

CHAPTER 8, A FEW GOOD MEN AND WOMEN

TIMELESS TRUTH: THE CALL VS. THE CULTURE - AN ETERNAL PROBLEM

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

The nation of Israel had a place to call home at last. Settling into the Promised Land enabled them to leave behind their wandering ways and fulfill one of the key promises to Abraham: a land for God's people to occupy. But, failing to evict the Canaanites from the land, these pagan neighbors became a toxic influence on a nation called to be different.

After the death of Joshua, God's people felt this pull of worldly culture and a destructive pattern emerged:

- Israel turned again and again to the worship of pagan gods.
- God brought divine judgment.
- Israel cried out for God's help.
- God raised up a judge to save them.
- This cycle of sin became the pattern of life in Israel for the next 300 years.

Early on, Israel was conquered by the Canaanite king, Jabin. God appointed Deborah, a prophet, judge, and strong leader to deliver her people. She and her military leader, Barak, defeated the powerful Canaanite army led by Sisera. He escaped and took refuge in the tent of a woman named Jael, who killed him while he slept. Israel had been delivered for now, but the cycle would continue.

Israel was later oppressed by the Midianites. God called Gideon out of nowhere to deliver His people. Gideon was pretty sure that God has mistaken him for some well-built four-star Israelite commander and asked twice for a miraculous sign. God confirmed His intentions and Gideon gathered 32,000 troops to take on the vast Midianite army. God, however, trimmed their forces to just 300 men. He used them to route the Midianites and the people enjoyed freedom...for a while.

The cycle continued and Israel was soon dominated by the Philistines. This time God prepared a deliverer by promising a child to a barren woman. This child, Samson, was to be raised as a Nazirite, who was set apart to God. His hair was not to be cut and he was to drink no wine. He was well known for his superhuman strength and less than super character, especially in the company of beautiful women. His second wife, Delilah, betrayed him by cutting his hair so he would forfeit his advantage and God's favor. Samson himself embodied this insidious cycle that had enslaved Israel, with his saw-tooth history of indiscretions and victories.

As a result, the Philistines took him captive and gouged out his eyes. But his hair grew back, and his strength returned. Samson's last day was his best one. He was brought into the Philistine temple to entertain their leaders. He prayed to the LORD, collapsed the pillars of the temple and defeated the Philistines at last.

God is never bashful about His intentions for His people. He never tolerates sin and, at the same time, never breaks His covenant with His people. Israel may not have fully understood God's discipline, but over and over He had to bring them to their knees in order to bring them to Himself.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Have you ever been rescued from a dangerous or difficult situation? What happened?

1. Israel is constantly running from the true God to other false gods. What are some of the false gods in our culture today? Which of them have you trusted?
2. False gods trigger a cycle: a web of sin, God's judgments, crying out for help, and God providing deliverance. What are some destructive cycles you have seen in your own life?
3. Do you think that the Israelites did a good job of passing their faith to the next generation? How can we do this better in the church and in our own families?
4. How would you describe Deborah? In what way does her story influence your view of women in leadership?
5. Do you think Gideon's request for a sign was an act of faith or an act of faithlessness? Does his faith change over time?
6. Your friend, Samson, confides in you that he has trouble with women but doesn't understand why. What would you tell him?
7. In what ways was Samson a faithful man of God? In what ways was he not?
8. What was Samson's true weakness? How can you deal with your weaknesses before they become your downfall?
9. Where do you see God's grace in this chapter?
10. Which character in this chapter stands out to you and why? How can you be more like them?

CLOSING PRAYER