

July/Aug 2019

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

EYES OPEN
TO **GOD**



ALSO: EARTHLY TREASURES, HEAVENLY TREASURE

Friends:

How are your eyes? A few years ago, I underwent a series of surgeries on my eyes that left me partially blind for many months. At one point, I went on a seaside tour with my family, and while they marveled at majestic landscapes, ships on the horizon, and birds in the air, I could barely see my feet. The experience left me with a deep sense of how precious and fragile our physical eyesight truly is.



The Bible calls us to cultivate spiritual eyes to see God at work in our lives. While we are created to know God and enjoy him forever, our own sinfulness pushes us to close our eyes so that we ignore God as if we didn't need him. Our human nature today is no different from the way it was in biblical times. Against our own best interests, we would rather wander blindly instead of following God.

In July, Arie Leder leads us through stories from the book of Judges, showing how even God's chosen people, who should have seen him best, often turned away from God's leading. Like them, we have to admit that we would rather do what seems right in our own eyes.

Then in August, George Young explores the concept of wealth with the theme "Earthly Treasures, Heavenly Treasure." God's creation is full of rich gifts for us to enjoy to his glory, but none of those compares to his wondrous gift of salvation.

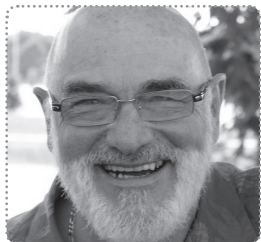
May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

—Steven Koster

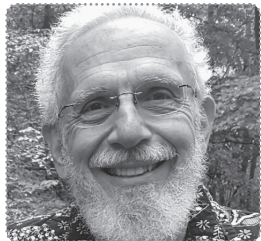
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**“Eyes Open to God”
Arie C. Leder**



**“Earthly Treasures,
Heavenly Treasure”
George R. Young**

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ReFrame
Media

Eyes Open to God

Arie C. Leder

july

The book of Judges describes a people of God we'd rather not see. With our eyes open to the teaching of Judges, we see the truth about God's people, including ourselves—for we often abandon our Lord in favor of this world's attractions. With eyes open to the truth, we can also see God's endless patience with an undeserving people and our need to be saved from ourselves. Above all, eyes open to God help us see that we are not our own, "but belong—body and soul, in life and in death"—to our patient, merciful Judge and Redeemer, Jesus Christ (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1).

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Earthly Treasures, Heavenly Treasure

George R. Young

august

Jesus likened salvation to a treasure, and this helps us understand our eternal salvation and how to live as Jesus' followers. In the month of August let's reflect together on the many blessings we have here on earth, giving God thanks for all good things and pondering how God calls us to use his blessings for good and for others—with eyes open to the coming of his kingdom. As a hymn suggests: "May the mind of Christ, my Savior, live in me from day to day, by his love and power controlling all I do and say."

George Young is a retired missionary to Japan who is now living in the northeastern United States, where he and his wife can be near their children and grandchildren.

“OH, BE CAREFUL, LITTLE EYES”

His eyes were opened . . . and he saw everything clearly.

—Mark 8:25

Parents' eyes light up when their little ones sing at a school or church program, “Oh, be careful, little eyes, what you see. . . .” They're proud of their children—and why not?

But who has had more opportunity to see what their eyes should not look at, or to go where their feet should not take them—the children, or the parents?

According to the Bible, the problem with our eyes began long ago, with our parents in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). Eve saw the forbidden fruit, desired it, ate it, and gave some to Adam, who also ate. Seeing, desiring, and taking what is forbidden is now natural for Adam and Eve's descendants.

Who of us doesn't strain to see and touch what is prohibited?

The book of Proverbs says, “The eyes of the LORD are

everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good” (15:3). The book of Judges tells us, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (17:6, NRSV; see also 21:25). And in story after story in Judges, we read, “Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (see 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).

When we think about the children's song “Oh, be careful, little eyes,” let's also think about where our own eyes take us.

Thank you, Lord, that you look on us through Jesus Christ. Help us and our little ones to see and do what is right in your eyes. Amen.

WHAT THE FIRST GENERATION SAW

"The Lord . . . has sent me so that you may see again. . . ."

—Acts 9:17

Paul (also known as Saul) had seen amazing church growth but could not accept it as God's work. Then, on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, Paul had a blinding vision of the Lord Jesus. And later, when "something like scales fell from his eyes," Paul couldn't hold back from proclaiming "all the great things the LORD had done." He had seen the Lord (see Acts 26:15-18).

Centuries earlier, after a long journey to the promised land, God's people had seen the Jordan River stop flowing so they could cross it on dry ground. They had also seen Jericho's walls tumble down (Joshua 3-6). And all they had done was to follow the ark of God, as their leader Joshua had told them to.

Would you have believed if your own eyes had seen the waters of the Jordan stop flowing or the

walls of Jericho crumble? The people who followed Joshua did. But after that generation died, another generation grew up and didn't know the Lord or all the great things he had done.

According to the book of Judges, God's people "turned from the ways of their ancestors" and refused to believe in what God had done (see 2:17-19). They were satisfied with doing "what was right in their own eyes" (17:6).

"Blessed are those," said Jesus, "who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

Lord, even though we have not seen the great things you did long ago, please bless us, that we may believe what you reveal in your Word, the Bible. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHAT GOD SEES

You were taught . . . to put off your old self.

—Ephesians 4:22

The Israelites had seen their parents and grandparents serve the only God of heaven and earth. Some had even walked through the Jordan on dry ground and had seen Jericho collapse; others had heard their parents talk about these mighty works of God. Still, the generation after Joshua ignored what God had done. Like sheep, they turned to their own way (Isaiah 53:6).

Children born today in the Christian community of faith may think they know better. Rather than receiving the wisdom of the past with gratitude, the next generation seeks its own way. It's not that the older generation's beliefs are false, they're just not "true for us." The next generation seeks what is true and good in its own eyes.

According to Judges, the next generation must face an un-

comfortable truth: What matters is not what parents believe, but what is right *in God's eyes*. God's eyes are eternally open to the faithful service of one generation and the straying of the next.

We might object that God's seeing invades our privacy. But, like loving parents, the Lord is actually looking out for us. As children take comfort in their parents' constant presence, so God's children of every generation learn to depend on God to help them see and do what is right in his eyes.

Lord, we sometimes struggle to see and believe what you teach us in your Word, pointing us to Jesus Christ. Help us in our unbelief, increase our faith, and guide us in living by what is right in your eyes. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LOOKING IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

They exchanged the truth about God for a lie . . . and served created things rather than the Creator. —Romans 1:25

What did Israel do that was so wicked in God's eyes? "They forsook the LORD . . . and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them." Judges 2:17 describes this as committing adultery with other gods. Many other Bible passages also describe God's people that way. The people often preferred to "trade in" the God of their salvation for other "saviors."

Disloyalty, infidelity—"looking for love in all the wrong places"—brings harsh consequences: God turned Israel over to plunderers. God himself turned against them. God's response makes sense. If you abandon God to seek the life of doing what is right in your own eyes, you can expect those eyes to lead you astray, with inescapable consequences.

Paul describes the consequences of lives driven by base passions: "they are full of envy,

murder, strife, deceit and malice" (Romans 1:29). Strangely enough, this debased mind seduces God's people again and again: "As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly" (Proverbs 26:11).

The Israelites didn't suffer because God had abandoned them; they suffered *because God was looking after them*. "The LORD disciplines those he loves" (Proverbs 3:12). It's as if God was saying to later generations, "Be careful what your eyes wish for; you may get it."

May the Spirit of Christ discipline our hearts to desire what is right in God's eyes.

O Lord, be gracious and deliver me from base desires, for the sake of your steadfast love. Amen.

WHERE'S THE PROBLEM?

They would not listen to their judges. . . .

—Judges 2:17

God heard Israel's cries of distress and often raised up judges to lead and save the people from their enemies. Through Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, and others, God gave the land rest for forty and even eighty years at a time (3:30; 5:31; 8:28). But after each of those saviors died, God's people eagerly cozied up to a way of life that had brought nothing but misery before. Only a fool does the same thing again and again and expects different results (Proverbs 26:11).

We might think Israel's addiction to its base desires could have been solved by better leadership. But the judges generally served well. The shepherds God sent to lead his people were not the problem; the *sheep* were the problem. Leave them alone for a few minutes, and they go their own way or distress themselves with greenery they shouldn't eat.

God's people, the sheep of an eternally patient Shepherd, need to be saved from themselves. And that demands a leadership that can get rid of the enemy forever, while also changing the way of disobedient sheep. Later, even though the great King David saved Israel from the Philistines, he and his royal descendants could not rescue God's people from doing "what was right in their own eyes."

As Christians, we know we are tempted to drink from the same old wells of misery again and again. But we also have hope, for Jesus Christ has delivered us from death and our self-inflicted misery.

I am your servant, Lord.
Forgive my addiction to
sin's misery, through Jesus
Christ. Amen.

UNEXPECTED SALVATION

The LORD relented because of their groaning. . . .

—Judges 2:18

Seven times Judges tells us that God's people did evil in the eyes of the Lord (2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1), and each time God sent saviors to rescue them from their misery. Thanks be to God that his mercy is everlasting, that it covers our endless dedication to sin and misery.

But God's mercy does not give us a license to keep on sinning—and being forgiven—so that grace may increase (Romans 6:1-2). Rather, God's mercy impels us to persevere in faith. We implore God to forgive us our sins, and through Jesus he has done that. But the power of our unrighteousness can be so overwhelming that we might believe God doesn't want to forgive our same old sins, again and again.

The good news of Judges (and the whole Bible) is that God's compassion is wide and deep

enough to cover our repeated sins. When God's people suffered for their sin, time after time, God sent Spirit-empowered judges (3:10; 6:34), repeatedly and unexpectedly, to rescue them, again and again.

Crying out to God, not covering up our sins or making excuses for them, says the psalmist (Psalm 32:3-5), brings undeserved, even unexpected, forgiveness on the challenging road of faith. And if we do not know how, or if we are afraid to bring our sins to God, the Holy Spirit does it for us in our weakness, in line with God's will.

Thank you, Lord, for our compassionate Savior and Judge, Jesus Christ, who sent his Spirit to bring to you our groans of sin and sorrow. Amen.

TESTING

If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief. . . .

—1 Peter 4:15

Peter writes that Christians will suffer for their faith, but unrighteous behavior or compromising the faith will also produce suffering. If we ignore God's commands, we may well face consequences. And James points out that if we break just a part of the law, we are guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:10).

Israel suffered for their unfaithfulness to the Lord. God allowed this because they did not keep their promises and did not listen to the Lord. So God tested them, Judges says, to see "whether they [would] keep the way of the Lord and walk in it as their ancestors did."

Judges' description of suffering because of disobedience may bring to mind James's image of the law as a mirror (James 1:22-25). Looking into the problem of Israel's suffering here raises an inconvenient question: Are God's people

today suffering for their faith or for their faithlessness?

Unending prayer regularly supports brothers and sisters throughout the world who suffer for the faith. But what about fervent prayer for Christians who cannot yet admit they are suffering for unrighteousness, for compromising the faith?

Scripture asks every generation of God's people this question. It may seem unkind, or even unloving, but God means it for our good (see Hebrews 12:10).

May our worship today provoke us to self-examination and to direct our eyes to Jesus for the sake of our spiritual health.

Lord, please show us and forgive us our sins—and if we suffer, may it be for Jesus' sake. Amen.

WHO'S THE WRONGDOER?

"Grant me justice against my adversary."

—Luke 18:3

Parents teach their children to be careful and not touch a flame or a hot stove, to look both ways when crossing the street, and so on. We want children to be safe and protected. But if a child disobeys and gets hurt, do we refuse to comfort them? Of course not.

Israel cried out to the Lord because they had failed to listen and were suffering again. God heard their cry and sent a Spirit-empowered savior to treat their distress. In truth, though, Israel didn't need saving from the king who was oppressing them. They needed saving from their own wayward tendency to flirt with trouble.

It's fair to ask God to be just with an unrighteous neighbor or someone who mocks your faith. But what if we ourselves are the instigator of our hurts? What if our own behavior lands us in terrible distress? Will we,

with equal fervor, insist that God be as just with us as with that unrighteous neighbor?

When we ask God to rescue us from distress, it's good to know who did us wrong—especially if we're the cause of our own misery.

The good news is that God hears all the cries of his people. Jesus rescues from misery all who call on him, and we need to ask him to help us see when we are the cause of our own suffering—and confess it.

Father, by the power of your Son and Spirit, keep me from bringing trouble into my life. Help me to live faithfully for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

EHUD: DIVINELY DESIGNED SAVIOR

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"

—John 1:46

Did you smile a little as you read how a shrewd lefty from the tribe of Benjamin (which literally means "son of the *right* hand") got that sword past the guards, or how Ehud managed to keep Eglon's death hidden while he escaped? Maybe you were aghast at the description of Ehud plunging the sword so deep into Eglon's belly that the fat swallowed it, or that Ehud described this execution as "a message from God."

What should a savior look like? How should a savior act? Whose expectations should a savior meet? God designs all the saviors of his people, from Moses to Jesus, according to standards that are right in God's eyes. The lefty from Benjamin and the teacher from Nazareth, although just right in God's eyes, did not look like saviors to most people.

Our own expectations of a savior do not matter. We're in so much sinful trouble that we can hardly imagine the kind of rescuer we would want—not to mention the kind we *need*.

Jesus, an unlikely teacher from Nazareth, regularly amazed people wherever he went "because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law" (Mark 1:22). In fact, Jesus had the authority of God, and he also did many miracles. People paid attention to these things—but would any of us have designed a Savior who freely submitted to an excruciating death to pay the price for our sin?

Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Thank you, Father, for sending your only Son to be the one Savior we truly need. In his name, Amen.

UNEXPECTED SAVIORS

“God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”
—Acts 2:36

In those days it was usually mighty men of war who fought in battle. But in this story Barak of Israel—a capable man of war—would not enter the field of battle without Deborah the prophet. The message from God that Deborah had given him wasn't enough. Did Barak not trust the Lord? Did he not trust Deborah, who had been serving faithfully as a judge for God's people?

Because of his decision, Barak is told that God “will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” And when the Lord routs Sisera's army (v. 15), Sisera escapes from Barak's advance and runs away on foot.

In those days, it was embarrassing for men to be saved by the help of women. In Jesus' day, it was embarrassing for the people's leaders to hear that an under-educated teacher from Nazareth could save them, and

that their own sophisticated religious culture had no such power. What embarrasses us about Jesus as Savior today?

Our embarrassment about the Savior sent by God opens our eyes to uncomfortable truths: we cannot rescue ourselves from sin, and all our ideas about rescue from unrighteousness inevitably fail.

Not Barak or even Deborah fit God's overall design for a Savior. Only the Son of God, mysteriously born of Mary, would do. Hallelujah!

Lord, may the grace and love of the unexpected Savior, Jesus Christ, lead us to godly sorrow and the joy of deliverance from unrighteousness and its misery. Amen.

JAEL AS THE HAND OF GOD

When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law. . . .
—Galatians 4:4

A tired and thirsty Sisera accepted Jael's invitation to rest in her tent. He had no reason to fear. Jael, the wife of a trusted ally, soothed him: "Don't be afraid." Then, after doing as hospitality required, Jael tent-pegged Sisera as he lay sleeping. "On that day," we read, "God subdued Jabin king of Canaan."

How could someone who violates norms of hospitality be God's instrument of salvation? Couldn't God use better people or a more acceptable means to set things right? According to Scripture, there are no "better people." "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Even God's justice seems unwise in the eyes of the world, which considers the cross of Christ foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:23).

In the days of the judges, Jael tent-pegged Israel's oppressor.

But even though God used Jael as his hand of victory in this episode, Israel would still need other saviors. They needed rescue again and again.

Having heard the cries of his people in distress, "when the set time had fully come," God sent a Savior who would be "pierced for our transgressions . . . [and] crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5). Jesus Christ, the ultimate Savior, "bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12).

Do you see God's hand at work in this world? Has God opened your eyes to see the wisdom of his strange salvation?

Lord, help me to see your hand in the strange way your Servant has saved your people from unrighteousness. Amen.

TERRIBLE PRAISE

"Most blessed of women be Jael. . . ."

—Judges 5:24

It is not wise to rejoice at the downfall of enemies, "or the LORD will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from them" (Proverbs 24:17-18). But Deborah and Barak do exactly that with their terrible praise of Jael: "She struck . . . she crushed . . . she shattered. . . ." Likewise, they speak of their enemy: "he sank, he fell . . . he lay . . . dead." Jael is described as the "most blessed of women."

But Deborah and Barak also call on the kings of the earth (5:3) to fear the great King of all the earth. Their song boasts not of *Israel's* victories but the Lord's, by his strangely designed saviors: "So may all your enemies perish, LORD!" The enemies of God's people were never merely flesh and blood. They always were and continue to be powers and authorities and spiritual forces of evil (Ephesians 6:12) that

refuse to submit to the Lord and his anointed one, Jesus Christ (Psalm 2:1-3).

Deliverance from the powers that persecute God's people is messy because the ancient adversary "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). That's why Deborah, Barak, and the angel in Revelation 18 rejoice in God's victories over the adversary.

Killing the works of the flesh (our sinful nature)—impurity, hatred, jealousy—is messy and impossible for us to do, but the Holy Spirit will strike, crush, and shatter them (Galatians 5:16-25). And they will be as powerless as Sisera in Jael's tent.

I praise you, Lord, for salvation; by your Spirit help me die to the works of my sinful nature. Amen.

GIDEON'S ALTAR

We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.
—1 Corinthians 1:23

The Israelites had done it again. They had wandered from God and had worshiped the gods of the people around them.

These were Baals and Asherahs, made-up gods and goddesses that were supposed to give you abundant crops and herds if you worshiped them and slept with their sacred prostitutes. Altars to these gods were everywhere in the land. And, to Israel, it often looked as if the sacrifices to these gods worked. The rains came, the fields yielded rich harvests, and the herds multiplied.

But what did Israel do when enemies came and stole their harvests and livestock, ruined their fields, and trampled their vineyards? They cried out to the Lord. Canaan's gods were defenseless against the invaders.

When an angel of the Lord came to visit, Gideon had no idea who it was, and he

spoke doubtfully about God. But when Gideon's eyes were opened and he feared he would die, he learned that God was not only real but also merciful. So he built an altar to the Lord. God had come to rescue his unfaithful people, so Gideon worshiped the Lord there.

Christians today know that the cruel cross on which Jesus died was the final altar from which all blessings flow. The message of the cross may seem like foolishness to others (1 Corinthians 1:23-25), like Gideon's altar amid all the others in the land, but the gods of other altars have no power. Cry out to the Lord for rescue. He will save you.

Thank you, Lord, for blessings that flow without end and with the power of your mercy. Amen.

GIDEON AND BAAL

"Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit nothing?"
—Isaiah 44:10

The saviors God sent his people often got into trouble with their neighbors for listening to God. The townspeople were so committed to Baal and Asherah that they wanted to kill Gideon for destroying Baal's altar and the Asherah pole.

This reveals an uncomfortable truth: God's people didn't worship other gods now and then. Rather, according to Judges and the Prophets, it happened regularly. It was almost normal. Because Gideon had disturbed their comfortable religion, the townspeople were eager to sacrifice him.

Would Baal avenge the destruction of his altar? The people thought so. But their false gods did not and could not do anything. What could wood, stone, precious metal, or even animals do? The prophets scorned false religions, but that didn't stop Israel from putting

their hope in good-for-nothing idols.

What do we do today? Are there any false gods and altars of sacrifice in our lives? We know that prosperity, positions of authority in church and community, good schools, and a healthy family are all gifts of the Lord. But have we worshiped or sacrificed to them in place of God?

There is only one God worthy of our worship: the Lord Jesus Christ, who shed his own blood on a cross, the final altar, as the sacrifice for our sin. Worship him today and every day. All other gods and their altars are good for nothing.

Lord and Savior, thank you for sacrificing yourself willingly for us on the cruel cross. Help us to worship you only, we pray.
Amen.

GIDEON'S ARMY

“. . . or Israel would boast against [the Lord, saying], ‘My own strength has saved me.’”
—Judges 7:2

Gideon was unsure of himself, so he gathered an army of 32,000 men, as many as he could find. But then the real Commander of the army reduced the troops to 300. How could Israel now hope to defeat the vast army of Midian and their allies?

That was exactly the point. The size of Gideon's army had little to do with defeating the Midianites. To be sure, the shock and awe of the trumpets, torches, shouting, and breaking of jars in the darkness were intimidating, but they were only instruments in God's hand. And “if God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

There was no standing army—fully trained and ready for a fight—in Israel. The people Gideon had gathered were ordinary Israelites. No wonder Gideon was afraid to attack. But the Lord would give them victory.

The struggle for faith often seems impossible. Not only do we ourselves struggle to hold on, but the path of destruction by sin and death can be overwhelming. Every day people suffer and die—from disease, war, famine, corruption, abuse. All this can make it difficult to hold on to God.

Fear not! One Soldier, trained in humility and subordinate to the Commander's will, shattered the bonds of death when he rose from the grave! So now we can ask, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55).

By your Spirit, Lord, help us to trust in you. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ, our Lord! Amen.

GIDEON, UNAPPRECIATED SAVIOR

“Whoever has will be given more. . . .”

—Matthew 25:29

It's strange that the leaders of Sukkoth were blind to God's gifts. The Lord had used Gideon and a small, untrained army to rout the powerful hosts of Midian. It's even stranger that the Sukkoth officials refused to feed Gideon's troops. Gideon pressed on and captured the enemy. Then “he took the elders of the town and taught the men of Sukkoth a lesson by punishing them with desert thorns and briars” (8:16). Disloyalty brings its own reward.

The greatest gift of God is Jesus, our Savior, who has rescued us from sin and death. But what do we do with the gift of this Savior and the accompanying gifts of mercy and grace?

Jesus told his disciples a parable about the gifts of the kingdom; God expects his gifts to be appreciated and used, not ignored and hidden, as if buried

in the ground. Are we grateful for and using God's good gifts of mercy and grace—or are we disloyally hiding them away?

Disloyalty demonstrates a rejection of God's gifts: whoever does not live out the gifts of the kingdom will lose them, Jesus told his disciples.

May the gift of Jesus Christ move us to gratitude for our rescue. Loyalty and dedication to God for his gifts of grace and mercy multiply those gifts—for all who witness God's goodness in our lives. Thanks be to God!

Help me, Lord, to multiply your gifts of mercy and grace by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

COSTLY KINGSHIP

They gave him seventy shekels of silver, and Abimelek used it to hire reckless scoundrels. . . .
—Judges 9:4

The Israelites had asked Gideon to rule over them, but he had refused, saying, “The LORD will rule over you” (Judges 8:23).

But after Gideon died, his son Abimelek manipulated the people of Shechem to support him, and then he killed his seventy brothers and set himself up as king. Some people will do anything, pay any price, to achieve a position of leadership—also among God’s people.

The leaders of God’s people included some who lacked humility and self-control: for example, the judges Jephthah and Samson (Judges 10-16), the kings Saul and Rehoboam (1 Samuel 15; 1 Kings 12), and even the great King David, who committed adultery with the wife of a dedicated warrior—and then had the man killed in battle (2 Samuel 11; 23:29).

Truth is, none of us can bear the true cost of successfully leading God’s people. Bribery, smooth-talking, and manipulation may get us a position, but sooner or later our flaws and sin will find us out.

Unlike Abimelek, Christ was publicly declared king on a cross. There they mocked him: “If you are the King of Israel, come down from the cross.” He did not. He required no one’s life in exchange. His own Father did not deliver him from that horrible crucifixion. He surrendered himself to the grave to pay the price of all our sin. Then he rose again. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

For “your dying sorrow,
your mercy without end,”
Lord, “let me never, never
outlive my love for you.”
In your name, Amen.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." —Luke 23:47

All that Abimelek's soldiers could see was a dead Abimelek. Ironically, his last command as a self-appointed king had helped him escape an embarrassing death at the hands of a woman—but not really. God set the record straight: with Abimelek's death "God repaid the wickedness that Abimelek had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers."

Corrupt leadership has its consequences. No matter who holds positions of power, God administers justice in line with his perfect will. Though we may not always understand his timing, God's justice is equal to the crime committed.

Except in one case. When Jesus died on the cross, the centurion "praised God and said, 'Surely this was a righteous man.'" And the people who had come to watch a spectacle "beat their breasts" (Luke

23:47-48). Why would God allow an innocent man to die so horribly? Could that be just?

We have to admit that we, along with our leaders, cannot pay the true price for all our unrighteous behavior. Instead, an innocent man, the Son of God himself, perfect and without sin, died willingly for all our sins and trespasses. That's God's compassionate, merciful justice.

Jesus Christ died, Jesus Christ was buried, Jesus Christ rose from the dead. "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow."

For your compassionate justice to me, the worst of sinners, I thank you, Lord. Please grant wisdom and righteousness to all who lead your people. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

JEPHTHAH THE OUTCAST

Gilead's . . . sons . . . drove Jephthah away. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said. . . —Judges 11:2

Jephthah's family and community had rejected him because his mother was a prostitute. So he had fled to another land, where he made a name for himself and outlaws followed him.

Though Jephthah had been exiled, the elders of Gilead begged him to return and help them fight the Ammonites, whom God had set against Israel because they had worshiped other gods. The elders even said that Jephthah could be the leader over all of them. That sounded good to Jephthah, and he made them commit to their promise.

The elders and Jephthah are like mirror images—corrupted opportunists serving themselves. They did what seemed right in their own eyes.

But what do we do? In our communities and our families,

do we simply do as we like? Or do we try to seek out God's will, reflecting on the teachings of his Word to us, asking the Lord for guidance, and searching out the wisdom of others who believe and trust in God? If we only do what seems right in our own eyes, we won't be much different from Jephthah and the Gileadites, acting in line with our sinful nature.

But through another child who had a scandalous birth and was often an outcast, God has provided another way. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to live a perfect life and to give up his own life for our sake. He defeated our worst enemies—sin and death—so that we can live at peace with God. Praise be to God!

Lord, thank you for the Savior who brings us full life with you. Amen.

JEPHTHAH'S BARGAIN

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

—Galatians 5:25

Before going into battle, Jephthah made a vow: if God would give him victory, he would sacrifice whatever met him when he returned home. Jephthah won the battle and kept his foolish vow, at the cost of his daughter's life.

Proverbs 20:25 teaches: "It is a trap to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider one's vows." Think before you speak; make your vows in line with the right and good will of the Lord.

In the days of the judges, however, people did what was right in their own eyes. On that note Proverbs says: "The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice" (12:15).

Jephthah made his foolish vow even after the Spirit of the Lord had moved him. But then, if you live in a culture de-

finied by what is right in your own eyes, it's not uncommon to speak before you think and to avoid reflecting on the motivations of the Holy Spirit.

As believers in Christ today, we can live by the Spirit, asking God for wisdom every step of the way (James 1:5). As Paul urges us in Galatians 5, "walk by the Spirit" and "keep in step with the Spirit," turning away from the desires and foolishness of the sinful nature (see 5:13-26).

Keep me, Lord, from making rash promises; by your Spirit, help me live and walk closely with you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

BIRTH OF A SAVIOR

"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus."
—Luke 1:31

Manoah was troubled when the angel of God showed up. It was commonly thought that if you saw the face of God, you would die (see Genesis 32:30). What's more, Israel had done "evil in the eyes of the LORD" again—so the visit by the angel of the Lord might seem like bad news.

But the messenger from heaven brought good news: Manoah's wife would bear a son, and this son would begin to save Israel from the Philistines.

Saviors are unusual people, for they represent God. Because the child would be a "Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb," his hair would not be cut, and he would not have any wine or other fermented drink. As a Nazirite from birth, this boy would be totally dedicated to God.

His mother called him Samson. The Lord blessed him, and the

Spirit began to move him. In Samson, God's people had received a specially designed savior.

Many years later, Mary, who became the mother of Jesus, received a visit from an angel too. She would have a son, the angel said, and she was to call him *Jesus*, which means "Savior." Filled with the Spirit, Jesus resisted all the temptations of the devil, taught and healed many people, and even gave up his own life, once for all, to save people from their sin.

Unlike Samson and all the other deliverers God had sent to help his people, Jesus was the Son of God. Hallelujah!

Thank you, Lord, for the Savior dedicated from the womb to do your will for our sake. Amen.

IS THIS REALLY A SAVIOR?

God [sent] his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. . . .

—Romans 8:3

In Samson, God sends his people a savior—and what does Samson want to do? All he wants is to satisfy his eyes' desire. Samson sees a Philistine girl and wants her for his wife. His parents remind him that God wants him to marry one of God's people (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). But Samson insists on having this woman because she is right in his own eyes (14:3).

This Nazirite from the womb, though endowed with the Spirit, is not led by the Spirit but by his wandering eyes—just like God's people. They too are God's firstborn, special among all the peoples of the earth, bound by their promises (covenant) to love God above all—but repeatedly they follow after other gods. Like the people, Samson does what is wicked in God's eyes.

In Samson, God sent a savior who mirrored the sins of his

people, because God designed the savior of his people to know the burden of their wickedness. Even more, to suffer the consequences of their wickedness. None of these saviors in Judges, however, could escape the burden and consequences of their own sins.

Thanks be to God for the true Savior, Jesus, who understands our weaknesses, who was tempted as we are, but did not sin (Hebrews 4:15). He took on the burden of all our wickedness, and he suffered the consequences for our sake. Then he rose from the grave, providing new life for all who believe in him. Hallelujah, what a Savior!

For the Savior who knew and bore my sin, I thank you, Lord. Open my eyes to live for you. Amen.

WHO KNEW?

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ. . . .

—2 Corinthians 5:19

Samson's parents didn't know that their son's behavior was a part of God's redemptive toolbox. Sinful behavior that can bring about salvation from the enemy is an unthinkable, even foolish thought.

But God himself didn't make Samson lust after Philistine women. Like all the descendants of Adam and Eve, Samson was perfectly capable of creative sinfulness and obstinacy to God's will.

It's strangely fitting that God hid the savior of his people in plain view: Samson the Nazirite lusted after Philistine women just as Israel panted after the gods of other peoples. No one would guess that he was God's special instrument of salvation. He was just another young man obsessed with women.

God's ways are not ours. He chose what is low and weak for

a world-shaking transformation. Who could have known that sinners like Jephthah and Samson might rescue Israel for a time from its self-made messes? Who could have known that a no-name Galilean from Nazareth might be the Son of God?

One day in Nazareth, Jesus, the son of Joseph, told the local community that he was God's Servant. Then they knew. Some were amazed, and others tried to kill him (Luke 4:14-30).

God so loved the world that he sent Jesus of Nazareth to save from sin all who would believe he is the Son of God, our Savior. Hallelujah!

Dear Lord, I need you every hour. Teach me your will, and use me in fulfilling your promises. Amen.

HONEY IS SWEET, BUT . . .

He did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass.
—Judges 14:9

Why didn't Samson tell his parents that the honey was from a carcass? Because at that time in Israel's history, touching the carcass of a dead animal was considered unclean (Leviticus 11). But Samson ate the honey anyway, gave some to his parents, and so defiled himself and his parents. He also defied God's wishes by marrying a Philistine woman who worshipped other gods.

At the wedding feast Samson entertained the local young men with a riddle about sweetness. Unable to solve the riddle, the men threatened Samson's wife. Fearing for her life, she begged and harassed Samson till he told her—and then she told them.

Samson was furious, but the mess was his own doing. He'd created the riddle from the carcass, something no faithful Israelite, not to mention a Nazirite, would touch. But it

had seemed right in Samson's eyes. Honey from a lion's carcass? *Eat it!* A "sweet" Philistine woman? *Get her for me!* Defiling himself or his parents didn't matter to this savior of Israel.

Many years later, Jesus, the true Savior, explained that what really defiles people is what's in their heart, not what they eat (Mark 7:1-23). Samson defiled himself by turning away from God to pursue his own desires, doing what was right in his own eyes. Jesus, however, took our defilement on himself, washing us clean and giving us new life. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

"I praise the Christ of God; I rest on love divine; and with unfaltering lip and heart I call this Savior mine. . . . I love because he first loved me; I live because he lives." Amen.

CONSEQUENCES

... *The LORD had left him.*

—Judges 16:20

Samson kept following his own desires, doing what looked right in his own eyes. In this way he mirrored the people of Israel. They rarely saw their own faults and their pride, which always led to destructive consequences. No matter how often God rescued them and gave them victory, they kept turning away to other gods, doing only as they desired.

In today's reading we find Samson following his eyes again. He goes to see a prostitute. Then, "some time later," he falls "in love with a woman" named Delilah. But Delilah doesn't love him; she only seeks to lure him and destroy him.

Following our own desires can be destructive to us too. Have you ever found, like Samson and Israel, that if you keep going your own way, God will let you face some of the consequences of your actions? In his

mercy, God will often give us a wake-up call so we can turn around and seek what's right in his eyes, rather than our own.

Samson's uncut, Nazirite hair was a symbol of his dedication to God. When he gave that up and his enemies jumped him, Samson discovered that "the LORD had left him." Humiliated and blinded, the savior of Israel was led away in shackles.

Defying God is not fitting for any of us whom God calls to live by the power of his Spirit. Thankfully for our sake, Jesus never defied God but humbled himself, even to death on a cross, saving us from the power of sin and its consequences.

Lord, help us to live by the power of your Spirit filling our lives. In Jesus, Amen.

EYES ON REVENGE?

"If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out. . . ."

—Matthew 5:29

Samson's eyes got him into trouble, and without them Samson triumphed over the enemy. Forced to entertain his captors, blind Samson asked the Lord for strength one more time. His reason? To "get revenge on the Philistines for [his] two eyes."

In his human weakness and pride, Samson could not forget his eyes. Even so, God used him as an instrument to rescue his people. Without the eyes that provoked passionate desire in his heart and led him away from God, Samson, now blind, "killed many more when he died than while he lived." And Samson died with them.

Unlike the stories of other judges, the Samson story does not end by telling us that Israel had peace from their enemies. Rather, it shows us a Samson who saved Israel without his offending eyes. Would God's

people too have to endure a time of blindness before they could see what is right in God's eyes? (See Matthew 13:13.)

Samson was blind not so much because the Philistines took his eyes but because his eyes caused him to sin. He didn't need his eyes to save Israel. But he couldn't let go of them without seeking revenge.

Unlike Samson, Jesus Christ died for our offending eyes, our wayward hands and feet, our deceitful hearts, and our loose tongues. And instead of seeking revenge, he died so that "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" with God (John 3:16).

Father, forgive me, for Jesus' sake, for I know the offensiveness of my eyes, hands, and tongue. Amen.

RELIGIOUS CHAOS

To suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

—2 Timothy 4:3

The closing chapters of Judges (chap. 17-21) show how things go from bad to worse as God's people keep doing what is right in their own eyes—and what is evil in God's eyes. The people fall headlong into a downward spiral leading to religious chaos.

God had set up the leadership of his people, appointing priests to serve in worship (Exodus 40:12-15). In those days the priests were to serve only at the tabernacle, the house of God in Shiloh (Judges 18:31)—and then later at the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 5-6).

We read today, however, that Micah made a shrine for his own gods and installed one of his own sons as his priest. Then, even worse, a traveling Levite, who was ordained to serve at the tabernacle (Numbers 3), agreed to be Micah's priest.

In all of this, the people and their religious leaders corrupted the system of leadership in Israel, doing what seemed right in their own eyes. Or, as we read in 2 Timothy, people set up teachers around them to say only what they wanted to hear.

Corruption like this stains biblical religion to this very day. Today we have preachers of self-esteem and prosperity—and many others who make political statements that defy the teachings of God in Christ. For Jesus' sake, there's no better time than now to evaluate what our eyes are eager to see and what our ears are itching to hear.

My eyes and ears are weary of seduction, Lord. Give me your light and saving words, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

STUBBORN WORSHIPERS

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way. . . .
—Isaiah 53:6

Isaiah's description here is an apt one for God's people. Sheep can be stubborn wanderers, always grazing where the grass looks greener.

Not long after Israel came to the promised land, the tribe of Dan set up an idol for worship, stolen from Micah in Ephraim, along with Micah's priest, who is now identified as a grandson of Moses. Dan's stubborn idolatry seems to have lasted about 300 years.

The people of Dan, like many others in Israel, ignored God's instructions to have "no other gods" and to make no images for worship (Exodus 20:3-5). Even if they claimed they were committed to the God of Israel by having a priest, they were really just doing as their neighbors in the land of Canaan did. But, surely, God would understand that worshipping "outside the box" was the creative thing

to do—right? After all, isn't variety the spice of life?

Spiced food may be good, but strangely spiced worship only defies and mocks the Lord. We do well to note that Hebrews 12:28-29 reminds us to "worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.'"

It is good to remember that the Holy Spirit brought us into the fold of the great Shepherd, and that he daily nudges us to abandon our stubborn ways. Today, may we hear and listen to his voice (Psalm 95:6-7).

O Lord, help us not to grieve your Holy Spirit. May we honor you not only in worship today but in all we do each day of the week. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

HOSPITALITY?!

"You are welcome at my house," the old man said. . . . "Don't spend the night in the square."
—Judges 19:20

The old man in Gibeah showed hospitality to the visitors—a Levite, his concubine, and his servant—by taking them into his home. And when wicked men surrounded the house at night and wanted to rape the Levite, the old man defended his guest—but then offered them his daughter and the concubine! The outlaws still wanted the Levite, so, to save himself, he handed them his concubine. The men abused her all night, and she died on the doorstep.

Then, when the Levite found his concubine dead in the morning, he took her body home, cut the body in pieces, and sent them throughout the land. What?! We learn later that this became a call for punishment against the wicked men of Gibeah (Judges 20).

What are we to think of all this? When people do only what is right in their own eyes, things

go from bad to worse—and even worse. Eventually this mayhem leads to a civil war in which the people of God fight and kill one another.

The old man mixed hospitality with an utter lack of respect for his daughter and the concubine. And the Levite sent his concubine to her death. Women were treated horribly in those days, and wild gangs did as they pleased. God's Word, however, called everyone to love their neighbor. No one should treat others so cruelly.

Let us thank God today for our good King, Jesus Christ, who rules compassionately and firmly through the Holy Spirit.

Lord and King, help us to love all our neighbors as you have loved us. Save us from inhospitality. Amen.

PEACE AT WHAT PRICE?

The LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel. . . .

—Judges 20:35

This story about God's people can make our heads spin. How could such things happen?

Though this account appears near the end of the book of Judges, we can tell it took place early in the time of Israel's judges: "In those days the ark of the covenant of God was there, with Phinehas . . . the [grandson] of Aaron ministering before it." So this story occurs not long after the death of Joshua (see Joshua 24:29-Judges 1:2). Perhaps it is placed here to stand out as an appendix, reminding Israel that they can bring destruction on themselves just like any other nation—if not for God's intervention.

Horrible crimes had been committed. A measure of justice was needed, and some peace had to be restored. But at what price?

Though people had been doing what looked right in their

eyes, they also finally remembered to "inquire of the LORD." So they wept and fasted and pleaded with God for direction.

But even with repentance, sin and defiance against God bring consequences. Thousands of lives were lost. A whole tribe was nearly destroyed. And if God had not intervened, it's safe to say that Israel would soon have destroyed itself.

But God preserved his people, keeping his promises. And one day many years later, God's one and only Son, Jesus, from the tribe of Judah, went "up first" for us all, to fight the enemy and to win for us peace with God and one another. Praise him!

Lord, may your peace fill my soul daily so I can be at peace with all my neighbors. In Jesus, Amen.

THE TRUE SHEPHERD

When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were . . . like sheep without a shepherd.

—Matthew 9:36

Again the book of Judges shows that people desperately need a savior. Though they had asked God for direction before the war with Benjamin (Judges 20:18, 23, 28), Israel now took matters into their own hands again.

The Bible speaks honestly about human beings: all are unwilling to live by God's direction for good, righteous, and just living. When the Bible turns to describe the history of God's own people, we find that no one is without fault. The closing line of Judges says it all: "all the people did what was right in their own eyes." And later, in the days of Israel's kings, even those who were not described as doing "evil in the eyes of the Lord"—such as David, Hezekiah, and Josiah—were flawed.

Is any of us any different? Today we live in the reign of King

Jesus, but in this New Testament age we read of lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3), sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:13-20), sneering at neighbors (James 2:3-4), and idolatry (Revelation 2:20). And then there are abuses against women and men, murders, and wars throughout church history.

The book of Judges exposes God's people's notorious tendency to ignore its Savior. After the death and resurrection of our true Savior and Shepherd, the good news is that King Jesus sees our self-inflicted misery. And by the power of the Spirit, he keeps us alive.

Lord Christ, you are the Shepherd of my body and soul. Keep my eyes from the seductions of sin, and grant me new life with you forever. Amen.



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