



*Bruce Butler*

This week's devotions are based on the book of Judges. We get to travel with the people of Israel while they are on the painful road of doing evil in God's sight; then we get to cheer when the Lord raises up judges to deliver his people from their self-inflicted predicaments. Along the way we will learn faith lessons to take to heart.

I live and pastor in Glendora, California, in the shadow of the city of Los Angeles and the San Gabriel mountains. I like to work on my mother's home, read books, watch English mysteries and cowboy movies, and hang out with all kinds of folks. My son lives in California, and my daughter and her husband live in Texas.

*BIBLE READING: Judges 2:8–18*

One day in my teens I drove into the countryside of northwestern Oklahoma, chasing a storm cell in the hope of observing a tornado. My car got stuck in a deep rut on a muddy dirt road, and it was several days before I got it pulled out. We all get stuck in ruts from time to time. Sometimes we blithely wander into them, and sometimes we foolhardily defy obvious warning signs. This can happen on muddy dirt roads, in neglected relationships, amid intellectual or moral apathy, or more disastrously, through sinful behavior.

In Judges 2, the story of Joshua closes with the passing of the generation who conquered the promised land. That generation was far from perfect, as Judges 1 explains, but the next generation foolishly fell into the devastating rut of forgetting God and his saving power, when they learned to serve other gods and followed the sinful ways of the culture around them. This new rut became a sinful cycle of rebellion against God, which in turn provoked a reckoning from God. But through God's mercy and covenant love, he provided judges to help Israel escape the dire consequences of their sinful ruts.

You may recognize the Judges cycle in your own life: rebellion and spiritual recklessness, followed by embracing God's grace and love in Christ to escape slavery to sin and self—to live a life that witnesses to our Savior's deep work in us. Our church family is where we find the encouragement, strength, and discipline to find our way out of sinful ruts and point one another to Jesus, helping each other develop holy habits.

*SONG: Grace Greater than Our Sin*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, make me aware of the sinful ruts in which I find myself, and give me the courage to receive your grace, rescue, and discipline. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Judges 3:7–30*

I find this truth at work in me: I grow spiritually when I experience pain. Grief, worry, loneliness, and sickness drive me to Jesus' side for relief and rescue. Most of us recognize the benefits of controlled discomfort through regular exercise or holy habits like fasting. Some of us even thrive under extreme conditions and circumstances. But few of us are able to endure chronic psychic or physical pain without relief.

Judges 2 introduces us to the Judges cycle, wherein Israel did evil in God's eyes, worshiped idols, experienced oppression, and cried out to God who then sent judges to deliver them. We are introduced to the first two judges, Othniel and Ehud, whom God raised to deliver Israel from oppression by neighboring nations. It was only after Israel experienced the painful consequences of their choice to do "evil in the eyes of the Lord" that they finally "cried out to the Lord" for deliverance. God was attentive to the cries of his people and brought forty years of peace under Othniel, followed by eighty years of peace after Ehud's left-handed deliverance.

You have undoubtedly cried out to God amid your trials and pain and have experienced his rescue and deliverance. Some learn to turn to God as a first instinct, but others cry out only after exhausting all other options. Personal pain may not lead everyone to the Lord, but without it, few would call on the name of the Lord.

Let's pray and humbly work for our churches and small groups to be places of healing from life's pain, where people just like us can cry out to the Lord Jesus and find rescue.

*SONG: Hallelujah, What a Savior!*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, draw me close to you in the midst of my pain, and help me offer comfort to others. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Judges 4:14–23*

I have mostly lived in a small world: small churches, wee towns, little cities, and I've never really been part of the hipster crowd. Not that I haven't wanted to be part of something significant, but I've found that God does large things in the midst of my small world. We live in a world of mega churches, mega cities, mega trends, and super-size everything. When all around us seems big and important, why would God want to use lowly, lightweight, little "us" to accomplish his purposes?

Judges 4 tells the history of Israel's only female judge, Deborah, who led her people after they once again wandered from God. Jabin, king of the powerful city-state of Hazor, and his general Sisera "cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years" until they finally cried out to God for rescue (v. 3). Deborah was a ruler but not a soldier, so the Lord directed Barak to be Israel's warrior to fight God's battle plan against Sisera's chariots. Asking Deborah to accompany him to the battle, Barak lost the honor of victory to a woman. Interestingly, God used the lowly outsider Jael, who killed General Sisera, which subdued mighty King Jabin and delivered Israel from cruel oppression. Judges 5 retells the story as a hymn.

You will be used of God in the midst of your small world as you trust in the Lord's power and not your own. In the midst of your insignificance, you will find Christ's strength at work to accomplish his purposes.

Together we can have significant ministry no matter the size of our churches as we serve faithfully in the power of the Holy Spirit and for the glory of Christ Jesus.

*SONG: Little Is Much When God Is in It*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, I don't need earthly significance. All I need is you. Fill me with your power so I may humbly serve you this day. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Judges 7:1–9*

One of my favorite board games is called Risk. The object is to lead your forces to world domination by defeating other players' armies. A tried and true method for winning is to tilt the odds in your own favor by increasing your strength and numbers. We are sometimes tempted to think life is like a game of Risk—that strength and numbers will achieve our desired ends. We want to be part of a team, a company, a nation, a church that has the look of a winner, where victory seems assured, and in which we can take pride.

In light of Midian's might and Israel's plight in Judges 6, we could be tempted to think Gideon would raise an army of tens of thousands. Actually, that's exactly what happened—initially. Gideon's strategy was simple: put as many warriors as possible into battle. But Gideon's mighty army of thirty-two thousand was too many for God's battle plan, so the army was reduced to three hundred soldiers. God was concerned about Israel's pride, concerned that a victory by a huge army would cause Israel to boast that its own strength had saved them from Midian's oppression (v. 2). God was Israel's protector, warrior, and deliverer, and rightfully wanted the glory for himself. God used Gideon's three hundred soldiers to gain a lopsided victory over Midian, shouting, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!"

You may have experienced seasons when God seemed to downsize your life—money, home, employment, prestige—so you can see clearly that it is the Lord who saves you by his might and power, discovering with Paul that Christ's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

*SONG: The Sword of the Lord and of Gideon*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, I confess I find comfort in strength and looking like a winner. Help me see it's you who saves me. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Judges 11:29–40*

I like to think of myself as having honest faith in God, but there have been times when I've pushed sensible boundaries, such as rashly praying for my favorite sports team to prevail, or asking God to bless foolhardy decisions. It's easy to turn God into an idol, a genie in a bottle, in an attempt to get what we want.

The Israelites did evil in God's eyes by abandoning him to worship other gods, resulting this time in oppression by the Ammonites. Jephthah, a mighty warrior yet a social outcast, was brought in by the elders of Gilead to deliver them. When his judicious negotiations with the Ammonites failed, "The Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah," a sure sign of good things to come. Inexplicably, Jephthah's reasonableness turns rash as he offers a foolish vow to God to sacrifice "whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me." Not only was this vow foolish, it was deeply offensive to God, who strictly forbade his people from offering human sacrifices. Jephthah appeared to treat Israel's God like the Canaanites treated their idols, to get what he wanted. Sadly and sinfully, Jephthah kept his vow, costing his only daughter her life.

You've probably experienced how easy it is to get caught up in the pull of the culture around us. If we don't stay close to the cross of Christ, we'll find the world's ways creeping in. We are called by Christ to be a peculiar, cross-bearing people in the world. The church is the people of God, living together in God's ways, no matter what direction our culture takes.

*SONG: The Wonderful Cross*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, find me faithful to live for you in today's world, where it sometimes seems legitimate to look to my own needs and wants above your purposes and ways. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Judges 13:8–20*

I was blessed to be raised by a Christian mother who taught me to give to God's work. Even though as a child I couldn't quite understand why this act of Christian faithfulness was important, I knew it was important to obey. This is often the essence of Christian discipleship: to obey as we seek understanding—and sometimes in spite of not understanding.

God had a plan to deliver his people from forty years of Philistine oppression, and used childless Manoah and his wife to bear Samson into the world and raise him as a Nazirite (see Numbers 6). Instructions were given to the couple by the angel of God, who appeared as a human-like figure. Manoah prayed for assurance about the promise and task given to his wife. Seeking to exercise faith and faithfulness in their task, Manoah asked for clarification about when God's word would come true and confirmation about the Nazirite rule of life for their son. The angel of the Lord reiterated instructions given earlier to Manoah's wife. The Lord himself confirmed his word, but not by giving his name, as Manoah requested, but by consuming the couple's offering while "the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame." Samson was blessed to have faithful parents.

You are called to keep faith with the living God, exercising trust in his word, even if you don't fully understand it. God is pleased with your pursuit of his assurance, and more importantly your faithfulness to the tasks and lifestyles he asks of you as a disciple. Your faithful obedience to God's direction will bless someone else's future.

*SONG: I Would Be True*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, I confess I often don't understand all I want about your will, but I ask for your help to keep faith with you even as I seek understanding. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Judges 16:18–31*

Long ago, while playing an intense game of mini-basketball in our bedroom, I blocked my brother into a nearby wall, plunging him through the drywall material. We decided to move a poster and hide the gaping hole. Thinking we got away with something, our pride swelled. Eventually, though, our mother discovered the destruction.

For all Samson’s advantages, he was not a model judge. The story of Samson and Delilah comes at the end of Samson’s sinful rebellion against the Nazirite lifestyle. By the time Samson told Delilah the real secret of his strength—his Nazirite, uncut hair—he felt utterly confident in his strength. Though convinced by his pride that he was powerfully in control, today’s text tells us, “He did not know that the Lord had left him” (v. 20). The Philistines gouged out Samson’s eyes—but he had already been blind to spiritual reality for a long time. Interestingly, Samson is listed with others from Judges in the “cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 11:32). Why? Reading carefully, consider Samson’s regrown hair, his prayer, honorable burial by his family, and twenty years of leadership. God said Samson would be a Nazirite until “the day of his death” (Judges 13:7). God’s mercy and grace met Samson, though he had descended into sin and self-destruction.

Perhaps you’ve been tempted to think God isn’t troubled by your sin or that you can hide things from God or that you control your life. Don’t let pride and presumption blind you to God’s call to lay aside sin and selfishness and run toward Christ.

*SONG: Amazing Grace*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, my deepest desire is to know you, to be known by you, and to know your mercy and grace. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler