Living in a Pluralistic Society

“You shall have no other gods before me.”

Deuteronomy 5:7
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Living in a Pluralistic Society

Idolatry and modern society

IDOLATRY – A topical Bible study

Idolatry is one of the main themes of the Bible.

Idolatry as the story of the Bible
The entire story of the Bible can be seen as a struggle between true faith and idolatry.

Idolatry in the beginning
In the beginning, human beings were made to worship and serve God, and to rule over all created things in God’s name (Gen.1:26-28). Instead, we “fell into sin”. When Paul sums up the “fall” of humanity into sin, he does so by describing it in terms of idolatry. We refused to give God glory (i.e. to make him the most important thing) and instead chose parts of creation to glorify in his place. “They exchanged the glory of the immortal God… and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator.” (Rom. 1:21-25) In short, we totally reversed the original intended order. Human beings came to worship and serve created things, and therefore the created things came to rule over them. Death itself is the ultimate emblem of this, since we toil in the dust until finally we become just dust (Gen. 3:17-19).

The Law against Idols
The great sin of the Mosaic period is the making of a golden calf (Exod. 32), and the Mosaic law most emphatically forbid the use of any concrete “form” for the worship of God — whether it was meant to represent the Lord or not (Exod. 20:4; Deut.4:12-19). When God made a covenant with Israel, he gave them a code of covenant behavior in Exodus 20-23, and it ended with a warning not to make “a covenant with… their gods” (v.32) lest they “snare you” (v.33).

Just like in Romans 1, this passage does not envision any “third” option. We will either worship the uncreated God, or we will worship some created thing (an idol). There is no possibility of our worshipping nothing. We will “worship and serve” (Rom.1:25) something. Whatever we worship we serve, for it “snares” us. Therefore every human personality, every human community, and every human thought-form will be based on some ultimate concern or some ultimate allegiance to something.

The Polemic against Idols
The prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, leveled an enormous polemic against the worship of idols. Some of the key elements in their teaching:
1. First, an idol is empty, nothing, powerless.
The idol is nothing but what we ourselves have made, the work of our own hands (Is. 2:8; Jer. 1:16). Thus an idol is something we make in our image. It is only, in a sense, worshipping ourselves, or a reflection of our own sensibility (Is. 44:10-13). It has no ability or power of its own (Is.41:6,7); it will eventually rot (Is. 40:20); it cannot tell the future nor control it (Is.41:22-24). Even within its own claims, each idol or god is only part of a pluralistic world. No idol is all-powerful and lord over every area of life. Every god is simply the god of this or that city, this or that vocation, this or that arena, this or that person. Everyone has his or her own gods. No god demands exclusive superiority over all of life and over all people.

Idols, then, contrast with the true God, who makes us in his image, who is not a reflection of our experience but one who shows himself through authoritative self-revelation. He is the only true God, the Lord of heaven and earth.

2. Second, (paradoxically) an idol is all and only about getting power.
Idolatry is so often associated by the prophets with social injustice (Amos 2:6-8). Why? Because the dynamic of idol worship was to achieve power and security by appeasing the god through rituals and good works. All systems of idolatry were always centered on localized deities that were mediated by royal and priestly elites. This is why when Naaman went to Israel’s God to get healed of leprosy, he went to the King of Israel with loads of money (2 Kings 5:6,7). The idols helped people “at the top” maintain the status quo. Idolatry is a way to perform and appease a god so it will give you security, influence, comfort, and power.

Idols, then contrast with the true God, who saves us completely by grace. Idols are manipulated by religion and performance, while God can only be responded to by repentance — a loss of power. While idolatry is the attempt to manipulate God to obtain power and security/salvation for oneself or one’s group, the gospel is that we are saved by sheer grace, and thus we surrender ourselves in grateful love and become willing, sacrificial servants of everyone. We now become agents in God’s kingdom which comes full of justice and mercy to all who are suffering.

3. Third, an idol is a spiritually dangerous power which saps you of all power.
Paradoxically, idols are seen by the Bible as terribly dangerous evil powers.

First, the idol brings about terrible spiritual blindness of heart and mind (Is.44:9,18). The idolater is self-deluded through a web of lies (Is.44:20). When we set our ‘worship apparatus’ in our hearts upon something smaller than the true God, it produces a ‘delusional field’ which causes us to live in deep denial of the truth and reality. This can be the delusion of an idol that makes something into a psychological idol — such as power, approval, comfort, or control. This can be the delusion of an idol that makes something into a social-
cultural idol — such as nationality (fascism), the state (socialism), reason (rationalism), science (empiricism), experience (existentialism), ad infinitum.

Second, the idol brings about slavery. Jeremiah likens our relationship to idols as a love-addicted person to his or her lover (Jer.2:25). We cannot help ourselves — we must follow our god. They poison the heart into complete dependence on the idol for salvation and hope (Is.44:17) and yet, when we are in trouble, they cannot save us (Jer.2:28). In Ezekiel 14:1-11, we have the unique term “idols in their hearts” which the people “set before their face” (v.3, 4). God says that we set up idols in our hearts, but he will seek to “recapture the hearts of the people” (v.5) This means that an idol is not primarily a material image, but some thing or relation or person or cause that we make the center of our hope and affection. It is that thing that we “face” with our whole being, that which absorbs our thoughts and imaginations.

The New Testament and Idolatry

“If ‘idolatry’ is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then ‘lust’ [inordinate desires], epithumiai is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for that same drift. (See summary statements by Paul, Peter, John, and James as Gal.5:16ff; Eph.2:3, 4:22; I Pet.2:11, 4:2; I John 2:16; James 1:14ff, where epithumiai is the catch-all for what is wrong with us.)

The tenth commandment [against ‘coveting’, which is idolatrous, inordinate desire for something]… also… makes sin ‘psychodynamic’. It lays bares the grasping and demanding nature of the human heart, as Paul powerfully describes in Romans 7… the NT merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires… for lust, demandingness, craving and yearning are specifically termed ‘idolatry’ (Eph.5:5 and Colossians 3:5).

– David Powlison – “Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair”

Sum: The sin under every sin.

The Ten Commandments begin with two commandments against idolatry. Then comes commandments three to ten. Why this order? It is because the fundamental problem is always idolatry. In other words, we never break commandments 3-10 without first breaking 1-2.

“The principle crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry. For although each individual sin retains its own proper feature, although it is destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet they all fall under the general heading of idolatry… [All murder and adultery, for example are idolatry, for they arise because something is loved more than God — yet in turn, all idolatry is murder for it assaults God, and all idolatry is also adultery for it is unfaithfulness to God.] Thus it comes to pass, that in idolatry all crimes are detected, and in all crimes idolatry.”

– Tertullian, On Idolatry Chap. I
“There is not one in a thousand who does not set his confidence upon the works, expecting by them to win God’s favor and anticipate His grace; and so they make a fair of them, a thing which God cannot endure, since He has promised His grace freely, and wills that we begin by trusting that grace, and in it perform all works, whatever they may be.

– Excerpts from Martin Luther, Treatise Concerning Good Works (1520) (Part IX)

“All those who do not at all times trust God and do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments, and in addition had all the prayers, fasting, obedience, patience, chastity, and innocence of all the saints combined. For the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but mere sham, show and pretense, with nothing back of them… If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior]…”

– Part X. XI

“This faith, faithfulness, confidence deep in the heart, is the true fulfilling of the First Commandment. Without this there is no other work that is able to satisfy this Commandment. And as this Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed, in which they exist, and by which they are directed and measured, so also its work, that is, the faith or confidence in God’s favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all others must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured…

– Part IX

“Note for yourself, then, how far apart these two are: keeping the First Commandment with outward works only, and keeping it with inward trust. For this last makes true, living children of God, the other only makes worse idolatry and the most mischievous hypocrites on earth…”

– Part XII

**Point:** All people sin in general because we are sinners, but why do we sin in any particular instance? Luther — any sin is rooted in the inordinate lust for something which comes because we are trusting in that thing rather than in Christ for our righteousness or salvation. Therefore, in sin we are always ‘forgetting’ what God has done for us in Christ and instead are being moved by some idol. Luther says that to fail to believe God accepts us fully in Christ and to look to something else is a failure to keep the first commandment — love God with all the heart. Thus beneath any particular sin is the general sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation.
Belgic Confession       Chapter 24

“We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin. Therefore it is so far from being true that his justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary without it they would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation. Therefore, it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man; for we do not speak of a vain faith, but of such a faith which is called in Scripture a ‘faith working through love,’ which excites man to the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word… We would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be continually vexed if they relied not on the merits of our Savior.”

Point: Unless we believe the gospel, we will be driven in all we do — whether obeying or disobeying — by pride (“self-love”) or fear (“of damnation”) because we are serving God idolatrously. We are manipulating him for power with our good-works. Apart from ‘grateful remembering’ of the gospel, all good works are done then for sinful motives. Mere moral effort, may restrain the heart, but does not truly change the heart. Moral effort merely ‘jury rigs’ the evil of the heart to produce moral behavior, out of self-interest. It is only a matter of time before such a thin tissue collapses.

Sum: This means then, that idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong. Why do we ever lie, or fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is “because we are weak and sinful”, but the specific answer is always that there is something besides Jesus Christ that you feel you must have to be happy, something that is more important to your heart than God, something that is spinning out a delusional field and enslaving the heart through inordinate desires. So the secret to change is always to identify the idols of the heart.
INTRODUCTION (Revised)

Historical setting
The first and last verses together clearly frame the historical setting of the book of Judges. It covers the period between the death of Joshua and the end of the Exodus (1:1) and the beginning of the monarchy (21:25).

Who were the “judges?”
The “Judges” who arose during this period were not primarily judicial officials in the contemporary sense. (Of all those mentioned in this book, Deborah came closest to what we consider a “judge.” The people brought “cases” to her as she held court under the Palm of Deborah — see 4:5.) Rather, they were mainly military leaders who meted out justice to evildoers and oppressors. In other words, they were “deliverers” or “saviors” who redeemed the people from slavery. When we read in Psalm 96:10-13 that the Lord will “come to judge the earth,” it means he comes to rule it and to liberate it from bondage.
The narrator tells of twelve of these deliverers:
- Othniel (3:7-11)
- Jair (10:3-5)
- Ehud (3:12-30)
- Jephthah (10:6-12:7)
- Shamgar (3:31)
- Ibzan (12:8-10)
- Deborah (4:1-5:31)
- Elon (12:11)
- Gideon (6:1-8:35)
- Abdon (12:13-15)
- Tola (10:1-2)
- Samson (13:1-16:31)

Relevance for today
Israel had strong leadership under Moses and Joshua during the exodus, and later under David and Solomon in the monarchy. In both eras there was a strong human leader who represented God and ruled society on the basis of divine law. But in these intervening years, the Israelites lived in a “spiritually pluralistic” society. Due to Israel’s various failures, the society of Canaan was a mixture of pagan and believing peoples. There are many parallels between that situation and ours today. Largely due to the failures of the church, believers in the West find themselves living in a religiously pluralistic society. Individual Christians work and live among a great variety of gods — not only those of other formal religions, but also the gods of wealth, celebrity, pleasure, ideology, achievement. Our era can also be characterized by the phrase, “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (21:25). Thus the book of Judges has much to say to the individualism and paganism of our own day.

Since there was no Moses and no king — who “judged” Israel during that time? A superficial answer would be to say that God raised up charismatic individual leaders — “judges” who navigated the people through crises. But Jephthah had a better understanding when he referred to “the Lord, the Judge” (11:27). In other words, in times when believers live as a minority in a
pagan society, they are to look directly to God as their Lord and Judge. They are to follow his lead, and not the spirit or powers of their age. That is extremely difficult, as this book shows us. Judges is mainly the story of how believers failed in this task. (Later, during the Babylonian exile, there are more ‘success’ stories, such as Esther and Daniel. Earlier, there was another success story in Joseph.)

Christians reading Judges today must ask: how can we be sure to follow God rather than the idols of our society and neighbors? How can we renew ourselves when we fail or fall?

Themes to look for
As can be seen from the list of judges above, the narrator gives some judges major treatment, while others get only a single verse of mention. That immediately alerts us to the fact that the book of Judges is not merely a history book. (It is not less that true history, but it is much more.) The narrator is not just a reporter, but a teacher. What are his themes?

This is the place for a first word of caution. One commentator summed up the book of Judges as “despicable people doing deplorable things” and as “trashy tales about dysfunctional characters.” As the history unfolds, even the “heroes”, the judges, become increasingly dysfunctional and flawed. They do many appalling things, and their efforts have less and less redemptive effect. It is a dismal story. The reader will be led to ask, again and again, “what in the world is this story doing in the Bible?” The answer is an important one — it is the gospel! Judges shows us that the Bible is not a “Book of Virtues;” it is not full of inspirational stories. Why? It is because the Bible (unlike other faiths) is not about emulating moral examples. It is about a God of mercy and long-suffering who continually works in and through us despite our constant resistance to his purposes. With that in mind look for the following themes.

1. God relentlessly offers his grace to people who do not deserve it nor seek it nor even appreciate it after they have been saved by it. The book of Judges is not about a series of role models. Though there are a few good examples (Othniel, Deborah), they are early and do not dominate the narrative. The point is that the only true hero is God, the only true savior is the Lord. Judges is ultimately about grace abounding to chief sinners. God’s grace will triumph over the stupidest actions.

2. God wants lordship over every area of our lives, not just some. God wanted Israel to take the entire land of Canaan, but instead they only cleared out some areas and they learned to live with idols in their midst. In other words, they neither wholly rejected God nor wholly accepted him. This half-way discipleship and compromise is depicted by the book of Judges as an impossible, unstable compound. God wants all of our lives, not just part.
3. There is a tension between grace and law, between conditionality and unconditionality. Readers will find in Judges a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, God demands obedience because he is holy. On the other hand, he makes promises of commitment and loyalty to his people. Will his holiness and his conditional commands (“do this and then I’ll do this”) override his promises (“I will always be with you”), or will his promises override his commands? Put it this way — are his promises conditional or unconditional? Judges is crucial, in that it shows that neither answer to that question is right. Nearly all readers of the Old Testament take a “liberal” view (sure, God will always bless us as long as we are sorry) or a “conservative” view (no, God will only bless us if we are obedient). But Judges will not resolve the tension. One commentator says: “It is this tension [between conditionality and unconditionality] more than anything else that propels the narrative.” Only the New Testament gospel will show us how the two sides are both true because of the death of Christ on the cross.

4. There is a need for continual spiritual renewal in our lives here on earth, and a way to make that a reality. Judges shows that spiritual decline is inevitable, and spiritual renewal then becomes the continual need. We will see a regular, repeated decline-revival cycle. Some of the elements in this renewal include repentance, corporate prayer, the destruction of idols, and anointed human leaders. Renewal happens when we are under the right master/ruler; slavery occurs when we are under the wrong master/ruler. Judges is the best book in the Old Testament for the understanding of renewal and revival, while Acts is the best place in the New Testament. Watch however, for the fact that the revival cycles in Judges become weaker and weaker as time goes on, while in Acts they grow wider and stronger.

5. We need a true Savior, to which all human saviors point, through both their flaws and strengths. As we noted above under #1, the increasing magnitude of evil and brokenness in the narrative points us to our need of a savior, not role models. But the decreasing effectiveness of the revival cycles and the decreasing quality of the judges point us to the failure of any human savior. The judges themselves begin to point us to someone beyond them all. In Othniel we learn that God can save through all, in Deborah that he can save through many, in Gideon that he can save through few, and in Samson that he can save through one. God will save by sending the One.

6. God is in charge, no matter what it looks like. The most pervasive theme is maybe the easiest to miss. God often seems almost absent from the scene in Judges, but he never is. He works out his will through weak people and in spite of weak people. His purposes are never thwarted, regardless of appearances. The mills of God may grind slow, but they grind exceeding fine.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read Judges 1:1-2:5. Which of the six themes do you see any traces of in these first verses?

2. (In groups of 2 or 3) — Which of the themes would be most helpful to you? Why is it personally relevant right now?

Bibliography


1. Read Joshua 1:1-9 and 23:3-13. Here is the mission of the Israelites, given by God through Joshua just before he died. 
   a) What are the specific directions they are given? 
   b) Why do you think God is so careful to insist that military bravery be combined with whole-hearted discipleship in this campaign? 
   c) Do you see in this passage any of the reasons (mentioned last week) that this is not a warrant for other “holy wars.”

2. Read 1:19-35. Though beginning well (1:1-18), the Israelites eventually fail to drive out the Canaanites. Make a list of all the reasons given (or hinted at) in the text for why various tribes failed to do so.

   a) How does God assess the reasons for the Israelites’ failure to drive out the Canaanites? 
   b) What does he say in v.2 the real purpose of the campaign was? 
   c) In the light of Joshua 1 and 23, why do the reasons given in vv.19-36 constitute not just military failure but spiritual unfaithfulness?

4. a) Is there anything in your life about which you can say “I can’t do” but about which God may say, “you won’t do?” [Read 1 Cor.10:13. Is there any place in your life that you are not taking this promise seriously?] 
   b) What two things does God say that the Israelites have forgotten in 2:1? How can we overcome our excuses by reflecting on the same two items?
5. 2:1-3. a) What tension do you see between the first “I said” in v.1 and the second “I tell you” in v.3? b) How does this dramatic tension make the story of the Judges gripping? c) How does Jesus Christ solve this dilemma? d) What practical implications are there for us when we break one of God’s laws?

6. 2:1. a) The Angel of the Lord comes up from Gilgal. Why would God want them to remember Gilgal as they heard the charge of disobedience? (Read Joshua 5: 4-10 on what happened there.)

7. 2:3 – God says that the Canaanites allowed to stay will now become a “thorns” and “snares.” What things have you allowed to stay in your life which should be expelled? How do they become a snare? Pray to God for a ‘wedding’ of his power and your willingness to remove it.
1. 2:2-3. a) What is was the main reason that the Israelites were to drive out and “not make a covenant” with the Canaanites? b) If the Lord is the only true God, how can the Canaanite gods be both a “thorn” and “snare”?

2. 2:6-19. List the stages of a continually repeated cycle that the children of Israel went through. [If you get stuck, cf. these verses with 3:7-9 where all the stages are repeated.]

3. Cf.2:7-10 with Deut.6:4-9, 20-23. In what ways may one generation fail to pass its faith on to the next generation? Did you have Christian parents? What was your experience?
4. 2:16-19. Two groups are contrasted here — each group vying for control of the Israelites. Name each group and explain a) how they are like each other, and b) how they are opposite.

5. 2:17. What does the word “prostituted” tell us about idolatry? About God and the relationship we must have with him?

6. The people’s failure (as a group) to take all of Canaan both resulted from and represented their failure (as individuals) to give God exclusive lordship over their whole lives. A good way to determine if Christ is Lord of an area of your life is to ask two questions: a) Am I willing to do whatever God says about this area? b) Am I willing to accept whatever God sends in this area?
Name one or two (at most) areas where you are not passing these tests.

What, then, is controlling you in that area?

7. 2:20-3:6. What does this section tell us are two reasons that God did not drive out Israel’s enemies? How is this “judgment” also a form of mercy? Cf. this passage with Heb.12:1-13. How has something difficult been a mercy in your life?
INTRODUCTION

To the first readers of this passage, the great surprise would have been that Ehud, the man God used, was “left-handed” (v.15). God swears by his right hand, he has pleasures by his right hand, and his chosen One sits at his right hand (Is.62:8-9; Ps.16:11; 110:1) Why? Since most people were right-handed, the right hand was a symbol of power and ability. But most intriguing is the term in 3:15 which literally reads “unable to use his right hand”. It is very possible that Ehud’s right hand was paralyzed or disabled in some way.

1. **Why did the Israelites do evil and turn to idols, according to v.7?** How does 2 Peter 1:5-9 shed light on the root reason we do wrong? Cf. how in Joshua 4:19-24 this problem is addressed. **How can you address it today?**

2. **vv.7-11. This is the first example of a “revival” that God sends to people who have become spiritually cold. What does God send to bring the renewal about? What do the people do? How can you keep these same factors present in your life?**

3. **vv.12-19. Why do you think the king would be so foolish as to be meet alone and unprotected with a member of an oppressed, enemy nation?**
4. vv.15-30. Compare how the Othniel and his deliverance is like Ehud’s. Contrast how they are not alike.

5. What can we learn for ourselves from the differences between Othniel and Ehud? Consider lessons about: a) how spiritual renewal comes, b) why troubles sometimes come to us.
6. What does the “unexpected” nature of Ehud’s leadership tell us about: a) why God chooses to use the people he does. [cf. this passage with 1 Cor.1:26-29.], and b) what God will finally do for the salvation of the world? c) How then should we expect the world to regard us?

7. Choose an application question for discussion: a) Can you think of some of your inherent deficits that God could develop into assets in his service? b) How could some troubles in your life be an opportunity for spiritual renewal? c) Have you been putting God ‘in a box’ in some way — demanding that he act in a certain way, ‘according to the rules’?
1. 4:1-24. What are the gifts and skills Deborah possesses (4:4-14) What were the effects of her career (5:6-9)

2. How is the judgeship of Deborah both like and unlike the judgeships of the Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar?

3. How does Deborah’s career modify both the “strong conservative” and “strong liberal” views of women’s leadership?
4. Read 4:6-16 and cf. with Hebrews 11:32-34. Barak is praised for the faith he exercised in this campaign. a) In what ways does he show faith? b) In what ways does he point the way to the ultimate Savior/judge?

5. 4:17-22 and 5:24-31. a) How does 5:29-30 perhaps shed light on the motives of Jael? b) How does God’s concern with the thing he wants done relate to his concern with the methods of the person who does it?
6. 5:1-31. How is the Song’s description of the same events different from the historical account in chapter 4?

7. Choose application questions for discussion: a) Do you have a Judges 5 perspective on what is happening in your life, or only a Judges 4 perspective? How could Deborah’s perspective on some recent events help you? b) Is God calling you, like Barak, to do something for which you won’t get much credit? How can you respond in faith? c) Can you pray like Jesus does for your enemies, or only like Deborah?
1. vv.1-10. What three things happen to prepare the people for revival this time? What did God do? What did they do?

2. vv.1-10. What is the difference between repentance and regret? Read 2 Cor.7:9-11. Which do the people express? How does God try to help them? What do we learn from this for our own spiritual renewal?

3. vv.11-24. a) God starts the deliverance though the people do not yet show signs of repentance. What do we learn from that? b) Who is this talking to Gideon — an angel or the Lord? Why does this figure keep turning up (cf.2:1; 13:1ff.) How does Gideon’s fear of dying and his altar shed light on this question?
4. vv.11-16. Is Gideon’s assessment of Israel’s problem right (v.13) or is God’s right (v.1, 14)? How can we make the same mistakes in our lives today?

5. Is Gideon’s assessment of his ability right (v.15) or is God’s right (v.12) — or are they both right? How is this a picture of what it means to be a Christian? What happens to us when we lose either “side” or perspective?
6. vv.16-40. What ways does the Lord prepare Gideon? How does he show him how to see and deal with a) the enemy among us (vv.25-32) b) the enemy around us (vv.33-35) and c) the enemy within us (vv.36-40). How do we today need to make the same adjustments in our own lives?

7. Application. How has God helped prepare you to be of service to others? How has God given you guidance at key times in your life?
1. vv.1-8. Who is sent home and why? Why did God want to reduce the size of Gideon’s army?

2. vv.1-8. “You have too many men for me to deliver…” (v.2). How does this principle shed light on how God has worked in your life? (cf. 2 Cor.12:7-9). What do you tend to “boast” in?

3. vv.8-15. Why does God send Gideon into the Midianites’ camp? List all the things this incident tells us about a) about God, and b) about us?

4. What do you need assurance about? [Or what lessons do you need God to tell you over and over?] How does God assure and teach you?
5. vv. 15-25. What did Gideon’s battle plan have going for it? Where does the strategy for the “surprise attack” come from? How does the strategy that was chosen fulfill the dream of the barley loaf?

6. Where are you feeling “outnumbered”? or in need of some intervention? How can you: a) accept the limits God has given you, and b) accept that ‘God’s power is made perfect in weakness’? Can you ask the group to join you in your “battle” by praying for you?

7. Think back over all of chapter 6 and 7. Make a list of everything God had to expose Gideon to in order to help him reach his potential as a leader?
1. **8:1-17.** Observe Gideon’s response to the Ephraimites (vv.1-3) and the men of Succoth and Peniel (vv.4-17). a) How were the responses of all three groups to Gideon similar? b) What do you think Gideon was feeling on the inside when they dealt with these groups?

2. **8:1-17** a) How is Gideon forgetting the “lesson of the 300” (7:2)? b) What kinds of emotions result when you forget God’s grace?
3. a) 8:1-17. Why do you think Gideon’s response to Succoth and Peniel was different than to Ephraim? (refer to 7:24-25) b) 8:18-21. What do we learn here is the reason that drove Gideon with only 300 men to pursue relentlessly (8:4) and attack a superior (8:10) force? c) One commentator says that Gideon proves we must “beware of the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit!” What do you think that means? What does it mean for us?

Background Note:
The ephod of the high priest (Exodus 28) was a breast plate that covered the wearer’s front and back. It was covered with ornamental gold patterns and studded with gems. On the front of the breastplate were the Urim and Thummim — two stones that were used to receive ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers from God. (Many believe that they were two sided stones, much like coins. When they were ‘flipped’, two ‘up-sides’ meant yes, two ‘down-sides’ meant no, and a mixed result meant ‘no answer’.) Gideon’s ephod (8:24-27) was some sort of reproduction, and it was an effort to ascertain God’s answers to their questions. People came to worship it as an idol.

4. 8:22-35. a) Why did Gideon decline the offer of kingship? b) How could Gideon resist the invitation to rule in the place of God (v.22) yet worship an ephod in the place of God (v.27)?
5. a) What good thing becomes an “ephod” and a “snare” in your life? b) How is prosperity a greater spiritual test than adversity?

6. 9:1-57. a) How is the story of Abimelech distinctly different than that of every other leader we have profiled? b) Why would the narrator devote so much space to this? c) How did Gideon’s actions sow the seeds for the disaster of Abimelech (8:29-31) d) How does the parable of the bramble bush (vv.7-21) shed light on the meaning of the narrative?

7. 10:1-5. What is so striking about the simple record of the two judges, Tola and Jair?
1. 10:6-18. a) What is the relationship the gods Israel worships to the peoples that enslave them? b) Why do you think the word ‘sold’ is used in v.7? (cf. Judges 2:14, 3:8, 4:2 with Rom.1:24-25) c) What does this teach us for our own lives?

2. 10:6-18. a) Why does God respond so brusquely to their cry in v.11? What does this tell us about their repentance in v.10? b) Is there a contradiction between v.13 and v.16?

3. 10:6-16. a) What do these verses teach us about steps to spiritual renewal/revival? b) What does v.15-16 tell us about real repentance? c) Which of the “steps” do you most need to consider or do?
4. 11:1-11. a) How did Jephthah’s early history make him an unexpected deliverer? b) How did it, however, prepare him for his Judgeship? c) How is Jephthah like the other Judges and even Jesus in this regard? d) How can terrible troubles prepare you to be a person who mightily helps others?

5. 11:12-28. The king of Ammon justifies his attack on the Israelites by insisting that the land they now live in belonged formerly to the Ammonites (v.13). What three arguments does Jephthah use to refute this claim in his letter of diplomacy? Why do you think this fell on deaf ears?
6. 11:29-40. What does Jephthah promise God? Why does he promise it? Why does he keep his promise?

7. What a terrible story (perhaps the worst in the whole book)! What do you think the author hoped to teach us? What lessons can we learn from this incident.
1. 13:1-2 – How is this cycle of apostasy and renewal a) the same, and b) different from the earlier ones? Why does the writer so often add “in the eyes of the Lord”? (cf. Judges 21:25). What does the term tell us about sin?

2. 13:1-3. a) What characteristics does this special birth share with that of Isaac, Samuel, John the Baptist, and Jesus? b) What does this list tell us about God? c) Notice the similarity to the announcement in Luke 1:31. How would Samson’s birth have begun to prepare Israel for the real Messiah? (see v.5)

3. a) What things does God tell Samson’s mother(13:3-5)? b) Read Numbers 6:1-21. How was Samson’s Nazirite-life unusual? How could living as a Nazirite prepare Samson for service? c) What does this teach us about how God prepares us for service? How has he prepared you for more service to him?
4. 13:6-25. a) What evidences of faith do you find in both Samson’s mother and father? b) Why is the angel’s re-visit both gracious and yet firm? c) How do you react when God won’t give you any more details? Why doesn’t he give us more? d) Why does the angel come back if he has no new information? What does this teach us about raising children (or living life ourselves)?

5. 13:16-21. a) How is the faith of the mother greater in the end than that of the father? b) What lessons for your own life can you see in the father? the mother? c) How many of your problems today stem from a basic mistrust of the goodness of God?
6. 13:16-21. How does the angel show who he is? How does this tell us who the angel is? What is remarkable about the fact that it took them so long to realize that this was really the Lord?

4d. (Supplemental) Why does the angel come back if he has no new information? What does this teach us about raising children (or living life ourselves)?
1. Read 14:1-5; 15:9-13. What do these texts tell us about the level of conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines at that time? [Note: Timnah was a village in Israelite territory (Josh.19:43).] How is this a different attitude than the Israelites have shown toward oppressors in the past (see 10:6-12)?

2. 14:4. a) How does God’s plan for Samson differ from how his parents (or we!) would have expected God to use him to deliver Israel from the Philistines?  
   b) What does this teach us about being patient with God’s seeming inactivity?

3. 14:1-4. a) Read 3:5-6 and Exodus 34:15-16. Is his parents’ concern about his marriage a racist one? b) Read and compare 2 Cor. 6:14-16. What is the chief concern in the Bible about ‘mixed-faith’ marriages?
4. 14:1-20. a) What do we learn in this chapter about Samson’s character?  
   b) Why would Samson not tell his parents about the lion and the source of the honey (14:9)?

5. Samson had these flaws despite having the power of the Spirit (13:25; 14:19).  
   a) What does this teach us about the difference between spiritual gifts-skills and spiritual fruit (cf. 1 Cor.13:1-3 and Gal.5:22ff.)?  
   b) How can we be more on the look out for this problem in our own lives?
6. **15:1-20. “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us?” (15:11) — their question to Samson admits that there is in truth no such thing as harmonious co-existence between the church and the world, for where there is no conflict it is because the world has taken over.” (M.Wilcock, p.142.) Give some examples of how the church’s efforts at avoiding conflict with the world has been or is now really a surrender?**

7. **Conflict with the world is a necessary part of authentic Christianity. What actions might God be calling you to take that would conflict with many in your “world”?**
1. 16:1-3. a) Some have called vv.1-3 a kind of prologue that ‘sets up’ the climactic scenes of Samson’s life. How does it foreshadow and prepare us for what is to come? b) How can success be the worst thing for us spiritually? Have you grown spiritually most through success or through failure?

2. 16:4-21. a) What is motivating Delilah to do what she does? b) What is motivating Samson to play this dangerous game with her? c) Though each says, ‘I love you’ (v.15) they are really just using each other. What other forms can this sort of relationship take? What is the solution?

3. 16:15-21. Why does Samson tell Delilah the truth?
4. 16:15-21. What is the secret of Samson’s strength? a) Where does it come from, and b) who really understands this secret?

5. What is the source of your spiritual strength? When do you feel strongest, when the weakest? What forms of this ‘magic’ view of God’s blessing exist among us today?

6. 16:21-31. How is the arrest and death of Samson a) unlike and b) like the arrest and death of Christ?
7. 16:22-31. Why did Samson’s strength return (read Heb.11:32-34 for the best answer)? How does Samson’s story illustrate “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor.12:9-10)? How have you seen the principle work itself out in your own life?

8. What is the biggest thing God has taught you through Samson?
REVIEW

The book of Judges has concentrated up until now on the times in which God intervened to save Israel from its spiritual decline and slide into idolatry. Each episode in the narrative followed a cyclical pattern, which Michael Wilcock called: “rebellion, retribution, repentance, and rescue”. We saw, however, that the rebellion got deeper and deeper until the repentance completely disappeared. More and more the salvation God sent had to be sheer grace — accomplished with less and less cooperation on the part of the Israelites. Finally, in the judge-ship of Samson, even God’s rescue had to be through the weakness and defeat of the rescuer! In all these ways, God is pointing us toward the gospel, showing us that his salvation must be through grace that we do not merit, and it is accomplished for us through the weakness and defeat of the Savior.

INTRODUCTION

But these last chapters of Judges are a departure from the earlier narrative structure. The earlier passages give us a bird’s eye view of things, usually only saying, “they fell into idolatry” — while these chapters give us a ground-level, detailed view of what life was like in Israel during those times. (Various references within the passages show us that these did not come chronologically after Samson and the other judges, but rather they happened earlier, between the earlier judges.) The earlier passages showed us how God rescued Israel, but these passages give case studies of the kind of spiritual condition he rescued them from. That is why these final chapters barely mention the Lord. It is showing us what life was like when Israel was left to its own resources. This view of humanity-without-God is so bleak that these passages are almost never preached upon or even studied.

1. 17:1-2. A lot of information is packed into this sentence! What do we learn about a) what Micah has done, b) what kind of person Micah is, c) what kind of person Micah’s mother is?
2. 17:1-11. a) In what ways is the worship practice of Micah and his mother ‘orthodox’ and right? b) In what ways does it contradict the 10 commandments and other laws concerning the true worship of God?

3. The first of the 10 commandments forbids us to worship other gods, but the second commandment forbids us worshipping God by images we make. (Exodus 20:3,4) What is the difference?

4. a) How can we today worship God by images? b) How does this lead to problems in our personal lives? c) Read Col.1:15. How does the New Testament show us why God forbid anyone to make an image of him? (cf. Col.1:15)
5.  17:1-11. Micah’s family-religion is externally orthodox but internally idolatrous. It is not only idolatrous in its understanding of God, but in its approach to him. a) What is the goal of their religion (v.13)? b) What is the means to that goal (v.4-5)? c) What is its standard for behavior (v.6)?

6.  17:1-11. Micah’s mother promises all of her money to the Lord (v.3) but keeps most for herself (v.4). How is this an important indicator of our heart’s spiritual condition?

7.  a) 18:1-2. Why are the Danites still homeless in Canaan? (Read Josh.19:40-48; Judges 1:27-34; 2:1-3). What can we surmise about their spiritual condition? b) 18:3-21. How do they relate to God in their quest for a home? How do they show all the same spiritual characteristics of Micah’s family?

8.  18:30-31. What is significant about this statement? Why do you think this whole fairly uninteresting story is told to us?
Levite. The Levites were the descendants of Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. The Levites were the only tribe of Israel who were not given an allotment of land in Canaan. Rather than working the land for their livelihood, they were to live near and work in the tabernacle and the worship of God — and they were to be supported by the tithes and gifts of the rest of the people. (Read Numbers 18:20-24.) The actual priests were Levites who were descended from Aaron (Numbers 3:10), while the rest of the Levites assisted the priests in the work of the tabernacle. The Levites were considered by the Lord to be consecrated to his service and ministry (Numbers 3:5-13) and thus had a special responsibility to be holy.

Concubine. “A secondary wife acquired by purchase or as a war captive, and allowed in a polygamous society…” (New Bible Dictionary, p.246.) A concubine was essentially a slave-mistress who was not a prostitute, but was not a wife in the full sense of the term. She was a ‘second-class’ wife, a slave-mistress, a sex-object. That is why sometimes in this passage the Levite is called the ‘master’ of his concubine (19:27) but once her ‘husband’ (v.3). While God makes clear in the beginning (Gen.2:24) and in the teaching of Jesus (Mark 10:7-8) that marriage is to be between one man and one woman, many believers in intervening times nonetheless had both multiple wives and concubines (e.g. Abraham in Genesis 16:2-3) contrary to God’s design. But from the history of Abraham through Jacob down to Solomon, the practice of polygamy is revealed in the Bible to bring heart-ache and pain in every family without exception. What we see here in Judges is that a Levite, who should have been quite holy, has been shaped by the pagan culture surrounding him, by buying a concubine and treating her like a piece of property.

1. 19:1-10. Read the ‘Background’ notes above. What can you tell about the relationship of the Levite and the concubine from — a) how she left him, b) how long he waited to go to her, c) why (it is implied) she returned with him? Why do you think her father was so extravagantly positive to the Levite?
2. 19:11-25. a) How does he narrator foreshadow the character of this city in vv.18-20. b) How does the incident of vv.22-25 compare and contrast with the one in Gen.19:1-11? What are we to learn from the parallels?

3. 19:25-30. a) Why would the Ephraimite offer two women, even his own daughter, rather than the Levite? b) Why do you think the concubine did not enter the house (v.26)? c) List the details given us in vv.26-29 about the Levites treatment of the concubine. What do the details tell us about their relationship? Why does the narrator gives us hardly any details of the mob’s treatment of her all night, but all this about the Levite seeing her in the morning? Why this focus?

4. 19:25-20:7. a) Why do you think the Levite was indifferent to her abuse and rape, but furious upon her death? b) Compare the Levite’s account (20:4-6) with what really happened. c) Compare the moral performance of the Gibeah mob with the moral performance of the Levite. What is this all saying about human nature and sin?
5. a) 20:1-18. The stress in these verses is on the unity of Israel (see vv.1, 2, 8, 11). Compare 1:1-2 with 20:18. What is ironic and tragic about this unity here at the end of the story? b) Why did the Benjamites not turn over the guilty men (vv.12-15)?

BACKGROUND

The battle of 20:19-47. The Benjamites lived in a hilly terrain which favored a defending force. Though vastly superior in numbers, the Israelites could only send in one or two tribes at a time to fight in the narrow space defended by the Benjamites on the first and second days, the Benjamites defeat the Israelites and there is great slaughter and sorrow. God twice gives them answers (through the priest’s ephod) as to who to send each day, but these answers are no guarantees of success, as they were in the past. Finally on the third day, the Lord assures them of victory. Israel chooses a new strategy. One force of Israelites first engaged the Benjamites and began to withdraw, drawing the main force of Benjamites after them. But as they moved away from the city of Gibeah (v.29-31), another, larger force came up behind the main force of Benjamites and took Gibeah (v.34-39). Then they all turned on the Benjamite army that had been drawn away. Soon all but 600 Benjamites were destroyed (v.47).

6. 20:48-21:9. a) What evidence is there that there is bitterness and sinful anger driving this conflict rather than a concern for justice? b) How does anger and resentment affect you? What can we do to avoid vindictiveness?
7. a) Did the civil war ‘purge the evil from Israel’ (20:13)? Why not? b) What could they have done instead? c) 21:10-24. How does the rest of the chapter illustrate that ‘sometimes it is a worse sin to keep a promise than to break it’?

8. 21:25. How is this an appropriate bottom line for the book of Judges? How does the following quote shed light on the book of Judges?

“Whatever controls you is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our life.”

– Becky Pippert

9. What is the single most helpful or striking truth that you have learned for yourself in your study of the book of Judges?
1. Read Psalm 137. a) v.8-9 - What did the Babylonians do to break the Jews’ spirit during the sack of Jerusalem? What is the Psalmist's response? b) v.2-3 – What are the Babylonians doing now to break their spirit? What is the Psalmist’s response?

2. To what extent is the Psalmist’s attitude justified and to what extent is it incomplete?

3. a) What sort of life in Babylonian society will the Psalmist and those like him have? b) Do you know Christians today who relate to their society in the same way?
4. Read Jeremiah 28:1-4; 29:1-14. a) What attitude toward life in Babylon was Hananiah promoting? How is this picture of the different than the view we saw in Psalm 137? b) Do you know Christians who relate to their society in the same way?

5. How does Jeremiah give a completely different picture of a) God’s purposes for them in the city, and b) God’s directions for them on how to live in the city?

6. How does this relate to us today? (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1)
7. How does Daniel 1:1-2 seem to have the same perspective toward the exile as that of Jeremiah’s letter? How can we apply this insight in general to troubles in our own lives? How can we apply this in particular to our own ‘sojourn’ as believers in an unbelieving culture?

8. Summary: Make a list of all the possible attitudes or stances to a pagan culture that believers may take.
1. a) Review the ways that a believer can relate to a pagan society. (See “Living in a pagan society: Five Models”) a) What helped you most in the reading? b) What questions did it raise?

2. Without a spirit of scorn or superiority, share some examples of Christian practice that grow out of any of the four inadequate models.

3. Now share some practical ways we can live out of the fifth model.
4. 1:3-8. How does Daniel’s stance and relationship to Babylonian culture in vv.3-8 accord with the perspective of Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles (Jer. 29)?

5. 1:6-16. a) What would the king’s purpose have been for this course of study for the young Jewish men? b) Why do you think they refused to eat the king’s food?

6. How does this give us any guidance for our own stance toward our pagan culture?
INTRODUCTION
At Mt. Sinai, God constituted Israel as a nation. In the history of Israel covered by the Bible, there were two eras in which they lived as believers in a pluralistic, pagan environment. First, when they got to Canaan, they failed to drive out the idol-worshipping people groups and, instead, settled in among them. Secondly, when Nebuchadnezzar defeated Jerusalem, he carried most of the Israelites off to live in the city and environs of Babylon. In both situations, believers did not live in a believing nation or culture, where the government, the arts, the cultural institutions were committed to the Lord and his Word and will. They lived in an environment where the dominant and privileged culture was pagan.

Christians in Europe and North America today live in a similar situation. Once, Christianity was privileged in society — it was the dominant culture. The government/culture was either formally or implicitly committed to the Bible and Christianity. But now that has changed, and we find ourselves in pluralistic culture. Therefore, we have been studying Judges and we are about to study Daniel, Esther, and Joseph (in Genesis). Last week we discussed the exile itself and the various reactions that the Jews had to it. Why? When we study these books we learn good and bad models for how believers can relate to an unbelieving, dominant culture. Before we plunge in to Daniel, let’s take stock of what we’ve learned.

MODEL 1 – THE “UN-CULTURE” – JUDGES 14-16
“Accomodationist” – In this model, believers simply give in and adopting the pagan culture’s values and world-view, both internally (in their fundamental values and perspectives) and externally (by learning and adopting the customs and habits of dress, food, language). This is also an “immigrant” model. The immigrant comes to a new culture with the goal of blending in and losing any distinct identity. Judges gives us many sad examples of this. By the time of Samson (Judges 14-16), the Israelites were so accomodated to Philistine culture that they were within a generation of losing all distinct identity.

MODEL 2 – THE “SUB-CULTURE” – JUDGES 17-18
“Privatization” – In this model, believers keep the external trappings of Christian faith and practice, but they adopt the more fundamental values and perspectives of the dominant culture. Often this is called ‘privatization’ because one’s faith is kept to Sunday services externals and does not really shape the way we actually live. To use an obnoxious term, this may be called an “oreo” model, in which we are externally one way and actually another. For example, believers may not smoke or drink too much or have sex outside of marriage, yet in their core beings they may be as materialistic and selfish and individualistic, and status- or image-conscious as the society around. In this model, believers may even stay somewhat apart from unbelievers in various Christian ministries, yet they have just ‘sprinkled’ Bible verses and pious
language on a lifestyle that is fundamentally no different from those around them. Thus they are a “sub-culture” is just a sub-set of the dominant culture. The story of Micah and his mother is a perfect example. Though not externally and formally worshipping the Lord, the idolatrous attitude of the surrounding culture had penetrated them to their core. They sought to manipulate God into giving them prosperity and comfort through limited ‘buy-offs’ of the deity rather than surrender to his grace.

MODEL 3 – THE “ANTI-CULTURE” – PSALM 137

“Ghettoization and/or militancy”. In this model, believers respond to the unbelieving culture with a sense of superiority and hostility. They feel highly polluted by the very presence of the unbelieving schools, entertainment, arts, and culture, and feel they cannot really function in the society without having the cultural power. This is the “soldier” model, in which believers consider themselves hostile visitors, seeking to undermine the culture. Some take a more passive approach and withdraw from any real interaction, just denouncing and bewailing the moral decay, while others aim to get the cultural power back. Psalm 137 gave us a picture of people who are more angry than repentant over their new powerless situation, and who cannot envision how they can worship and function outside of the land where they had sovereignty.

MODEL 4 – THE “PARA-CULTURE” – JEREMIAH 28

“Revivalist” – In this model, believers respond not with too much pessimism but too much optimism. They expect a miraculous, sweeping intervention by God which will convert many or most and explosively transform the culture. Therefore, instead of becoming deeply engaged with the society and people around them, working with others to roll back the troubles and problems, believers concentrate completely on evangelism and discipleship building up the church and their own numbers. Christians are pressed to go into ‘full-time ministry’ but not to become playwrights, artists, lawyers, or business people. They form a happy parallel alternative culture, with a goal of picking off individual converts and bringing them in. This is a “tourist” model in which the believers are just ‘passing through’, enjoying the society but not becoming involved. The prophet Hananiah in Jeremiah 28 is a great example of this kind of optimistic approach.
MODEL 5 – THE COUNTER-CULTURE” – JEREMIAH 29

“Engagement” – In this model, believers engagement with the pagan culture and co-working with pagan people but in ways that reveal the distinctiveness of the values of the kingdom of God. If anything, they become very conversant with and adaptive to the dominant culture externally (language, customs), but they are at their core very different in the way they understand money, relationships, human life, sex, and so on. This is the “resident aliens” or “colony of heaven” model. Believers are truly resident, yet not seeking the power or approval of the dominant culture. Rather they show the world an alternative way of living and of being a human community. Jeremiah letter to the exiles in chapter 29 lays this model out. And Daniel, Esther, and Joseph show us how to live it out.

Harvie Conn has a marvelous way of putting this ‘model’:

“Perhaps the best analogy to describe all this is that of a model home. We are God’s demonstration community of the rule of Christ in the [unbelieving] city. On a tract of earth’s land, purchased with the blood of Christ, Jesus the kingdom developer has begun building new housing. As a sample of what will be, he has erected a model home of what will eventually fill the urban neighborhood. He now invites the… world into that model home to take a look at what will be. The church is the occupant of that model home, inviting neighbors into its open door to Christ. Evangelism is when the signs are up, saying ‘Come in and look around’… As citizens of, not survivalists in, this new city within the old city, we see our ownership as the gift of Jesus the Builder (Luke 17:20-21). As residents, not pilgrims, we await the kingdom coming when the Lord returns from his distant country (Luke 19:12). The land is already his… in this model home we live our out new lifestyle as citizens of the heavenly city that one day will come.

We do not abandon our jobs or desert the city that is… We are to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” to which God called us in exile (Jer.29:7). And our agenda of concerns in that seeking becomes as large as the cities where our divine development tracts are found.”

THE ONLY TRUE MODEL

The first two ‘models’ are over-adaptations (too close to the world) and the third and fourth model are under-engagements (too far from the world). These are not perfectly distinct categories of course, and nobody ‘gets it right’. Nobody except for one. Jesus Christ became really and fully human, one of us, completely “engaged” with us — yet without a bit of sin. The “incarnation” then becomes our ultimate model. We knew God was loving, wise, and holy, but Christ brought the love, wisdom, and holiness of God down and showed it to us in concrete form. That is what we are to do. Christians to be truly “incarnate” in the culture, yet our “citizenship” is in heaven (Phil.3:20). We are to bring the love, wisdom, and holiness into the midst of our culture, yet without sin.
1. 2:1-3. Why would an absolute monarch like Nebuchadnezzar have such anxious dreams (see 2:31-35)? What does this tell us about the king? How does this apply to us?

2. 2:4-13. Why do you think the king demands that the interpreters tell him the dream as well as its meaning? What particularly infuriates him (v.11-12)? What does this reveal about the source of his agitation?

3. 2:14-30. a) What similarities are there in Daniel's behavior here with his behavior in chapter 1? b) What differences are there? cf. v.27 and v.12. What does the risk Daniel took? c) How does this give us guidance for handling a crisis?
4. 2:31-45. What might the following features of the dream mean? a) The four kingdoms are all parts of one image — and they are all broken “at the same time” (v.35) by the stone. b) They are increasingly strong yet less valuable and coherent. c) The image is pretty clearly an idol. d) How important do you think it is to determine what empire/civilization is represented by each metal section?

5. 2:31-45. a) What differences between the kingdoms of the world and the new kingdom are indicated by the images of the statue and stone? List all you can tell about this coming kingdom from the dream. b) Why is the time of this new kingdom ‘set up’ given so vaguely (see v.44)?

6. 2:27-48. What purposes or results did the dream accomplish?
1. vv.1-15. a) What is required by the king? b) Why do you think the king was so concerned to have absolutely everyone in the kingdom take part in the worship of the image? c) How does the image relate to the dream in chap 2?

2. Contrast Nebuchadnezzar’s words in 2:47 and 3:13-15. What might account for the change? What does this tell about his heart? About our hearts?

3. vv.8-14. Consider the ‘politics’ of this situation. a) Why did astrologers do this? b) How is their accusation designed to stir the king’s anger? c) Why did the astrologers have to tell the king about the non-compliance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? Why didn’t they come to the king and complain?
4. vv.13-18. There is a remarkable balance in the striking answer of the young men to the king. a) How do they balance respect and defiance? b) How do they balance confidence and humility?

5. vv.19-25. a) What two things amaze Nebuchadnezzar? b) cf. 1 Peter 1:12-14. What does this incident teach us about going through ‘fiery’ trials?

1. How is this dream like and unlike the king’s dream in chapter 2?


3. How well does Nebuchadnezzar heed God’s warning? How do we receive God’s warning? (Think of the ways that the king was sent warnings by God.)
4. a) What is the significance of the lesson of v.17? Why is it so important? b) Nebuchadnezzar is both insecure and abusive. How would the lesson of v.17—practically change those two aspects of his character? c) How would this principle — that success is always an unmerited gift — affect the way a successful man or woman today conducts his or her business and life? (Consider the two practical exhortations of v.27)?

5. vv.19-27. How does Daniel combine both love and forcefulness in his counseling of the king? Which side of effective shepherding do you need to work on more in your care for people?

6. v.27. Here Daniel accuses the king of social injustice and calls him to change his policies. What practical principles are there in Daniel’s story for working for cultural change and justice as Christians in our society?
7. Do you think that the particular kind of affliction God sent to Nebuchadnezzar was significant? Was it designed to teach anything?

8. vv.34-37. Compare this confession to the confessions in 3:28-29 and 2:47. Do you think he was ‘converted’? Why or why not?

9. What practical encouragement is this narrative for believers living in a pluralistic and pagan society?
10. Read the following quotes. a) What are the marks of pride in this classic Christian teaching? b) How does Nebuchadnezzar illustrate the marks of pride (see esp. 4:30)? What do we learn about human pride in this passage? What harm did it cause Nebuchadnezzar? How did God heal it? c) What are your main temptations to pride?

Pride is faith in the idea that God had when he made us. Most people are not aware of any idea God had in the making of them... or else it has been lost, and who shall find it again? They have got to accept as success what others decide success is, and to take their happiness, even their own selves, at the quotation of the day.”

– Isaak Dinesen

Pride... leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind...

1) Pride is essentially competitive... Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others...

2) Pride can often be used to beat down the simpler vices. Teachers often appeal to a boy's Pride (or, as they call it, his self-respect) to make him behave more decently: many a man has overcome cowardice or lust or ill-temper by learning to think that they are beneath his dignity. The devil laughs. He is perfectly content to see you becoming chaste and brave and self-controlled provided he is setting up in you Dictatorship of pride... For Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.

3) Pleasure in being praised is not Pride. The child who is patted on the back for doing a lesson well, the woman whose beauty is praised by her lover, the saved soul to whom Christ says 'well done', are pleased and ought to be. For here the pleasure lies not in what you are, but in the fact that you have pleased someone you wanted (and rightly wanted) to please. The trouble begins...the more you delight in yourself and the less you delight in the praise [and the pleasure of the praise-er]. That is why vanity, though it is the sort of Pride that shows most on the surface, is really the least bad... sort. The vain person wants praise, applause, admiration too much and is always angling for it... It shows that you are not yet completely contented with your own admiration... The real diabolical Pride comes when you look down on others so much that you do not care what they think of you...

Do not imagine if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be... always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you ill think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him, it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all. [Real humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.]
4) In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that — and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison — you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you. That raises a terrible question. How is it that people who are quite obviously eaten up with Pride can say they believe in God and appear to themselves very religious? I am afraid they are worshipping an imaginary God… Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good — above all, that we are better than someone else — I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil.
   – C.S. Lewis, “The Great Sin” in *Mere Christianity*
1. vv.1-4. a) What hints are there that this party is more frenetic than is ordinary? b) Considering the fact that an army took over Babylon that night, what might the reason for the party have been?

2. How can entertainment and recreation function in a similar way in the lives of us today?

3. vv.5-9. Why is Belshazzar more terrified, seemingly, than Nebuchadnezzar ever was (v.6 and v.9)? How does this manifestation of God compare with those to Nebuchadnezzar? Read Exod.19:9-22, Is.6:1-8, and Heb.12:18-24,28. Why is this response typical? What does it teach us about God and ourselves?
4. vv.10-12. Commentators have noted how odd it is that ‘the queen’ comes in though all the king’s wives are in the hall (v.2-3). Also, she comes in without permission (cf. Esther 4:11). a) Who might she be? b) What role does she play in the story?

5. vv.18-24. What four things is Belshazzar accused of?

5. How does God write on our wall? What are some of the ways he shows us our pride, our assumption of divine perogatives for ourselves?
6. Compare and contrast how God dealt with Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar. Why does God seem to give Belshazzar less ‘chance’?

7. vv.26-28. The strange words here represented three ‘weights’ or coins of value. Daniel’s interpretation uses numerous plays on words to get across the idea of being ‘weighed in the scales and found wanting’. What practical help is it to believers living in an unbelieving world, to know that there is a divine Judge, with divine scales of absolute justice?

9. Read Luke 10:1-20. Reflect on the following comment on this passage:

How can Christians do what Ellis says?
1. vv.1-4. For what reasons does Daniel get such a high position (again) under this next king? Why do you think the officials expect to find corruption in him (see v.2)?

2. vv.1-12 Why were the officials so hostile to Daniel that they were willing to hunt him down to the death? (Notice that the race-issue does not seem to be as important here. Cf. 3:12 and 6:13.)

3. Read 2 Timothy 3:12. Have you ever attracted hostility for your character or your faith? Why don’t we experience more opposition? What could be persecuted for instead of godliness?
4. How is Daniel’s career and faith a good embodiment of Jeremiah’s exhortation (Jer. 29:4-7) and a good example for Christians in a pluralistic society?

5. vv.6-15. How is ‘the law of the Medes and the Persians’ an improvement over jurisprudence under Nebuchadnezzar? But how is it still inadequate? What approach to law does the narrative hint would be better? (vv.5)

6. vv.10-12. What do we learn about Daniel’s prayer life from these verses? Read Daniel 9:1-19 for a sample of his prayer. What do you learn about his prayer life from these verses? What from his example do you personally need to practice?
7. What parallels do you see between Daniel’s betrayal (vv.3-18) and Jesus’? What parallels do you see between Daniel’s triumph (vv.19-28) and Jesus’?

8. Compare Isaiah 11:6-7. Miracles in the Bible are not just naked displays of power, but they usually teach something about God’s coming salvation. What does the lion’s den teach us?

9. v.25-27. Does Daniel’s ‘resurrection’ actually bring about what Darius calls for? Whose resurrection did?
1. vv.1-11. Trace the stages of development of the attitude of Joseph’s brothers and father toward him in these verses.

2. What sin(s) did a) Joseph, b) his brothers, and c) Jacob each contribute to create the terrible family situation? How do the brothers illustrate James 3:14-16? Why should Jacob have known better? How does v.11 illustrate greater spiritual maturity in Jacob than his sons?

3. Have you seen certain sins ‘passed down’ in families? Have you received any? To what extent are you responsible for the effect in your life of other’s sins against you?
4. vv.5-11. a) Are the dreams an expression of Joseph’s heart or an expression of God’s revealed plans? (This is a trick question.) b) See Gen. 50:18. How do the dreams shed light on the meaning of the whole history of Joseph and his brothers?

5. vv.12-30. Count how many events and ‘accidents’ had to happen in order for Joseph to become a slave in Egypt. What does this teach us?

6. Read 42:21 and 2 Kings 6:13-23. a) Compare how God answered Joseph’s cries for help at Dothan with how he answered Elisha’s need for help at Dothan. b) Have you had a Joseph-cistern experience? An Elisha-chariots experience? How did your respond? c) What does this teach us about how to face our own difficulties?
7. vv.31-35. a) Where else did deception happen through a goat? What does that teach us? b) What had the brothers probably hoped for from the father, now that his favorite was gone? Did they get it? What does that teach us?

8. vv.28. In what way does Joseph’s story point to the way God always does his salvation (remember the Judges)? In what way does Joseph point us to Christ? (If time, read Acts 7 for help on answering the question.)
1. 39:1-6, 20-23. a) What phrase is central? What do you think the phrase means?  
   b) What are the parallels between vv.1-6 and vv.20-23? What are the parallels designed to teach? Cf. the principle of Gen.28:15.

2. 39:1-6 and 20-23. It is easy to miss the most obvious point. God is ‘with’ Joseph and is ‘using’ Joseph by giving him success in administration and business. a) Does the church today think of God’s blessing in this way? b) What does this tell us about the relative merits of ‘Christian ministry’ versus ‘secular work’?

3. 39:5-7. a) How does Joseph’s success lead to temptation? b) What are some other ways that happens? c) Have you ever been tempted as the result of a success?
4. 39:7-12. a) Trace the progression of the woman’s temptation of Joseph. b) How has your own experience confirmed that temptation is progressive? c) Read Hebrews 3:13; 10:23-25. How is Potiphar’s wife an ‘evil twin’ of the kind of relationship Christians should have with each other? How can we practically carry out this ideal of Hebrews?

5. 39:7-12. a) Make a list of all the ways that Joseph uses to resist temptation at each level. b) How has your own experience confirmed the principles that Joseph uses?

6. 39:13-20. a) How does Potiphar’s wife get Joseph imprisoned? b) Scholars note that the ordinary penalty for such an offense would have been death. Why do you think he didn’t get it?
7. a) What one difference do we see between 39:3-4 and 39:21-22. What is the significance of that difference? b) Read chapters 40-41. What does this tell us about how we should look at delayed hope? at our own tragedies?

1. 42:1-5. Jacob fears to send Benjamin with his brothers. Why is he afraid?


3. 42:6-38. a) What parallels are there between chapters 37 and 42? b) How did his treatment of them arise from his memory of his dreams (42:9)? c) What are Joseph’s goals? d) What evidence is there that his strategy is working?
4. Does God do the same thing in our lives as Joseph is doing? How God done anything like this with you?

5. 42:36-43:14. a) How does Jacob’s reaction in 42:36-38 reveal his spiritual weaknesses? b) What does Jacob finally realize about what he must do with Benjamin with Judah’s help (43:8b)? How is that a principle for all of us? How have you seen this worked out in your own life? c) Where does Jacob finally put his hope (43:14)?

6. 43:32-44:34. We have seen what Joseph had to sacrifice (his revenge) and what Jacob had to sacrifice (his idol). a) What is the final sacrifice that has to be made before reconciliation can be complete? How does Joseph ‘set up’ the opportunity for this sacrifice? b) Why is the particular brother who makes the sacrifice significant to Joseph? Why is it significant to us?
7. Consider how reconciliation in relationships only happens through these same kinds of sacrifices (made by Joseph, Jacob, and Judah). Is there some relationship in your life that will be strengthened or healed if you practiced one or more of them?

8. Remember the dreams of Joseph. How does this history illustrate the principle of Acts 4:27-28? How can this lead to confidence in our own lives?
Chapter 45


2. 45:4-8. a) How has Joseph’s understanding of God’s attributes practically affected how he treats others and faces life? b) Where specifically could you use this same understanding of God to face issues in your life now?

3. In 45:5 and 50:20 Joseph says that God’s purpose for him was that he “save many lives”. a) How did he do this? What does this teach us about a) what our attitude should be toward ‘secular work’ and b) what our own response should be to hunger and other ‘social’ problems? cf. Eph.4:28; Luke 12:32-33; Matt.25:31-46. c) How can you practically be more responsive to such issues?
Chapter 48

4. 48:1-20. Hebrews 11:21 selects Jacob’s blessing of Joseph’s sons to be the premier act of faith in his life. Why does Joseph bring them to Jacob? How does both his blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh (v.14), and his summary of his life (v.15) express great faith? (cf. Jacob’s statement of 42:36 and 48:15-16.)

5. What difficult incidents in your life can you look back on with the perspective of faith and see God being your ‘shepherd’ and your ‘guardian’?
Chapter 50
6. 50:15-20. a) Why is the brothers’ message in v.17 so disappointing to Joseph? 
b) What three things can we learn from Joseph’s response which will help us 
in living anger-free lives? c) Is there anyone in your life that you need to ‘use’ 
these factors with — in order to forgive them?

7. Compare Joseph with Daniel. What lessons have you learned from them about 
how to live as a believer with integrity in a pagan, non-Christian environment?
INTRODUCTION

The book of Esther has had many critics. Martin Luther was particularly unhappy with it. A great number have questioned whether it should be in the Bible at all. Why?

Perhaps the most notable facts about the book is that God is not mentioned by name at all. Even during the repeated description of the Jews’ fasting “in sackcloth and ashes” does not directly say that it entailed prayer (although it certainly did). The author seems, therefore, to be deliberately avoiding any reference to God. There is no depiction of anyone worshipping anywhere in the narrative. Not only that, the Jews we meet in this story have chosen to remain living in the pagan Persian society and to not return to Jerusalem and identify with the restoration community of Israel being re-established there. The events of this account take place in Persia in the reign of Xerxes (486-465 B.C.), after the return of the exiles to their homeland. In short, this appears to be an almost ‘secular’ story about a group of non-religious Jews.

But that if that is all that it was, the ancient Hebrews would never have recognized it and received it as part of Scripture. Rather than being a theological weakness or ‘lapse’, the hiddenness of God is a powerful literary device to bring home its message about the absolute sovereignty and grace of God.

It is noteworthy that in the oldest Hebrew Bibles, Esther was not grouped with the historical books (Judges, Kings, Chronicles) but with the wisdom literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes). This doesn’t mean that the account is fictional — the author clearly claims to be recording historical events (2:23; 10:2-3). As we will see later, it is very right and helpful that Esther is placed alongside of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Bible we have today. But this association of Esther with wisdom literature is instructive. It reflects an awareness that the book is about practical principles for living wisely in a pluralistic, pagan society like ancient Persia. Just as we saw in the case of Joseph, and Daniel, the Bible addresses the question: can we live a life of faith and integrity in a faithless culture and society? It’s answer is a resounding “yes”. Then a second question is addressed: “how can we live faithfully in such a society?” The narrative itself yields answers to that question as we study and reflect on it.
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The Feasts of the King (1:1-4:17)
1:1-22 – The King’s Power revealed
   (1-8) The King’s first feast
   (10-12) The defiance of the Queen
   (13-22) The revenge of the King

2:1-18 – The Ascent of Esther
   (1-4) The King’s regrets
   (5-11) Esther, the beautiful orphan
   (12-18) How the orphan became a queen

2:19-3:15 – The King’s weakness revealed
   (19-23) The plot against the King
   (1-15) The plot against the Jews

4:1-17 – The Choices of Esther
   (1-8) The challenge of Mordecai
   (9-17) Esther takes the lead

The Feasts of the Queen (5:1-7:10)
5:1-14 – Esther risks her life
   (1-5) Esther finds favor
   (6-8) Esther’s first feast
   (9-14) Haman digs his own pit

6:1-14 – The sleepless night
   (1-3) The king’s book
   (4-14) The first reversal of destinies

7:1-10 – Esther intercedes for her people
   (1-6) Esther’s second feast and her petition
   (7-10) Haman’s falls in his own pit

The Feasts of the Lord (8:1-10:3)
8:1-17 – The King’s new edict
   (1-6) Esther’s second petition
   (7-13) The salvation reversal
   (14-17) The people feast and rejoice

9:1-17 – Rest from enemies
   (1-16) The execution of justice
   (17-32) The annual feast established

10:1-3 – The peace of Mordecai
1. Why do you think the description of the feast is so lengthy? Why do you think Vashti refused the request, though she probably knew of the danger? Summarize what can you learn about the characters of Xerxes, Vashti, and Memucan from this chapter.

2. Why did Xerxes (and his counsellors) decide to order all husbands to rule their wives? How do you think this looked to the rest of the country? What indication is there that the king had regrets?

3. How would a young girl feel who was being taken to the King’s harem? What factors in Esther’s life are out of her control? What factors are under her control? Why does Mordecai tell Esther to be silent about her Jewish faith?
4. Who is conspicuously absent from this Biblical narrative so far? Where do you see God’s hand at work?


5. What do we learn about Haman’s character? What do we learn about Mordecai from this chapter?

Read Esther 4:1-17.

6. How does Mordecai handle Haman’s threat (vv.1-4, 7-8, 12-14, 17)? What understanding of God is assumed? How do you handle times of crisis and difficulty?
7. What is Esther’s first response to Mordecai’s request (vv.6-11). What do you think Esther is feeling?

8. What three arguments does Mordecai use to persuade Esther to act (v.13-14)? What is Esther’s response? How is it a model for us? Where do you next need to apply it?

9. Read “THEMES of Esther”. Which of these themes do you see reflected in the story so far?
THEMES

1) God calls us to serve him in intensely secular settings.
This message is similar (but stronger!) as that of the accounts of Joseph and Daniel. We learn here how a believer can be effectively used by God in the heart of secular and pluralistic culture, even in the centers of its power. In all three accounts, we learn of Jewish figures who rise to power in an unbelieving society through their skills and talents — and then use their places to save their people.

This is a threatening message to many Christians today. There has always been a strong tendency among orthodox believers toward separation from the polluted, unclean, and morally/spiritually ‘messy’ arenas of politics, business, government, and so on. But Esther is a concubine, a member of a harem!

“Let Esther’s harem represent every unclean political or commercial institution or structure where evil reigns and must be confronted. Believers are needed there… Our cities are full of dens of iniquity. Our culture is described as essentially post-Christian, secular, and often antithetical to biblical values and hostile to biblical virtues… [But] Esther gives us permission to reflect on our call to serve God within the matrix of a modern secular… system… How could God call Esther to be the interracial replacement spouse of a polygamous, pagan Persian king?… This book is off the screen for many evangelicals… We urban people need Esther now more than ever. Never allow it to be trivialized or spiritualized away, as it has been so often…”

— Ray Bakke, A Theology as Big and the City (IVP, 1997)

2) God calls us not only to change individuals, but change society and culture.
In each case we’ve looked at in this course — Joseph, Daniel, and Esther — God called someone to work for just laws and policies in a secular society. It is common for modern Christians to insist that the only way to change society is to convert and disciple individuals. If that is all there is to be done, then the ‘higher’ calling would be to go into Christian ministry. But the Bible shows us people who God also calls to work for social and “systemic” justice and peace in society. Esther used her position to have an unjust law repealed.

Ray Bakke (A Theology as Big as the City, p.106) reminds us that we must read Esther ‘synoptically’ with Ezra and Nehemiah. These three Jewish ‘heroes’ had three very different callings. Ezra was a clergyman, who taught the Bible to the restored community in Jerusalem. Nehemiah was a lay person who used his skills to literally rebuild the wall and infra-structure of Jerusalem to insure safe streets and a decent economy. Esther, meanwhile, used her position to work for just laws in the secular realm. Only all three people, working together, were able to rebuild Jerusalem into a viable city. One did evangelism/discipleship (working on the spiritual welfare), one did community development (working on the social and economic welfare), and one did social justice (creating laws that were just and allowed the community to grow). This was not only a lay-clergy leadership team, but a male-female leadership team.
This means that we will never see God’s kingdom move forward with only evangelism and discipleship. We must also do ‘wholistic’ ministry that works on behalf of the poor and at-risk neighborhoods, and we must also have Christians in ‘secular’ jobs working with excellence, integrity, and distinctiveness. We need Ezra ministry, Nehemiah ministry, and Esther ministry — all together — if we are going to ‘win’ our society for Christ.

3) In our life in secular society, believers will sometimes have to choose between conflicting authorities. Mordecai and Esther have to face very difficult choices between obeying legitimate human authority and obeying the ultimate authority of God. Though it is not completely clear why, Mordecai refused to prostrate himself before Haman. Esther had to risk her standing and resist the natural desire to conform and obey. Believers in a secular society have to be careful to not ‘stand up’ and resist too often or too seldom. At one point Esther says, “I would not have protested x but I feel I must speak up about y.” (See 7:4). Wise living in a pluralistic society includes the ability to know when to speak up and when to keep silent.

But the message is very clear. God has a plan (see #4 below), and in order to be part of it (4:14) there ordinarily comes a time when we must stand up for our beliefs regardless of the potential cost.

4) God is the only real King.

We have noted that God’s name is never directly mentioned why? The teaching is: God is sovereignly in control, even when he appears to be completely absent. The dramatic tension in the book revolves around a threat to the very existence of the Jews. If we put the book in its total Biblical context, we know that this is really a threat to the whole plan of God to redeem the world by grace. Genesis 12:1-3 tells us that God planned to bring salvation into the world through a family and a people, descended from Abraham. Abraham’s people were to be guardians of both the true faith and the “Messianic seed” which would one day produce a savior who would redeem the world. A threat to the Jewish nation was, therefore, an attack by the world on God’s redemptive plan. However, largely through a set of “coincidences”, the Jews are saved. God’s plan to save the world through grace is intact.

“What the writer of Esther has done is to give us a story in which the main actor is not so much as mentioned — the presence of God is implied and understood throughout the story, so that these mounting coincidences are but the by-product of his rule over history and his providential care for his people. It is an extraordinary piece of literary genius that this author wrote a book that is about the actions and rule of God from beginning to end, and yet that God is not named on a single page of the story.”

– Dillard, p.196
What a vivid way to teach us that God is always present, even when he seems most absent and his purposes most ‘opaque’! The message of the book is that God’s plan of grace/salvation cannot fail, and though he may appear to be completely absent, he is really behind everything, working out his plan.

Because of this theme, the writer contrasts two conflicting world-views — that of Haman and that of Mordecai. Haman believes in chance-fate. He casts lots to determine the best time to annihilate the Jews (3:7-11). He thinks he can control history by the exercise of his power. The other world-view is that of Mordecai. He believes that there is a divine presence over-ruling history (4:14) who can use us if we make ourselves available to him, but whose plan is not dependent on nor thwarted by human power. “The book sets the two world-views in contrast and shows by the outcome which is to be preferred.” (Baldwin, p.38)

Nevertheless, we are taught that God’s sovereignty is not determinism. When the story is over, it will be possible to look back and see that so much of what happened was do to a divine power behind even the most mundane ‘accidents’. Yet the narrator does not depict a kind of fatalistic determinism. Our choices are not determined apart from the responsible exercise of our will. Esther will have to risk her life and act courageously if the salvation of her people will be realized. We are not just passive pawns in God’s plan.

5) Human strength is weakness and weakness is strength
Recent commentators have noticed the weakness of men and the power of women in the book. In contrast to the huge show of power in his great feast, the drunken Xerxes tries to humiliate his wife who in turn humiliates him. In response, he decrees that all men should control their wives when he can’t control his own. The decree, evidently made when he was still drunk, only makes him look foolish. Later he appears to regret it on several fronts.

Not only is he ‘bested’ by his first queen, the rest of the book shows him being ‘bested’ by his next queen. While the king is revealed to be ill-informed, forgetful, impulsive, unjust, and unwise, his queen Esther is seen to be brave, take-charge, focused, wise, and just. Not only Vashti and Esther, but Haman’s wife Zaresh appear as ‘strong and shrewd’ while all the men (except Mordecai) appear vain and foolish. Eventually, even Mordecai takes orders from Esther (see the end of chapter 4).

Esther, of course, is the person who most of all stands the world’s expectations on their head. First, she was an orphan, without father or mother (2:7). Orphans are one of the oppressed, powerless groups (cf.James 1:27). Second, she was a woman, and not a powerful or wealthy woman, but a concubine, the member of a harem. In the process of the narrative, however, she ascends from being an orphan and Mordecai’s protege to being a queen of great power, who makes plans and takes decisive leadership and who in the end is her uncle’s guardian.
Originally, her physical beauty won the king’s heart, but 2:15 indicates that her character and behavior had won the attraction of the rest of the court as well.

Esther comes from the outside margins of society and is used by God to do redemption. So again we see a very prominent theme in the Bible. God does not work through the channels that the world considers strong and powerful. Instead, he works through groups (women, racial minorities) who seem powerless. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

In a related theme, we learn that “the one who would lose himself will find himself”. We learn that evil sets up strains in the fabric of life and backfires on the perpetrator, while faithfulness to God is also wise. Haman, who intends to destroy Mordecai and his kin, ultimately destroys only himself and his kin. This theme is especially achieved through the literary device of irony. The gallows that Haman builds for Mordecai becomes his own place of execution. Haman seeks to plunder the wealth of the Jews, but it is his wealth that fall into their hands. The reversal of role and of fortune that occurs so often in the Bible eventually finds its fullest expression in Jesus, who was exalted because he stooped so low. At the same time Satan is brought low because he sought exaltation.

6) Salvation “rest” comes by the sacrifice and intercession of another.
Many modern readers are uncomfortable with how the Jews in chapter 8-9 turn on their enemies and kill many of them. It seems vindictive. However, the intriguing note that they did not take any of the money of their victims (9:10,15) indicates that this event is part of a larger and longer story.

The writer tells us that Mordecai is a descendant of Kish, the father of Saul (2:5) while Haman is a descendant of Agag (3:5) the Amalakite king who fought against Saul (1 Sam.15). From the time of the Exodus (Exod 17:14-16) through the time of the Judges (Judges 3:13; 5:14; 6:3,33; 7:12; 10:12), the Amalekites had been aggressors and oppressors of the Israelites, and they represented the hostility of the world against God and his people. It is very interesting that the Jews do not take any of the wealth of their victims (9:10,15) — they did not want to make the same mistake that Saul did with the Amalekites (1 Sam.15:9-19). They did not take their wealth because their destruction of their enemies was a simply act of justice — it was not an imperialistic action of self-interest or exploitation. They were seeking to claim the “rest” that God promised some day to give them. Deuteronomy 25:19 promised that some day, “Amalek” will be destroyed, and the people of God will experience “rest” from their enemies. The end of the book of Esther shows that this “rest” was partially fulfilled in the ministry of Esther (see 9:22).

But the book of Hebrews tells us the “rest” of the Sabbath day and the “rest” of military triumph over enemies is only a dim hint of a greater “rest” to come (Heb.3:7-4:16). “There still remains a rest for the people of God, for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.” (Heb.4:10). That rest is the resting from our good works through the grace of the “gospel” (Heb.4:6).
What this means is that Esther’s ministry is a pattern of Christ’s.

Esther’s great temptation, once she comes into a place of luxury, comfort, and privilege, is to hold on to that position to the detriment of her people. When by God’s grace we come into such a standing, we may be seduced by it. Mordecai had to challenge Esther and force her to see her choices. Salvation comes through Esther only when she is willing to give up her place in the palace and take her life into her own hands and risk it all in order to intercede before the throne of power. Again we see that redemption comes not by gaining but by losing, not by filling oneself, but by emptying oneself.

We also see, over and over, that we need a deliverer who identifies with us and that stands as our representative — as in the career of Joseph in Egypt, David before Goliath. So in this story we are led to see Jesus, who did not need a challenge to leave his place of power, who saved us not at the risk of his glory but at the cost of his glory, who did not say, “if I perish, I perish” but “when I perish, I perish”, who had to die in order to stand before the throne as our intercessor (Heb.7:24-25).

But the “rest” that Jesus brings is not one that gives us rest from enemies by killing them, but by winning them. After the cross, we pray for our enemies. Jesus has brought the barrier down between Jew and Gentile, Saul and Amalek.

Resources
