

Free - Take One



Shaqah

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*“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”
Colossians 2:8*

Issue #124

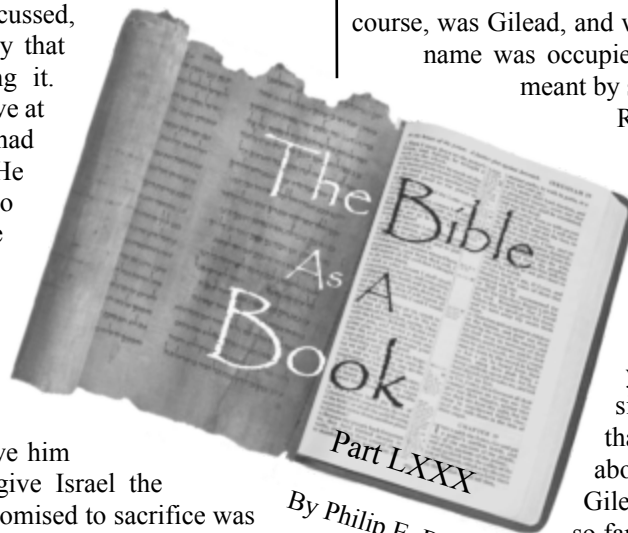
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As we continue our overview of the Book of Judges, last time we talked about how Israel had once again turned from God to take on the false religions of surrounding people. When the Ammonites and Philistines began oppressing Israel we see they once again cried out to God for help. As much as these details seem very much repeated over and over what was new this time around is that God said He would not deliver them. Instead He challenges them to cry to the gods they now served to see if they would deliver them. Israel showed they knew very good and well that wasn't going to help and began destroying the idols in the land as well as make an attempt to serve The Law of God. As we discussed, following the Law was not really that useful if God was not honoring it. However, this caused God to grieve at the condition His chosen nation had fallen into, and for that reason He led Israel to the next judge who would deliver them. That judge was a man named Japhthah who was a unique judge considering his circumstances. Japhthah did know of God but he didn't know enough that he made a very bad decision to promise God a sacrifice if God would give him the victory in battle. God did give Israel the victory, but what Japhthah had promised to sacrifice was whatever came out of his house as he returned home. Thus, we ended last time talking about how we need to be more in tune with what God wants instead of making blind promises that turn out to be wrong to break and wrong to keep! All that brought us through Judges chapter 11 verse 40 and we are ready to begin chapter 12 verse 1 this time.

As we begin chapter 12 we are still reading about the story of Japhthah, and what happens next gives a real view of why the Israelites living on the east side of Jordan always had a little difficulty staying connected to the nation. The tribes of Gad and Reuben might not have had as much trouble being entire tribes who lived on the east side but it was particularly hard on Manasseh. That tribe had been given land on the east side and still received land on the west side of Jordan because they were such a large tribe. However, splitting a tribe in this

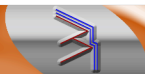
way seemed to make those on the east side be looked at as almost a whole other tribe. The trouble with that is they were not a separate tribe and this left those living on the west side in a bit of a contradiction when it came to them. In so many ways they seemed to feel those on the east side were something different but on what you might call a legal level of thinking, they were all the tribe of Manasseh. What added to this contradiction is that those who lived on the east side had been given a piece of land that had an established name which predated the children of Israel coming out of Egypt and going back to at least the time of Jacob, likely beyond. That name, of course, was Gilead, and while some of the land known by that name was occupied by the tribe of Gad, that's what I meant by saying what I did concerning Gad and Reuben.



By Philip E. Busby

If you referred to them it was easy to speak of the land of the tribe of Gad or Reuben and everyone knew what you were talking about. If you were speaking about Manasseh the question was, are you speaking about those on the east side of Jordan or the west? To clarify that confusion it was easy enough to talk about those on the east side as being in Gilead or of Gilead. This eventually went so far as to end up being more of an actual name for them as we see references about them being Gileadites. Once such a designation was used for any time period it only seemed to make sense that those of Manasseh living on the east of Jordan were more like a separate tribe or people with a name all their own. The story we see has a few details in it that show us exactly how that dynamic worked and some of the problems it caused. Of course, what we see next also has a great deal to do with something we've covered before, which is the fact Manasseh is actually a half tribe to begin with along with their brother tribe of Ephraim. This added to the complexity of the thinking in that on many levels not only were those of Manasseh on the east of Jordan not a different tribe than those on the west, but Ephraim and Manasseh being half tribes meant they were as a whole one tribe! Add to that another fact we've talked about before, which

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is that Ephraim was and certainly thought of themselves as a leading tribe among Israel, and the following story makes perfect sense.

What we see beginning in chapter 12 is that the men of Ephraim gather themselves together and much as they did to Gideon, they accuse Japhthah of going to battle without sending for them. In some ways this was like saying Japhthah (and the men of Gilead in general who had made him their leader) didn't have official permission to declare war. In other ways this was simply arrogance in Ephraim being offended someone in Israel went to battle without thinking they needed Ephraim's help! The other aspect that made it seem Ephraim had a point in this was what we just covered. Ephraim and Manasseh were half tribes, meaning it took both of them to have one full tribe, and Ephraim definitely felt they held the leadership role in that arrangement! The men of Ephraim were so serious about this charge they tell Japhthah they were going to burn his house to the ground. To be clear, this is more than the loss of a house. This is to say they were going to destroy everything Japhthah owned and kill Japhthah along with his entire family! In our world today this would be bad enough but in those days it was even thought of as worse. What they were threatening to do was remove the family of Japhthah from Israel both now and for the future.

There can be no wonder Japhthah took this seriously. He had already been originally rejected by his father's house for being the offspring of a harlot, but after coming back to lead the very fight the men of Ephraim are upset about, Japhthah had been promised the position of leadership at least in Gilead. Now part of what was essentially the same tribe was not only telling him he was not worthy of leadership but that his name would be blotted out completely. Japhthah responds to these men by pointing out it was obvious the men of Gilead were going to war against Ammon. In other words, the call to battle could not have been something these men of Ephraim were unaware of, yet they did not come to help. Instead they waited until the victory was won, which Japhthah once again makes clear was an act of The God of Israel. This was a tense situation to say the least. Ephraim was declaring those of Gilead "fugitives" from their tribe for not following what Ephraim felt was the proper line of authority, and Japhthah felt Ephraim had failed them by not showing up for this war with Ammon! Due to this a war broke out between the two parties and Japhthah gathered all of Gilead to go against Ephraim. This obviously did not go well for Ephraim as we are given the picture they must have been somewhat scattered and attempted to get back across the Jordan as they could.

The issue with that was that the men of Gilead had taken control of the passage used to cross the Jordan, and when anyone came to cross, these soldier were to ask them if they were of Ephraim. If they attempted to deny their tribe they would ask them to say the word "Shibboleth," which means stream or floor. In asking this we see a difference between those on the west and those on the east of the Jordan, in that if you were from the west side you had an accent or lack there of which became evident when attempting to pronounce this word. When the men of Gilead found any man who showed he could not pronounce the word like a Gileadite they took him and executed him right there by the passage. In the end, Ephraim

lost 42,000 men in this fighting, which is no small number! It also proved the point that Ephraim was not up to fighting Japhthah in any way which in turn proved how much God was with Japhthah. This I'm sure put an end to any doubt that Japhthah was a judge backed by God's authority and he would go on to judge Israel for six years. Upon his death we see confirmation that he was not rejected by those of Gilead in any way as Japhthah was buried in a city of Gilead.

After Japhthah we begin going through another time of having judges listed for us of whom we do not get much information. Again, this speaks at least partly to that fact we discussed in an earlier segment which is that God was sending judges among Israel, not because a specific enemy had attacked or was oppressing them, but because God was giving Israel the opportunity to have a better system than a king. It was not the system God designed Israel to have but it was better than having especially a dynasty of men or the expectation of a dynasty each king would bring. The next judge of Israel would be a man named Ibzan. He is yet another judge we are given no tribe for but we are told he was from Bethlehem. This causes most people to assume he was of the tribe of Judah, but in those times it would be just as reasonable to believe he was of the tribe of Benjamin. No matter how right or wrong those guesses may be, the fact tribes are not always given for a judge might speak more to the idea Israel did not care about tribes as much as they should have, even at this time. I repeat over and over that Israel was given the Law to enact because the entire nation was meant to be a representation of God's plan and will. Having twelve tribes was a part of that representation along with all those things they did which would be considered more religious practices.

Certainly what we see as Israel comes out of Egypt is the truth God made this twelve tribe fact physically apparent in the way He instructed the nation to encamp around the tabernacle. While living on a large piece of land did not put them in this perfect order around the tabernacle (or later temple), we see in the Book of Joshua the specifics of how the land was divided between the tribes. In doing this Israel was still maintaining that obvious twelve tribe system, and this was not so much for the organizational benefit for Israel's sake which many would say it was for. It was more so to continue showing those outside of Israel the fact the nation consisted of twelve specific tribes. These kinds of facts are why the word "Gentile" is not the general term many believe it is. Gentile does not refer to all non-Jews. The word was specifically intended to refer to those who live directly around Israel and within fairly close proximity to the most. This is because of the same radiating evangelistic idea we see Jesus instruct His disciples to follow in spreading the Gospel. (Acts 1:8) Jerusalem may not be the center of the universe as some ancient Jewish philosophy held, but it is the center of God's evangelism to the world and living around and close to Israel gave Gentiles an advantage in being the first non-Jews to benefit from what God had given the nation. In short, Israel losing the clear picture of consisting of twelve tribes wasn't good for anyone!

Another fact we are given about Ibzan, which is a lot like the earlier judge Jair, is that he has thirty sons. However, this judge also has thirty daughters. He also would appear to be

Following the Biblical Stream:

By Philip E. Busby

In our last segment we continued the story of Abraham's servant being in Mesopotamia to seek a wife for Isaac. Specifically we were discussing the story where the servant is sitting with the family telling them all the details that had sent him on this journey as well as what brought him to this very point they were now. In covering that we talked a lot about how much this story gives us the clear perspective that God really does care about us as individuals. This is all part of why we have recorded for us the details of the servant recounting a story we were already witness to by reading the events as they unfolded. The servant may be telling details we already know, but much of it Rebekah does not and certainly her family does not. Thus, there is great value in seeing this story was told to them and we should see how our view of these details is one perspective as we read them happening but a different perspective at this point. This comes by stopping to think about how they were told to the people who are the fulfillment of what the servant was sent to accomplish. In spite of human culture and customs of the day Rebekah got to hear how much God was not pushing her into this, while at the same time He had worked everything out to set this opportunity before her. No matter if she has or does not have her family's support in going, they too have to be lying to themselves if they say God wasn't in it. All this brought us through Genesis chapter 24 verse 47 and we are ready to begin verse 48 this time.

Looking at the place we ended last segment we see we're getting very close to the end of the servant's story. We came all the way down to the point where he asks her whose daughter she is and finds he has been led straight to a woman from Abraham's brother's family. This leaves us with just one fine detail of his story but it's an important detail. Verse 48 is where the servant tells how he immediately went into worshipping God when he found out he had been led to the exact family Abraham had sent him to find. This is the confirmation to the family that the servant believed at that moment they were the right family and Rebekah the woman he sought. This might seem obvious to them as it does to us on many levels but this ended any doubts. The servant wasn't just being lazy in his task and took the first opportunity he got in finding a wife for Isaac. You may agree or disagree the servant's worship had that much bearing on the situation, but to understand the Bible we must appreciate God is speaking to us all. God is not just speaking to those of us who take what He says at face value. God is using His Word to reach out to even those who are skeptical on many different levels and ways as to if there is a God at work in this world at all.

For those who do not see how a simple verse like retelling the fact the servant bowed his head in prayer and worship to God can accomplish so much, I'd like to speak to that point before we move on. You see when it comes to people who are just looking for a reason to throw the Bible aside and call it an old dusty book it might not mean much. However, for those

who are compelled to give it some thought these details are part of the meat of the story. This is why I keep hammering over and over on how we need to consider the culture of the day in which these stories take place. If we look at this in the light of our culture today we find many people violate the third commandment out of what we call the Ten Commandments on a regular basis. What shocks me beyond belief is the way people will do this even when they claim to be Christians! It's almost as if the excuse is that as a Christian we have the right to speak God's name in worship to Him, and so when we use His name in more of a swear it's acceptable because we are calling out to God and/or giving Him credit for something amazing. It's hard to make this point without writing out an example of when I've heard people do this but I won't even use God's name in vain to do such a thing, so you either see this for yourself or you don't.

My real point as it relates to our verse is that in contrast to much of modern society, the culture of the world in the day this story took place was very different! Today we take a lot of pride in the simple idea we are willing to acknowledge God at all. It is to say, I'm not one of those backward people who still worships some idol or a god of nature. This goes so far it finally brings us to the people who feel prideful enough they don't believe in any god, even The One True God. Many see this as enlightened or the like, and we all want to be up with the times right? In truth, believing in God is only part of the process God is looking for and that's shown in Hebrews 11:6. There we are told that without faith it is impossible to please God. Satan has worked long and hard alongside evil men to distort the simple fact faith is a relationship with God. This because a relationship is more than just acknowledging a person or being's existence. It takes continual time and effort. This does not have to be the arduous task many people believe living for God is and we should see that in any relationship we have with other people, especially relationships we enjoy. No matter how much we enjoy a relationship there is still time and effort put into it; it just looks and feels different if we enjoy the relationship. That said, we should see how having faith is not God asking for too much, and if our relationship with Him seems cumbersome we need to stop and think about how we really feel concerning God!

So I repeat, having a relationship with God is far more than just acknowledging His existence. This all leads into answering why God, after creating Adam, said it was not good for man to be alone. God did not want the reason for our having a relationship with Him to be some manifestation of what we now call Stockholm Syndrome. God didn't want us to feel like we were His captives and we could either have some kind of relationship with Him or live our existence in total isolation. This also shows us why we are told God brought all the animals to Adam and specifies there was not a suitable helpmate found among them. (Gen. 2:18-20) People can and do find great comfort in animals. They can often make people feel they are not alone, but that's all speaking from a perspective of living in

a world full of people and possible relationships. Animals alone are not a replacement for knowing what it's like to have a relationship with another being who is at our same level or above. This is why God created Eve and it also speaks to why God gave humans the ability to be like the animals in that we were created male and female which can procreate. Procreation is by far not the obligation so many people feel it is, it's a choice God made available to us; a choice I don't believe we can grasp what it would feel like to be without!

I know some believe I've lost our point here but there are just so many great opportunities in studying one part of God's Word to explain another part of God's Word and maybe, just as we are talking about in the verses we are discussing, there is a way to see it from a different angle we had not considered before. This is how we go deeper in having a relationship with God. We can question many things God has done, not the least of which is how He created us with the choices we have. However, we question those things from the standpoint of having choices. Our view from a world where we were not given such choices would be very different and we would be far more in doubt of what God has done than we ever could be with what we've been given. We need to seek to be well rounded in knowing why God did what He did in creating us, and that takes us to the next words of the verse in Hebrews. It is impossible to please God without faith but the way we choose to do that, in spite of all the pain and suffering we see and all the things we might question about how God has created us, is to acknowledge God is God! I can't emphasize this point enough. We may or may not have had a difficult time accepting faith in the first place. However, we still come to faith with at least the thought it must be a good idea to have a relationship with the Being Who created us and all things we know exist.

As we go forward in faith that thought pattern is likely dampened with every struggle we face and every suffering we endure. It can be hurt with every struggle we see others face and suffering we see in this world at large. All the destruction man's sin has caused in this world can be blamed on God because it all comes back to saying, if He had not created us none of this would be happening! At the very least, if He had not created us the way He did this would be true. We have all kinds of reasons to doubt God, and that's exactly the trick Satan pulled out of his bag the day he got a chance to talk to Eve about The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. (Gen. 3:1-6) In this we see it's not just about us coming to faith in the first place but remaining in faith throughout our lives. We need to acknowledge God as God! This means we need to grasp the fact He knows so much more than we do that we don't fully understand why He did what He did. He comes from a perspective so far above ours we're just not going to quickly understand why He allows all that He has allowed. This fact is why many people believe faith is blind and we just have to accept we don't understand, but are we really blind? The answer to that is no we are not! From creation forward God has attempted to show us how much He wants us to grow to understand. Where this might have led by now if we had not fallen from the state we were created in is hard to imagine. However, even in a world as damaged as ours we can grow, and that's exactly what God wants us to do. The fact God wants us to continue to grow, no matter how far down we start, is why Jesus said He was going to prepare a place for

us that where He is we might be also. (John 14:1-3)

We can be well rounded and understand many things from many directions which help us better see the overall picture. In other words, faith is not blind, but if we don't want to put in the effort to have a relationship with The God Who can teach us all things we will live our existence in the dark. This is not pleasing to God and why it is impossible to please God without faith. God only asks of us something that is in our best interests, and that's a very mild way to put a very meaningful life changing truth! If we accept God as God we understand there are many things we do not currently know but we know The One Who knows it all! That brings us to the end point of the verse in Hebrews, for in those words we are told we also must believe He is one Who rewards those who "diligently" seek Him. The diligent part is important because again, we get very few points for simply acknowledging God's existence. We must desire a relationship with God and not just any relationship. We must accept a relationship where we acknowledge how much we need our Creator because He is our Creator. Why would we do that? Because we believe He is not some self serving god like the gods men create. God is not asking of us what He is asking of us because He wants to be appeased in return for giving us a good harvest or any number of things people might wish for in our modern world.

A great example of the fact we seek such things is seen in the way people want to make deals with God. If we do this for God we want Him to do this other thing for us. In so many ways we are working our way back to the point I am trying to make that got us started down all this to begin with. Whether we make a deal with God or not, we as humans have an overall thought pattern that leads us to believe God owes us something, especially if we are trying our best to be, "a good person." This is why people use the name of The Lord in vain. Instead of using His name to call upon Him and learn from Him, we use His name to curse Him for the things we feel He is responsible for if for no other reason than the fact He allows it all to happen! This in so many ways is where cursing in general comes from, and this is not the first time I've made this point. However, it directly relates to what we're talking about in this verse concerning why it's important the family know the servant immediately bowed himself and worshiped God for bringing him straight to Rebekah. It's important we understand the fact we don't really get any real long-term value in simply acknowledging God's existence because in the day and culture this story takes place people did that far more readily than we do today!

Far more people were what many today would call backward in that they worshiped many false gods. However, they actually held to a deeper understanding that God is God than many of us today! This fact is shown in how even people claiming to be Christians so easily take the name of God in vain and think nothing of it. Even claiming to be in a relationship with God Himself doesn't strike fear or conviction in one's heart that they just broke a commandment very high on the list of ten. We're not easily shaken like people use to be. I can see the degrading of what I'm talking about just in my own lifetime. Growing up I knew many people who did not claim to be Christians and had no interest in being one. However, if they

What About God's Chosen People?

Part LIV

From Living Springs' Questions and Answers

"Is it true that the Jews are God's chosen people? I have a Christian friend who says the Jews were not God's chosen people."

In our last segment we continued our step back to talk about the fact history tells us the Roman Empire was a Christian empire in its latter time. In doing this we are hoping to see how the Roman leadership was causing Rome's decline, especially when it came to how they handled the people they considered barbarians that lived in the North. Thus, we discussed the last couple emperors of Rome who belong to the set history calls the Five Good Emperors. An important fact we covered in that discussion was that in spite of these emperors being "good," Christians saw an increase of persecution during this time because they, like the Jews, appeared to be a cultural threat to the Roman people. This all went hand in hand with how the barbarians were also a cultural and physical threat to Rome. Our last segment ended by talking about an emperor named Commodus and how he eroded the empire through just his irresponsible handling of his position. This man grew to be so out of his mind he was eventually assassinated and the Roman senate had to try and undo a lot of the damage Commodus had done through his outlandish arrogance!

Commodus was assassinated on New Year's Eve of 192 A.D. Perhaps it's a bit of an irony that what was to come next began on New Year's Day 193 A.D. People often celebrate the New Year because it feels like a new beginning; a fresh start at attempting to improve one's life. This is best seen in people making New Year's resolutions where they make all sorts of determinations about what they are going to improve and accomplish over the course of the new year. This sort of tradition is nothing new but very ancient in nature. Thus, no doubt the people of the empire believed this to be a fresh start, and while the death of Commodus might have seemed like the end of a very bad time for Rome which gave hope for a brighter future where things could be sorted out and set straight once again, the road ahead was filled with turbulence for Rome's leadership like it had never seen before. Instead of being a chance to improve the empire and restore it to the glory of earlier days, 193 A.D. would actually be so bad it came to be known to history as the "Year of the Five Emperors."

If you remember, last segment we talked about a man named Pertinax. This man had been sent out to replace the governor of Britain after a round of assassinations had taken place at the time of Commodus. Not long after that he would be brought back to Rome and named "Urban Prefect," which is the title given to the person who administered the city of Rome. In our day we might call him the Mayor of Rome but it actually came with more power than a typical mayor of today has over a city. In a perfect example of this truth you might remember it was Pertinax who dispatched the Roman guard slated with

protecting the city in order to stop a military guard that had been ordered to "disperse" a mob who had come against one of Commodus' highest men. In doing this Pertinax no doubt saved the lives of countless Roman citizens who had come to protest the bad leadership Commodus and his officers were responsible for and which had led to a bread shortage. One would think after this Pertinax probably had a pretty good reputation among the people of Rome and others who knew about this incident. Whether that had much of anything to do with it or not it's hard to say, but Pertinax would be the man rushed to the barracks of the Praetorian Guard (the military unit slated with protecting the emperor) to be sworn in as the next emperor of Rome!

Pertinax attempted to bring the empire back to the leadership style it had seen under the "Five Good Emperors." Pertinax wanted to show the same kind of steady handedness emperors such as Marcus Aurelius had been known for. However, he was resisted on many levels, by many players, for many factors. Pertinax attempted to reform what was essentially Rome's welfare program but was resisted by those who felt they'd lose benefits due to this reform. This is not uncommon, as we see today. Politics play a far bigger part in government decisions than they ever should, and what really needs to be done is often stopped by those who are greedy and want to protect their piece of the pie! An almost instantaneous problem Pertinax faced was the fact the Praetorian Guard, who had essentially been the muscle behind Pertinax's ability to rise to the position of emperor, expected a reward for their services once he sat on the throne. However, Pertinax was quite different from his predecessor in that he desired to end corrupt practices such as payoffs for power and the like. This meant he did not give the expected reward and that upset the very guard slated with his protection. Nothing says government corruption like leaders being threatened by the very people slated with protecting them!

Pertinax made many enemies in his attempt to end corruption, and this should come as no surprise considering how many people had been struggling for years to gain power. They were very upset this man who was not in any line to become emperor believed he could just reset the system to something more noble and pure. For instance, in a move that should have been popular with the people Pertinax actually worked to reverse the devaluation of Roman money; in particular raising the purity of the silver Roman coins were made from. While this might have been popular with some people, there are always people who lose something in such a move and they would not be very happy. Going back to the Praetorian Guard, Pertinax was eventually pressured enough by these men that he was forced to come up with the money to pay them their "reward." To do so Pertinax would sell off much of Commodus' family property, including women and young men Commodus had kept as sex slaves. Such things show us how very difficult it is to end

corruption once it's in place!

In spite of the threat the Praetorian Guard was to him, Pertinax continued his attempt to cut off the corrupt payouts the military expected and he tried to impose more discipline in general. This and other factors such as the Praetorian Guard claiming they only received half the pay they expected, put Pertinax in great danger. Early March would bring the first attempt to assassinate Pertinax, but word of the attempt leaked and it was stopped. The man leading the attempt was actually pardoned but the officers involved were executed. Unfortunately for Pertinax it would not take long before the next attempt on his life was made. Angered by not getting what they felt they deserved the Praetorian Guard stormed the palace with at least two hundred men. Of course, the guards on duty at the time did not resist them and neither did the palace officers. Pertinax sent a man he believed to be loyal to him to meet the guard, but this man ended up siding with the guard instead. In spite of being advised to flee, Pertinax stayed and held his ground with the belief he could reason with the soldiers. History records he was very nearly successful in his attempt, but a single soldier decided to take it upon himself to rise up and kill Pertinax before any agreement could be made.

This left the Praetorian Guard, once again, in the most powerful position of choosing who the next emperor would be. In order to make their choice they put the position up for auction. The man who won the prize was named, Marcus Didius Julianus. Julianus was a man who had shown himself to be a successful Roman governor and even is credited with defeating two invading Germanic tribes, which is to say he defended the empire against "Barbarians." He was a rising star and gained power in about the same stride as Pertinax, but when Commodus came along he demoted Julianus and severely stunted his political career. This shows us all the more why such a man would take the opportunity to buy the emperor's throne when given the chance. However, there were three Roman generals who refused to follow Julianus and instead thought of themselves as the rightful emperor of the empire! None of this was helped by the fact Julianus was very unpopular with the people. He was not a good emperor and the people took every occasion to let him know how they felt. That's why as much as they might have wanted the power to begin with, it's not so much the generals who proclaimed themselves emperor as much as the military and the people. Pescennius Niger would be proclaimed emperor by the legions in Syria; Septimius Severus by the military in Illyricum and Pannonia; and Clodius Albinus by the military in Britain and Gaul. With these three generals unwilling to follow Julianus and they being no friends of each other, the empire was on the brink of civil war. This had to be great news for any of the barbarians who wanted to take advantage of it, and while we don't have a lot of details on how they might have, there should be little doubt they made inroads into the empire at this time.

Now, Severus truly wanted to be emperor but the people of Rome were more in favor of Niger, who they had called for to come and liberate Rome from Julianus. Problem was, Niger was not the general stationed closest to Rome. The one closest out of the three was Severus, and to Rome he would head. Julianus had anticipated this and attempted to train the Praetorian Guard for field battle which they had little to no

experience in fighting. In the hope he might find the fighting men of the military loyal to the throne, he sent senators to persuade Severus' men to abandon him in favor of a new general who had been named to take Severus' place. Julianus also sent a centurion with orders to kill Severus. All of this backfired as in the end no one did anything to stop Severus from marching right into Rome. There is debate about this, but as he approached the Praetorian Guard were either sorely ineffective in stopping Severus or they abandoned Julianus completely. In either case Severus' success in moving forward won over the support of more and more of the people in the heart of the empire. Julianus offered Severus the chance to share his power in ruling the empire but there was no reason for Severus to take up such an offer. He simply won over the people he needed to win over and killed the people who stood in his way. He even got the Praetorian Guard to betray the actual men who had killed Pertinax and he executed them! In the end, the Roman Senate passed a motion proclaiming divine honor to Pertinax and sentencing Julianus to death. On the second of June, just 66 days into his rule, a soldier carried out Julianus' execution.

The senate then passed a further motion condemning Julianus and his legacy. Severus had no trouble securing Rome and he dismissed what was left of the Praetorian Guard in order to rebuild the guard using his own men who were loyal to him. This is when civil war truly broke out. It could have been very nasty considering there were three players who all had reason to hate each other, in particular Severus and Albinus who had found themselves on opposing sides before. Oddly enough Severus was able to make an agreement with Albinus proclaiming him Caesar, and in so doing giving Albinus great power along with potential to be full emperor one day. With at least some of the people still supporting Niger, Severus actually sitting on the throne in Rome and Albinus given the title Caesar, it was as if Rome had three emperors all at once. This situation is why the year of 193 A.D. is looked at as the Year of Five Emperors. Pertinax would serve for about nine and a half weeks before he was murdered and Julianus right about nine weeks before he was executed. Then these three generals would round out the year serving as co-emperors of the empire, though I doubt very much any of them would have liked to put it that way. The simple fact is Niger certainly did not recognize Severus as emperor and that meant those regions and people loyal to Niger did not. With Albinus appeased with a title and significant power Severus did not need to worry about those loyal to Albinus for the time and so Severus would go after Niger.

Niger held great pieces of the empire with powerful governors who were loyal to him. However, Severus actually controlled a much greater share of the military force, which gave him the advantage. The fighting between the two would go on for the remainder of 193 A.D., but things generally did not go well for Niger. He suffered loss after loss and this did not go unnoticed by some of those regions loyal to him. People began to switch sides but Niger kept fighting because by that point it was pretty much a fight for his life. It finally came down to the battle of Issus in May of 194 A.D. where Niger was decisively defeated by one of Severus' top generals. Niger retreated to Antioch and then attempted to flee to Parthia but was captured and beheaded. His severed head was taken to Byzantium in the hopes that city would now surrender to Severus' forces. It would take Severus into 196 A.D. before he could bring Byzantium to

its knees, but when he did he did so with such destruction that the city had to be rebuilt. Many of Niger's supporters had been very loyal through it all, so not only did it take some doing for Severus to completely bring them all down under his control, he would seek to punish them once he did. Severus would eventually bring Niger's head to Rome and put it on display for all to see, and this was a truly brutal act for a proper Roman emperor. Severus would also have Niger's wife and children executed and his estate would be confiscated.

After Severus brought down Byzantium it became his goal to consolidate power all to himself. It had been of great advantage for Severus to bring Albinus to his side up until now. Not only had it given him someone steady who could be depended on to run the empire while he fought a war, it kept an enemy close so he didn't have to fight two fronts. For the empire this turned out really well considering what a mess a three way battle for power might have caused. That move alone may have served to save the empire from falling apart right then and there. However, the crisis had passed and now Severus was more worried about his future than any war or even the empire as a whole. Albinus was smart enough to see this danger coming and even avoided one attempt on his life, all be it narrowly. After this Albinus took direct control of the legions that were loyal to him; an army of some 150,000 men. In the autumn of 196 A.D. he received news that Severus had named his eldest son rightful heir to the throne and gave him the title of Caesar. Severus also convinced the Roman Senate to proclaim Albinus an enemy of the state! Such situations are almost hard to believe because it's one thing for Severus to want Albinus gone but to convince the entire senate to make it official was quite the political feat. The most likely explanation for why the senate did this is that they, more so than Severus, cared about settling down future civil war which would surely break out between the two families should Albinus remain in the picture.

Again, we see how much Albinus understood he might as well fight for the throne or die trying. He would declare himself emperor and begin his army's march from Britain to Gaul. He found victory over Severus' forces there but not the allegiance of other pieces of the military stationed near by. In mid February of 197 A.D. Albinus would clash directly with Severus and his forces at what is in our modern time Lyon France. This would be a large battle with the forces of both sides numbering over 150,000 men in total. However, it would not go well for Albinus as his army was defeated and history does not know clearly if Albinus committed suicide or was captured and executed by order of Severus. In either case one story shows us just how much these men hated each other as we are told Severus had Albinus' body stripped naked and laid on the ground in front of him so Severus could literally trample Albinus under his horse's hooves. This would go down as the hardest fought and bloodiest battle between Roman forces that had ever been seen! In further cruelty Severus first pardoned Albinus' family but then executed them by beheading. He also beheaded the corpse of Albinus and had the head sent to Rome in much the same way he did Niger's. These kinds of acts show no matter how much men like to believe they are building a utopia, they are nothing but destructive and hateful without God's guidance. Rome had no right to call those to the north of the empire, barbarians!

After settling Rome's civil war Severus was determined to push east into Mesopotamia capturing a great deal of territory belonging to the Kingdom of Parthia. It is said his motivation for this was the idea that Parthia had supported Niger, and we see in this how Severus was greatly motivated by revenge. He would also expand the empire to the south, setting up fortifications in the Arabian desert, and yes he went back to Britain to push north against Caledonian. In doing so he was able to strengthen Hadrian's Wall and pushed past Antonine's Wall. He forced his way ahead to take back a lot of the gains Rome had lost to the native people over the last century. However, none of this came without a price. The Caledonians intentionally encouraged the Romans to keep trudging ahead through the forest and swamps in the hope the army would be worn out, scattered, and vulnerable to attack in smaller groups. This is said to have cost the Romans around 50,000 men. In spite of this, Severus pushed until the Caledonians sued for peace in 210 A.D. This Severus would grant with conditions seriously unfavorable to the Caledonians. Due to this the Caledonians, along with other "barbarians" living north of the Antonine Wall, revolted later that year. In an example of how much Rome brought themselves to be hated by so many barbarians in the North, Severus would return to Britain with determination not just to bring the barbarians under control but to exterminate them! Severus' order to his soldiers was, "Let no-one escape sheer destruction, no-one our hands, not even the babe in the womb of the mother, if it be male; let it nevertheless not escape sheer destruction."

On the pure Roman side of things, Severus turned out to be a powerful emperor, which was good for him considering he was never popular with the senate. While his conquests might seem like similar grand acts to emperors of the past, Severus basically turned the Roman Empire into a military dictatorship. At will he would execute senators and replace them with men he favored. He got away with much of this because he somehow became popular with the people of Rome. However, this odd fact can be greatly attributed to the simple idea Severus was a good emperor in comparison to Commodus, which is not a very high standard to go by. That said, this shows another way in which the Roman Empire was falling not rising to the wonderful things men continue to believe they can build with a one world government, and none of this was good for Jews and Christians to be sure! While there is debate about how much Severus himself may or may not have liked or hated Christians in particular, persecution of both groups went very unchecked during his time.

What would ultimately bring an end to Severus was his campaign in Caledonia. He would fall seriously ill and be forced to fall back to York which he had made his base for the campaign. There he would die in 211 A.D. His son, Caracalla continued the campaign but ultimately agreed to peace and withdrew. After this Rome would never again push north into Caledonia and ultimately withdraw to Hadrian's Wall permanently. Now as history sees it Severus began what is known as the Severan Dynasty, and upon his death leadership of the empire would fall to both of his sons, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, who was more commonly known by the nickname "Caracalla," and Geta with Severus' wife acting as their main advisor. It was Severus' wish the two sons rule jointly and his wife was to see that it happened. However, power corrupts and

maybe the chance at more power corrupts even more. Caracalla would have nothing to do with joint rulership and had his brother murdered by the Praetorian Guard later that same year. This would make Caracalla sole ruler of Rome, but once again, he was an emperor who did not care to administer the empire. Caracalla was more of a military man and left the administration to his mother for the most part. This was not good for the empire, and once again caused internal strife to rise up. Caracalla also had a problem with the barbarians as at some point while other affairs were getting the attention, Germanic tribes had broken through the Roman border along the Rhine River. In 213 A.D. Caracalla left Rome to deal with this problem and he never returned to the city during his lifetime.

The fine details of Caracalla's dealings with the Germanic tribes are not given to us in history, but what does seem clear is that as much as Caracalla was a military man and desirous to see victory in his campaigns, the barbarians were already becoming too much of a problem for Rome to handle. Caracalla had already made peace with the Caledonians, finding no solution to that frontier other than to fall back to Hadrian's Wall. Now dealing with the Germanic tribes we find he did not totally beat them back but instead is said to have made peace treaties with them. What all these treaties contained and exactly which tribes were involved is not clear, nor does it matter much because what it shows us is that Caracalla did not feel it in his best interest to go head to head with these tribes in order to put them under Rome's thumb. He did not beat them back to the border in order to hold Rome's ground. In the end it might seem Caracalla did do the latter because he is credited with strengthening the border against Germanic attacks in a way that secured it for the next twenty years. However, what is more likely the case is that he agreed to concessions in exchange for peace with the tribes which bought Rome twenty years of retaliative peace along that border.

By spring of 214 A.D. Caracalla was ready to begin a tour of his empire and traveled east and all the way back around to Alexandria in Egypt where the city mocked him for the claim he had killed his brother in self defense. In return Caracalla would show what a brutal man he was and execute the leading citizens of the city. He would also turn his troops loose to pillage and loot the city for about three days. In 216 A.D. Caracalla would begin military campaigns into Parthia. He had offered the king of Parthia a marriage between himself and the king's daughter, but the king saw this as just a way to take over Parthia without having to fight for it. It seems Caracalla was also looking for an excuse to attack and the king's refusal gave him one. As aggressive as Caracalla was in his attack it did not accomplish much in the way of actually taking down Parthia. What he mostly did is carry out mass slaughters in Northern Mesopotamia. Some believe Caracalla never intended to take Parthia but only wished to show Rome's power. Caracalla would return to Asia Minor for the winter of 216-217 A.D. where he would make preparations for further incursions into the Kingdom of Parthia. In the end Caracalla would never get the chance. In the spring of 217 A.D. the leader of the Praetorian Guard used a soldier greatly upset with Caracalla for not making him a centurion, to assassinate Caracalla. That man would also be killed in the aftermath of the

assassination which took place on a roadside while Caracalla was traveling and had stopped for a restroom break. When news reached Caracalla's mother that her son had been assassinated, we are told she committed suicide.

Now, the leader of the Praetorian Guard who had orchestrated the emperor's assassination was a man named Marcus Opellius Macrinus, and he would proclaim himself emperor three days after Caracalla's death with the full support of the Roman army. This support likely came about due to the fact it was believed Macrinus had Caracalla killed in order to spare his own life. No matter the truth the Roman senate confirmed this man's position as emperor, and Macrinus would be the first emperor never to have visited Rome during his reign. Caracalla's actions had left the empire broke and at war with Parthia, Armenia, and Dacia. Macrinus would be forced to implement monetary reform and accomplishing peace with the kingdoms they were at war with came at a cost as well. The problem was the military had gotten used to being lavished with rewards by Caracalla, and to accomplish what Macrinus did such things had to be deeply cut. This greatly upset the military and Caracalla's aunt, Julia Maesa, would take advantage of this in the hope of making her fourteen year old grandson emperor.

When Macrinus came to power one of the first things he did in an attempt to protect it was exile the remaining family of Caracalla. Maesa, her two daughters, and her grandson best known by the name, Elagabalus, were all sent to their estate in Syria. There Maesa began spreading a rumor that Elagabalus was actually the illegitimate son of Caracalla and thus deserved the loyalty of the senate and military which had been pledged to Caracalla. One legion of soldiers would support this claim due to having great privilege under Caracalla compared to Macrinus. On May sixteenth 218 A.D. Elagabalus was declared emperor of Rome by this legion's commander. Elagabalus also took on the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus because it had been Caracalla's. Macrinus took this threat lightly until the new commander of the Praetorian Guard went to attack Elagabalus' forces. This did not go well as his soldiers killed all their officers and joined Elagabalus. Macrinus would flee to Antioch as allegiances began to shift, and on June eighth Elagabalus' forces attacked Macrinus outside of Antioch. Now, Macrinus had named his 9 year old son, Diadumenianus co-emperor about a year earlier, but at this point sent him to Parthia for safety. Macrinus himself would end up fleeing the battle with hopes to reach Rome. Macrinus' forces would fall apart after his departure and be defeated. Diadumenianus would be captured in route to Parthia and be killed. Macrinus would also be captured in route to Rome and upon learning his son was dead he attempted to escape but injured himself. He was recaptured and later executed. Both his head along with his son's would be delivered to Elagabalus as trophies and the Severan dynasty was at that point officially restored.

Until next time, may we each continually choose to be the people God wants us to be!

***Questions submitted to the Institute, answered by
Philip E. Busby.***

FBS continued from pg. 4

were ever around when it was time to say a prayer, a prayer they would not normally have done themselves, there was still a deep respect for the fact someone was talking to God. In respect to that understanding men would take off their hats and be sure their sons did the same. These might seem like small gestures but they were very deeply felt in the minds of many people. Today we see less and less of even those small gestures in respect to God and as with taking His name in vain, I've seen plenty of men who claim to be Christians see no value in taking off their hats when a prayer is being offered, especially when outside. People just don't grasp in a deep way what it means to know God is God!

However, as I have touched on so many times before, people of the past did not yet have such problems. People in Noah's day are said to be people who were the wickedest of them all, but part of the reason that was so true is because they knew God in a way most don't today. Now there are a lot of dynamics to this which would fill an entire book but we should appreciate that people before the flood just were not that far from the Garden of Eden. They were not that far removed from the days when it was commonplace for God to come down and talk to individuals directly and very much so audibly. If it seems hard to imagine how such people could possibly go so wrong just think about what Cain did. He killed his brother, yet when God came to talk to him about it he tried to deny it and shrug off responsibility for it. He had killed Abel out of jealousy that he thought God had given his brother more attention than he got from their offerings. Yet in the end, Cain went out from the presence of God to live his life without faith. (Gen. 4:16) He did this because he did not want to be obligated to God in any greater way than being part of God's creation already made him, and there in is the point! Cain understood God was still God, Cain just let go of the last part which was the belief there is reward in diligently seeking God; at least a reward Cain felt was worth giving up all he might have in the here and now in order to obtain.

As we move past the flood we need to appreciate everyone alive today came from just eight people. On that point it is irrelevant whether all eight of those people got on the ark believing what God had told Noah or not. The flood had come and done what God told Noah it would do. When they and Noah got off the ark and Noah built an altar to God, God made a promise that was sealed with the appearance of a rainbow in the sky. (Gen. 9:8-17) We may take rainbows for granted but just think if you had never seen rain fall from the sky before. When it happened again and again what a comfort it must have been to look up and see this rainbow in the sky God specifically used to seal the promise He would not destroy the world again as He had done with the flood. This allowed people to go on living without feeling God had to be appeased at every moment or He might kill us all again, and many did go out and lived without faith in God. However, they still knew God was God in ways we don't really comprehend today, and this holds true by the time of Abraham and the story we are studying. That's why I've attempted to point out many examples that show this fact as we have gone through the verses in this study. It's just a truth and what it means as it comes to the servant praying a prayer immediately upon knowing God had put him in contact with the

very woman he had been sent to retrieve is, no matter how much this servant did or did not have faith in God, he was giving the highest power known to man the credit for putting all this together.

As I started out saying, this might not seem that potent in a day and age like ours where even those who claim to live in faith take the name of God in vain but in a day such as this story takes place, it was serious! People did not go around taking the name of God in vain in those times unless they really wanted to curse themselves. Saying something like, "With God as my witness..." came with a feeling that God really was taking records which would have bearings on your eternity if you didn't do what you said you'd do. This is why it meant so much for God to put a mark on Cain and say whoever took vengeance on Cain for killing his brother would have to answer to God for it. People in the groups Cain began and lived his life among may not have had a desire to live in faith, but this mark was no light thing. They understood how foolish it would be to ignore the mark God had placed. This is why these ancient cultures were so "backward" by our standards today. They feared God and when they created a false religion it included high stakes punishment and reward for appeasing versus not appeasing the gods they made up. They understood nothing could be taken seriously as a god if it was not powerful enough to crush you when you didn't do what the god wanted.

In that light it might be hard to imagine how people could follow false religions at all, but that too actually speaks to how potent God's existence was to them. Today many feel no fear in not following any god or religion, much less God Himself. If they do follow a religion it's far more light and easy than people of the past would have ever considered following. Our religions today are not just self serving, they are blatantly so! Maybe the best example of this is what calls itself Christianity today. We just don't feel the fear of God; the fear of knowing our Creator must and will judge us one day. We've become comfortable with the idea all good people go to some level of heaven and only quibble over small details about what it takes to be a good person. I could go on but simply put, in the days of Abraham plenty of people were without faith but they did more than remove their hats when The One True God was spoken to and/or about. What this meant for Rebekah and her family is that they now knew beyond a doubt the servant was convinced God had chosen Rebekah. No man would dare invoke anything to do with God if they didn't believe God was in it. This servant had staked his life on the belief God was in this and Rebekah was the woman he sought. With that they had the information they needed to choose for themselves if they believed the servant or thought him so wrong it was worth risking going against all this by saying Rebekah couldn't go!

This was a good thing because moving on into verse 49 we see the servant is so convinced of this he does not feel it necessary to belabor the obvious any longer. The servant asks them for their answer as to if he could take Rebekah or not. This he makes clear he wants so he can immediately move in one direction or the other. We see again in this a point we have touched on many times. This servant was in step with God's pace. God was bringing this together fast and he would not be accused of slowing the process by dragging his feet. If anyone

was going to drag their feet at this point it would have to be Rebekah's family and/or she herself. In fact this request of his comes with such urgency one wonders if he even took a breath before he got it out. It seems if they had said no, he would not even eat the meal they had set before him but get up, gather his camels, and be moving on. This was not done to pressure the family into a rash decision. It was done so they too could understand the pace the servant had felt God moving at. They either felt it too or they did not at this point. If they felt it that would be more evidence God was working all things out, but if they did not the servant was confident God wanted him moving on leaving the consequences of their choice between them and God.

This too speaks to the serious way people of those days knew God is God. The servant did not feel it necessary to start into a big warning about how his story showed this was God's will and they had better heed that fact. The servant knows they know what their choice is just as Cain knew what he was doing in rejecting God while actually speaking with God in a very tangible way. Verse 50 confirms he was correct. Both Laban and Bethuel (Rebekah's brother and father) agreed if there was one thing they could take from this story it was that God had set it in motion and was moving it ahead. Then in a show of what we have been discussing they agree due to this there is nothing they could say good or bad about it! Now, it might be easy to see why they wouldn't want to say anything bad but the good part is the telling part. To say you can't say anything good about it is to believe it so radiates with God's presence and will, saying anything more would be as insulting as saying something bad! Now there's a piece of something to chew on and why the Psalmist said he meditated on God's Word day and night. Again, accepting God as God means understanding even those things that flabbergast us have a reason when God is The One clearly making it happen!

Verse 51 is where people would debate what I have repeated several times leading up to this point and that's the idea Rebekah was considered, not forced as a woman might be in those days. In this verse the men tell the servant Rebekah is his to take and become Isaac's wife. Just like that, without hesitation Rebekah was given away to this stranger to put her in chains and drag her to a life of servitude as the wife of a man none of them had ever met. Now, that last sentence is not the overkill of drama some would say it is because there are people who would look at it just that way. There are likely people who dislike the Bible who would put it just that way if you were in a direct debate about if Rebekah did or did not have a choice. However, as much as we sit on our little high horse (and believe me we love to sit up there) and judge cultures of the past for being anti-women, we often don't take all the facts in hand. Sure the culture was inconsiderate of women on many levels in those days but there was also a much clearer understanding of what things meant. Who met this man at the well? Who told this man when he asked about "room" that there was plenty of room and provisions at her father's house? Who went running back leaving this man and his camels at the well to go to her mother's house and tell what had just happened to her in excitement that was clearly evident? The answer to all these

questions and more is, Rebekah!

Rebekah knew what she was doing when she took the actions she took. She understood clearly when this man gave her bracelets for her arms and an earring in her ear he was proposing something to do with marriage. She didn't even know at that point who exactly he was proposing marriage to and she knew next to nothing about what brought this servant into her life. Yet her excitement is inescapable! Even putting aside the fact later verses show her being asked if she was willing to go with this man, there is plenty of evidence she wanted this. That later verse is the sealing of the deal both that she still wanted it and would go with him so quickly. However, the point is, what reason did the men have to hesitate at this moment? They admit as the servant clearly believes that God had orchestrated all this. That means not just the way it happened but the swift timing it had happened with. Rebekah was part of that overall story. She might not have been much of a part of what the servant told but the part about her excitement they knew for themselves and even better than the servant had the chance to know. They would give their blessing to something they had no reason to believe was not already chosen by those most effected which was Abraham, who had entrusted this servant with the task of choosing a wife for his son, and Rebekah who would go to be that wife.

In verse 52 we see a repeat of the servant worshiping God upon hearing this news. These men were the final possible hitch in all this coming about and now that was out of the way he would worship God once more. This is like that old song about praising God in the morning, praising God at the noontime, praising God all day long. This servant worshiped God in every step that brought him closer to success, but don't get tripped up about what he was worshiping God for. Let us not forget he worshiped God at steps that meant he was closer to being successful but by far not yet successful. He did this for a simple reason we often overlook and we overlook it because to us it's not as big a deal as it should be. It was not just the idea the servant was one step closer that he worshiped God. No, he worshiped each time because it meant God was with him. He worshiped each time because it confirmed he was walking in God's path whether anyone else was or not. Each step was a personal success for the servant no matter the end result, and that's important in ways we do not often take the time to appreciate. In short, what it comes down to is the servant's faith. He was listening to God and God was answering in clear unmistakable ways. Why is this something to send us to our knees in worship? It's not just because only God can accomplish some of the things we witness but also because of something we often complain about. We don't always get to see God's answers like we'd like to. This means it is certainly worth worshiping in those times and at those steps we are privileged enough to be witness to them!

Until next time, Shalom!

The Bible As A Book continued from pg. 2

a more diplomatic judge in his actions as we are told he sent his thirty daughters "abroad." This would indicate they were sent to places outside of Israel. In exchange he brought thirty daughters from families outside Israel to be the wives of his thirty sons. This is a process I can't imagine took place in one large operation but over the course of time, and while it might seem good unto a man that he did this "diplomacy," it was not God's plan for Israel. Aside from the intermarriages we see Israel having with Canaanite people whom they were suppose to have specifically driven out and destroyed, this is a very prominent example of men in Israel ending up with women for wives who came from who knows how far reaching places outside of Israel. On top of that, this example comes from a judge! In this we get yet another small glimpse at the way Israel was moving more and more off the pure plan of God for the nation and into being what man would make it by using his own thinking. This, a lot like what later got King Solomon in trouble, was likely done by this judge for the purpose of making peace with other places almost in a preemptive way. However, it again shows a violation of God's pure way for Israel, and that shows us a couple of important things one of which is not the idea some would take it as, which is that it's acceptable to bend God's Laws!

The fact it is not acceptable to bend God's Laws is why we see people believing the God of the Hebrew Bible was/is a different God than the God of the New Testament. God made it clear over and over how displeased He was with Israel that they did not follow the Law with purity. While these acts are used to say God is an angry God, what we do not understand is that God had every reason to be a far more angry God than we ever see Him be! What God told Moses at Mount Sinai about wiping the nation completely out and starting over with Moses himself was completely justified considering Israel had begun to worship a false god after all God had done to show Himself in freeing them from Egypt. What we see in that story is the fact God did not wipe them out, and this because Moses begged for God to give them another chance. (Ex. 32) We can give Moses all the credit we want but Israel was spared that day for one simple reason - God's grace! This is exactly what we are told in the New Testament. The only reason salvation is something available to us all is grace. We are saved by grace first and foremost, and let us never forget that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us! (Eph. 2:8, Rom. 5:8) Grace does not mean we can claim faith and then do whatever we want. Grace means we have a shot at a relationship with God in spite of the fact none of us come anywhere close to deserving it, and the problem grows worse with each generation!

The second thing we see in the fact God allowed Israel to slip from the pure path He had set out for them is seen in the fact the Law was not what saved them. This is a fact we should see clearly in the New Testament but often miss with the idea God totally changed everything once He sent The Messiah. What's ridiculous about this idea is that it's the belief the Law passed away in a way It had not already done! Now there's a point I wish more people would get because it's exactly what we're talking about. By the time Jesus walked this earth Israel was so far down the hole in this slipping off God's pure way for them they would be almost unrecognizable to Jews of Moses' and Joshua's day, and this is true in spite of how bad we think

those early generations of Israel might have been at executing the Law. By the time of The Messiah what Israel was defining as following the Law almost makes one stop to wonder if they ever read the Law at all or were just making everything up based on traditions that had been handed down; rumors, if you will, about what the Law actually said. Now before you go off thinking that's a pretty Anti-Semitic thing to say, I'd make that same statement about a vast majority of what calls itself Christianity today! It's like most people claiming to be Christians have never cracked the spine of a Bible for themselves because it's astonishing the things people will believe even when it contradicts words of God that are right there in front of their face!

My whole point here is that God wants us to repent and that means He wants us to turn around. No matter at what point we begin this journey of faith or have fallen to after slipping away from things we already knew by walking in faith with God, God is always looking for us to turn around and head back in the right direction. God would use judges in Israel, many of whom were by far not perfect men, not to mention perfect in their understanding and handling of the Law, in attempt after attempt to turn Israel around and head it in the right direction. This is God's grace and we see it even when Israel slipped all the way down to insisting they have a king instead of no king or even these judges whom God was giving them in order to have the human leadership they wanted. Ibzan was one of those judges who clearly fit into that category of those not handling God's Law correctly, yet God used him to judge Israel for seven years. The only other fact we are given about Ibzan is that when he died he was buried there in the city he was credited with being of, and that was Bethlehem.

The next judge we are given very little information about! All we get is his name; what tribe he was from; how long he judged; and where he was buried when he died. This man's name was Elon and he was of the tribe of Zebulun. He judged Israel for ten years and when he died he was buried in a city of Zebulun named, Aijanlon. Now, what we see in being given the tribe for this judge is the fact once again God pulled judges from all over Israel. They were men God could use in spite of their flaws. They were not kings so there would be no dynasties; just men God chose from where God chose them. This fact shows us not just what we've talked about before concerning this being a better system of God giving Israel the human leadership they wanted while being able to pick each one but also the clear view these men did not hold power of their own. Another odd fact we see among men is that people called of God often begin to think of themselves as so special they can set the rules instead of instructing what the rules are according to God. More people believe this idea than I think imagine they do both inside and outside those who claim to be the people of God. Often people will say someone who tells them something or teaches a certain thing is being judgmental! Almost never is the premise of this accusation based on looking in the Word of God and knowing for one's self if what the person is teaching and saying is actually something of God or not. Instead it is far more often than not based on one simple verse which is the one where we are told to judge not. (Matt. 7:1-2)

Why do we think this makes sense and in some way

gets us off the hook of being wrong in what we're doing which the person was "accusing" by teaching against? Because we think people of God have the authority to make up the rules. This causes us not to live our lives in the way Paul instructed the church to live, which was to hold each other up and be honest with each other because we are all attempting to walk the upward way. Instead we try to find every loophole we can to say something we want to do is acceptable. In other words, we don't want to look in the Word of God and really attempt to know It ourselves. We just have itchy ears and desire to heap to ourselves teachers who will tell us a lie that makes us feel better about ourselves rather than teach us the truth. (II Tim. 4:1-4) This makes us feel better because if we can surround ourselves with ministers and other "believers" who make the kind of rules we like to see made, we then feel secure because that's what "people of God" believe. Hopefully in just attempting to explain that amazing loop of human thinking one can see for themselves what a contradiction this process is. If you can, then you should also find why men feel they can make graven images to worship as gods, when the very thing they are worshiping is clearly lower than man because it was made by human hands!

The next judge was a man named Abdon, and again what seems to be important about this man is not what tribe he came from but only the city. That along with giving us whose son he was to define which Abdon we are talking about would seem to be how he was identified and that's why we are given this information. When he died we are told he was buried in that city he was from named Pirathon, which is also more specifically identified as being in the mount of the Amalekites. By going back to reference where this city was, using a Canaanite people, we are not being told he lived among the Amalekites, but it would seem this city was so unknown in Israel this reference had to be given in order for even those reading this record early on to have a general idea where this man was from. This simply speaks to the fact God did not consider it important to bring judges from prominent places in Israel. Again, God used whoever He chose without respect for the things people find important. For the people who lived at the time of this judge, it should have been very clear this man was called of God to judge the nation because almost no one from an unknown place like he was from could rise to predominance by the hand of man.

Now, another fact we see in this judge which shows us once again how these judges did begin acting more like kings is that this man outdid Ibzan when it came to sons. Abdon had forty sons and his family was so large he had thirty nephews on top of that. Like the earlier judge Jair, it is specified all these sons and nephews rode on young donkeys which was a sign of prestige. How such a man obtained this many young donkeys for the use of his sons and nephews we don't know for sure just as we couldn't say for Jair. However, in doing this Abdon was giving hints at the idea he was a king of sorts and his sons or family in general could go on to lead Israel after he was gone. Just as with Jair there is no indication this happened in any way, but I just want to keep repeating how much we're seeing more and more human thinking sneaking into the way Israel operated. This does not speak to the low estate God was willing to choose

a judge from but the low estate God had to call a judge from in order for there to be one in Israel at all. You can think this idea of acting like a king isn't so bad but considering God was attempting to steer Israel back from that idea, why would He pick men who acted this way if there were better choices? I bring this up specifically because we are headed for the judge that seems to many people the most questionable character of them all, and that's Samson. If while going over his story you wonder why God would put up with such a wild man as he was, much less use him as a judge, think about the fact we just covered.

In dealing with men God only has so many choices without violating our free will. Thus, God went from men who were acting more and more like kings to a man like Samson. These were the available choices of those willing to listen to God in leading Israel and it was by far not perfect! In many ways this fact is also why God sent His Son to this earth. I know the issue gets clouded by the traditional Christian thinking that God had to send Jesus to die for our sins in order to gain the power to save us, but that is a distortion or misunderstanding at best of what was actually going on. However, while there are aspects of leaving no accusations against God for having the right to save us, it was not necessary from the standpoint God did not already hold the power to save us. What made it "necessary" is this slipping effect we are seeing here in Judges which we continue to see clearly in the time of the kings and all the way down to the coming of The Messiah. We had fallen so far down, the choices among men for who God could use in a really useful way was slim to none. Even at the end of the period of these judges we are talking about we find before Samuel it had been a long time since anyone knew how to get a hold of God. (I Sam. 3:1) This kind of gap had gotten so big by the time of John the Baptist we can't say how many generations had lived and died since anyone could really be used of God in the ways we so desperately needed for us to find the truth!

Thus, Jesus coming when He did has a lot to do with the fact there were no more Ibzans, Elons, or Abdons; much less Abrahams, Isaacs, and Jacobs. When we get high-minded about what great believers in God we are because we know something believers of the past didn't know or that we have something they didn't have in living on this side of the cross, we need to humble ourselves and think about this. We only know what we know and have what we have because God finally had to lay it out for us in such simple illustrations even a child could understand it. That's what we are in ways we don't appreciate at all – children! Men like Abraham and Moses were giants! Men like David were usable and people like us today are potentially salvageable. This is why Jesus described the day and age of His return as being like those of the days of Noah. (Matt. 24:36-44) We are fast falling to a useless state where it will, if not already does, grieve God that He ever created us to begin with! (Gen. 6:5-6) If God's call to His chosen nation so long, long ago was that they needed to humble themselves before Him and pray in order to see Him act in hearing from heaven and healing their land, how much more do you think that call goes out to us today? (II Chron. 7:14)

Let's stay in God's Word!

