

RAMAH MONTHLY



*a monthly devotional
for Ramah Baptist Church*

March Part 2 — April 2025
Judges — 1 Samuel

INTRODUCTION

Saints,

Press on in your study of God's Word. You'll never regret one moment spent knowing Christ through the Scriptures. These readings cover the dark days of Judges, the faithful remnant in the book of Ruth, and the story of Saul, the king like the nations. We trust there is much encouragement as well as conviction along the way.

Several of the weekend readings are Easter related. Be on the lookout for an additional Holy Week devotional Pastor Laramie has written to help focus your attention on the cross of Christ.

The Scripture text for Sunday's sermon is also included each weekend so that you can read and pray over the text in advance. You'll be amazed at how much more you get from the Lord's Day service when you prepare your heart in advance.

At the end of the booklet is this month's hymn we will be learning together including an introduction from Pastor Laramie and a recording link to listen to the hymn. Again, you'll be amazed at how much more you'll grow in singing God's praise with just a short amount of preparation.

We pray this resource better equips you in knowing, loving, and serving our great God.



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FOR GOD FOR THE CHURCH FOR THE WORLD

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Monday, March 24

Read: Judges 1–3

If the book of Joshua provided a picture of mostly success, the book of Judges provides a picture of Israel's overwhelming failures. The nation's downward spiral of disobedience grows more shocking with each chapter. As we begin reading through the book of Judges, it is helpful for us to hear how it ends:

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.
Judges 21:25 (LSB)

There is no godly leadership in the land. The faithful generations did not pass on the knowledge and worship of God to the next generation (2:10) and this results in national catastrophe. That loud clanging gong at the end of the book is already beginning to ring at the beginning of the book. Chapters 1 and 2 serve as prelude to the actual account of the judges beginning in 3:7. Joshua has died but no new leader is announced. Things seem to be going well with the tribe of Judah, but a sour note rings in 1:19: "they could not dispossess the inhabitants of the valley." Conquest is incomplete. That sour note is sadly repeated throughout the rest of chapter one as we're told of tribe after tribe who did not dispossess the inhabitants of the land. The angel of Yahweh makes clear in 2:1-5 that because of Israel's disobedience in obeying God's instructions in the land, they will not be able to drive out all of their enemies. Disobedience brings consequences.

The cycle in 2:11–2:23 will play out time and again in Judges. The people of God will not worship God, but instead worship false gods. God will allow their enemies to defeat them because of their sin. The people will cry out to God and he will answer, because he is faithful (unlike fickle sinners). God will graciously raise up a judge to deliver his people from their enemies, but victory will not last long. They will quickly fall into idolatry again, with each successive generation acting "more corruptly than their fathers" (2:19). God is testing his people, to see if they will obey (3:4).

The bulk of the book of Judges from 3:17–16:31 tells the stories of twelve judges. Some judges receive greater attention than others, and the judges themselves are not always righteous or even obedient to the will of God. While the Spirit of Yahweh is upon Othniel for special service (3:10), we'll see a downward trajectory even with the judges themselves. May the time spent in the dark book of Judges cause us to reject the temptation towards faithless sin and cling tightly to our faithful Savior.

The cycle of sin continues. “Then the sons of Israel again did what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh” (4:1). The people are defeated. They cry out to God for help. This is the part where we expect to see the male judge arrive; but we’re introduced to a woman instead. Deborah the prophetess is leading Israel at the time, sort of. She is dispensing wisdom and justice in some sense, but she doesn’t actually lead the army. She challenges a man named Barak to lead the army (4:6–7) not because she thinks it’s a good idea, but because Yahweh has commanded him to lead. That should be all the encouragement or motivation that Barak needs, but he insists Deborah go with him. It has become necessary for her to lead in Israel because men like Barak have failed to lead. Deborah is not an example of female empowerment but of failed male leadership. Deborah’s strength is that she continues to remind Barak of what Yahweh has said. It is God who has commanded Barak to lead the men into battle, and it is God who will be with him during the battle.

After God parted the Red Sea and defeated the enemies of Israel, Miriam led the people of God in song. God has once again defeated his enemies, and the proper response again is song. Chapter 4 reads like a textbook account of a battle whereas Chapter 5 reads like an eyewitness account of the battle. Both perspectives remind us of the idea that God is the true hero of the battle. Barak did not want to enter the battle but he did with Deborah’s encouragement and prodding. In the gracious providence of God, it is Barak who is mentioned in Hebrews 11 along with other examples of faith. What a reminder that God isn’t looking for perfect faith but obedient faith. But the text is clear that Barak did not win the battle. It is Yahweh who routed Sisera in battle (4:15). It is God who subdued the king of Canaan (4:24).

What about the nail-driving Jael? How should we think of her? Deborah makes clear in her hymn that Jael is blessed for her bravery in crushing the head of Sisera. Ever since Genesis 3 we’ve been looking for the seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent. We don’t see the serpent-crusher yet in Judges. But the faithfulness of Jael in crushing the seed of the serpent surely causes us to long for the true Serpent-Crusher who will one day come. Because Christ has come and subdued the enemy, we can be faithful rather than fearful in serving him.

Wednesday, March 26

Read: Judges 6

Things aren't going as planned. The people of God are not flourishing but floundering. They are living in caves and hideouts, and they are not enjoying the fruit of the land. God promised Abraham that his offspring would be so many that they would not be able to be counted, but it is the offspring of Midian that are so many that they cannot be counted. They are like the locusts of Egypt spread throughout the land and oppressing the people of God. So they cry out to God, as usual, and he reminds them of his power and deliverance, as usual. But this time God's words ring out in judgment at the end of verse 10, "You have not obeyed my voice." Will God deliver Israel again or has God's mercy run out?

We are now introduced to this man Gideon, whom we must assume will be the next deliverer of Israel. But where do we meet him? Hiding down in a winepress attempting to thresh wheat. To thresh wheat you need to be on a high place where the wind will blow freely, but this also exposes you for all to see. Gideon must be greatly afraid to work in such a counterproductive manner. Some mighty man of valor he is. Like Moses before him, Gideon responds to God's call on his life with excuses. Surely there must be someone stronger than Gideon to lead the people of God. Isn't that just like God to choose the weak things of the world to shame the wise? The Lord uses Gideon to show the complete weakness and inability of the false god Baal, but God also shows us in the text how weak and wavering Gideon himself can be.

How often do we build our theology from our experiences? Our feelings and emotions typically reign supreme over the truth of what we know from the Bible. We see this in the life of Gideon. He is told plainly by the angel of the Lord that God is with him, and yet because of his circumstances, Gideon doubts the truth of God's word. He builds his theology from his experience. He obeys God in tearing down the town's idolatrous altar, but he tears it down at night for fear of his own family and the townsmen. Gideon is a mixture of fear and faith. We see this clearly in his infamous fleece. God has already told Gideon what to do; no fleece or any other sort of test is needed. God is patient with Gideon, but we should not emulate Gideon and his feeble-faith fleece. We should take God at his word and obey in faith.

God is the hero of the Bible. Far too often when we read the Bible, we're looking for the human hero or villain in each little story and we miss the big point. It's at this point in Judges that we're tempted to look at Gideon as the hero. We've already seen his feeble faith in chapter 7, but now he leads Israel to a mighty victory in chapter 8. Isn't he the hero? Or is he simply the human instrument of our all-powerful God?

God brings victory in the way that only he can. He reduces Gideon's army in a way that has no human explanation. The lapping water test and the final number of 300 soldiers are not military insights we should be applying today; they are simply the methods of our sovereign God. In a battle that seems as strange as the battle at Jericho, God brings the victory for Gideon in chapter 7. Gideon continues fighting in another battle in chapter 8, but this time God does not seem to be involved. He's not mentioned in the text, and Gideon is not described in heroic or godly ways. Gideon is now chasing the enemy whereas God had previously delivered the enemy into his hands. He seems to be petty and is feuding on a personal level. Worse still, Gideon leads the nation into false worship. He gathers the gold of the people and crafts an idol! This mighty man of valor who started out like a new Moses now sounds a lot like Aaron with the golden calf. How the mighty have fallen. This is yet another reminder that God's goodness and faithfulness to his people is not due to human goodness but all due to God's grace.

The author of Hebrews includes Gideon in the hall of faith in Hebrews 11. Gideon is not the hero of the story, but neither should we disregard him altogether. God used Gideon to bring rest to the land for forty years, and he is the last judge of whom that will be said. Even though the people tried to make Gideon the leader of a family dynasty, he told them that Yahweh is their ruler (8:23). While Gideon is sinful (see the multiple wives and concubine), God used him to do good to and for Israel. The final assessment of Gideon's life in 8:33–36 indicates that Israel was kept from greater sin and idolatry because of the leadership of Gideon. What a complicated legacy. May we be faithful like Gideon was in his best moments, and we may avoid the stumbles he made in his worst. Above all, may we cling to the One who is able to keep us from stumbling (Jude 24).

Friday, March 28

Read: Judges 9

My father is king. That's what Abimelech means. His father Gideon had sworn he would not be king and he would not begin a family dynasty in Israel, but he named his son "my father is king." While Gideon had some glory days of faithfulness in service to Israel mixed with some dark days of sin, his son Abimelech has no such glory and far deeper darkness.

How did Abimelech become king? By killing his brothers, all seventy of them. He eliminated all potential challenges to the throne. Wait, he missed one! Gideon's youngest son Jotham hides and survives his brother's murderous rampage. Jotham ascends Mount Gerizim and tells a parable to the leaders of Shechem, comparing the new "king of the forest" to the lowly bramble bush. Jotham ultimately pronounces curses on them because they have not acted in good faith in calling brother Abimelech to be king. When Israel entered the promised land, they joyfully pronounced the blessings of the covenant of God from Mount Gerizim just as Moses commanded. Now the blessed mountain has become the cursed mountain because of the lack of truth and integrity from the people of Shechem. What a prologue to Abimelech's reign.

We're told that "my father is king" ruled for three years. It is interesting to note that the word used in 9:22 is not the same word Gideon used when he declared God as ruler in 8:22–23. Abimelech may be governing but he is not king. The people made him king, but he is a distant second to God as true king. In God's providence, the same people who made Abimelech king turned on him and now oppose him as king. We're given details of the back and forth battles between the king and the people of Shechem, and Jotham's parable proves true. Because Abimelech was certainly the wrong choice as ruler, "the bramble" shoots out fire and destroys the stronghold in 9:49, 52. Jotham also predicted that Abimelech would be destroyed, and he is destroyed in a most unusual way. His fear of being known as the man who was killed by a woman is exactly how we remember Abimelech all of these thousands of years later. What a conclusion to Abimelech's "reign."

This dark story of Abimelech leaves the reader to respond in the same way the entire book of Judges leaves us to respond: looking for someone better! This would be king is no king at all. He certainly was not a godly leader. How can we read of Abimelech and not pause to thank God for the true king who has come? O worship the King!

Weekend Devotion: Learning from the Judges

Certain periods of history stand out to me as particularly instructive for the course of all of history. That is, sometimes we can zero in on one period of time in the past, observe how the entire span of human history recapitulates that particular period, and then learn from that period what we should do today. One of these instructive periods is the period of the judges of Israel. This period, narrated for us in the books of Judges and Ruth and the opening chapters of 1 Samuel, spans a period of roughly 350. If you want a sense of how wide an expanse of time this represents, think back to the middle of the seventeenth century in America. Think of all the history that has transpired in America from a period of 125 years before the Revolutionary War up to the present day. That's the same time span that the period of the judges covers.

For this period of about three and a half centuries, there was no king in Israel, no single leader of the nation. Israel was living in the land of Canaan as a tribal federation, led by a succession of individuals whom God raised up in times of crisis and empowered to perform particular tasks. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, Samson exercised great physical strength against the Philistines. Deborah and Barak were anointed to defeat the evil King Jabin. And so on.

Now, the reason I believe the period of the judges is instructive for the flow of all history is the pattern we see during those 350 years. Repeatedly during this era, the book of Judges tells us, the Israelites would find themselves in a cycle that began this way: “The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” And each time we read that phrase in the book of Judges, we see that God would raise up enemies of Israel—the Midianites, the Philistines, the Moabites, and others—as tools of chastisement against His people. Those pagan nations would oppress the Israelites, who would then cry out for relief and repent of their sins. Then, God would raise up one of the judges who, under the power of the Holy Spirit, would defeat the enemies of Israel and bring deliverance. One scholar calls this a cycle of relapse, retribution, repentance, and rescue. Following each relapse into gross sin recorded in the book of Judges is the retributive justice of God whereby He pours out His judgment and wrath against His own people. Under the weight of that retributive justice of God, the people are then brought to repentance, and they bewail their situation and await their rescue by God, who redeems them.

The grim history of Israel's sin in the period of the judges goes against what the people pledged. When Joshua brought the people together to renew their covenant with the Lord just before his death, the Israelites promised two things, one positive and one negative. Positively, they promised to obey God. Negatively, they promised not to forsake Him for idols.

The era of the judges shows us that the Lord will not fail to rescue and preserve His church when His church repents and cries out to Him.

And this is significant in light of the promise God made again and again to the patriarchs. When He committed Himself to Jacob, for example, He said, "I will not leave you" (Gen. 28:15). This covenant pledge of God to those who are in a relationship with Him is a key theme of Scripture. The book of Judges attests to that, that even though God chastened His people, He was chastening His children whom He loved. And though they felt forsaken for a season, God did not utterly abandon them.

However, the record is that the people forsook Him. That's the big difference between the God of Israel—the God of the covenant—and His people. God does not forsake us, but we are prone to forsake Him. What provoked the forsaking of God during the period of the judges was the Israelites' great desire to be like their neighbors. God had called them to nonconformity. God had called them to be a holy nation. God had called them to be godly and to flee from idolatry, but that was unpopular in those days. It's often been unpopular in church history. And without a doubt, it's unpopular today as well.

The people of God relived the cycle of relapse, retribution, repentance, and rescue over and over again throughout biblical history. And, dare I say, the church has seen a similar cycle over the past two thousand years as well. But we have a tendency to think such things cannot happen in the life of the church today. We refuse to take note of this recurring pattern of the actions of God, believing that God will not bring calamity upon a people who forsake Him. But the God of Israel is a God who promises both blessing and curse, both prosperity and calamity. We should not be surprised to see trouble for the church when it has been worldly, when it has been unfaithful to the Lord.

Sometimes, of course, the church suffers because of its faithfulness, because the forces of darkness respond with hostility against the advance of gospel transformation. At other times, however, the church suffers because of widespread, persistent unfaithfulness. That happened during the era of the judges, and it can happen today as well.

Nevertheless, we read in the book of Judges that when the Israelites repented, God delivered them. No matter how badly God's covenant people fail, our Lord is quick to rescue His church when she repents. His people forsake Him, but He never forsakes them. Judgment begins at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17), but it is a judgment that is disciplinary, not destructive. It's designed to move us to repentance and faithfulness. And the era of the judges shows us that the Lord will not fail to rescue and preserve His church when His church repents and cries out to Him.¹

1 This article was first published at www.ligonier.org



R.C.
Sproul

R.C. Sproul (1937–2017) was founder of Ligonier Ministries, first minister of preaching and teaching at Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., first president of Reformation Bible College, and executive editor of Tabletalk magazine. His radio program, Renewing Your Mind, is still broadcast daily on hundreds of radio stations around the world and can also be heard online. He was recognized throughout the world for his articulate defense of the inerrancy of Scripture and the need for God's people to stand with conviction upon His Word.

This Sunday's Sermon text:
Matthew 16:21–28

Monday, March 31

Read: Judges 10–12

God's lavish grace extends to even the worst of sinners, and for that we are thankful. Today's reading might cause us to question God's mercy. We find the name of Jephthah listed among the faithful in Hebrews 11, but after reading Joshua 10–12 we might wonder why.

Chapter 10 sets the stage for the Jephthah story. The cycle continues, "the sons of Israel again did what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh" (10:6) They are worshipping false gods—seven nations are listed showing the completeness of their idolatry. Yahweh's anger burns against Israel. God punishes Israel: he "sold them into the hands of the Philistines" (10:7). The people cry out in repentance, and the chapter ends with the nation wondering who will deliver them. Enter Jephthah. We're told Jephthah is an illegitimate child (Why is this happening in Israel? This sounds like the sins of the nations!), and his half-brothers reject him. When trouble arises the people seek Jephthah out to be their head, but there is no mention of God raising up Jephthah. Jephthah seems at first to be diplomat but eventually the battle comes.

The Spirit of the Lord is on Jephthah (11:29), but this does not mean everything Jephthah does is righteous. God anoints Jephthah for the specific task of leading Israel in this season. Yahweh gives the enemy into his hand (11:32) and victory is won, but that is not the focus of the narrative. The focus is on Jephthah's vow to sacrifice if the Lord will give him victory in battle. At best this reflects Jephthah's misunderstanding of offering your best to God. At worst Jephthah is mixing pagan theology with the worship of God. Jephthah thinks he must keep the foolish vow he made, but the law in Leviticus actually provided a way to honor God and not keep a foolish or rash vow. Jephthah keeps a vow he never should have made, and no one stops him. In those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

The need for a king is amplified when a fight breaks out between the tribes. Jephthah's diplomacy is now gone, and he creates a test to sniff out any enemy outsiders from their midst. The people of God are turning on each other and destroying one another. The Bible does not say that Jephthah's rule brought rest to the land. Things are going from bad to worse in Israel. Israel did not deserve deliverance, and Jephthah sure doesn't seem to deserve to be listed among the faithful. And yet our King Jesus extends mercy to someone like Jephthah?! And you? And me? God is faithful, even when we are not.

Does God use sinful people for his sovereign purposes? To that question the story of Samson shouts a resounding, “Yes!” We’ve seen the cycle so many times in the book of Judges, and yet something is different this time. Yet again the people of Israel do what is evil in the eyes of Yahweh (because they’re doing what is right in their own eyes). Yet again they are handed over to an enemy nation; this time it’s the Philistines. But this time we’re not told that the people cried out in repentance to God. We’re not told that God will send a deliverer. The scene just shifts its focus to the birth of Samson.

As he’s done before God brings about a miraculous birth, and this child is to be set apart from birth. He’s going to be set apart for life as a Nazarite in service to God. Numbers 6 teaches us that the Nazarite vow is normally voluntary and temporary, and the special spiritual service is marked by avoiding all alcohol, all contact with the dead, and any cutting of the hair. This will be important to remember as we evaluate Samson; even here we see that Samson’s vow will be lifelong and is placed upon him in the womb. Samson’s mother is told before his birth that he will be a deliverer of Israel. This supernatural birth announcement brought by the angel of Yahweh sets up Samson for a marvelous beginning in ministry. Perhaps he will fare better than so many judges before him.

The story fasts forward to Samson being old enough to take a wife, and who does he choose? A Philistine woman! No Israelite should marry a Philistine; certainly not a Nazarite groom. Samson’s parents know that it’s not right for him to marry this Philistine woman, but what is Samson’s motivation in verse 3? “Take her for me, for she is right in my eyes.” Yet God is working sovereignly behind the scenes, even while Samson is breaking his Nazarite vows. He’s touching a dead animal carcass. He’s throwing a wedding feast, which likely involves alcohol. Samson’s spiritual stock is dropping rapidly.

The story of Samson has only begun. We often hold up Samson as a hero to children, probably because the story is fascinating and filled with his feats of strength. But to view Samson as a hero, we have to ignore a lot of the text. His promising start is already marked by many red flags, yet here again we have someone listed in the Hebrews 11 Hall of Faith. Perhaps our focus should be on the gracious God who continues to deliver his people in spite of their repeated sins.

Wednesday, April 2

Read: Psalm 17

Psalm 17 is simply identified as a prayer of David. We're not given any insight into David's life circumstances when he wrote this prayer. It is a prayer for vindication—a prayer for God to judge rightly when the whole world gets it wrong. Like David, we can trust the Lord and approach him confidently in prayer.

Where do you turn when the world turns against you? David cries out to God in verse 1. He prays “Hear me, O Yahweh. Give heed to my cry. Give ear to my prayer.” Like a defendant before a judge, David is pleading his case. David does not claim to be perfect, but he is standing before the judge with integrity. He has withstood the Lord's investigation. “You have tested, you have visited, you have tried me” (17:3). David has avoided the path of the violent and clung to the path of God (17:4–5). He is confident that God will not only hear him, but God will act. God will answer his prayers and show his lovingkindness.

David's prayer of confidence shifts to a prayer for protection in verses 8–12. Like a mother bird protects her babies, David wants to be hidden in the shadow of God's wings. Like we treasure and protect the organ that gives us sight—our eyes—David wants to be kept as the “apple” of God's eye. David knows that there is safety with the Lord, and that's where he wants to be (17:8). His wicked, deadly enemies are after him. David describes his enemies in verses 10–12. They are hard-hearted and arrogant. They have no pity. They are circling their prey like a lion eager to tear into its next meal.

How do we think about the need for protection from enemies? How do we deal with the enemies of life? David's prayer for protection in verses 8–12 is now seen through the lens of his confidence in the Lord as righteous judge as he prayed in verses 1–7. Those two streams form the river of the remainder of his prayer in verses 13–15. His focus does not remain on his circumstances, but he focuses on his covenant keeping God. David began his prayer in verse 1 by addressing God as Yahweh, the personal covenantal name of God. As David begins the conclusion of his prayer, he again speaks to God as Yahweh. His prayer is possible because he is in a covenantal relationship with the true Judge of the universe. Likewise, our prayers are not only possible but heard and answered according to God's perfect will because we are in relationship with God through Jesus Christ. David ends his prayer with the same confidence we have today through Christ.

When we last left Samson, his bride had been given away to his best friend on his wedding day. Can you imagine?! Remarkably Samson exercises patience and waits until an appropriate time to try and return to his new wife. Samson's father-in-law is certainly sneaky and his excuse seems rather thin, but doesn't he remind us of someone else? Jacob the deceiver had been also deceived on his wedding day and was offered his bride's sister as a consolation prize. Samson is not here a deceiver but a destroyer. Using the fiery weapon of foxes or jackals, he causes great financial loss to the Philistines. Had Samson been tricked and mistreated by his father-in-law? Of course. Was Samson justified in responding the way he did? Of course not. And yet God is still working to defeat the enemy Philistines, even through a flawed leader like Samson. When the enemy realizes who has committed this act of economic terrorism, they bring the very punishment that Samson's wife had wanted to avoid when she tricked him into revealing the answer to the riddle: she and her father are burned alive. Samson's revenge is swift and severe.

The Philistines invade Judah in response to Samson's fury. You would think his national kinsmen would be grateful for Samson's defeat of some of the Philistines, but the opposite is true. The men of Judah confront Samson: "Do you not know that these people rule over us?" (15:11). It seems that Judah has become comfortable with their dominion by the Philistines. Isn't that just like us? We grow comfortable with our sins and forget the freedom available to us through Christ. God has sent a deliverer to Israel, but it seems like they're not interested. Not only do the men of Judah not want Samson's help, they want to hand him over to the Philistines. We're even given details about the rope to show how secure Samson is supposed to be. Yet no ropes can bind him because God is not through with him. The Spirit of Yahweh comes upon Samson to empower him for this act of judgment upon the enemies of God, the Philistines. Those fresh ropes were nothing against the strength of God in Samson. The Philistines are no match against the jawbone of the donkey in Samson's hands. Samson as God's executioner may have a strange weapon, but his strength is sure as the Spirit of God upon him.

God miraculously provides for unworthy Samson as he is used for God's glory. He can certainly use you and me, as well. Verse 20 might lead you to think the Samson story is over, but it is only the end of Act I.

Friday, April 4

Read: Judges 16

Samson's story comes to a dramatic conclusion in Judges 16. His sins become more vivid as he encounters multiple sinful women, but his strength seems to be on greater display. Samson's lover Delilah makes a Judas-like deal with the Philistines, and she seeks ways to betray him. As a reader, we want to scream at Samson, "Why are you putting up with this? She's obviously trying to trap you!" Each time Delilah springs her snare, Samson breaks free from the trap of the Philistines. Until the day that Delilah wears Samson down. She annoys his soul to death, and she springs the final trap. Whatever Samson thought when he told Delilah all that was in his heart, it seems certain that he did not know that Yahweh would leave him. That's exactly what happened. Samson's sins have found him out, and his sins ensnare him, enslave him, and grind him. Samson does get one final victory over the Philistines, but his motivation seems to be personal vindication, not the vindication of Yahweh. Yet God continues to use sinful people for his sovereign purposes.

The rest of the book of Judges is marked by further illustrations of the resounding theme: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." The rotten seeds planted by so many of the judges bear deadly fruit in these illustrations. The enemies have been outside of Israel in chapters 2–16, but the enemies in the rest of the book are within. It is their idolatry and their false worship that is the nation's greatest downfall. The book leaves the reader desperately longing for the King who is to come.

Perhaps it is helpful at this conclusion of reading most of the book of Judges to ponder Hebrews 11 for a moment. We have already made note that Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah are all included in the long list of the faithful in Hebrews 11. After reading these narratives, we may wonder why. Yet when we read that famous chapter in context, we begin to see that all of the faithful in Hebrews 11 were also severely flawed. The sermon of Hebrews is not preaching that we should emulate each of these people in their actions. In other words, don't live like Samson! Rather your faith should be like theirs in this sense: our faith looks to the promises of God, not ourselves. We must lay aside the sins we saw throughout Judges, because they can entangle us as easily as they entangled Samson and Jephthah. We must fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith who is also the true judge and true king. We must consider him and not grow weary. Look to Christ!

Weekend Devotion: The Prayer of Faith

Years ago, the editor of a publishing company asked me to write a book on prayer. The theme is a vitally important one. The publishing house was well known. To be honest, I felt flattered. But in a moment of heaven-sent honesty, I told him that the author of such a book would need to be an older and more seasoned author (not to mention, alas, more prayerful) than I was. I mentioned one name and then another. My reaction seemed to encourage him to a moment of honesty, as well. He smiled. He had already asked the well-seasoned Christian leaders whose names I had just mentioned! They, too, had declined in similar terms. Wise men, I thought. Who can write or speak at any length easily on the mystery of prayer?

Yet in the past century and a half, much has been written and said particularly about “the prayer of faith.” The focus has been on mountain-moving prayer by which we simply “claim” things from God with confidence that we will receive them because we believe that He will give them.

But what exactly is the prayer of faith?

Association with the Dramatic

Interestingly, it is in the letter of James (who has so much to say about works) that the term occurs. It climaxes the marvelous teaching on prayer that punctuates the entire letter (see 1:5-8; 4:2-3; 5: 13-18).

¹³ *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.*
¹⁴ *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.*¹⁵ *And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*¹⁶ *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*¹⁷ *Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.*¹⁸ *Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.*

James 5:13-18 (ESV)

What is even more striking is that the significance of the phrase seems to be illustrated by the experience of one individual, the prophet Elijah. In his case, the prayer of faith was instrumental in shutting the heavens. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that the phrase has come to be associated largely, if not exclusively, with dramatic, miracle-like events- with the extraordinary rather than the daily. Yet this misses the basic thrust of James's teaching, The reason Elijah is used as an example is not that he was an extraordinary man;

James stressed that he was “a man with a nature like ours” (James 5:17). It is his ordinariness that is in view.

Elijah’s praying is used as an example not because it produced miracle-like effects but because it gives us one of the clearest of all illustrations of what it means for anyone to pray with faith: it is believing God’s revealed Word, taking hold of His covenant commitment to it, and asking Him to keep it.

This, then, is the prayer of faith: to ask God to accomplish what He has promised in His Word.

The Prayer of a Righteous Person

Shutting up the heavens was not, after all, a novel idea that originated in the fertile mind of Elijah. In fact, it was the fulfilment of the promised curse of the covenant Lord: “If you do not obey the LORD your God . . . these curses will come upon you . . . The LORD will strike you . . . with scorching heat and drought . . . The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron. The LORD will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder” (Deut. 28:15, 22-24, NIV).

Like every “righteous man” (James 5:16), Elijah sought to align his life with God’s covenant promises and threats (which is, essentially, what “righteousness” means in the Old Testament—to be rightly covenantally related to the Lord). He lived his life in the light of the covenant God had made, and so he held on to its threats of judgment in prayer, as well as to its promises of blessing.

This, then, is the prayer of faith: to ask God to accomplish what He has promised in His Word. That promise is the only ground for our confidence in asking. Such confidence is not “worked up” from within our emotional life; rather, it is given and supported by what God has said in Scripture.

Truly “righteous” men and women of faith know the value of their heavenly Father’s promises. They go to Him, as children do to a loving human father. They know that if they can say to an earthly father, “But, father, you promised...” they can both persist in asking and be confident that he will keep his word. How much more our heavenly Father, who has given His Son for our salvation! We have no other grounds of confidence that He hears our prayers. We need none.

Such appeal to God’s promises constitutes what John Calvin, following Tertullian, calls “legitimate prayer.”

Some Christians find this disappointing. It seems to remove the mystique from the prayer of faith. Are we not tying down our faith to ask only for what God already has promised? But such disappointment reveals a spiritual malaise: would we rather devise our own spirituality (preferably spectacular) than God's (frequently modest)?

The struggles we sometimes experience in prayer, then, are often part of the process by which God gradually brings us to ask for only what He has promised to give. The struggle is not our wrestling to bring Him to give us what we desire, but our wrestling with His Word until we are illuminated and subdued by it, saying, "Not my will, but Your will be done." Then, as Calvin again says, we learn "not to ask for more than God allows."

This is why true prayer can never be divorced from real holiness. The prayer of faith can be made only by the "righteous" man whose life is being more and more aligned with the covenant grace and purposes of God. In the realm of prayer, too (since it is a microcosm of the whole of the Christian life), faith (prayer to the covenant Lord) without works (obedience to the covenant Lord) is dead.¹

¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel Centered Life*, (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007).



Sinclair
Ferguson

Sinclair B. Ferguson (b. 1948) is a native of Scotland and earned his Ph.D. at the University of Aberdeen. He was minister of two churches in Scotland, on the Island of Unst the most northerly of the Shetland Isles, and in St George's-Tron, in the center of Glasgow, as well as serving in the USA at First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C. In addition, he was for many years Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and at Redeemer Seminary in Dallas. He is currently the honorary evening preacher in St Peter's Free Church of Scotland, Dundee. He has authored around fifty books and contributed to many others.

This Sunday's Sermon text:
Matthew 17:1–13

Monday, April 7

Read: Psalms 19–20

We can know God because he has revealed himself to us. If God had not revealed himself to us, we could not know him, at least not personally. David explains this in Psalm 19. When we speak about how God has revealed himself to us, we speak in two categories: general revelation and special revelation. Verses 1–6 paint a beautiful picture of general revelation. Creation is speechless but it is telling a story. The heavens are telling about the glory of God. The skies above are proclaiming his handiwork. Even day and night tell a story, but it is a silent story. Paul explains in Romans 1 that the invisible attributes of God—the very existence of God—can be understood from creation. This is general revelation, and this is enough to condemn all people for rejecting or denying the existence of God. The earth itself lets us know that there is a God, but how can we know him personally? For that we need special revelation.

God has indeed revealed himself to us in a particular or special way, and he has done it through his word. David uses a variety of words to describe what we often simply refer to as the Bible: law, testimony, precepts, commandment, fear, and the judgments of Yahweh. There is a depth and richness to God's words to us. David declares the glories of God's revelation of himself to us. The words of God are perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, and true. And it's not the case that God has spoken and his words are lovely, but they have no impact on us. Did you notice the effects of God's revelation? The Scriptures restore the soul, make the simple wise, cause our hearts to rejoice, enlighten the eyes, endure forever, and are righteous altogether. What an infinitely priceless treasury we have received because God has chosen to reveal himself to us. God has spoken. He has made himself known to us. Now how should we respond to his special revelation?

In verse 10, David suggests that the Bible is more valuable than your most valuable possessions and more delightful than the tastiest experiences this world offers. Do we live our lives as if this were true? Do we treasure the Bible this way, or do David's words sound a bit extreme to us? Not only is God's Word to be appreciated, but it is to be applied. God's Word warns us and protects us. It shows us our sins, protects us from further sins, and shows us how to have our sins forgiven, ultimately through Christ. Because God has revealed himself to us and because his words are as wonderful as we've seen, our prayer should be David's prayer in verse 14. Is that your prayer today?

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God's Word does not deal with spiritual matters only; it is intensely practical. This is perhaps most obvious in the book of Proverbs. As we have already noted, many of the proverbs are credited to Solomon and are written from the perspective of a father to a son. How greatly we suffer when we neglect this practical wisdom from the Bible. How greatly we suffer when fathers fail to pass on God's wisdom concerning the practical everyday matters of life. How greatly we suffer when we children fail to obey the wisdom passed down to us.

Solomon first speaks to the matter of securing a friend or neighbor's debt. He certainly would advise his son to not get in this situation in the first place, but the wise father does not assume that his children will always listen and obey. He teaches his son what to do after he has found himself in the situation he should have avoided in the first place. The son should have never taken responsibility for someone else's debt, but when he does he should make it his highest priority to escape this burden which is comparable to death. The proverbs always speak plainly about the dangers of debt and encourage wise dealings with money. Related to this, Solomon encourages his son to learn hard work and diligence from an unlikely place: the ant. Twice he warns the lazy sluggard to build a good work ethic and escape the poverty (and debt) that otherwise awaits. Solomon then warns his son against being worthless and wicked. The varied and repeated sins that he warns against will lead to a life broken beyond healing (6:15) if not avoided.

All that Solomon has mentioned so far in Proverbs 6 is intensely practical, but can anything be more practical than his warnings against sexual sin in the remainder of chapters 6 and 7? We live in a time when sexual sin tempts the youngest among us, and the oldest cannot escape. Our world preys upon the most vulnerable and attempts to lure them into immorality and assumes the strongest are secretly addicted to some form of sexual sin. This is why Solomon's warning is so important, a warning that he ultimately failed to live by in his own life. The Bible stresses that this teaching will lead us and watch over us and preserve life (6:22–23). Specifically, these instructions will protect against adultery, but the underlying principles extend to every form of sexual sin conceived in our wicked hearts. Read God's words carefully and apply them to your own life. They will convict you, but may they also comfort you. Be reminded that no matter how deep your sexual stains may go, our Savior forgives, cleanses, and restores.

Wednesday, April 9

Read: Proverbs 8

For a second time in the book of Proverbs, we are given an extended section that praises the value of wisdom and exhorts the reader to seek wisdom at all costs. In verses 1–3, wisdom is personified as a woman standing in the streets calling out to all who will listen. Her message makes up the rest of chapter 8; some have divided the chapter into five sections. We see in verse 4–5 her address in her speech. Wisdom calls out to all mankind, but especially the simple-minded and foolish. In verses 6–11, wisdom declares that she will speak noble things. Right things. True things. Righteous things. The value of wisdom’s teachings is worth more than silver, gold, and even jewels. All of our earthly desires pale in comparison to the value of wisdom, because without wisdom we are not able to make wise and godly decisions about these earthly things. We read it over and over again in the Bible, but do we really live this way? Do we really believe that God’s Word is this valuable? Do we really think that God’s way of thinking is so true and perfect that we must race to it in the same way that we race to the news or social media to learn the world’s way of thinking? God help us.

Verses 12–21 form the next section and emphasize that wisdom is marked with prudence, knowledge, and discretion. Knowing what wisdom knows will cause us to think like God. When we think like God we will love what he loves and hate what he hates. Thinking rightly about the Lord is sometimes called “the fear of the Lord” in the Bible. Even as we saw the warning against being worthless and wicked in 6:12–19, wisdom tells us in 7:13 that understanding this hatred of evil is to have the proper fear of Yahweh. Wisdom guides the simple and foolish as much as it guides kings and rulers and princes.

Not only is wisdom given a voice like a person throughout this chapter, but in verses 22–31 wisdom is pictured as being with Yahweh back at creation. Cults like the Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that this passage says God created Jesus. This is actually an ancient heresy we must reject. However, we must also acknowledge that Jesus is wisdom personified. When we look at Jesus Christ, we see the wisdom of God taken on human flesh. Many of the lofty passages about Jesus in the New Testament show us that not only is Jesus truly God, he is the walking talking wisdom of God. Therefore, the final appeal of 8:32–36 is ultimately an appeal to listen to Christ.

Against the dark background of the book of Judges emerges the shining portrait of God's providence in the book of Ruth. As horrible as things were in the days of the judges, God was faithfully preserving his remnant (the small group of faithful Israelites in the midst of an otherwise faithless nation), but ultimately he was preserving his Messiah.

The story begins with a family from the tribe of Judah who leaves the promised land to go to the pagan land of Moab. This is enemy territory. Why would Elimelech lead his family to leave Bethlehem? There was no bread in "the house of bread" as Bethlehem's name means. After a decade in Moab, Naomi has lost her sons and her husband, but gained two daughters-in-law. Word reaches her that God has provided food in Bethlehem once again, so she makes preparations to return home. Daughter-in-law Ruth, who is a Moabite woman and has no part in the people of God, converts to the faith of Naomi and returns to Bethlehem with her. Naomi returns broken and bitter. Her first assessment is that she left Bethlehem full but is returning empty. We know that she actually left empty (remember the famine) and is returning mostly empty. She does have a faithful daughter-in-law with her. In the providence of God it is through this daughter-in-law that Naomi's story will change. The book of Ruth is the story of going from emptiness to fullness due to the lovingkindness of God.

Ruth the Moabite but is now a follower of Yahweh seems to be familiar with his law, because she seeks to go into the fields to glean enough grain for her and Naomi. God's law provided for people in their exact situation. During this time of the judges, Ruth finds not a wicked man but a godly man named Boaz. The author tips us off that God is orchestrating this entire scene even as the text reads in 2:3 as if this were all a coincidence. Of all the fields Ruth could have found, she just so happened to come to Boaz's field. He treats Ruth kindly and even prays that Yahweh will bless Ruth for her treatment of Naomi. Little does Boaz realize that he will be the answer to his own prayer. Ruth is also oblivious to God's plan, but Naomi is beginning to get the picture. God is indeed going to fill empty Naomi and Ruth. He will care for them. He will provide. And he will do it through his redeemer. Do you really believe that you can trust God even in the darkest of circumstances? Do you know his great redeemer?

Friday, April 11

Read: Ruth 3–4

Reminders of God's faithfulness energizes our faith. Naomi returned to Bethlehem bitter against God, but she has seen the signs of Yahweh's faithful working on behalf of her and Ruth. Now she is encouraged by the possibility of Boaz being the kinsman redeemer for their family, and she instructs Ruth on how to pursue this opportunity. In a scene that seems strange to us, Ruth visits Boaz during the night at the threshing floor. While nothing inappropriate happens, the possibility of scandal does seem to be present, but Boaz and Ruth both act righteously. He promises to serve as kinsman redeemer if a nearer relative does not redeem her. Boaz continues to generously care for these widows, and Naomi is confident in his integrity in the matter.

In another humorous nod to God's detailed sovereignty over this entire story, Boaz just so happens to run into this nearer kinsman in 4:1. We're given greater understanding of what exactly a kinsman redeemer will do in 4:5. A kinsman redeemer rescues a family's land when debt or other circumstances might cause it to be removed from the family. Remember that the land was not merely property but their inheritance in the covenant of God. The kinsman redeemer will also help father a child in the name of a deceased childless relative in order for the family name to continue. The nearer kinsman weighs the prospect and determines that it is simply financially unfeasible for him to be the redeemer. This is not described as a sin but as a simple fact: this will be a costly redemption. 4:13 contains five crisp verbs that move the story forward rapidly. Boaz and Ruth are married and have a son thanks to the Giver of Life. Naomi's fortunes have been reversed. She began the story empty but she is now full thanks to the faithfulness of God and her daughter-in-law Ruth. This child is so closely associated with the blessing of Naomi that the child is even identified as her own. What generous care God has provided for the once-bitter Naomi.

The story began with a list of names and now ends with an even longer list of names, but the names are important. This snapshot of a faithful family in the dark days of judges is not just any family. This is the family of King David. The faithful Moabite Ruth is not only the great-grandmother of a king, she is in the family tree of King Jesus. The generosity of Boaz in his costly redemption of Ruth is but a picture of the even greater redemption brought by our Kinsman Redeemer, Jesus of Bethlehem. Praise the Lord for he has redeemed us.

Weekend Devotion: Jesus is Lord

*“For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus sake.”
(I Corinthians 4:5)*

If I were to ask any Sunday-morning congregation, “Do you believe in the Lordship of Jesus Christ?” I would get an easy reply in the affirmative. But if I were to ask each individual in that congregation, “Is He Lord of all you are and have?” we might have a very disturbing and revealing morning! Any church gathering can sing, “Bring forth the royal diadem and crown Him Lord of all,” but not all who are willing to crown Him with their lips will make Him Lord of their lives.

Coleridge speaks of “truths often considered as so true that they lose the power of truth and lie bedridden in the dormitory of the soul.” The Lordship of Christ is one of these truths. One writer has said that the word “Lord” is one of the most lifeless words in the Christian vocabulary. Yet Dr. A. T. Robertson said that the Lordship of Christ is the touchstone of our faith, and Dr. G. Campbell Morgan has called it “the central verity of the church.”

The Lordship of Christ was the initial confession of the church. “... if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Romans 10:9). When a Jewish convert in the early church said, “Jesus is Lord,” he meant that Jesus was God; and when a Gentile believer said, “Jesus is Lord,” he meant that Caesar was no longer his god. Polycarp went to his death affirming the Lordship of Christ above the claims of Caesar. In the New Testament it is never “Christ and ...” because one never needs to add anything to Jesus. He is Alpha and Omega and all the alphabet between. But it is “Christ or..” the world, Christ or Belial, Christ or Egypt, Christ or Caesar.” Early Christianity demanded a clean break with the world, the flesh and the devil. That lasted until Constantine made Christianity fashionable and popular. Pagans flocked into the church lightheartedly bringing their idols and their sins with them, and the church lowered her standards to accommodate the influx. We have never recovered from that mistake. Today, although Caesar is dead, too many church members try to serve two Lords, Caesar and Christ, God and Mam-mon. Churches are filled with baptized pagans living double lives, fearing the Lord and serving their own gods, drawing nigh to God with their mouths and honoring him with their lips while their hearts are far from Him, calling him Lord, Lord, while they do not what He says. We are not only to worship the Lord on Sunday but to serve Him all week.

The Lordship of Christ is the authentic confession of the Christian. “Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost” (1 Corinthians 12:3). Calling

Jesus Lord is the authentic work of the Holy Spirit for the old Adam never bows to the Lordship of Christ. Nowadays we have created an artificial distinction between trusting Christ as Saviour and confessing Him as Lord. We have made two experiences out of it when it is one. So we have a host who have “accepted Christ” in order to miss hell and reach heaven, who seem not at all concerned about making Him Lord of their lives. Salvation is not a cafeteria line where we can take the Saviourhood of Christ and pass up His Lordship, take what we want and leave the rest. We cannot get saved on the installment plan, with fingers crossed and inner reservations, as though one could take Christ “on approval.” To be sure, one may not understand all that is involved at conversion, but no man can knowingly and wilfully take Christ as Saviour and reject Him as Lord, and be saved.

We have only one option: we can receive the Lord or reject Him. But once we receive Him, our option ends. We are then no longer our own but bought with a price. We belong to Him. He has the first word and the last. He demands absolute loyalty beyond that of any earthly dictator but He has a right to do it. “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” How foolish to say, “Nobody is going to tell me how much to give, what to do.” We have already been told! We are His and His Word is final.

I came to Christ as a country boy. I did not understand all about the plan of salvation. One does not have to understand it, he has only to stand on it. I do not understand all about electricity but I do not intend sitting around in the dark until I do! But one thing I did understand even as a lad: I understood that I was under new management. I belonged to Christ and He was Lord.

Here is the key to the sad state of many Christians and churches. There is a cheap, easy believism that does not believe and a receivism that does not receive. There is no real confession of Christ Jesus as Lord . . .

Salvation is free. The gift of God is eternal life. It is not cheap for it cost God His Son and the Son His life, but it is free.

However, when we become believers we become disciples and that will cost everything we have. Our Lord lost some of His best prospects on this very point.

It appears that He lost three in the last six verses of the ninth chapter of Luke. He lost the young ruler. What a prospect he was! He had manners because he came kneeling. He had morals for he had kept the commandments. He had money for he would not let it go. He was a good catch but the Lord did not catch him.

. . . Our Lord was after disciples, not mere “joiners.” Americans are notorious

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joiners. Give them a red button and a certificate and they will join anything. We would have taken the young ruler into church immediately and made him treasurer but our Lord would have him mean business.

The New Testament teaches not only faith in Christ but following Christ. “Come unto me . . .”— that invites the believer. “Learn of me . . .”— that makes the disciple. The Word of God knows nothing of that strange variety of Christian willing to take Christ as Saviour but unwilling to confess Him as Lord. He is not only Saviour of the soul, He is Lord of the life.

The lordship of Christ will be the ultimate confession of creation. We are told that one day every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-11). I do not ask the sinner, “Will you confess Jesus as Lord?” for that he must do now or later. I ask, “When will you confess Him as Lord—now while you can live for Him or beyond the grave when it will be too late?” A flour company had a slogan, “Eventually—Why Not Now?” Eventually every tongue will confess Jesus as Lord, in heaven, on earth, under the earth. But why not now? Is He your Lord? Is He Lord of your body, your thoughts, your tongue, your temper, your spare time, your life plans, your pocketbook, your church life, your recreation, what you listen to by radio and look at on television? His Lordship covers everything from eating and drinking to world problems. But it is not bondage, it is freedom, for “. . . where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”¹

1 Excerpted from *The Best of Vance Havner* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1967).

Vance Havner (1901–1986) was an American evangelist for nearly six decades. His conservative theology and quotable preaching still influences many today.



Vance
Havner

This Sunday's Sermon text:
Matthew 17:14–27

Monday, April 14

Read: 1 Samuel 1–3

We've seen in the days of the judges that there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. We've been encouraged that God was faithfully preserving his remnant in those dark days. As we begin the books of Samuel, we see those ideas blend together. Israel will have a king on the throne, but first we're introduced to one more major character: Samuel. We first meet his parents who remind us of many characters we've already met, particularly Samson. Will this new judge fare better than he fared? Father Elkanah's two wives are struggling in much the same way that Leah and Rachel struggled. As we've seen many times, God is the one who opens and closes the womb. In another miraculous birth, God gives them a special son Samuel whom Hannah commits to serving the Lord. In a lavish offering at the boy's weaning, this mother who prayed so fervently for a child now entrusts him to the care and service of Yahweh. The prayers Hannah prayed in bitterness and sorrow are not preserved in Scripture, but the marvelous prayer of chapter 2 is preserved. Many themes for the entire two-volume book of Samuel are present in Hannah's prayer. It serves as a companion to Mary's prayer in Luke 1.

While Hannah is portrayed as a godly mother, the priest Eli is not commended. His sons are worthless; they are doing what is right in their own eyes according to their own customs instead of obeying the Lord's commands of priests. These "priests" are preying upon the people they're supposed to serve. Aging Eli warns his sons, but it is too little and too late. Yahweh announces that he intends to bring an end to the house of Eli. The faithless priests will die, but God will raise up a faithful priest. How different from Eli's sons is Hannah's son. See the boy Samuel serving in the temple; he's even dressed like a little priest! He's growing in stature and in favor with God and with man.

Young Samuel is probably around twelve years old in chapter three, but he sees God more clearly than old Eli. The priest of God cannot see the things of God, spiritually and literally. Eli's sons did not know the Lord at all (2:12), but Samuel does not know him yet (3:7). In another dramatic scene of calling, God reveals himself to Samuel. God is with Samuel in his conception, his childhood, and his calling; God will be with Samuel through his death. Christ has promised to be with Christians in an even greater way (Matt 28:20). What an encouraging introduction to the prophet Samuel.

God has spoken to and through his prophet Samuel. Looking at the end of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4, the words of Samuel and the word of Yahweh become almost indistinguishable. We were told in 3:1 that the word of the Lord was not frequent in those days, but that is changing with the calling of Samuel. Or is it?

Chapters 4–6 describe another saga in the ongoing battle with the Philistines. We saw the Philistine in several stories in Judges, but things should be better now with a word from the Lord, right? Careful attention has been given to Samuel in the first three chapters, but now we won't see him until chapter 7. Israel is still not seeking God. They seem to be treating the ark of the covenant as a good luck charm instead of the earthly place where the presence of God dwells. Worse still, Eli's sons are right there with the ark, and we haven't heard anything good about them yet. This isn't looking good for Israel! The Philistines rally and fight courageously in battle against Israel. Verses 10 and 11 spell out the dramatic consequences for the people of God. It seems shocking that the ark of the covenant can be captured, but the author saves the most important thing for the end of the sentence: The two sons of Eli died, that is, Hophni and Phinehas. God has kept his word and is bringing an end to the house of Eli.

A man from the tribe of Benjamin runs from the battle to bring the news to the people of Shiloh. His appearance tells the story before he opens his mouth. It seems Eli has so little influence that the man tells the town before he even tells the priest. The messenger makes a four-fold announcement: The army has fled. They have been defeated. His sons are dead. The ark is captured. We might expect Eli's sorrow to be greatest over the death of his sons, but it is the announcement about the capture of the ark that brings about his death. Heavy Eli has weighed down Israel long enough. The old priest has judged Israel forty years, an echo from the book of Judges and another reminder that there is still no king in Israel. Phinehas's wife sees the situation more clearly than Eli ever did. She hears of the death of her father-in-law as well her husband, but it is the capture of the ark that grieves her most. With her dying words, she declares the glory of God has left Israel. Are things any better now than they were in Judges? The people need a king.

Wednesday, April 16

Read: 1 Samuel 5:1–7:2

In Hannah's prayer that previewed the books of Samuel, she prayed for Yahweh to judge the ends of the earth (2:10). Judgment upon Israel began in chapter 4, but now the focus is on the nations, particularly the Philistines. The Philistines parade the ark of God like a trophy of war back to their temple for Dagon. To the Philistine mind, their victory over Israel is a sure sign that their god Dagon has defeated the God of Israel. He who sits in the heavens laughs (Psalm 2) and the narrator is laughing as well. He keeps repeating the word "behold" as if to say, "Would you look at that, there's Dagon falling down. Whoops, there he goes again. Oh my, looky there—his head and hands are cut off." The feet of the wicked are being cut off and the adversaries of Yahweh are being broken to pieces (2:9–10).

Not only does God make a mockery of the Philistine god Dagon, he puts his hand against the Philistine people of Ashdod. His hand is so heavy against his enemies that eventually the people cry, "Get this ark out of here before we all die." The city is thrown into turmoil, and where do they turn? Their fortune-tellers and sorcerers. When we consider the best response their spiritual advisers have to offer, we understand that the Philistine's biggest problem is not the tumors but their spiritual darkness. They know some things about God, but they do not know him. The Philistines create this test to determine if the God of Israel is actually the source of their problems. If a nursing cow that has never pulled a cart actually ignores its calf and pulls the cart to this particular city, then they will feel confident that Yahweh is at work. The text makes it clear that the cows go against their natural instincts and pull the cart directly to Beth–Shemesh. This is a Levite city given to the family of Kohath, and they were assigned the responsibility of caring for the "holy things" including the ark (see Num 4:4, 15). This should be good news; they should know what to do with the ark. The Philistines are glad to be rid of the ark, but now the ark brings judgment upon the men of Beth–Shemesh. No matter how sincere their intentions may have been, they disobeyed God's clearly prescribed method of worship. They mishandled the ark when God had clearly told them what to do.

How many times must we be reminded that God cares how he is worshipped? The pagan Philistines seemed to figure it out faster than the people of God. Will we learn the lesson?

After twenty years of silence, the text tells us that Samuel leads the people to repent. Like Jacob (Gen 25:2) and Joshua (Josh 24:14, 23) before him, Samuel leads the people to rid themselves of their sin. His language is similar to that of Paul in the New Testament: the people are to put off their idolatry and put on their love of Yahweh. It's never about getting rid of sins only; Christians are also to actively pursue the new way of life we have in Christ. Israel had thought they would be blessed by God by moving the ark of the covenant into battle with them; it turns out they actually needed simply to move back toward God (repent!). We need this reminder as much as they did. Look at the blessings of their repentance in 7:14. All that Israel had lost at the hands of the Philistines in the previous chapters are now restored by the hand of God. It's not that they could manipulate God through the ark; they needed to walk in repentance and faith.

Time marches on and an uncertain number of years have passed as chapter 8 begins. Samuel is getting older (although he doesn't die until chapter 25), and he appoints his sons to join him in serving Israel. Sadly his sons are no better than Eli's sons. The people come to Samuel and demand that he appoint a king over Israel. It's important for us to understand that the act of having a king is not itself a sin. Moses predicted back in Deuteronomy 17:14 that Israel would have a king one day. The problem is the phrase "like the nations." Israel wants earthly security in an earthly king just like everyone else, but Israel is not like everyone else. They have a unique covenant relationship with the one, true, living God. They were so quick to raise their Ebenezer stone in chapter 7 (a testimony to their dependence on God), but in chapter 8 they are looking to an earthly king to be their help and strength.

Samuel warns the people about the kind of king they will have. Six times he says the king will take and take, and he will take the very best. The people want a king so badly now, but the day will soon come when they regret their choice. The one they want to deliver them will actually oppress them. Isn't it always that way when we reject the word of the Lord? They will live with the choices they make. As the chapter ends, we're left to wonder: who will be this king like the nations?

Friday, April 18

Read: 1 Samuel 9–10

The people have demanded and the Lord has permitted—Israel will have a king like the nations. What will this king be like? Chapter 9 introduces us to young, tall, handsome Saul. His pedigree seems to be solid. Someone has pointed out that only the enemies of Israel are ever described by their height, but here we're told that Saul is taller than everyone else. He even looks like a king like the nations. However, the first picture we get of Saul is not very king-like. Israel has a rich history of being led by shepherds (think of Abraham and Moses), but future king Saul can't even find big, loud donkeys! This future king of God's people seems wholly unfamiliar with God's prophet. Remember that "all Israel" has heard about Samuel (3:20; 4:1); everyone except Saul it seems. However, God hasn't forgotten his people, and he providentially brings Saul and Samuel together to meet. As chapter 9 ends, Saul seems oblivious to the honor Samuel is showing him as the soon-to-be king of Israel.

Samuel tells Saul that God will provide a three-part sign to confirm to Saul the word of the Lord: Saul will be king. Each successive part of the sign will be bigger and more spiritual. First, two men from Saul's family, the tribe of Benjamin, will come to him with a certain message. Secondly, three pilgrims on their way to worship God will greet Saul in a way indicating his special status. The third and largest portion of the sign involves a group of prophets prophesying. When these three consecutive events take place, the Spirit of Yahweh rushes on Saul just like with the judges of old. The Spirit is anointing Saul for the specific task of serving as king.

When Samuel calls the people together to announce Saul as king, he first reminds them that God has been faithful yet they rejected him. As the time for the big announcement arrives, the people are looking for their new king. Yet he cannot be found! There will be many times in the days ahead when King Saul's leadership will not be found. The people pray and God tells them where their new king is: hiding among the baggage! Some brave warrior he seems to be. Yet Samuel proclaims that ultimately Yahweh has chosen Saul to be king. The people have demanded a king, but God is sovereign over the people's demands. As his coronation ends, there are both supporters of the new king as well as worthless men who are blind to the work of God in choosing a king. How will this new king like the nations respond to the word of the Lord?



Facing The Cross

A GOOD FRIDAY SERVICE

*Scripture and Song
commemorating the death of Christ*

Friday evening, April 18 at 6:00pm
in the Chapel

RAMAH 
BAPTIST CHURCH

502 Ramah Drive
Palmetto, GA 30268

Weekend Devotion: The Resurrection of Our Lord

"The Lord is risen indeed." Luke 24:34

... I wish to make certain observations respecting the resurrection of the Son of Man, even the resurrection of Jesus Christ as an unquestionable reality.

My friends, if I do not know that Jesus Christ rose from the dead then this world has no history. I do not know anything in the past if I do not know that. If a man will look carefully and thoughtfully over all these evidences, will note the slowness of belief of these men, their intelligence, will see that they were not prejudiced enthusiasts, will see how when they had fairly been convinced of this they gave their lives for it, if a man will put all circumstances together including the traditions and discrepancies of the experience, I am satisfied that he will see, if he is willing to see, that the fact shines out clearly. I will not say a man is obliged to believe it. If a man is determined to doubt he can always find some loophole for doubt, but a man who is desirous of believing will see that it is reality: that there is no excuse for question.

The second observation is that *the resurrection of the Lord Jesus establishes the truth of Christianity*. The apostle Paul says he is declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead. Now Lazarus was raised from the dead and that did not prove such a thing concerning him; but Jesus of Nazareth had claimed to be the Son of God, had claimed it before the Sanhedrin when he had been denounced as a blasphemer, and after all his high claims and predictions if he had not been all that he claimed there never would have been such a high destiny accomplished for him. It was the sign manual of the Deity, it was the seal of the Sovereign of the Universe affixed to his claim, it declared him to be all that he had ever professed to be, and so it establishes the truth of all his teachings and the truth of the whole Christian society. The great fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead is the central fact of the evidence of Christianity.

The third observation is that *the resurrection of Christ consummated his work of redemption*. This is a view which I think does not appear to come often within the sight of Christian teachers at the present time, and yet was much in the minds of the first disciples. The resurrection with them was not merely a great fact that established the truth of Christianity but also consummated the work of redemption.

Paul says, "Who was delivered for our offenses and was raised again for our justification." He says to the Corinthians, "And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again." He says not merely "died for them" but that he "rose again." He laid down his life, and took it again for us. He rose triumphant over death and over sin and over Satan in our behalf. And thus you see how it is that in the Epistle to the Romans he makes this statement: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." That is the consummation of the Christian redemption, believe that God raised him from the dead and confess him with the mouth, and you shall be saved.

The fourth observation is that *the resurrection of Christ is the pledge of the resurrection of his people*. "Now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept." The sheaf of barley that they weighed as the first fruits of the harvest was regarded as a pledge that the rest of the harvest would come in its time and Christ's resurrection is the first fruits, the pledge of our resurrection. And so the apostle wrote to the Thessalonians, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope." A great poem before that time had expressed it, "When a man has once died there is no resurrection," but Paul says, "If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." The resurrection of Christ is the pledge, I say, of the resurrection of his people.

Yet a fifth observation. *The resurrection of Christ is celebrated by us on the Lord's day*. I have no time to go into the argument which is here involved, but we believe from slight intimations in the Acts of the Apostles and in Revelation which show conclusively that the Christians of that time held religious meetings on the first day of the week, and from the light which is shed back upon it, and from known facts we learn that the apostles had authorized that the Sabbath should be transferred to the first day of the week; not that there were any minute directions, such as Moses had given to the Jews, that they should pick up sticks and make fires on the Sabbath day; not that there were any directions as to ceremonial but they were reminded the old primeval Sabbath which God had declared should be kept holy to him. Those directions stand without any specific qualifications as to how we shall do them and stand with new significance in that they represent the resurrection of Christ, a day concerning which we have no specific details as to how

we are to observe it, but the general thought that it is the old day of God which is to be set apart from all other days and sanctified to him and also the day that represents the resurrection of Christ.

Finally, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is a pledge to his people to live a risen life. You remember what the apostle says to the Romans: “Know ye not that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus were baptized into his death; therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, and, like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father even so we also should walk in the newness of life.” Oh, ye Christian people, when you first set out in Christ’s service, you did by a solemn ceremony declare that by faith in Jesus Christ you had died to sin and risen to a new life and were going to live always afterward a new life. Has it been so with you? Does your heart smite you with the painful thought that it has been but very partially so? O friends and brethren, then God has given you a time to set out afresh.¹

¹ Excerpted from Vernon L. Stanfield, ed. *Favorite Sermons of John A. Broadus* (New York: Harper, 1959).



John
Broadus

John A. Broadus (1827–1895) was a Baptist pastor and educator. He served on the founding faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and as its second president. Broadus was one of the greatest preachers of his day. His textbook on preaching as well as his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew are still used today.

This Sunday’s Sermon text:
Isaiah 53

Israel demanded “a king who may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles” (8:20). They now have a king in Saul, and the time has come for him to fight their battles as we see in chapter 11. Nahash the Ammonite makes a heinous threat to the people of Jabesh-Gilead. The people need the leadership of their king, but he’s down home on the farm. The Spirit of God rushes upon Saul, but notice that the personal name of God (Yahweh) is not used. This might concern us. Saul uses a dreadful tactic like a judge to rally the troops, but as king he rallies the troops on a national level. He essentially makes them an offer they can’t refuse. Saul achieves a decisive victory in battle, and the crowd goes wild. Their king has fought for them in battle! The supporters of Saul want to punish the worthless fellows of 10:27 who scoffed at Saul. The new leader refuses to execute his political opponents, and declares to the people Yahweh has brought salvation for Israel. So far, so good Saul.

The focus shifts back to Samuel in chapter 12. He seems to be giving a farewell address although he still has years of service to Israel left. Judge Samuel puts himself on trial before the people asking them to bring evidence of any charges against him. Samuel has been a faithful prophet, but he is not like a king. Kings take but Samuel has taken nothing from the people. Samuel is weighed in the balance and found innocent. Now it’s time for Israel to go on trial. Samuel recounts their history, noting that God has been faithful before they came into the promised land and he has been faithful in the promised land. Every defeat Israel has experienced has been because of their sin, not because of any weakness in God. When faced with another enemy they could not defeat on their own, the people asked for a king rather than crying out to God for deliverance. Saul’s name means “asked for;” The people who asked for a king got exactly what they asked for when they got Saul.

Remember it’s not the act of having a king that is sinful for Israel; it is the motivation of their heart. They failed to trust Yahweh. The people seem to realize the seriousness of their sin in 12:19. They ask Samuel to pray for God to not strike them dead for their sins! Oh that we would take sin seriously. The chapter ends on an ominous note. Israel is at a crossroads. Will the nation trust and obey God? Will the king? Will you?

Tuesday, April 22

Read: 1 Samuel 13; Psalm 72

Israel officially has a king like the nations. Saul has been privately anointed by Samuel, publicly selected by God, and affirmed by the people. Saul has gone before Israel in battle and won. Things seem to be going well. Battle breaks out with the Philistines as it has so many times before and will again. Saul marches with his army once again, but they are greatly afraid with trembling. Saul and the army wait for Samuel for a week. They need him to arrive and make offerings to the Yahweh. Israel wants the Lord's blessing in battle, but they are getting tired of waiting. Saul, who is king but not priest, impatiently offers the burnt offering himself without Samuel. To be fair to Saul, kings could offer sacrifices under certain circumstances, but Samuel has already instructed him to wait. Samuel's word is as good as the word of the Lord.

Immediately Samuel arrives, and Saul is busted. Like his father Adam before him, Saul starts to pass the blame. It's the soldiers' fault. It's Samuel's fault. It's the enemy's fault. It's definitely not Saul's fault, at least according to his way of thinking. Saul sounds no better than the judges of Israel before him. He is using the offerings like a good luck charm. Does that sound familiar? Remember the misuse of the ark of the covenant in chapter 4. How often are we like Saul? We fail to take responsibility for our own sins. We look for someone else to blame. It couldn't have been our own fault, we swear.

Verses 13 and 14 are pivotal in Saul's story. In just two verses, Samuel clearly indicts Saul. The commands of Yahweh are emphasized four times in these two verses. Saul has not obeyed the commands of the Lord. As a result of his sin, his kingdom will not continue. The kingdom of Saul is over before it fully gets started. Remember that obedience brings blessings and disobedience brings consequences. Saul's consequences will become clearer as the text progresses, but Saul is not seeking after the Lord with all of his heart. Saul follows Saul's heart. Soon enough God will choose a king after God's own heart.

Psalm 72 seems to be a coronation psalm associated with Solomon. The psalm has high hopes for the earthly king. We know that Saul fails as king and we are already anticipating in our reading the day that David will become king. However, David, too, will fail. Solomon will fail. Ultimately, we need the greater Son of David who will rule justly forevermore. The psalm is properly understood as extending past the earthly king to the Messiah King, Jesus Christ.

Things aren't going well with the king like the nations. Maybe there's another option. Chapter 14 focuses on Saul's son Jonathan who also defeats the Philistines, but Jonathan is not like his father Saul. Chapter 13 left us with Israel being outgunned and outnumbered by their enemies. This chapter begins with Saul and his men hiding in a cave. Look at who is with Saul—it's Eli's grandson dressed like a priest! The house of Eli has ended. This man has no business pretending to be a priest, nor serving the king of God's chosen people. Things aren't well with Saul. How are things with Jonathan?

Jonathan tells his servant he wants to go into battle. Jonathan is literally between a rock and hard place. He is between the gleaming crag and the thorny crag and he somehow must make it to the top. Jonathan's plan defies all military logic. There is no element of surprise. He avoids the easy attack and embraces the difficult attack. Why? Because his confidence is not in himself but in Yahweh. The son is not like his father. Jonathan's trust in God is rewarded, and the enemy camp is thrown into so much confusion that victory is won. Notice verse 23: Yahweh saved Israel that day.

The contrast between Saul and Jonathan grows darker. Saul is not looking so much like a king as he looks like a judge, and that's not a good thing. He makes a foolish vow which reminds us of Jephthah's foolish vow, and that ended in his daughter's death. When Jonathan finds out his father's command, he compares his father with Achan who troubled Israel. Saul makes a foolish vow that makes it harder for the soldiers to fight because they are growing weak. Victory could have been greater had the men been stronger. When Saul hears that his son is the great offender against his command, he is resolved to carry out the foolish vow just like Jephthah. This time someone stops the vow from being carried out. The people of Israel take Saul's words and throw them back to him: As Yahweh lives, you will not kill Jonathan!

Saul is quickly learning the limitations of the throne. Kings can lead into battle, but they can also fail or diminish the ability for victory. Kings can build altars, but they can't guarantee God's will. Kings can talk big, but they can't always carry out their rash vows! Doesn't Jonathan stand out as a far better candidate for the throne than his father? Yet, God did not make a mistake when he allowed Saul to ascend the throne. God is still busy working out his perfect plans for his people.

Thursday, April 24

Read: 1 Samuel 15; Psalm 28

The termination notice was sent out in chapter 13: Saul is fired. His kingdom will not continue (13:14). Yet Saul is still on the throne, and he will remain on the throne long past his usefulness. God is sovereign over both Saul's sentence and its timing. Saul is rejected firmly for a second time in chapter 15. The words of Samuel communicate the words of Yahweh: Devote to destruction the Amalekites. The Amalekites plundered Israel back in Exodus 17, but now Saul gets to be the Lord's executioner. Like Joshua was told at Jericho, Saul is told to show no mercy to the Amalekites. God's Word is really clear, but does Saul obey?

Saul is victorious in battle, but he is not faithful in victory. The text gives a double emphasis in 15:8–9: Saul took Agag alive; Saul and the people spared his life. Saul kept the best for himself and only sacrificed to the Lord the despised and worthless things. This is what we might expect from a king like the nations, but not the king of the people of God. Yahweh grieves Saul's sinfulness as king and Samuel shares the same grief. Word reaches Samuel that Saul has built a monument to himself, which leads Samuel to travel to see Saul face-to-face. When he arrives Saul shamelessly tells Samuel that he has actually obeyed the commands of God. The bleating sheep and the lowing oxen tell a different story! Saul tries to say that he has saved the best for the Lord, but God had already told Saul what to do. Saul has not listened to the voice of Yahweh. He pretends that he was going to sacrifice to the Lord, but Samuel preaches: obedience is better than sacrifice!

Saul seems to be attempting to repent, but it is too little, too late. He is confessing to Samuel rather than Yahweh. He is blaming the people for his sin rather than taking responsibility and truly repenting. Samuel makes clear for the second time that just as Saul rejected God, God has rejected Saul. The kingdom will be torn from him no matter how many excuses he makes or how much he pleads. It's important that we understand exactly why the Lord is ripping the kingdom from Saul. It's not merely because he sins. David later sins famously, but there's a difference between David and Saul: repentance. David repents just as openly as he sinned. Saul denies responsibility and refuses to repent. If we learn anything from the life of Saul, let it be the necessity of repentance.

The king like the nations has been thoroughly disqualified. Saul was told that Yahweh would seek a man after his own heart, a neighbor better than Saul (13:14; 15:28). Now we get the first glimpses of this better neighbor, David. It will be a long journey to the throne. The people chose their first king, but now God has provided for himself the king after his own heart, a king of God's own choosing. Samuel is sent to the family of Jesse, but he must act wisely to avoid the wrath of Saul. After all, he's carrying the king-anointing oil. Samuel must also try to think wisely: which son of Jesse will be the king? Samuel seems to think like most ordinary people would think and he evaluates the potential successors to the throne based on their external appearances. Which son is the oldest? Who looks like a king? Who carries himself like a king?

God will have none of that logic. We're told that Yahweh looks upon the heart. It's significant that the most spiritual man in Israel was still trying to evaluate future kings based on appearances and worldly standards like age. Saul checked all the appearance boxes. Remember how tall and king-like he looked. It's time to consider the king's heart, which of course only God fully knows. Samuel's expectations seem like anyone else's, but they are wrong. When we first lay eyes on David, he too is handsome like Saul. Perhaps these external appearances truly don't matter at all. But David is not like Saul in key ways. When we first met Saul, he was an incompetent donkey wrangler, but David is faithfully shepherding the flock out in the field. Israel needs a faithful shepherd.

Samuel anoints David right there on the spot, and the Spirit of God rushes upon David like it rushed upon previous judges, but we're told that the Spirit is on David permanently. This is true, of course, of every Christian today. We have the Spirit and he will never leave us or forsake us. David is now the king of Israel. Or is he? He's only been anointed in front of his family. No one else in the nation knows. David doesn't go clear the throne and take his rightful seat. Instead we see David sent into the house of the enemy: Saul. Now that Saul doesn't have God's spirit, he is terrorized by an evil spirit—sent from God! The only relief Saul receives is through the ministry of young David. Could it be that the new king of Israel will not only fight their physical battles but also their spiritual battles? Doesn't this David point us to the greater David, our true King?

Weekend Devotion: Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

The first thing you need to understand about Jesus' death is that He died in our place, as our substitute. The Bible says Jesus died as "the just for the unjust."

Jesus was the just one, completely innocent of any sin. But He went to the cross and died for us who had already been tried and convicted of sin in heaven's courtroom. Jesus Christ did not die as a helpless victim . . . On the cross, Jesus took the death stroke for sin that we deserved.

God Cannot Simply Overlook Our Sin

Here is the heart of the matter of why Jesus had to die. When the Bible says that God is just, it means that He is perfectly, totally, and completely righteous, holy, and separated from sin. And being just, God cannot overlook sin . . .

If you were to go through all of the dictionaries in the world to find one word that would describe God, what do you think that word would be? Most people would say it is the word love, because the Bible says in 1 John 4:8, "God is love." But if you had to find one word that more than any other captured the essence of God's nature, it would be the word holy. "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts," the seraphim cry ceaselessly in heaven (Isaiah 6:3).

God's holiness means that He is the complete antithesis of sin. God's holiness burns against sin. His holiness regards sin as a clenched fist in His face. Sin is a repudiation of all that God is.

We Are Full of Sin

But if you were to search all the dictionaries and lexicons for a word that best describes mankind, it would be the word sinful. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). There is a chasm as wide as eternity between a holy, sinless God and sinful man. The glory of God is His holiness. The shame of mankind is our sin . . .

Merely ignoring our sin doesn't get rid of it, however. So we have a problem, which is that God is holy and just and must judge sin, and yet we are filled with sin . . . Someone might say, "Well, can't God just overlook sin? He can do anything He wants to do, and since He loves sinners and wants them to

be saved, why doesn't He just say, 'I forgive you,' without requiring that sin be punished?"

The reason is that simply overlooking sin would not make God loving, but only unjust and unfair. I doubt if any victim of a heinous crime would be satisfied to have the judge say to the criminal, "I'm basically a loving person. So I am going to overlook what you did and let you go." They say in a court of law that when a guilty man is acquitted, the judge is condemned. A judge who acquits the guilty cannot justify his actions by claiming that it was an act of love . . .

The Cross Is God's Eternal Provision for Our Sin

But because God is a God of infinite love, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit drew up a plan in the councils of eternity past that called for God the Son to take our sin upon Himself and go to the cross. The cross was not an accident or an after-thought but was in the heart and mind of God from all eternity. The Bible calls Jesus "the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).

Before God framed this universe, before He flung out the sun, moon, and stars, scooped out the oceans, and heaped up the mountains, before you and I were ever born, God saw the cross. His eternal decree is that "without shedding of blood is no remission" for sin (Hebrews 9:22). That is why Jesus Christ was born in the shadow of the cross.

The cross is pictured, prophesied, and portrayed from the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation. In a sense the river of blood that flowed from Jesus' side on the cross began in a figure flowing in the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve sinned and tried to hide their shame with fig leaves, God clothed them with garments made of animal skins (Genesis 3:21). You cannot make an animal-skin garment without killing the animal. God was teaching us that the guilt of sin must be dealt with by the shedding of blood.

Then in Genesis 4:1-5 we read that Adam's two sons, Cain and Abel, brought their offerings to the Lord. Abel was a shepherd who brought God a blood sacrifice by killing a lamb from his flock. But Cain was a farmer who tried to offer God fruits and vegetables from the ground that God had cursed because of sin. God accepted Abel's offering but rejected Cain's. Why? Because without the shedding of blood, there is no remission for sin.

Then God destroyed the world with a flood and saved Noah and seven others with him. When they came out of the ark, the first thing Noah did was to offer a blood sacrifice upon an altar (Genesis 8:20). Why? Because without the shedding of blood, there is no remission for sin.

But when Isaac was a young, strapping boy, God said to Abraham, “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest... and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of” (Genesis 22:2). Abraham must have been in agony, but he knew that if God wanted him to sacrifice Isaac, He could raise him from the dead.

So Abraham went to Mount Moriah, the place that would later be known as Mount Calvary, prepared an altar, and laid Isaac on it. But as Abraham took the knife to slay his son, God stayed his hand. Abraham looked up and saw a ram-crowned with thorns, if you will-caught in a thicket. God provided a substitute for Isaac, because blood had to be shed for the remission of sin.

And then this red river of blood flowed into Egypt, where the people of Abraham were formed into a nation in the midst of their slavery. When God got ready to deliver Israel from Egypt, the first thing He did was to command the people to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on the doorposts of their homes so that when God’s death angel came, he would “pass over” the Israelites. God told Moses, “When I see the blood, I will pass over you” (Exodus 12:1-13).

The Jews were also instructed to eat their lambs in a meal that came to be known as the Passover feast. An innocent lamb was killed as a substitute for the people in each Jewish home, and its blood was posted. If the Israelites had put diamonds or rubies on their doorposts, that would have done no good. Had they put up poetry and sentiment rather than sacrifice, that would have done no good. Neither would it have done any good to take a spotless lamb and tie it alive to their doorposts. God was cleansing His people, but that required blood.

This red river of blood continued to flow throughout the Bible until one day it reached its climax in the Lord Jesus Christ. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus one day and cried, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” John 1:29).

The Shadow of the Cross Fell upon Jesus

Hebrews 10:1 tells us that all of those Old Testament sacrifices were only a “shadow” of the reality to come. A shadow is only an outline that has no detail or color. It’s not the shadow that really matters, but the reality it represents. The Old Testament’s sacrifices were just getting people ready for Jesus to come. God was teaching us that the wages of sin is death, and that nothing but shed blood can atone for sin. Sin always brings death in God’s holy court of justice.

Now we can begin to see why Peter said that Jesus died in our place, “the just for the unjust” (1 Peter 3:18). The Lord Jesus hung His head on the cross and died on the same limestone ridge where so long before Abraham had found God’s substitute sacrifice in a thicket, and where the priests were the very day of Jesus’ death putting to death innocent lambs on the Passover: This is the substitutionary purpose of the cross.¹

¹ Excerpted from Adrian Rogers, *The Passion of Christ and the Purpose of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).



Adrian
Rogers

Adrian Rogers (1931–2005) was senior pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, for over thirty-two years. He also ministered to millions through his ministry Love Worth Finding. A denominational statesman, he served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention for three terms. He was a key leader of the Conservative Resurgence within the SBC, leading the fight for biblical inerrancy.

This Sunday’s Sermon text:
Revelation 2:1–7

Hymn of the Month

“Thine Be the Glory”

Few hymns capture the triumphant joy of the resurrection like “Thine Be the Glory.” Written by Swiss pastor Edmond Budry in 1884 and set to the stirring tune of Handel’s “See, the Conqu’ring Hero Comes,” this hymn proclaims Christ’s victory over the grave. The words echo the exultant declaration of 1 Corinthians 15:57: “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Christ’s resurrection is the foundation of our hope. He has won the victory over sin and death, and his empty tomb is the proof that the grave has lost its power. The second stanza reminds us that the risen Jesus meets his people with love, scattering fear and gloom. Just as he comforted Mary Magdalene in the garden and reassured his disciples behind locked doors, he continues to strengthen and sustain his church today.

The final stanza lifts our gaze beyond this life. Because he is the Prince of life, we do not need to doubt him. Life apart from him is empty, but through his love, we are made more than conquerors (Rom 8:37). One day, he will lead us through the final waters of death—our own “Jordan”—bringing us safely to our eternal home.

As we sing this hymn, let us do so with joyful confidence. Christ has risen, his victory is sure, and because he lives, so too shall we.

-Pastor Laramie



Scan this QR code with your phone to access a recording of this song on Youtube.

Thine Be the Glory

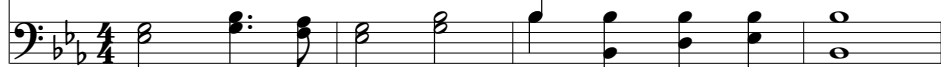
Edmond Louis Budry, 1884
trans. R. Birch Hoyle, 1923

JUDAS MACCABEUS
10 11 11 11 with refrain

George Frederick Handel, 1746



1. Thine be the glo - ry, ris - en, con - qu'ring Son;
2. Lo! Je - sus meets us, ris - en from the tomb.
3. No more we doubt Thee, glo - rious Prince of life!



Refrain: Thine be the glo - ry, ris - en, con - qu'ring Son;



end - less is the vic - t'ry Thou o'er death hast won.
Lov - ing - ly He greets us, scat - ters fear and gloom;
Life is naught with - out Thee; aid us in our strife;



end - less is the vic - t'ry Thou o'er death hast won!



An - gels in bright rai - ment rolled the stone a - way,
let His church with glad - ness hymns of tri - umph sing,
make us more than con - qu'rors, through Thy death - less love;



kept the fold - ed grave - clothes where Thy bod - y lay.
for her Lord now liv - eth; death hath lost its sting.
bring us safe through Jor - dan to Thy home a - bove.



Weekly Calendar at Ramah

Sundays:

Sunday School: 9:45 a.m.

Worship Service: 11:00 a.m.

Equipping the Saints: 4:00 p.m.

Wednesdays:

Prayer Meeting: 5:45pm

Choir Practice: 7:00pm

(on 2nd, 9th & 16th)

Family Ministry Events

Following the Equipping the Saints Gatherings

April 6, Bowling at Junction Lanes

April 27, Fellowship at PopDrinks in Newnan

Special Services

Saturday, March 29 at 5:00pm

Baptism Service

Friday, April 18 at 6:00pm

Facing the Cross Service



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