

Savior — Judges 1-3, Luke 4:18-19



*Speculum Humanae Salvationis, Ehud*

The book of Judges foreshadows Christ as merciful and forgiving, repeatedly rescuing his people despite their failures and disobedience. Seven times in the book the phrase “cried out to the Lord” is used, and each time God intervened on their behalf, raising up a rescuer who prefigures Christ’s rescue of us.

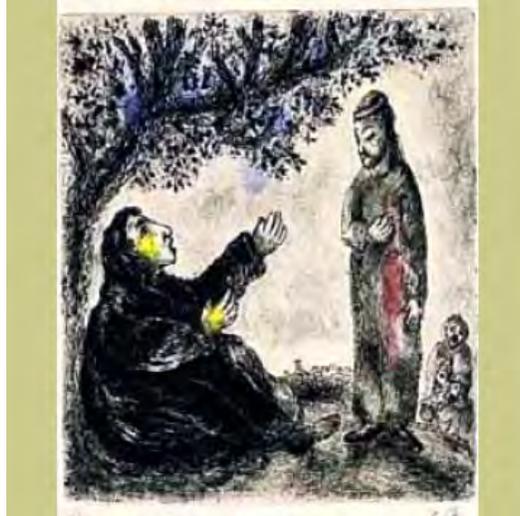
Oppression resulted from adopting their neighbors' idolatry, just as they had been forewarned in the law if they did not love God. But each time, their repentance resulted in God sending leaders who brought freedom for the people. Some translations call Ehud a rescuer or deliverer, and some call him a saviour. He thus foreshadows Christ who rescues, delivers, and saves us. In the book, we discover that unlike Christ, the saviours were very flawed people who they did their work by inflicting violence rather than receiving it.

The first hero, Ehud, defeated the king in a special forces action. When I read the Bible for myself as a young teen, I found it shocking that the Bible would describe the dagger's handle disappearing beneath the king's fat, his bowels emptying, and the detail that his servants thought that he was in the bathroom. I continued to discover that the Bible is an earthy book, and one could count on the most earthy sections being left out of Sunday School lessons or sermons. It prompted my quest to try to find the connections to Christ, even in these "odd parts."

In the text, the total time of oppression is 74 years, and the total time of peace is 296 years. So even in this time of great conflict and trouble we see God's mercy. The stories do not tend to show a culture that was following the law they had been given. In fact, accepting and practicing idolatry seemed to be the norm despite warnings, consequences, and suffering. They clearly forgot the goal to love God with their whole heart. Yet, repeatedly God showed them mercy, just as he continues to do for us.

*Can I look back on times Christ has rescued me when I have cried out to him?*

#### **Deborah — Judges 4-5, Luke 22:69**



*Marc Chagall, Deborah the Prophetess*

Deborah and Barak's song prophesied Christ's triumph in his ascension. Lines regarding the earth shaking at God's presence, heavens dropping, rain, and Sinai

moving, dominion over the mighty, and leading captivity captive were picked up in Psalms. The latter phrase is applied to Christ's ascension in Ephesians. On one level, then, the military victories in this book prefigure the spiritual victory of Christ over all evil.

Jael is celebrated for pounding a tent peg into Sisera's head: "Most blessed of all women..." is a phrase about Jael repeated regarding Mary, Christ's mother. Abigail Adams identified with Jael who applied the story metaphorically as a call to die to self when she did not want her husband to go abroad.

Handel wrote an oratorio on Deborah. His choice of characters with dramatic conflicts and triumphant military finales reflects his 18<sup>th</sup> century context of dramatic battle. Triumphant music celebrates Jael's killing of Sisera. He also wrote oratorios for Samson, Jephthah, Saul, Solomon, Athaliah, and Esther. .

The idea that God "gave them victory" is repeated three times in these chapters, and 19 more times in the book. The idea that God acts to bring victory, not me, is reassuring whenever I feel weak and overwhelmed. As I look back on life I can see victories in many areas: ministry, finances, relationships, health, and wisdom for different situations. These positive memories help me face the next challenge with confidence that God gives me victory.

*Do I trust in God's ability to give victory?*

**Gideon — Judges 6-7, Hebrews 11:32-34**



*Ferdinand Bol, Gideon's Sacrifice*

Gideon foreshadows Christ as leader of a small group of followers who dramatically turn the tables on more powerful people. Gideon and Christ let crowds go, and selected a small committed band of followers for battle against their enemies who had stolen all their food and left them starving. With a small band, Gideon routed the enemy, and with twelve followers, Christ turned the world upside down. This

story encourages us that God is with us and gives us strength and courage we do not have.

A favorite image from this story is setting out a fleece. Christians use this example to ask for a tangible sign of God's leading. Another favorite lesson is that one does not need strength in numbers, but rather strength of commitment and determination. The final lesson is that God wins the battle, and all we have to do is let our lights shine. Gideon was fearful, did not want the responsibility, but won his battle and place in history.

The time of the Judges reminds me of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels. Small nations, some good, some mixed, some downright evil, are in the midst of a massive competition between freedom and domination. The 40 or 80 year periods of peace remind me of the Hobbit residents of the Shire who take their small, happy lives for granted. But when the larger struggle intruded on them, they became unlikely heroes—weak, fearful and reluctant—but ultimately winning, letting their smallness and weakness become strengths.

*Do I let my weaknesses be turned to strength in God?*

#### **Gideon's Sons — Judges 8-9, Mathew 13:34-35**



*Peter Paul Rubens, Massacre of the Innocents*

Jotham, the youngest son of Gideon, survived the slaughter of his seventy brothers, similar to Christ's survival of slaughter of the innocents. When he spoke up against his brother using a parable, he prefigured the extent to which Christ would also speak against his brothers in parables.

After Gideon's success, he became oppressive and idolatrous, serving as a cautionary tale for us that great spiritual victories can be followed by great compromises. He became greedy, and he led his family and the people into idolatry. We have to stay alert to these possibilities in ourselves and our spiritual leaders.

One of his sons, Abimilech, murdered most of his brothers and became a tyrant and oppressor. Jotham pointed out his brother Abimelech's injustice by means of a parable. Trees sought a king, asking olive, fig, or vine to rule them, each of which refused. When they asked the bramble, it accepted, the analogy being acceptance of kingship by an unworthy man. Jotham prophesied that Abimelech would destroy his people by fire, and would be destroyed in turn.

Supporting a lawless ruler was a symptom of the peoples' disobedience to the law. A thousand people from Shechem who had supported Abimilech's kingship died by fire. He was wounded by a millstone thrown down by a woman, and asked his armor bearer to kill him. The moral given is that he was punished for murdering his brothers. It is sad that the great hero Gideon fell so far himself, and his son fell yet further from his former great victory. His family's tragedy is to foreshadow the massacre of the innocents.

*Am I alert to possible spiritual deterioration in myself?*

### **Jephthah — Judges 10-12, Matthew 5:37**



*Benvenuto, The Meeting of Jephthah and his Daughter*

As a flawed and foolish leader, Jephthah stands in contrast to Christ. Jephthah treated the vulnerable irresponsibly and made a vow that showed disregard for others. He then experienced the suffering he was willing to cause when it was his own daughter who was to be harmed thanks to his words. In contrast, Christ showed compassion to the poor, the ill, children, and women.

Jephthah, rejected by his brothers because he was a prostitute's son, gained a rebel following. When community leaders asked him to fight the Ammonites, he sent an appeal to the opposing King. He asked for respect for their 300 years possessing the land.

When he won the resulting war, he carried out his vow to sacrifice whoever met him upon his return which was, unfortunately, his daughter, celebrating with

tambourine and dance. Perhaps the result was perpetual virginity, not death, but a sad result of foolish words. As Christ exhorted us, we should simply say what we mean and mean what we say. Making promises we cannot keep gets us in trouble.

When disrespected by fellow Israelites, he retaliated by killing 42,000 people.

**Jepthah**

Son of a prostitute  
Led rebels while in the wilderness  
Leaders promised power  
Demanded reassurance of his position  
Made and fulfilled a foolish vow  
Took vengeance on his own for disrespect  
Ruled only six years

**Jesus**

Son of a virgin  
Defeated temptation in the wilderness  
Leaders opposed his authority  
Operated out of interior authority  
Advocated making no vows  
Allowed his own to kill him  
Is an eternal King

Before and after Jepthah we have ordinary leaders who did not have great battles but kept the peace—Jair for 23 years, Tola for 22, Ibzan for 7, Elon for 10, and Abdon for 8. How good to be reminded that a good ruler often does not have to make a big splash, but is gladly remembered for letting ordinary life go on.

*Do I think through the consequences of the promises I make?*

**Samson — Judges 13-16, John 5:19-22**



*Rembrandt van Rijn, The Angel Ascends after Manoah's Sacrifice*

Samson's birth and death parallel Christ, and yet he was the opposite of Christ in so many respects. He was stubborn, impatient, impulsive, sensual, and manipulated by women. But his birth was prophesied to his parents by an angel, and his decision to sacrifice himself by pulling down the pillars of the pagan temple and dying along with Israel's enemies bears some parallel to Christ's self-sacrifice.

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* makes the point that in Samson's story we have two motifs at once: the exploits of a successful hero, a strong man akin to Hercules, as well as the tragedy of personal weakness and failure to live up to his calling. These ambiguities make him a complex character who has intrigued artists through the centuries, creating an archetype we easily recognize--the flawed, but brave and strong hero.

The Nazarite vow of not cutting his hair was violated by being captivated by a famously manipulative Delilah. Once more, the laws of God given for help and protection were violated by a flawed saviour who nevertheless looked ahead to the perfect saviour.

Through his twenty years as champion, the people were only partially freed from the Philistines. Most touching in the story was Samson's acknowledgment of need

when he was thirsty and he cried out to God who opened a spring. Blind and a prisoner at his life's end when he asked for strength to defeat his enemies. "Remember me again, O God," he prayed. These moments of humility contrast with his arrogant forgetfulness that his strength was a gift.

Outward success and inner weakness and subsequent failure is something we have seen in political and religious leaders in our day. Our movie action heroes often have Samson's same strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps all these stories speak to us because we are aware of our own ambiguous qualities as a mixture of heroism and failure, prone to anger, violence or lust, even as we aspire to champion the good.

*How self-aware am I of my character strengths and weaknesses?*

### **False religion — Judges 17-18, John 4:24**



*Pinturicchio, Nativity*

God called for spiritual worship in both Old and New Testaments. He required the people to love him and to refuse to worship idols, preparing the way for presenting himself as a person in Christ. True worship focuses on Christ, God with us.

Idolatrous religion and ritual had starting points, and this story is a case study. Micah, the one starting the new religion, admitted to stealing his mother's money. Getting it back, she used part of the funds to make an idol. Micah set up a shrine,

and commissioned his son as a priest, and when a Levite needed work, Micah hired him. His motive was to manipulate the supernatural world to receive a blessing, rather than the curse his mother had pronounced on the unknown thief which turned out to be him. Every aspect of the prescribed worship of God was being violated.

The priest prophesied success for Israelites traveling through who were so pleased they asked him to become tribal priest and to steal the religious artifacts. Despite Micah's protests, they stole his manufactured religion. Sadly, the image was worshipped by the tribe of Dan for a long time.

The end of Judges shows a culture collapsing in fake religion, sexuality, and violence. The refrain "Israel had no king" was preparation for kingly rule, hoping they would bring more stability.

This deconstruction of starting a false religion warns us to notice our own attempts to manipulate God. Christ came and started no religion but rather called people to return from their hearts to God as they had been taught about him. He needed no image, because he was God's image. He did not pray for his own will, but accepted God's will. He did not manipulate the supernatural world with his prayers, but was able to do great things in the power of God.

*Am I inventing my own religion by thinking I can manipulate God?*

**The Unfaithful Levite— Judges 19, John 21:15**



*Rembrandt van Rijn, The Man of Gibeah offers hospitality to the Levite and his concubine*

Levites, those who served and cared for the tabernacle, were intended to be God's servants and representatives, foreshadowing Christ. But the Levite's behavior showed how far people who were set aside for God had fallen. His calling was to serve at the tabernacle and to live in one of 48 cities set aside for Levites, but he lived off in a remote place. His marital relationship was troubled. He was indecisive and easily persuaded to feast and drink. He did not have the courage to protect his concubine, but subjected her to suffering and death. He then desecrated her body, and he rallied people to a place that had no connection to the tabernacle. The war he inspired cost 65,000 lives.

The point is made that Jerusalem (Jebus) was still in the hands of non-Israelites, so he did not feel safe staying there. But in reality, he was not safe with Gibeah's inhospitable people. In Joshua 24:33 we are told that the town of Gibeah had been given to Phinehas, the descendant of Aaron. It is the town from which Saul would come, and he also would call the tribes together for war by cutting a bull into twelve pieces. At this point Phinehas had moved the tabernacle to Bethel, and the men from Gibeah were duplicating the sins of Sodom.

In contrast, Christ was the perfect servant of God, the true Levite who fulfilled all the tabernacle imagery of which they were a part. The victimized woman is more representative of him than anyone else in the story.

*Am I living as an authentic representative of Christ?*

### **A Cry for Mercy— Judges 20-21, II Corinthians 7:10**



*Rembrandt van Rijn, The Prodigal Son*

Men of Gibeah invited judgment on themselves by abusing and murdering the Levites' concubine. As Exodus 21:12 says, "Anyone who assaults and kills another person must be put to death". They and most of their community did end up dying for this sin. Hosea later says that it was right to attack these wicked men who refused to recognize the law. We also know we are sinners who are under a sentence of death and who need mercy from Christ.

Each step in the story shows the chaos that ensued when the law was not followed. The high priest clearly had no control over the sinful behavior of what had once been his town, showing the collapse of high priestly authority. Once the sin had been committed, there were alternatives for dealing with it that would have been more reflective of God's law, and Phinehas the high priest is shown as a failure, foreshadowing the high priest of Christ's day. Given the identification of Phinehas as Aaron's grandson, this story is out of chronological order, but it serves as a climactic expression of the depths of social chaos to which they fell.

Rather than rallying an army, the Levite, following the law, could have gone to Phinehas to ask him to exercise his responsibility to judge and punish the murderers. The Benjamite leaders could have turned over the guilty for

judgment. As Phineahas had done in Joshua 22, he could have attempted to negotiate to avoid war. Once at war, they could have spared the women and children. The losses they suffered make one wonder how accurately they were “hearing from God.”. They did not need to make a foolish vow not to allow their daughters to marry into the tribe of Benjamin. Killing more people from Jabesh-Gilead and kidnapping yet more women to solve their problem could have been avoided by repenting of their vow. In short, there was one poor decision after another.

Each choice represented falling far from the high ideals of the law. Having destroyed one of their own tribes, they sat weeping loudly and bitterly at Bethel. God in his mercy would restore that tribe and send future messengers from Benjamin, descendants of this sordid story: Jeremiah the prophet, and Paul the apostle. There is only one bright place where we see Christ in this dark story. In the midst of chaos, the people went to the Ark of the Covenant where they wept and appealed for mercy. That place of mercy is Christ.

*When I know I have done wrong, am I quick to cry out for mercy?*