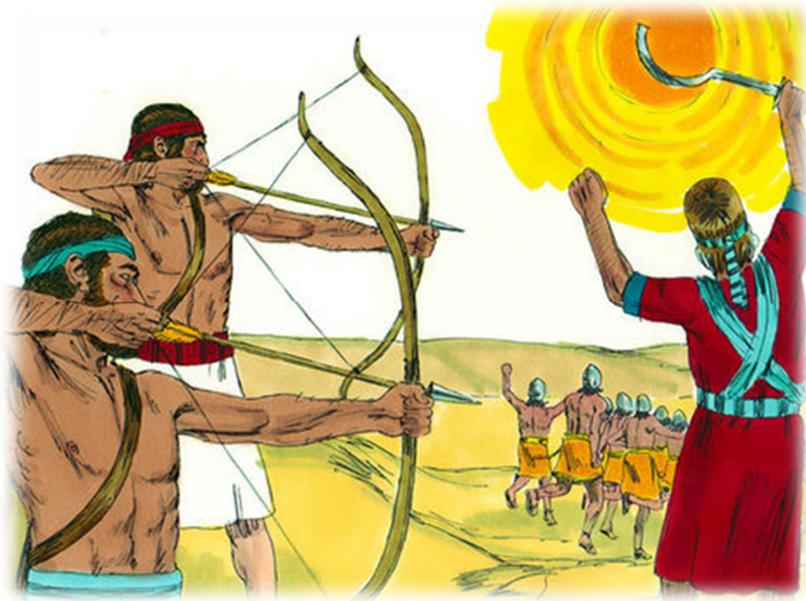


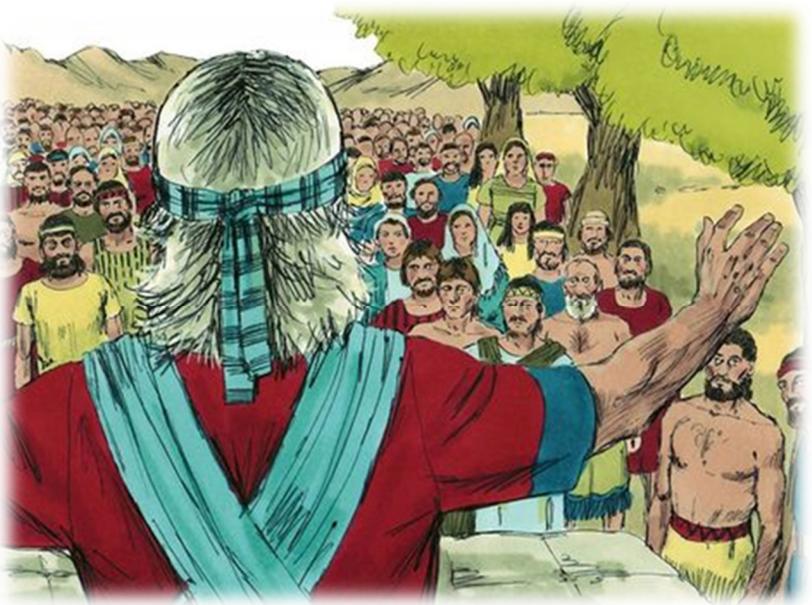
The Judges Cycle

Joshua 24, Judges 1



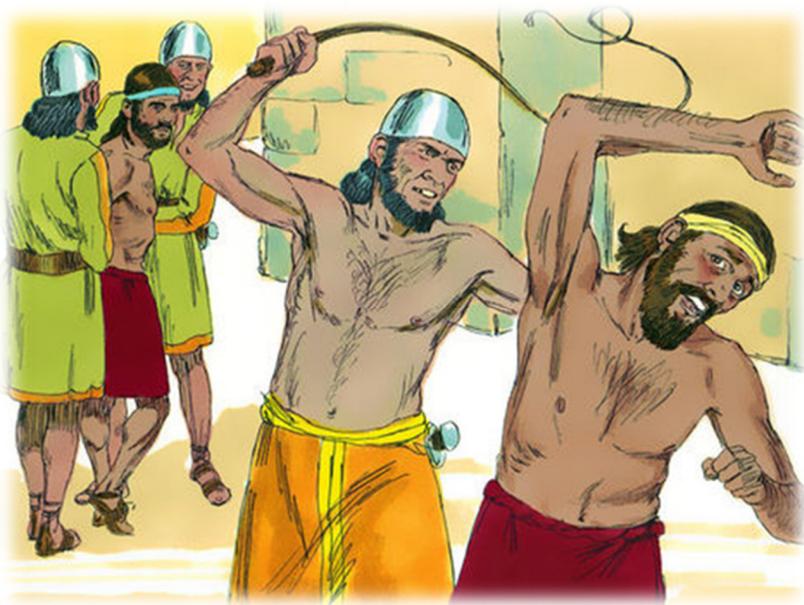
After the fall of Jericho and the defeat of Ai, God helped Joshua and the children of Israel fight and win many other battles. God continued to be with His people while they obeyed Him. In one battle, Joshua prayed to God that the sun would stand still so they could finish their fight—and guess what?! It did! God is an all-powerful God—not just powerful over His people’s enemies and their walls—but SO POWERFUL that He can even make the sun stand still.

Now Joshua was old and about to die. He called the children of Israel together one last time. “God has watched over you, and protected you, and delivered you from the Canaanites in the land, so that you could have a home here safely in the Promised Land.” Joshua said. “Because God has done all of this for you, serve Him, and Him alone. Put away your idols! As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” The people replied, “We also will serve the LORD, for He is God!” And Joshua made a covenant with the people that day that they would serve God only. And the people kept their promise...



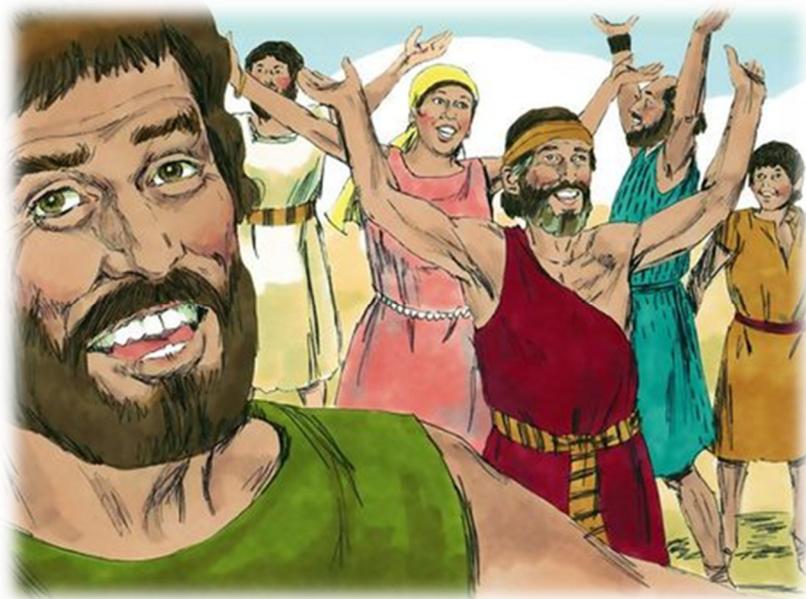
That is, they kept their promise until after Joshua died.

After Joshua died, a very dark time began for God's people that we read about in the book of Judges. You see, the children of Israel with Joshua had won many battles against the Canaanites and conquered a lot of the Promised Land. But there were still Canaanites to fight after Joshua died. Sadly, God's people did not continue to fight against the Canaanites and drive them out of the land as God had told them to.



Not only did they not drive the wicked Canaanites out of the land, they spent time with them and learned their idol worship! God was angry that His people had broken their covenant and forsaken Him to serve false gods. The children of Israel needed to learn that the idols could not help them, and the Canaanites were NOT their friends.

So God sold His people into the hand of the very Canaanites that the children of Israel had been commanded to drive out of the land. The Canaanites mistreated the children of Israel terribly until Israel finally realized their terrible sin. When the people turned from their idols and cried out to God for help, God would hear them and send a “judge” to deliver them. Sadly, each time the deliverer died the children of Israel returned to serving idols.



This is the cycle of the Judges. Over and over again, God’s people would worship the Canaanites’ gods. Then God would allow the Canaanites to torment His people. And Israel would turn back to God and seek Him, and once again God, in His mercy, would send another judge to save them. We will read about a few of these judges next.

When you disobey God, like the children of Israel, you can remember that our God is very merciful if you repent (turn around away from doing wrong) and turn back to Him. Jeremiah says that God’s compassion does not fail, and His mercy is new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23).

I Will Go With You

Judges 4

God's people were disobeying Him and acting wickedly again. Because of their disobedience, God sold them into the hands of the Canaanites. The Canaanites treated the people of Israel so harshly that they were afraid to even go out and walk in the streets!



At that time there was a mother in Israel named Deborah. She was a prophetess of God (like Miriam, Moses' sister) and she judged the people of Israel. One day, Deborah the prophetess called for Barak. She had a special message from God for him. "Barak! God has commanded you to gather an army and prepare to fight against the Canaanites and their captain Sisera. God will deliver him into your hand!"



But Barak was afraid. Sisera had 900 chariots of iron, and the children of Israel had hardly any weapons at all! “I will go,” Barak replied, “but, only if you go with me, Deborah.” “Yes,” Deborah assured him, “I will surely go with you.” So Deborah arose and went with Barak.

Barak had gathered his men. Sisera and his army and his 900 iron chariots came prepared to fight. “Up!” Deborah encouraged Barak, “Today is the day—the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand!” So Barak attacked Sisera at the River Kishon, and God fought on his side. Some of Sisera’s army were swept away by the River Kishon, and the rest fell by the sword. So all of Sisera’s army was killed... all except one—Sisera himself.



Sisera had escaped! He ran to hide in the tent of a woman named Jael. Jael was the wife of Heber, who had separated himself from the faithful in Israel. Heber had made peace with the Canaanites, and Sisera felt that he could safely hide with Heber's wife Jael. But Sisera was very wrong.



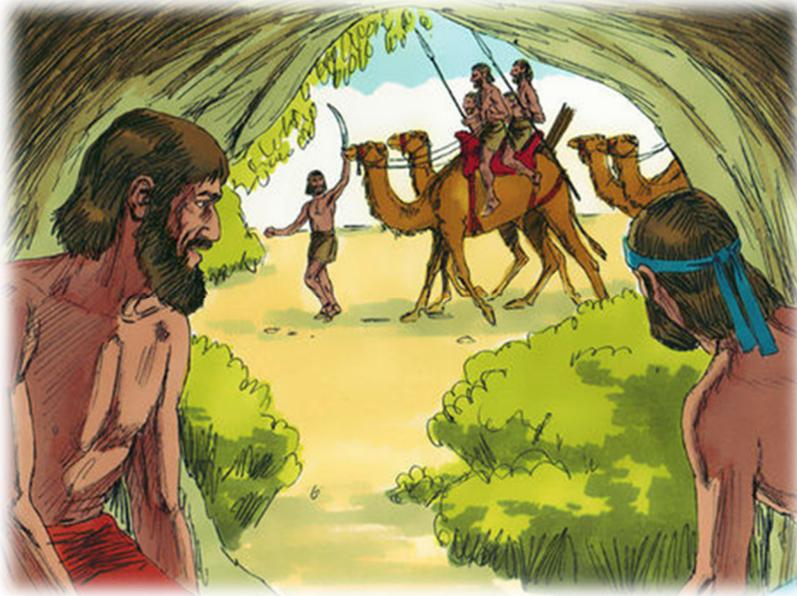
“Come in, my lord Sisera!” Jael said. “Don’t be afraid. I will hide you here.” Sisera came in and fell fast asleep. Quietly, Jael took a peg from the tent and a hammer and tiptoed to where Sisera slept... and quickly drove the tent peg through Sisera’s temple! Sisera was dead. God’s people were free.



Deborah helped Barak to do the right thing. When he was afraid to fight against the terrifying army of Sisera, Deborah went along with him to encourage him. You can be like Deborah, too. When you have a friend who finds doing the right thing difficult on their own, you can “go with” him and encourage him, just like Deborah.

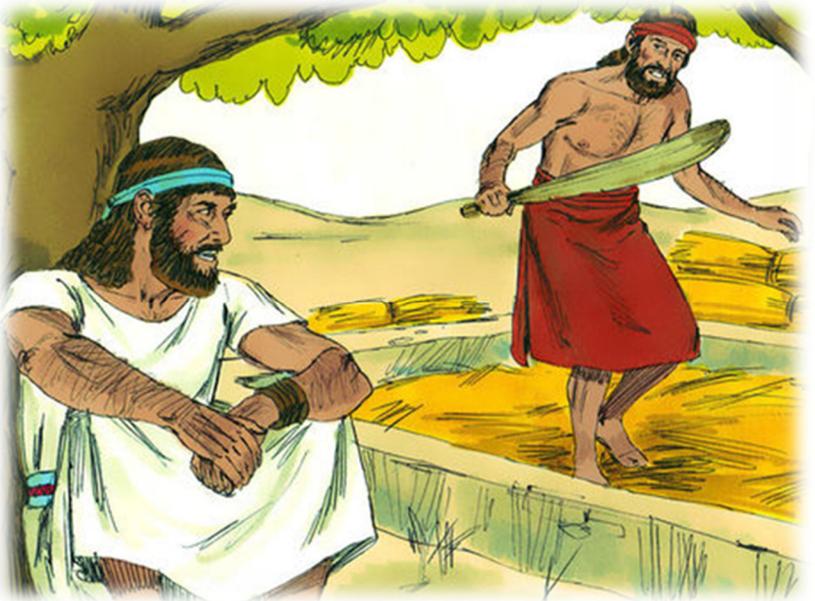
You Shall Have No Other gods

Judges 6

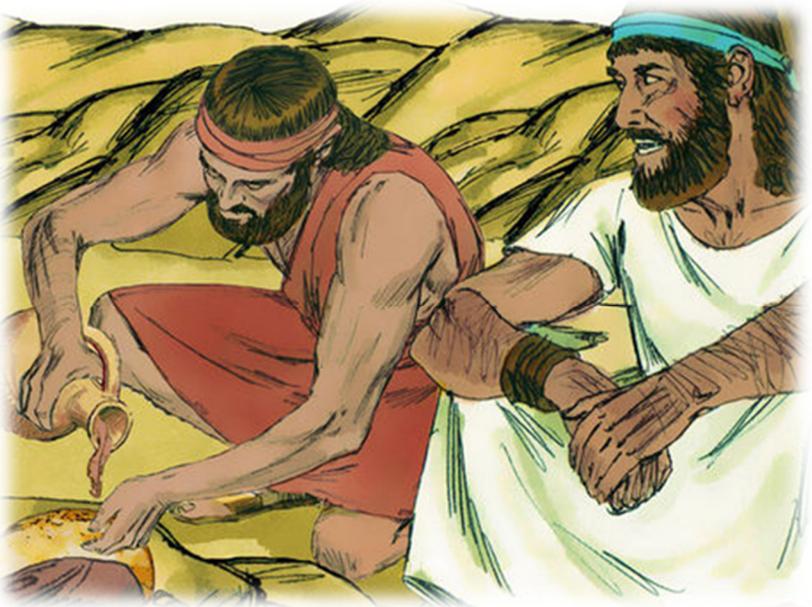


Gideon was threshing wheat. Up in the air he threw it. The wind caught the chaff and whisked it away, and the wheat settled back on the ground again. Gideon hoped he could finish and hide the wheat before the Midianites came to steal all the food again. For seven long years the Midianites had been destroying Israel's food leaving them and even their animals starving! Just like before, God allowed this because Israel had turned back to idols again. But now God's people had cried to Him for help. Once again God heard their cry and was ready to deliver them.

Gideon paused his threshing—there was a man sitting under the tree next to him. He had not noticed the man sitting there before. The man spoke: “The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!” It was an angel from God! “Oh my lord,” Gideon said, “if God is really with us, why has He delivered us into the hands of the Midianites? Where are all the miracles that our fathers told us about?” The angel turned to Gideon, “Go! Have not I sent YOU? You will save Israel from the hand of the Midianites.”



“How can I save Israel?” Gideon cried. “My family is the weakest of the tribe of Manassah, and I am the least in my father’s house.” The angel replied, “Surely, I will be with you, and you will defeat the Midianites!” But Gideon was not yet sure. “If I have found favor in your sight, please show me a sign. Don’t leave, please, until I come back with an offering and give it you.” “I will wait until you are back,” replied the angel. So Gideon went and prepared a sacrifice and presented it to the angel under the tree.



The angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in His hand, and touched the sacrifice. Fire consumed the sacrifice! And then... the angel was gone! Gideon knew then that this had truly been an angel from God.

That night, while it was dark, Gideon slipped out with ten men. Before God would fight the Midianites for Israel, Gideon must destroy the idol and the altar to the false god Baal. The Baal worship needed to stop. God wanted His people to know that He was the only true living God, and the only God they should ever worship!



With the ten men under the cover of darkness, Gideon smashed down the idol and altar of Baal. In its place he built a new altar to God, and offered a sacrifice to worship Him. Worshipping Baal had brought nothing but grief. How much better to worship the true and living God, the God who alone could save them from their enemy?

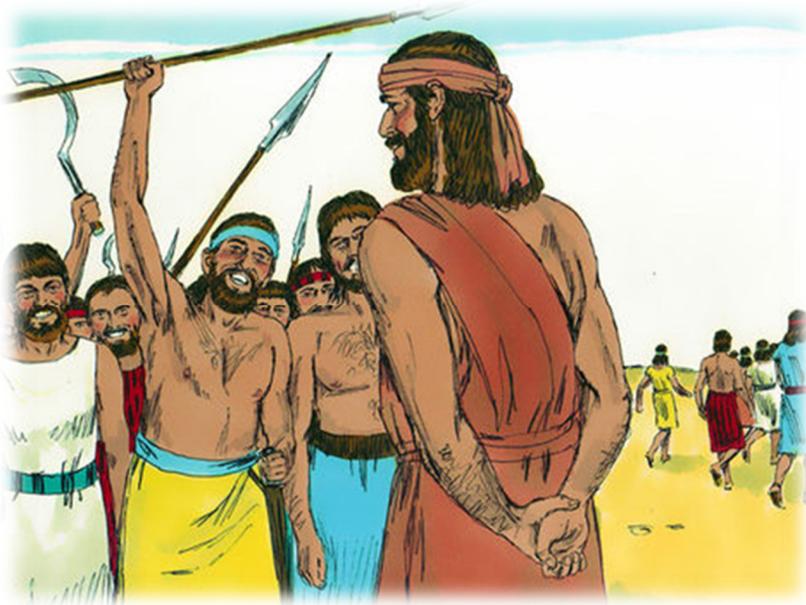


God wanted to send Gideon to save Israel from the Midianites– but there was a problem! The people still had an idol and an altar to Baal. This was the first thing God wanted Gideon to get rid of before he could do anything else. God, and God alone, is worthy of worship and serving. Today there are not idols of wood and stone anymore, but we are still surrounded by things that can take us away from the worship of God. You can be like Gideon and think about things in your life that can take you away from worshipping God, and think of how you can get rid of those things like Gideon.

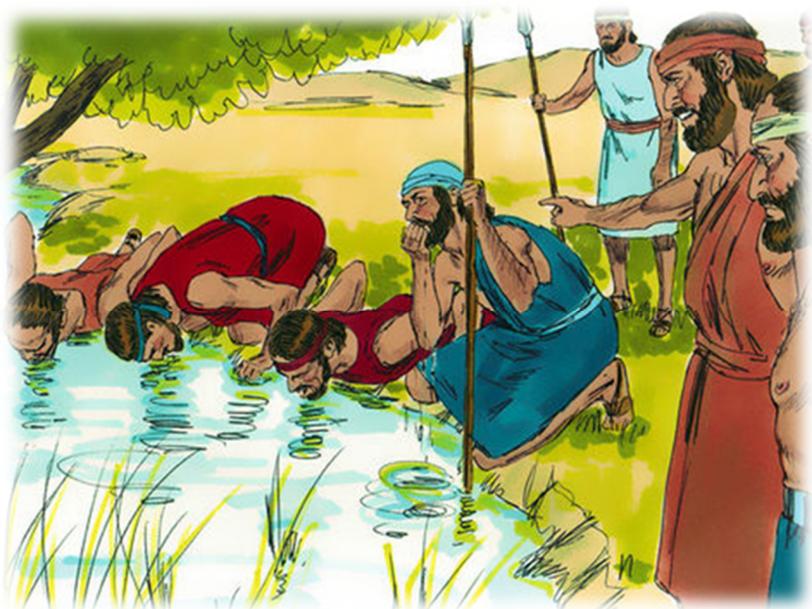
Trumpets and Torches

Judges 7

When God called Gideon, Gideon felt like the weakest and the least. But God chooses the “weak things to put to shame the things which are mighty,” because God wants us to have faith that it is HE Who is all mighty and all powerful, and we can really do nothing apart from Him.

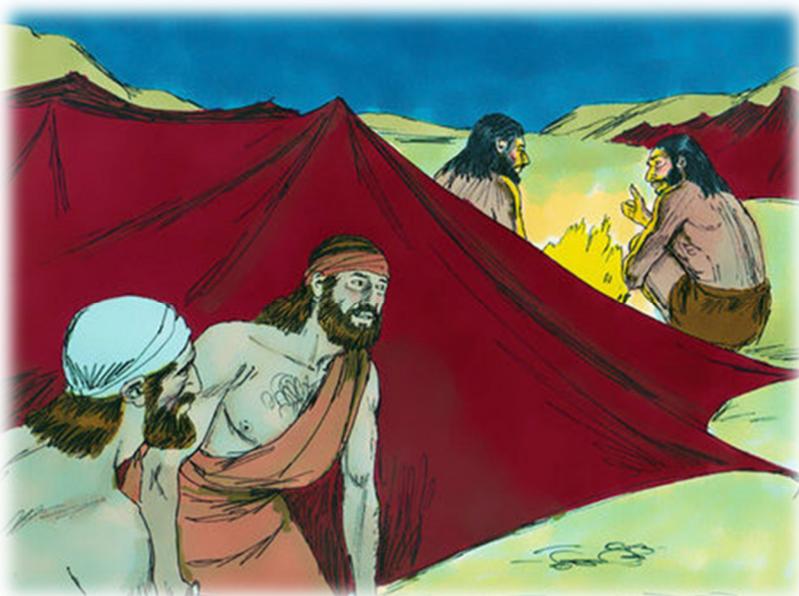


Gideon gathered together an army of Israelites to fight the Midianites to the Well of Trembling. Compared to the massive Midianite army, there were not many Israelites at all—and many of them were afraid. God spoke to Gideon, “Your army is too big. I do not want my people to think that they won this battle in their own strength. Send home any man who is fearful.” Gideon followed God’s command, and only 10,000 men remained.

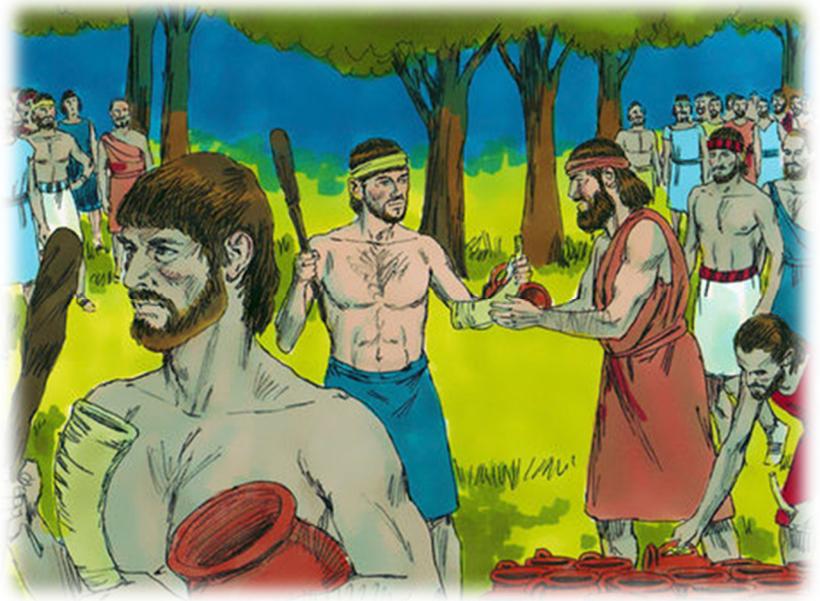


Still that was too many men for God's plan. "Bring them to the water," God told Gideon. "When the men drink, separate the ones who lap the water out of their hands, from the ones who bend down on their knees to drink." Gideon did so, and sent home the men who drank on their knees. Now Gideon had only three hundred men to go against the Midianite army that was without number! But Gideon had God on his side.

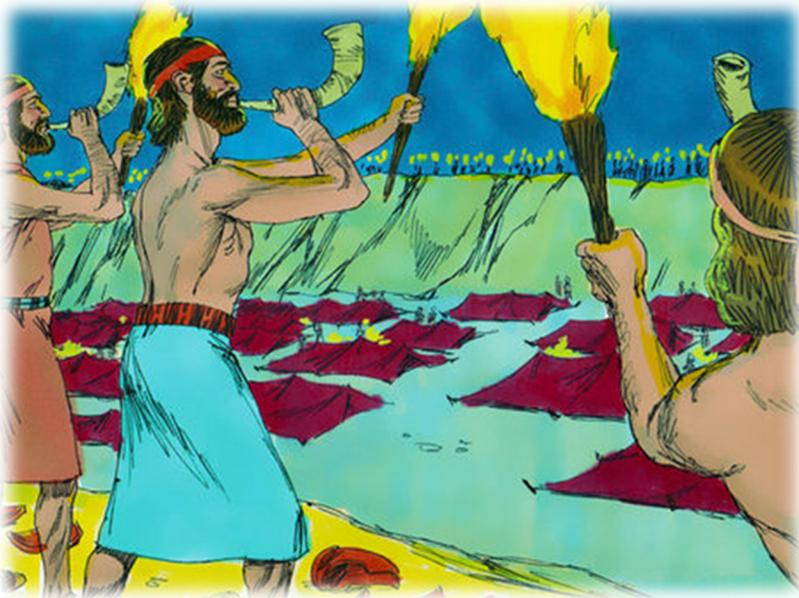
God knew that Gideon was afraid. To help strengthen Gideon's faith, God sent him and Purah, Gideon's servant, to go and spy the enemies' camp that night. As Gideon and Purah crept up to the tents of the enemy, they could hear one soldier talking to another about a dream that he had. "I dreamt that a loaf of barley bread tumbled into our camp, and fell on a tent so that the tent collapsed!" the soldier said. His friend answered, "This could only mean one thing: God has delivered this whole camp into the hand of Gideon, a man of Israel!" How surprised and encouraged Gideon and Purah must have felt to overhear this dream. He worshipped God, and returned to his small army of 300 men.



“Arise!” Gideon said to his men. “God has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand!” Full of faith and courage now, Gideon divided the three hundred men into three groups. Each man carried a trumpet in one hand, and a torch covered by an empty pitcher in the other hand. Where were their weapons? How could 300 men fight an army too big to count with no weapons? Only with God on their side.



“Follow me, and do as I do,” Gideon instructed the men. When the three groups had positioned themselves, Gideon broke the pitcher and blew with his trumpet. “The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!” He shouted. “The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!” his army echoed. The Midianite army woke up to the shouting and cried out in confusion. They began to kill one another. Gideon and his men learned that if God was for them, it didn’t matter how small or weak they were—no one could stand against them.



God wanted Gideon to have faith in HIM. Gideon didn’t win the battle because he was important, or because he was strong, or had a big army. He won the battle because he had God. We must remember that being important or strong or smart is not important to God. The important thing is to be on God’s side, and to have faith in Him.

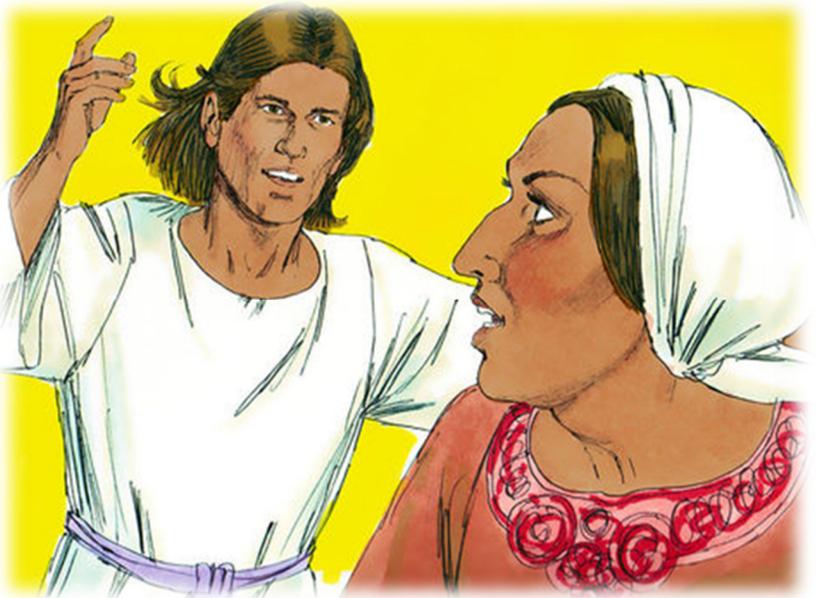
He Will be a Nazarite

Judges 13



God worked through Deborah and Barak to save His people from Sisera, and he worked through Gideon to save them again from the Midianites. But Israel again began to serve the false gods of the nations around. This time God delivered Israel into the hands of the cruel Philistines. Would God's people ever learn? When would they turn back to Him once and for all?

During this time of Philistine cruelty, there lived a man named Manoah. He and his wife were from the tribe of Dan. Most of the tribe of Dan had left the inheritance that God had given them because it was too difficult to drive out the inhabitants. But not Manoah and his wife! They continued to live in the inheritance that God had promised even after the Philistines came. Manoah and his wife were barren—they could not have any children. One day an angel appeared to Manoah's wife with exciting news.

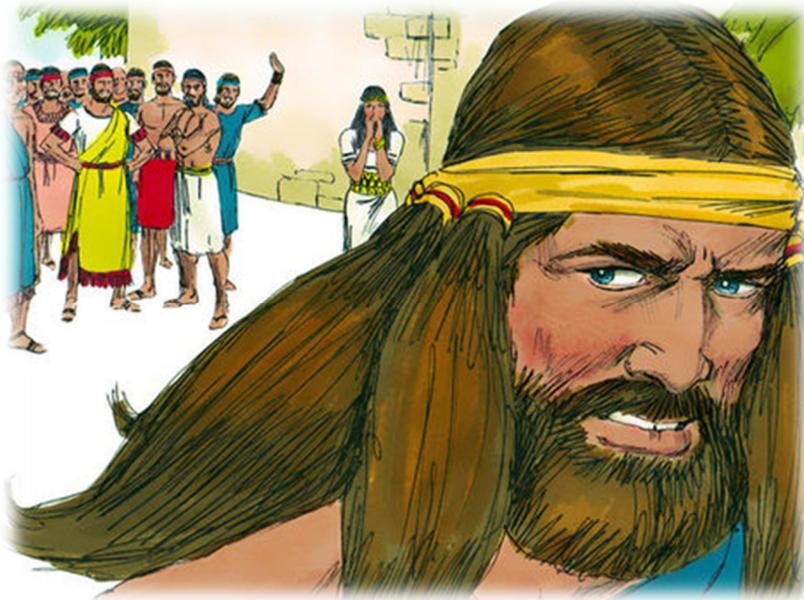


“You are going to have a son!” The angel told Manoah’s wife. “He will be a Nazirite to God, and he will begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.” A Nazirite was someone who made a vow to set himself or herself apart so that they could be holy and devoted to God in ways that were similar to the High Priest.



A Nazirite was not supposed to drink any wine or cut his hair. These were reminders to the Nazirite that his thoughts should always be clearly focused on God’s word. A Nazirite also was not allowed to touch a dead body. Death happens because of sin. By staying away from things that are dead, the Nazirite was to remember that he must also stay far away from sin. By telling Manoah’s wife that her son should be a Nazirite, the angel was instructing her that her son should be very careful to be separate from sin and focused on God.

Just as the angel had promised, Manoah's wife had a son and called his name Samson. Samson was a Nazirite, and his hair grew very long. When Samson was grown, he was incredibly strong and able to do amazing things with God's spirit power! Once when he was tied with ropes and given to the Philistines he snapped the ropes and killed one thousand Philistines! Another time the Philistines tried to surround the city where Samson stayed, and he pulled up the gate of the city and carried it to a far away hill—the very same hill that God had said to Abraham: "Your children will possess the gates of their enemies."



Sadly however, although Samson was keeping the Nazirite vow by not cutting his hair, he did not remember what the Nazirite vow taught. He did not stay focused on God, and he did not keep far away from sin. Because of this, Samson went down a path that would soon lead him into a lot of trouble.

The Nazirite was set apart from the other people as someone special to God. God also wants you to be set apart from the rest of the world so that you can be a special treasure to him. Just like the Nazirite, God wants you to stay focused on His word by reading and thinking about it. God also wants you to stay far away from sin, just like the Nazirite.

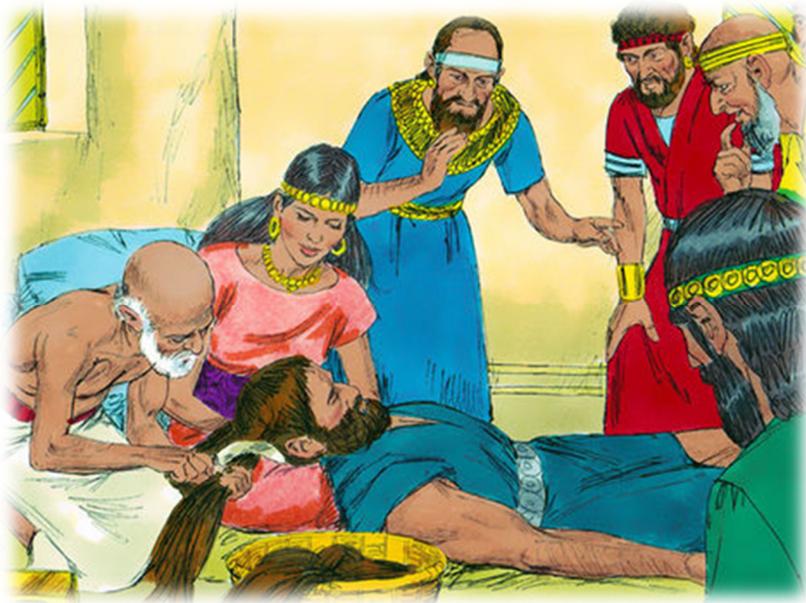
Samson is Blinded

Judges 16

Samson was called to be a Nazirite. He was supposed to be “set apart” for God, but he was not keeping separate from sin like the Nazirite vow taught. First he married a Philistine woman, then he loved a Philistine harlot. Now Samson loved a woman named Delilah. God tells us that friendship with the world is enmity (or hatred) with God. Samson was acting just like the nation of Israel by mingling with the nations around them. The consequence for Israel from mixing with the world was suffering. And the consequence for Samson would be suffering, too.

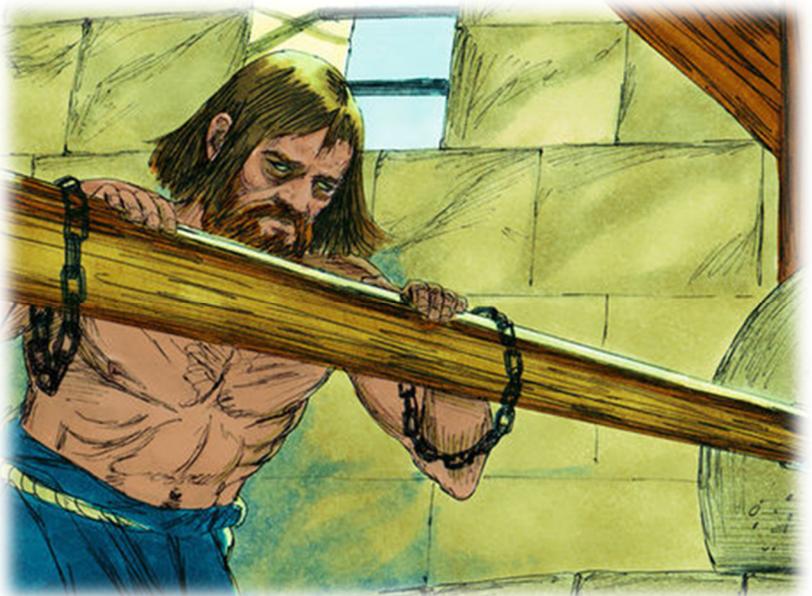


When the Philistines found out that Samson loved Delilah, they went to her and offered her money to find out the secret to Samson’s incredible strength. Delilah agreed to betray Samson, and began to pester Samson to find out where his strength came from. First Samson told her that if he was tied with seven new bowstrings, then he would be weak. Delilah found bowstrings and tied Samson, but it didn’t work. Samson broke free as if he were tied with burnt yarn!



Next Samson told her that if he was tied with new ropes that were never used, he would become weak. But that didn't work either. "You are mocking me!" Delilah said, "And telling me lies! Tell me what you can be bound with." Samson told her that if she weaved his hair into a weaver's loom, he would become weak. But again Samson broke free. "You don't love me!" Delilah cried daily. So finally Samson told her what was in his heart: "I have been a Nazirite to God. If I am shaven, my strength will leave me, and I will be as weak as any other man." Delilah knew Samson was telling her the truth this time. She lulled Samson to sleep on her lap, and while he slept, the Philistines cut his hair. "Wake up Samson, the Philistines are here!" Delilah shouted. Samson woke up to Delilah tormenting him, and he realized his strength had disappeared. Samson loved Delilah, but do you think Delilah loved Samson?

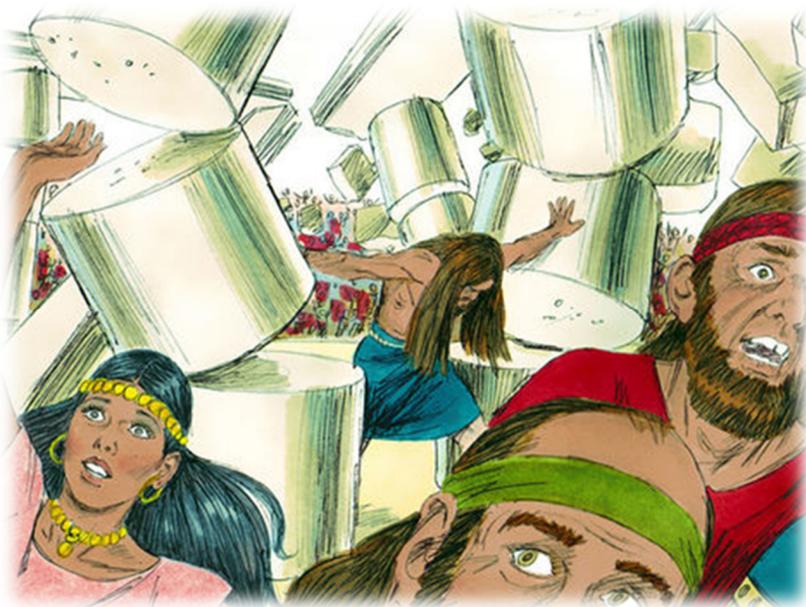
The Philistines took Samson and put out his eyes. Samson's eyes had gotten him into a lot of trouble. Instead of keeping separate from sin, he SAW the beautiful women of the Philistines and chose them instead of God over and over. But now, with his eyes blinded and stuck in a Philistine prison, Samson could focus more clearly on God. Samson would have seen how Delilah did not truly love him, and the path of sin had nothing to offer. And Samson saw how all along, it was God who loved him, and wanted him to be set apart from the world and from sin so he could special treasure for God. Slowly Samson's hair began to grow again...



The Philistines were having a celebration and offering sacrifices to their god Dagon. “Praise Dagon! He has delivered Samson into our hands!” they cheered. “Let’s call for Samson so he can entertain us.” So a young boy led blinded Samson into the temple of his captors, and placed him between the pillars of the temple. Samson now recognized that his strength could only come from God, and he prayed to God one last time. “O Lord, remember me! Strengthen me, I pray, just this once more, O God!”



With all his might, Samson pushed on the pillars—and down they came. The temple of Dagon crashed, killing three thousand Philistines! God’s deliverance from the Philistines had begun.



The world is a bad friend. Its path of sin might LOOK attractive, and it is easy to be drawn to it. But the world does not love you— it will only ever give you suffering and death. But there IS someone who loves you, who wants you to be set apart from sin so you can be His special treasure. God’s son, Jesus says, “Greater love has no man than this: to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Don’t be like Samson and let the world blind you to what is right, but instead focus on obeying Jesus’ commands so you can be a special treasure for God.