does the unlikely way God saves through Ehud and through Jesus highlight God’s power?*
- ❓ *What does the cross do to our pride and the thought that we’re the powerful masters of our lives?*
- ❓ *Why is it that we are sometimes ashamed of the message of the cross, even though it’s God’s way of salvation and wisdom?*

Thank God for the wisdom and power of the cross.



An unwilling leader

Why is it that God's people often find it hard to do what he says? Is it fear? Is it the cost? Or perhaps it's just a sense of resignation that we can't change the situation...

Same old, same old

God's people need a hero again. But this time Judges 4 presents a rather reluctant hero. God's people are in the same situation again after the death of Ehud. Once again, we're presented with a familiar cycle we've seen before.

Read Judges 4:1-16

- ❓ *What familiar features do we see in verses 1-3?*
- ❓ *In what ways is this time different from 3:8 and 3:14?*
- ❓ *What is Deborah's role in 4:4-7?*
- ❓ *How is Barak portrayed in verses 8-10?*
- ❓ *Despite Barak's misgivings, what is the outcome of the battle in verses 11-16 and who is really responsible?*

Apply

Barak is an ambiguous figure. He looks weak in some ways, but...

Read 1 Samuel 12:11 and Hebrews 11:32-33

- ❓ *What encouragement might this give us about the way God uses weak and fearful people like us?*
- ❓ *In what specific areas might you be unwilling to obey God's word in your life?*
- ❓ *What are the reasons why you find it hard to obey him?*

God defeats his enemies

Read Judges 4:17-24

Sisera flees the battle on foot (v 17).

- ❓ *How does he meet his end? Why is it significant that Jael is the one who delivers the fatal blow (v 9)?*
- ❓ *Why is it significant that Barak is mentioned in verse 22?*

Apply

It's easy to read a passage like this, and feel that we too let God down and fail him through fear, lack of courage, weak hearts and a whole host of other reasons. But the writer reminds us that God is the real hero (see v 6, 9, 14, 15 and 23). And wonderfully we have a better Saviour who knows how we feel, but didn't sin.

Read Hebrews 4:14-16

- ❓ *What encouragement does the writer give us in these verses? What does he urge us to do?*

Pray

Spend some time confessing your own weaknesses to the Lord, and admitting the times you've let him down. Ask for his forgiveness, and rejoice in his love and acceptance of you in Jesus. Ask him for help to live his way today.

Whose side are you on?

What are your favourite songs to sing? What are those songs all about?

Judges 5 is a unique chapter in this book. It's a song of victory penned by Deborah and Barak all about how God defeated the enemies of God's people during the events of Judges 4. But it's also a song that highlights those who didn't come to help the people of God in trouble. Those who came to fight on God's behalf are his friends. Those who didn't are classed as enemies. God's friends are shown to be those who line up behind his cause and who are prepared to fight for his glory.

Sing God's praises

Read Judges 5:1-15

- ❓ *What's the main theme of the song (v 2)?*
- ❓ *What picture do verses 4-5 paint of God?*
- ❓ *What problem is sung about in verses 6-7 and how was it resolved?*
- ❓ *What do verses 10-15 describe God's faithful people doing?*

TIME OUT

"The One of Sinai" (v 5) is the God who revealed himself to Moses and God's people on Mount Sinai. To see what he's like, read **Exodus 19:16-18** and **34:1-7**.

- ❓ *Why is it significant that "the One of Sinai" is the same God who rescues his people in Judges 4 and 5?*

Enemies defeated

Read Judges 5:16-31

- ❓ *Verses 16-18 describe a different reaction to the events from some sections of God's people. What do they do?*
- ❓ *How does God see their decision (v 23)?*
- ❓ *What do you think about the brutal, gloating satire of verses 28-30?*

Apply

Judges 5 is fundamentally about God's glorious rescue of his people. He provides the leaders to save God's people. He is the one who leads his people to victory. But God's people have a choice—to line up behind their glorious saving Lord, or not!

- ❓ *When are you tempted to be ashamed of God and his plans, and not to "line up behind him"?*
- ❓ *What situations can you think of where you're tempted to put your own comfort before doing what is right for God and his kingdom?*

Pray

While we might be afraid and ashamed of God and his kingdom, we can know his forgiveness through Jesus. Spend some time confessing your fear and those times when his glory and priorities come second. Rejoice that there is forgiveness in Jesus.

Fleeces and fires

Gideon is a favourite Bible character for many. But is he an example we should follow, or a warning we should heed?

So far in Judges we've looked at Othniel, Ehud and Barak as the main characters of the story. Slowly but surely there has been a steady decline in their leadership. Othniel was a model judge, but Ehud and Barak had serious weaknesses. As we come to Gideon, we need to be cautious to use him as an example of faithfulness. He's God's man to save his people, but he's also terribly flawed. All the way through the book we need to remember that God is the Saviour, even if he uses flawed people for his saving purposes.

Yet more of the same!

Read Judges 6:1-10

- ❓ *Why did God's people suffer (v 1-6)?*
- ❓ *What is God's response to their cry (v 8)?*
- ❓ *How does God summarise the problem?*

The cycle we've seen before repeats itself, but this time there's a difference. The writer will spend a long time telling us about the preparation for Gideon's act of rescue.

A new hero?

Read Judges 6:11-32

The way God deals with Gideon is different to anyone else in Judges.

- ❓ *What unique experiences does Gideon have in verses 11, 12, 14, 16, 20, 21, 23, 25?*
- ❓ *What do you think should be the effect on Gideon of all these experiences?*

- ❓ *What do his responses show about him? See verses 13, 15, 17.*
- ❓ *How do the events of verses 25-32 show some progress in Gideon's heart?*

Apply

Gideon is far from being the "mighty warrior" of verse 12!

- ❓ *But what does God's choice of Gideon show us about God and the way he works?*
- ❓ *How might that encourage you as you seek to serve God in your situation?*

For a New Testament perspective, have a look at 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.

Time for the fleece?

Read Judges 6:33-40

- ❓ *What do his requests to God about the fleece reveal about Gideon?*
- ❓ *Why are the fleeces unnecessary (v 14, 16, 36)?*
- ❓ *What do the fleece episodes reveal about God?*

Pray

Thank God for his patience and love for you, and his word to us in the Bible. Ask him to help you trust his sure word to guide you in all you face.



Outnumbered?

Gideon is ready for action. But who is it that really gives the victory? It is a wonderful story beloved by those who teach Bible stories to children!

But while the details are remarkable and memorable, we need to remember the big picture of Judges to see the desperate situation God's people were in because of their sin. The setting for this story is described in 6:1 and 6:6. Israel needs a saviour to rescue them from their enemies—and Gideon is the unlikely hero. Remember how the angel described him in 6:12. Is this really true? Has the story so far backed up the angel's word or not?

The 300

Read Judges 7:1-8

These verses describe the way God whittles down the army from 30,000 to 300.

- ❓ *Why did God do this (v 2, 7)?*
- ❓ *How do the armies of Israel and Midian compare now (see v 12)?*

TIME OUT

Read Deuteronomy 20:1-9

- ❓ *How do these verses shed some light on what God asks of Gideon in Judges 7?*
- ❓ *What encouragement does God give in Deuteronomy 20:4?*

Whose victory?

Read Judges 7:9-25

The two armies are ridiculously uneven.

- ❓ *But what does God say to Gideon in verses 10-11? Why does God do this (remember the Gideon of Judges 6)?*
- ❓ *What do the Midianite soldiers reveal to Gideon in verses 13-14?*
- ❓ *How does the victory come about?*
- ❓ *What do Gideon and his men actually do (v 21)?*

Go back to 6:12 and remind yourself of what the angel said about Gideon. Looking at the whole of Judges 6 – 7, how have the words of the angel been fulfilled through this weak man?

Apply

As we consider the story of Gideon up to this point, the main lesson is very clear. God is the Saviour—Gideon isn't! God uses a weak and fearful man for his glory and the people's good. Though that lesson is simple to understand, it's very easy to forget in our own lives. We rely too much on ourselves, and think we're the saviour, not God.

- ❓ *How might this be true, for example, as you seek to share your faith with unbelieving friends or family?*
- ❓ *How might this truth that God is the real Saviour help you if you're facing what seems like an impossible situation in your personal life or in your church?*

Take time to pray about those situations and ask for God's help.



To be or not to be king?

Gideon has led God's people to victory. But will his story end well?

The story of Gideon in Judges 6 – 7 has been a story of a weak, fearful man, used by God to save his people from their enemies, the Midianites. The angel said that Gideon was a mighty warrior in 6:12. But we have seen that Gideon is only a mighty warrior because the Lord himself saves his people through him. Judges 8 describes the end of Gideon's reign. Sadly this will be the last time Israel will know a period of peace in this book (8:28). From here it's further decline with a few brief highlights. Chapter 8 shows what happens when one leader makes some bad choices. We need a much better leader than Gideon.

Revenge!

Read Judges 8:1-21

Verses 1-3 show a rare bright spot in this chapter.

- ❓ *How does Gideon exercise wisdom with the Ephraimite complaints (see 6:34-35 and 7:24-25 for the context)?*
- ❓ *How would you describe Gideon's actions in 8:4-17? Compare for example verse 9 and 17.*
- ❓ *Verses 18-19 reveal that the Midianites have killed Gideon's own family. How does Gideon react?*

Will the real Gideon stand up?

Read Judges 8:22-35

- ❓ *What are the people forgetting (v 22)?*
- ❓ *Gideon's answer (v 23) sounds godly, but what do verses 24-27 reveal?*
- ❓ *How do verses 28-35 reinforce this view?*
- ❓ *How would you assess the state of God's people at the end of Gideon's reign?*

TIME OUT

Read Deuteronomy 17:14-20

- ❓ *How does Gideon compare to the laws about the king laid out in here?*

Apply

Gideon's reign leaves us longing for better leadership. And even when God provides Israel with kings, none of them are perfect—even David. We have to wait until King Jesus.

Read Matthew 11:28-30

- ❓ *How do Jesus' claims measure against the leadership of Gideon?*
- ❓ *How do Jesus' words give you strength and encouragement in all the challenges you face at the moment?*

Spend time thanking God for the beautiful qualities of Jesus, our Saviour and King. Ask God to help you trust King Jesus and submit to him.

Unjust rulers

Most lament psalms focus on the psalmist's difficult situation. This one looks wider. How do we pray for an unjust world?

Read Psalm 58:1-5

- ❓ *Who is the psalmist speaking about, and what is he saying about them (v 1-2)?*
- ❓ *How widespread is the problem (v 3)?*
- ❓ *What image does he use (v 4-5) and what does it suggest about these people?*

Good government should lead to justice. However, often those in power are selfish and unjust. In human terms there is little that most of us can do about unjust leaders. But there is always one thing that God's people can do. They can pray to the Ruler of rulers, who is just and calls those who rule under him to be just.

TIME OUT

Some translations have “rulers” in verse 1. Others have “gods”. In the psalmist's world many nations saw their kings as similar to gods—both of them very powerful beings that could do what they liked. In some countries in our world, people will still feel like this.

Read Psalm 58:6-11

- ❓ *What does the psalmist ask God to do (v 6-8)?*
- ❓ *What will be the response to this (v 9-11)?*

There are some difficult images in these verses. How can we make sense of them? We need to remember that this is a prayer

about injustice. We may be reading it while living in relative comfort and in a country where the justice system works reasonably well. If so, it invites us to identify with the oppressed, and to join their passionate call for justice. For example:

- Breaking the teeth (v 6) of predators who attack prey means freeing the prey (in their mouths)—thus removing the weapons of the unjust powers.
- Washing feet in blood (v 10) is not an image of bathing but of victory in battle. (The victorious side walk through the blood-soaked battleground.)

Verses 6-11 are a series of images calling on God to fight injustice. It is based on the faith that he is the just, supreme Ruler who can act and beat the mighty unjust powers.

Apply

- ❓ *Do you believe—really believe—that God can act against any injustice and any powers on Earth?*
- ❓ *Do you therefore pray earnestly for this to happen?*

Pray

Think of the wider world. Choose one or two places where unjust rulers are oppressing people. Bring them before God and ask him to act—to break their “teeth” and free their “prey”.

The thornbush king

What kind of ruler do you want to rule you? What kind of leader do you want? What factors shape your decision when it comes around to voting?

Gideon started weak and fearful, but became a strong and faithful leader. But then he acted like a king, hoarding wealth, taking many wives, and behaving ruthlessly. The result was a nation that forsook God (8:27). Chapter 9 sees the continuing slide downwards of the people under a “king” who is a disaster. How we need a better president, prime minister or king than Abimelek!

A leader after our own hearts

Read Judges 9:1-21

- ❓ *How does Gideon’s son promote himself to his family in verses 1-3?*
- ❓ *How do the people choose this leader?*
- ❓ *What do verses 4-6 reveal about his true character?*
- ❓ *Jotham, the youngest of Gideon’s sons, survives. What does his story in verses 7-15 prophesy about the “reign” of Abimelek?*
- ❓ *How does he apply the story in v 16-20?*

Notice where Jotham lays the responsibility for Abimelek’s kingship—verses 16 and 18.

Apply

It’s said that we get the leaders we deserve.

- ❓ *What kind of leaders do you really long for in your country and in your church?*
- ❓ *But how do our sinful attitudes obstruct*

these desires when it comes to actually choosing leaders?

- ❓ *How might this story help us think more biblically about how to choose leaders and what qualities we seek in them?*

TIME OUT

Look up **1 Timothy 3:1-7** to see the qualities God requires in church leaders.

- ❓ *How different are these qualities to Abimelek’s?*

From bad to worse

Read Judges 9:22-57

- ❓ *What are the key events in this section—who rebels and how does Abimelek respond?*
- ❓ *How is Abimelek acting like a Canaanite oppressor of God’s people (v 45, and compare 4:2-3 with 6:4-6)?*
- ❓ *What is God’s role in this, and why is that significant (9:23-24 and 56-57)?*

Apply

All this is grim news for God’s people. They reject God, appoint a bad leader and suffer the consequences. God is there, but only in judgment. It all points again to the need for godly leadership that only Jesus can provide. Turn Philippians 2:5-11 into praise for Jesus and pray that your own church leaders would follow Jesus’ example.



A foolish vow

Is there any hope when life is complicated and messy? Judges 9 saw a new low for the people of God. Can things get worse? Sadly they can, and they will.

The story of Jephthah is another step down. Judges doesn't simply go round in circles. It's a downward spiral into ever-deepening brokenness and sin. But even in these dark chapters, there is hope and light.

Light in the darkness?

Read Judges 10:6 – 11:11

The familiar cycle of Judges happens again.

- ❓ *Why do you think God challenges the people as he does in 10:14?*
- ❓ *What hints are there in verses 15-16 that the people have understood the key issue?*
- ❓ *In what ways is God's response at the end of verse 16 a glimmer of hope?*
- ❓ *How is the people's treatment of God reflected in the way they treat Jephthah?*

▼ Apply

In some ways, our treatment of God's leaders often mirrors our treatment of God.

- ❓ *Why do you think this is?*

10:16 sees the people breaking with their false gods and idols. Idols are anything or anyone that replaces God at the centre of our hearts.

- ❓ *What idols can you identify in your own heart that you know you struggle with?*
- ❓ *What steps can you take to loosen their grip on you and get rid of them?*

Read Judges 11:12-28

These verses show Jephthah acting wisely in the face of provocation.

- ❓ *How is his wisdom with the Ammonites shown?*
- ❓ *What do you make of the fact that people like Gideon and Jephthah can act so wisely but also so foolishly?*
- ❓ *Does this encourage you as you think about your own heart and mind?*

A tragic end

Read Judges 11:29 – 12:15

- ❓ *How does Jephthah act foolishly with his vow (11:30-31, 34-35) and with his own people (12:1-6)?*

Child sacrifice was forbidden in Israel. Jephthah could have sought forgiveness and offered an animal sacrifice instead (see Leviticus 27:1-4).

- ❓ *What does Jephthah's vow reveal about his heart towards God and his law?*

This is a very dark chapter. But God still graciously uses a sinful man to rescue his repentant people (Judges 11:32).

Think of those you know going through difficult times. Pray that they would trust in the Lord who brings light and rescue even in the darkest moments.

A fresh start?

If you were drawing up the qualities needed in a saviour, what would you include?

Looking back through all the judges we've studied so far, we've seen amazing strengths and pitiful weaknesses in the saviours of God's people. There have been some staggering highs, but also some deeply depressing lows. And it appears things are getting worse. But now, a new saviour arises whose story is very different. Samson is given more chapters than any other judge, and his birth is told in some detail in chapter 13.

Read Judges 13:1-5

- ❓ *Verse 1 describes the familiar cycle, but what is missing?*
- ❓ *How does this highlight God's grace in what follows?*
- ❓ *How does Manoah's situation in verse 2 reflect the spiritual state of the nation at this time?*
- ❓ *What does the angel promise in verses 3-5?*
- ❓ *How does this promise get to the heart of the big issues in this family's and the nation's lives?*

TIME OUT

Read Numbers 6:1-8

- ❓ *What is the point of the Nazirite vow?*
- ❓ *What is different in Samson's case and how does this highlight how special he is (see Judges 13:5)?*

Faithlessness and mercy

Read Judges 13:6-25

These verses describe the response of Manoah to the news his wife receives. He prays that the angel would come back and then God answers the prayer.

- ❓ *What new information, if any, does Manoah receive?*
- ❓ *What does the story reveal about Manoah's heart?*
- ❓ *What does the story show us about God's faithfulness, grace and mercy?*

This remarkable story feels like a fresh start in a dark book. Perhaps this time, the promised saviour will deal with Israel's heart issues once and for all! But the story also points us forward to another childless woman, who is spoken to by an angel.

Read Luke 1:26-38

- ❓ *What differences and similarities do you notice between Mary's story and Judges 13?*
- ❓ *What gives us confidence that the child of Luke 1 is a better Saviour than the child in Judges 13?*

Both Manoah and Mary had to believe the word of God. The challenge for us is to do the same.

- ❓ *In what ways might you disbelieve God's word that Jesus is the perfect Saviour for you?*



Goes off script

Samson's life seems more like a Hollywood film script than a story in the Bible. But even here, God is at work!

Judges 13 felt like a fresh start. A boy was born who we're told would "take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (13:5). At the end of the chapter, the Spirit was already stirring him (13:25). But in order to be the rescuer God wanted, he was set apart from birth to be holy. His parents were to treat him as a Nazirite, one devoted to the Lord. His hair would never be cut, he could not drink alcohol, and he should never touch dead bodies. He was to be a holy saviour. How does he get on?

Not so holy!

Read Judges 14:1-20

- ❓ *What does Samson's choice of wife reveal about his heart (v 1-3)?*

Remember how the people themselves acted in Judges 3:5-6.

- ❓ *How do Samson's actions in 14:5-10 undermine his Nazirite vow (the word for "feast" in verse 10 implies alcohol)?*

Samson sets his groomsmen a riddle (v 12-13) with the loser giving 30 sets of clothes to the other. An expensive wager! However, in the culture, Samson should have given his groomsmen the clothes as a gift. His riddle, which they could never work out, was a ruse to get out of giving the gift.

- ❓ *What are the results of Samson's greed in verses 12-20? Notice verses 15 and 19.*

Apply

Samson's actions here are far from holy, quite the opposite in fact. But in many ways, he reflects what is happening in the nation as a whole. He is blindly following ungodly desires, and ignoring the Lord and his calling.

- ❓ *Why is holiness important for God's people (see 1 Peter 1:14-16)?*
- ❓ *In what areas of your life can you see yourself being attracted more to unholiness than holiness? Perhaps, like Samson, something you look at, something you desire, or allowing anger to fester and blow up?*

A cycle of revenge

Read Judges 15:1-20

- ❓ *How does revenge and vendetta work out in this chapter?*
- ❓ *What are the consequences?*

Like many chapters in Judges, these chapters are gory and dark.

- ❓ *But can you see God's hand in any of this? See for example 14:4, 6, 19; 15:14-15, 18-19.*
- ❓ *What does this teach us about God's commitment to his people, and his power to bring good out of evil?*

A glorious ending?

The story of Samson and Delilah is one of the most memorable in Judges. But it's less about love and more about grace!

Samson's rule as judge has lasted 20 years (15:20; 16:31). But in that time, he's acted less like the godly saviour he was meant to be and more like the Philistines he was sent to destroy. His track record hasn't been great. He's more interested in sex, revenge, money and an easy life. He's seemed very uninterested in pursuing the mission God has given him (see 13:5); even though he has great Spirit-given power to rip a lion to pieces, capture 300 foxes and kill numerous Philistines with a donkey's jawbone. As the worst of the judges, Samson is a very odd choice for a saviour—but through it all God's grace shines bright to point us to a better Saviour.

When godliness is in second place

Read Judges 16:1-22

- ❓ *In verse 1, what do we learn about Samson's time in Philistine Gaza?*
- ❓ *How does he use his powers in verse 3? What should he have been doing (13:5)?*
- ❓ *What does all this reveal about his heart and desire to do God's work?*
- ❓ *Why do you think Samson doesn't just walk away when he discovers Delilah's duplicity?*

▼ Apply

We're more like Samson than we perhaps

care to admit. We follow our passions and they lead us into trouble. But we think we can deal with it all with our own strength, intelligence, skills or money.

- ❓ *Have you ever fallen into this trap?*
- ❓ *What steps can you take to make sure you don't fall for such temptations?*

Deeply flawed saviour

Read Judges 16:23-31

The Philistines have their prize and celebrate with their god.

- ❓ *What is the attitude behind Samson's prayer in verse 28?*
- ❓ *How good a saviour was he, given the author's comment in verse 30?*

▼ Apply

The story of Samson probably leaves us with more questions than answers. At best he's deeply flawed, his motives sinful, and his results mixed. But...

Read Hebrews 11:32-34; 12:1-3

As flawed as the four men mentioned in verse 32 were, they are still described as "men of faith". This gives us hope as equally flawed believers.

Ask God to give you courage to press on in faith, despite your failings, fixing your eyes on Jesus, your Saviour.

The land with no king

If no one's in charge, then we can make up the rules. Many people dream of a world like that. And yet the reality is often far removed from what people think it would be.

“In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (17:6). That phrase comes twice in today's passage (also 18:1) and then twice more in the final chapters of Judges (19:1 and 21:25). It's a phrase that really sums up what is happening in the final chapters of Judges. The last judge in the book, Samson, was an utter disaster—even though God was merciful and gracious. But now the restraints are coming off. Chapters 17 – 21 are some of the darkest chapters in the whole Bible. They show us what happens when human beings ignore God and put themselves on the throne in their lives—the result is chaos and carnage. There are very few references to God in these chapters. How we need a perfect King to rule us...

Do-it-yourself religion

Read Judges 17:1-13

- ❓ *How does Micah relate to God in this chapter?*
- ❓ *What do you think he's trying to do to God (verse 13)?*
- ❓ *How is verse 6 a commentary on the whole chapter?*

▼ Apply

Look up Deuteronomy 4:15-16, 25-26; 12:4-6, 8.

- ❓ *How much does Micah get wrong?*

- ❓ *What will happen if you conduct your relationship with God on your own terms and for your own comfort?*
- ❓ *In what ways do you try and barter with God to get his blessing?*

Do-it-yourself morality

Read Judges 18:1-31

We met the Danites in 1:34. They failed to take the land allotted to them, and now that failure comes back to haunt them. They need to find new land.

- ❓ *How do the Danites try and justify their actions (see 18:5-6, 10)?*
- ❓ *What do we discover about the Levite's motives in verses 18-20?*
- ❓ *Why is Micah's comment in verse 24 so sad?*
- ❓ *The story ends with the Danites in their newly conquered city. What do verses 29-30 reveal about their hearts?*

▼ Apply

- ❓ *How do these chapters warn us about thinking that success in what we do is a sign of blessing?*
- ❓ *What do they show us about the dangers of ignoring God's word?*

Wake-up call

Do you ever feel that God isn't paying attention to you and your needs? If so, how do you pray to him? This psalm gives you an example.

Read Psalm 59:1-17

- ❓ *How does the psalmist describe those against him (v 1-7)?*
- ❓ *Does he deserve what is happening (v 3-4)?*
- ❓ *What does he ask God to do (v 1, 5, 10-13)?*
- ❓ *What are the differences between the repeated sections (v 6-10 and 14-17)?*

Dogs and God

The psalmist is being attacked by people he describes as wild dogs prowling around (v 6, 14). In David's time and culture, dogs were not pets, but rather dangerous, wild scavengers. (We might say jackals or wolves.) They are bold to attack, thinking that nobody is listening, nobody will stop them (v 7). But the psalmist knows someone who is listening—his God.

- ❓ *How does he describe God (v 1, 5, 8-10)?*
- ❓ *What does he want God to do (v 1-2, 4-5)?*

The words of verses 4-5 are shocking. He asks God to rouse himself (literally “wake up!”). Does this suggest that God isn't watching, or that God is somehow asleep?

And yet at the same time he describes God as his fortress, someone to rely on (v 9-10, 16-17). Sleepy watchmen aren't reliable! How do we understand this?

This is lament, spoken in faith. The psalmist knows, loves and trusts God. Yet his current situation doesn't seem to match his faith. It looks to him as if God isn't watching, because of his troubles. But then note his response. He doesn't just ignore God, but rather calls out to him. It is because he trusts that God is reliable that he can call on him to act and show himself relevant to the situation.

We might be shocked by the words he uses, but he is talking to his heavenly Father. We can speak to God even more freely than we might speak to our parents, in the freedom of that loving relationship. If we are upset, and in danger of saying something “unfair” to God, he understands. He would rather that we speak to him unfairly than ignore him.

▼ Apply

- ❓ *Do you feel the freedom to tell God to “look” or “wake up!” if things are very difficult?*

This psalm gives you that freedom.

▲ Pray

Bring your needs and frustrations before your loving heavenly Father. Don't worry about offending him. Honesty comes first.



Heart of darkness

Think of some of the stories in the news at the moment. What sorts of things are human beings capable of?

We're in the final dark chapters of Judges. This chapter starts with the refrain, "In those days Israel had no king". The result is that everyone makes up their own religion, (chapter 17) and their own rules (chapter 18). If we thought things couldn't get worse, it does. It's a deeply sobering chapter and there's no avoiding how horrific it is.

One dreadful night

Read Judges 19:1-30

Verses 1-10 tell of a relationship breakdown and an attempted reconciliation.

- ❓ *What picture do we get of the woman's father?*
- ❓ *How does this contrast with the people of Gibeah in verse 15?*
- ❓ *In what follows, how is the woman treated by the old man, by the Levite and then by the men of the town?*
- ❓ *What do you think is the Levite's intention by his actions in verse 29?*
- ❓ *What does the comment in verse 30 reveal about the state of the nation at this time?*

Apply

The tragic truth about this passage is that God's people (the men of Gibeah) have acted like the Canaanites that the Levite tried to avoid in Jebus. God's people are the ones acting abominably towards the woman.

They have become like the nations around them. While this chapter is extreme, it is a deeply sobering warning of what happens when God's people take on the morals of the culture around them.

- ❓ *In what ways are believers today in your culture in danger of taking on the values and morals of the non-Christian world?*
- ❓ *In what ways can you see this happening in your own heart?*

Déjà vu?

Genesis 19 relates a very similar story of how Lot and his family were trapped in Sodom. Sodom is used in the Bible as an example of extreme ungodliness. Sadly, in Judges, there are no angels to save the day.

- ❓ *Why do you think Scripture contains such horrific accounts? What do these stories teach us about the human heart?*
- ❓ *What does it remind you about your own heart?*

Pray

Spend some time confessing your own sin to the Lord. Thank him that though our hearts are dark, there really is forgiveness in Jesus.

When the cavalry came

When bad things happen in our world, we all long for justice. Justice is a good thing, until it finally arrives with us. And then we can discover it has a bitter after-taste.

We last saw Israel reeling from the horrors of chapter 19. A woman has been systematically abused and then murdered. Not by Canaanite enemies, but by God's own people! What is going to happen next?

United front

Read Judges 20:1-25

Israel are finally united for the first time in the book of Judges. What Deborah, Gideon and Samson couldn't do, the Levite does with his grim story (v 1-2, 8, 11). But they unite against one of their own tribes, the Benjaminites, who were the culprits of the hideous crime in Gibeah. The battle is very like chapter 1 (compare 1:1-2 with 20:18, for instance) but the enemy is their brother!

- ❓ *How does the Levite's story in verses 4-7 differ from what happened?*
- ❓ *How does the change of details obscure his own sin in the affair (see 19:22, 25)?*
- ❓ *Why do you think the Benjaminites did not listen to the rest of the Israelites in 20:12-13?*
- ❓ *What does this reveal about the fragile state of the nation?*
- ❓ *What happens in verses 14-25?*

Judgment executed

Read Judges 20:26-48

So far, Israel has faced stiff opposition from the Benjaminites. But now the battle turns.

- ❓ *What good thing does Israel do in verses 26-28?*
- ❓ *How is the victory achieved in verses 29-48?*

The Israelites have their vengeance. But it comes at great cost. Thousands of Israelites lie dead, and the nation is fractured.

- ❓ *What is God's role in all this (v 18, 23, 28, 35)?*
- ❓ *Why do you think he allowed Israel to be defeated twice before their victory?*

Apply

Israel seeks justice, but pays a heavy price. The woman's death is avenged, but it's been a bloodbath, and justice has turned into a vendetta (v 48). It's a reminder that no one is without sin. We long for justice in our world, but we have to understand that our own hearts need dealing with too.

Read 1 Peter 2:21-25

- ❓ *How does Jesus' example help us when wronged?*
- ❓ *How does his death enable us to begin to find peace and healing when wronged?*

Pray

Spend some time confessing your own sin before the Lord. Ask God for grace to deal with injustice, and to be able to leave it with him.



A messy end

The book of Judges ends with a messy solution to a self-inflicted problem. Can there be any hope?

The last two chapters have been a grim read. The whole story speaks of the decay of the nation of Israel, and a people doing what they want because there is no king to rule them. But we've also seen, if only they could see it, that there is a King—God himself. But they fail to listen to his word and do what he says. The result is chaos. Now as the book ends, the Israelites try and sort out the problem they have created with a worse solution!

Adding fuel to the fire

Read Judges 21:1-12

The civil war between the Benjaminites and the rest of Israel was a bloodthirsty affair. It ended with the virtual annihilation of Benjamin, with only 600 men remaining (20:47-48). To make things worse, Israel had made a vow not to allow their daughters to marry any remaining Benjaminites (21:1, 7). With the tribe almost wiped out, there was now no way for the remnant of the tribe to survive—there were no women through whom children could be born.

- ❓ *What is Israel's emotional response to the events of chapter 20?*
- ❓ *How do they try to resolve the problem (21:10-12)?*
- ❓ *In what ways are Israel's actions less about justice and more about finding a way out of their problem?*

Back where we started, but worse

Read Judges 21:13-25

When the women from Jabesh Gilead are counted up, there are only 400. Two hundred short for the 600 Benjaminites.

- ❓ *How does Israel sort this problem out?*
- ❓ *Given this whole sorry saga began with the horrific treatment of the woman in chapter 19, how is this ending to the story sadly ironic?*
- ❓ *What does all this reveal about the hearts of the people of Israel?*
- ❓ *What is God's involvement in this chapter (21:15)?*
- ❓ *How do verses 23-24 offer a glimmer of hope and a sign of God's grace?*

Apply

- ❓ *How do you feel after reading these chapters and seeing that God's people can do these things to one another?*
- ❓ *What might it reveal about your own heart and motives?*

Spend some time confessing your sin and humbly admitting to God your own weaknesses. Thank God for his forgiveness and grace in Jesus.

And thank God that we do have a King who rules his people with love, truth and perfect justice.

A better hope to come?

The book of Judges ended on a dark note. Thankfully that's not the end of the Bible's story!

Our readings in Judges have covered 300 years of history, and many fascinating individuals. We've looked at remarkable stories like Ehud and Eglon, Deborah, Gideon with his 300 men, Jephthah's dreadful vow, Samson's supernatural strengths and pitiful weaknesses, and then the dark, dark anarchy of chapters 17 – 21. We've moved from the end of Joshua's time, to the time of Samuel and the hunt for a king. This final study gives us an opportunity to reflect on the whole book and then look forward to how the main themes are developed as the Bible's story goes on.

Look back

Read Judges 2:8-19

- ❓ *How does this passage serve to bring together the main themes of the book?*
- ❓ *What does it show us about the heart of Israel's problem?*
- ❓ *What does it show us about the character of God and his attitude to his people?*
- ❓ *What has been your favourite story in the book and why?*
- ❓ *What were the good and bad qualities of the judge in that story?*

Look forward

One key problem we've seen in the book is that Israel has no king. Leadership is the

big issue. The judges might help for a brief time, but they all ultimately fail. However God has a different long-term plan. The book of Ruth is set in the time of the judges (see Ruth 1:1). But it is a story of hope about how God will provide a new king to rule God's people. From this unlikely foreign woman, and the surprising way she ends up marrying, will come King David. Samuel, who is the last of the judges, prophesies about this king.

Read 2 Samuel 7:11-16

- ❓ *What will God do through this king?*

Look up

Ultimately, even David will fail. But when we come to the New Testament, we find that Jesus is the perfect King from David's line. He at last will do what the judges failed to do, and what even King David couldn't do.

Read Matthew 1:1, 18-23

- ❓ *How does Jesus deal with the big unsolved problem for God's people?*

Pray

Think of one challenge you have faced, one encouragement you have received and one new thing you have learned from Judges, and pray them through before God.

Thank God especially for Jesus, your perfect Saviour, King and God.



EPHESIANS: About a church

Ephesians is about the church. But the way Paul teaches us about church is by setting it in a much bigger story—the story of God’s eternal purposes.

The big picture

Read Ephesians 1:9-10

- ❓ *What is God’s ultimate end for human history?*

TIME OUT

- ❓ *List five ways that the world is not under the rule of Christ. What will it look like for God to unite these things under him?*
-

Christ didn’t come as a conquering king. Instead he came, he lived, he died, he rose again—and he left. This isn’t what anyone expected! So how exactly will God accomplish his purpose?

The plan

Read Ephesians 1:1-14

Note all the times Paul uses phrases like “in Christ” and “in him”.

- ❓ *What does God do for people who are in Christ?*

Some day, God will gather up everything in Christ. Until then, God gathers up his *people* in Christ, blessing them under his rule today with the blessings that one day somehow will be universal.

- ❓ *On what basis does Jesus welcome sinners to himself (v 7)?*

- ❓ *How must sinners respond to the gospel if they are to receive the blessings of union with Christ (v 12-13)?*

Apply

Is your hope in Christ alone? Or do you expect your good deeds—like reading this devotional—to count for something? Don’t lean on your own merits. Trust Jesus alone.

The present

Read Ephesians 2:19-22

By uniting believers to Christ, God unites believers with each other—the church! God’s plan for the end of history has broken into time in the people who are made one in Christ and transformed by the Spirit.

TIME OUT

The last three chapters of Ephesians show us how the gospel changes the way we live.

Read Ephesians 4:1, 17; 5:1, 7, 15; 6:10

- ❓ *What differences does the gospel make?*

Pray

Spend a few minutes praising God for his plan to bring everything under Christ and for including you in Christ, to the praise of his glorious grace.

Children of the Father

Family is a blessing—gone wrong. Even the best are deeply flawed. And some are truly tragic.

But no matter how good or bad your earthly dad is or was, there is an ideal Father—and he adopts. This passage tells the story of our adoption.

Choosing children

Read Ephesians 1:3-6

- ❓ *What three divine actions does Paul identify in these verses?*
- ❓ *When did God do this?*
- ❓ *Why did God do this?*

Paul ventured into this controversial territory of predestination for a good reason: to assure you that your salvation does not rest on you. God had been at work long before you were here. And he was at it for the purpose of adopting you as his child.

Becoming children

Read Ephesians 1:5-6

In the first century, daughters did not have the same legal rights as sons. That adds to the splendour of Paul's words. In God's family every believer—male and female—enjoys the full status of a son.

Read Ephesians 1:1-3

- ❓ *God is whose Father, according to...*
 - v 2?
 - v 3?

The beauty of adoption is not just that all believers enjoy equal status with one another. Because of our union with Christ

we enjoy the very same status as Jesus. Just pause to appreciate that for a moment. *We enjoy the very same status as Jesus.*

Pray

Spend a few minutes thanking God for uniting you to Christ and making you his child.

Living as children

Paul identifies two ways in which we live as children of God: submission and imitation.

- ❓ *Read verse 1 again. Why is Paul an apostle?*

Apply

Rewrite verse 1 with your name and vocation: for example, "Donna, a stay-at-home mother by the will of God". You are where you are by the will of God.

- ❓ *How does (or should) knowing this change the way you go about your responsibilities?*

As children, we should aim to live like our Father.

- ❓ *How can you imitate his love for widows, orphans, and the poor around you? Identify three things you can do to show the love of the Father to them.*



Rejected by God?

Have you ever felt that God was against you, not for you? If so, you are not alone.

Read Psalm 60

- ❓ *How does the psalmist describe what God has done to his people (v 1-4)?*
- ❓ *Does this fit with your understanding of God?*

“If God is for us, who can be against us?” But what if it seems that God himself is against us? It is a terrible thought, but that is precisely what the psalmist thinks. The heading to the psalm refers to battles in 2 Samuel 8 and 10. Presumably the people had been defeated and saw this as God being against them. But what do they do? They bring it to God himself.

- ❓ *What do they ask God to do (v 5)?*
- ❓ *What does God say in response (v 6-8)?*

TIME OUT

There is a story behind each of these place names that goes back to the conquests of Joshua, when God gave his people the land.

- Shechem and Succoth are places west and east of the Jordan.
- Gilead, Manasseh and Ephraim are Israelite areas, described as God’s weapons.
- Moab, Edom and Philistia are non-Israelite areas, described less positively.

But each of these areas is described as something over which God reigns and rules—to do with as he wishes. In blessing or judgment.

After a defeat in battle, Israel recall the promises that God gave about the land and his people. In the confidence of those promises, they call on God to act and help them.

- ❓ *What do they say about God and victory (v 9-12)?*

Praying in failure

What do we do when our plans for God’s work fail? Our temptation might be to haunt ourselves with doubts. Have we done something wrong? Has God rejected our plan or us? Even though, deep down, we know we remain God’s “beloved” (v 5, ESV), we can still feel this deeply. The bitter reality of life (v 1-4) is distant from God’s promises (v 6-8).

What do we do? We bring it back to God, who keeps his promises. We ask, “Why?” We ask him to help those he loves (v 5). We rely on God, not our human strength, as we know that only through God can we truly succeed (v 9-12). And then we see what God will do, in his time, wisdom and power.

Pray

Bring before God any failures or setbacks that you or others are experiencing. Then take comfort in the promises that he has given. Rely on his strength to succeed.

Freed for a future

What imprisons people? A lack of education? Income inequality? Dysfunctional families? Poor government? What is the prison from which we must be set free?

Present redemption

Read Ephesians 1:7

The word redemption describes the act of freeing slaves. In Christ, believers have been liberated. But what was the prison?

- ❓ *How does Paul define our redemption in this verse?*
- ❓ *What was the price to purchase believers out of this slavery?*

▼ Apply

- ❓ *Think about your life apart from Christ. Name five sins that used to imprison you, but which by his blood have been forgiven.*
- ❓ *No doubt there are sins that you still grapple with. What hope do you have that their power has been broken?*

Growing understanding

Read Ephesians 1:8-9

- ❓ *What three things has God lavished on believers (v 7b-8)?*
- ❓ *What (or who) is the centre of God's eternal purpose (v 9)?*

⬆️ Pray

Thank God that he has not only redeemed us from the prison of sin but also lavished on us his wisdom, understanding and grace.

Our future hope

Read Ephesians 1:10-12

In the Greek, much of verse 10 is a single, long word that means “to put everything together under one head”.

- ❓ *Imagine what the world would look like if it bows to the authority of Christ. How would his unrivalled rule transform our communities; our families; our minds?*

Paul uses a different word for “chosen” from the one in verse 4. This one means “we were claimed as his inheritance”. One day everything will be gathered up in Christ, and we who have been blessed in Christ are the foretaste of what will be.

▼ Apply

- ❓ *How does your certain future need to guide your thoughts and actions when it comes to the uncertainties of today?*

⬆️ Pray

Thank God for giving you insight into his will. Praise God for his promise that all will be well for those in Christ.

Ask God for grace to trust him in the midst of any discouragement. Your hope in him is not in vain.



What the Spirit does

The 18th-century writer Samuel Johnson wrote: “Age looks with anger on the temerity of youth, and youth with contempt on the scrupulosity of age”.

To put it another way, the older we are, the more cynical we become. Gone are the days of rash behaviour and risky bets. With experience comes bumps and bruises that shake our confidence about ourselves and the world.

This can be a particular problem for Christians. The blessings of Ephesians 1:3-12 sound great—but if they’re real, then why is life still so rough? Is the gospel all that it’s cracked up to be? Was my confidence in Christ born of “the temerity of youth”? Is Christianity really true?

Paul addresses this problem by directing us to the Holy Spirit.

Giver of light

Read Ephesians 1:13

- ❓ *When were you included in Christ?*
- ❓ *Why does Paul call the gospel “the word of truth” (ESV) instead of simply “the true word”, do you think? What’s the difference?*

Imprint of ownership

Rulers used seals on documents and objects to communicate at least three things:

- “this item belongs to me” (identification);
- “here’s evidence that this belongs to me” (proof);
- “don’t tamper with what belongs to me” (safety).

- ❓ *Read Galatians 5:22-23. How does the Spirit work to make believers distinctive from non-Christians?*
- ❓ *Read Galatians 4:6-7. What does the Spirit encourage us to say?*
- ❓ *Read Romans 8:22-23. How does being someone who struggles against sin assure us that we will reach our home in heaven?*

Pledge of completion

Read Ephesians 1:14

The word deposit means “guarantee” or “down payment”.

- ❓ *What is a down payment? What does it mean for the Spirit to be a deposit?*

Pray

Give thanks to God for these three works of his Spirit. Give particular thanks for how you have been encouraged from this passage.

Ask God for grace to recognise the Spirit’s work in your life and to enjoy the assurance he provides.