BEACON LIGHTS

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DEBORAH

Deborah was Israel’s only female judge recorded in Scripture. Her only family recorded in the text surrounding Judges 4–5 is her husband, Lapidoth. Deborah gave advice to the people of Israel at a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel. It was near Mount Ephraim. She is known for her courage and her song to the Lord, but why is she mentioned in the Bible? What did she do that should be used as a “model” for our life?

Deborah was the fourth judge of Israel. God put her in charge of bringing Israel back to worshiping God. After being judged by Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar, Israel had fallen into sin once more. After Ehud had judged, God punished Israel for their sin. How? They were put under the rule of Jabin, king of Canaan, for twenty years. Now, after their punishment, God would deliver Sisera (Jabin’s army captain/leader) and his army into the hands of Barak, a man of Israel. God had commanded Barak to gather ten thousand men from Zebulun and Naphtali. Barak refused to go fight unless Deborah would come along. Deborah had the courage to fight and went along. Barak gathered the men and prepared to fight. God caused the men of Jabin’s army to become frightened. Because of his fear, Sisera fled to the nearby tent of Heber the Kenite where Sisera thought he had safety. Jael (Heber’s wife) fed Sisera and let him rest. While he was resting, Jael killed him by driving a tent nail through his head.

Deborah is known for her victory song to Jehovah after the battle against Sisera. Her song is given in judges 5. Deborah’s song praises the Lord for the victory he had given them over Sisera and Jabin’s army. She sang of some tribes that didn’t help. Gilead, Dan, and Asher were just a few of them. Barak and Deborah sang of how Sisera’s mother would act when no one came back from the battle (not even her son, Sisera).

Why is this piece of history in the Bible? God must have had some reason. Here are a few reasons: One, that through Deborah’s song and her giving all the glory to God, we must learn that in anything and everything we do we must give glory to God just as Deborah did. In Judges 5:1 the Bible says that they sang “on that day”. It didn’t take Barak and Deborah a few days to get over their own glory and then give God the glory, but they gave God the glory right that day.

Another thing we can learn from the part of her song (Judges 5:14–17) about the tribes refusing to help fight, is that we need to stay active in the church of Christ. We need to continually pray for those in need of physical and spiritual help. To show our love and thankfulness to God for redeeming us from our spiritual, sickly state of sin, we give what we can to those who are currently on “beds of affliction” for the rest of their pilgrimage on this earth.

Yet, we need to be strong in our faith like Deborah. Barak was scared. We should not be scared of anything. Not even death, because death is the passage from this earthly journey to eternal life with Christ in heaven. Romans 14:8: “For whether
we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die we die unto the Lord: whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.” Joshua 1:9 is another great example of the commandment to be bold and strong in our faith. We will need to have great strength to endure the persecution of the wicked and their ridicule against us in the end times.

Through studying the life of Deborah the prophetess, we can be strengthened by reading and contemplating her song of courage. We can love those with special needs and do EVERYTHING to the glory of God. “Praise ye the Lord for the avenging of Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves. Hear, O ye kings; give ear, O ye princes; I, even I, will sing unto the Lord; I will sing praise to the Lord God of Israel.” Let Deborah’s song ring in our hearts as we continue on this pathway to our heavenly home.

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Writing Contest Caleb Van Overloop

THE CALL OF GIDEON

James 4:12a “There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy.

The seventh book of the Bible (Judges) received its name from the men who delivered Israel during the time from Joshua to Samuel. This was a period of about 450 years.

This time period showed that the prophets were necessary for the life of the elect. These people are called judges because they delivered the Israelites from their enemies (a picture of Christ) when they committed wicked sins.

After the death of the judges Shamgar, Deborah, and Barak, Israel again fell back into sin (Judges 17:6 “…but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” This evil originated from the mixed multitudes of Israel with the Canaanites. This was also the evil of idolatry. So God sent Midian to punish Israel for their idol worship.

The Midianites had been the foes of Israel in the past. The hatred of the Midianites against the Israelites originated when Abraham’s second wife, Keturah, had a son named Midian. Midian grew up and Abraham had sent Midian away from Isaac. However, the law says that whosoever is sent outside of the covenant will be the covenant’s most hated enemy. Now Midian, the hated enemy, ruled over Israel.

God sent Gideon, a humble man from the tribe of Manasseh, to deliver Israel from their hated enemy. God gave him the natural gifts and encouragement for the duties of his important work.

The story starts when Gideon was commanded by God to destroy an altar of Baal and a grove of Asherah. This infuriated the men of Israel so much so that the men wanted to kill him (Judges 6:30). Due to Israel’s desire to worship other gods, God sent the Midianites to plunder Israel’s crops and livestock (Judges 7:12). After Midian did their plundering, they burned and killed everything they could not carry back home. The point of this plundering was to destroy Israel by famine.

God encouraged the victory to Gideon by sending him and his servant to the outskirts of the Midianite camp. They overheard a Midianite soldier tell his dream of a cake of barley bread tumbling into camp and overturning the tent of Midian (Judges 7:13). This sign confirmed the deliverance of Israel from the Midianites and strengthened Gideon’s faith.

After the wonderful signs that God gave Gideon, Gideon presented before the Lord an army of 32,000 men. According to the Lord, the number was too many. So Gideon decreed that whoever was afraid of fighting the Midianites could return home. This left Gideon with 10,000 men, of which the Lord didn’t approve. Gideon then ordered his army to take a drink from the brook. All those who crouched down to lap the water were sent home. After this, Gideon was left with a mere 300 men to destroy a Midianite army of 135,000 men.

This is important for Christians today. Numbers of people are insignificant. God preserves, defends, and reforms his church with no sort of physical weapons or man power. Hosea 1:7 proves this point: “But I will have mercy upon the house of Judah, and will save them by the LORD their God, and will not save them by bow, nor by sword, nor by battle, by horses, nor by horsemen.” Having used no weapons in the fight of Gideon, God shows his church that we must put our trust in him alone.
After sending the men home, the Lord instructed Gideon to supply each of his 300 men with a trumpet and a lamp inside a pitcher. 300 men gathered around the camp of the Midianites and they blew their trumpets, broke their pitchers, and cried, “The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon.” (Judges 7:18, 20). The “sword of the Lord” was the power of God that struck into the hearts of the Midianites. That sword sent chaos into the camp of the Midianites and made them flee. God gave Israel the victory.

This history of Gideon gives us evidence of God’s wrath to destroy his enemies. In his love for the elect he accomplished their deliverance by destroying Israel’s enemy. Psalm 68:1 confesses, “Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered.”

The story of Gideon gives us a good example of how we should act as Christians. We should always depend on God in times of need by placing our trust in him. This story also gives us hope of Christ’s second coming and of his great deliverance for us.

Sources


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SAMUEL

How did Samuel show his godly life even before he was born? What did he do to guide Israel in the fear of the Lord? Samuel was known as not only the judge but also the prophet and military leader of the country.

Samuel did many things as judge, prophet, and military leader, and showed that he was godly through all of those jobs. He proved throughout events in his life, even his childhood, that he loved the Lord and obeyed him. We can use his godly life as an example.

Samuel did godly things when he was ruling the people. He turned many hearts to the Lord. He brought the word of the Lord to Israel and anointed two kings—one unbelieving and one godly. He didn’t want Israel to have a king because they wanted to be like other wicked nations. Yet, he gave them Saul, and eventually David. Anointing David was very important for the future of Israel, as he expanded the borders of Israel and brought prosperity to the country. He brought Israel to repentance many times. He corrected Saul multiple times, including when Saul didn’t kill all of the Amalekites as God had commanded. He also brought God’s message of judgement to Eli for not punishing his wicked sons. He kept the religion of Israel when Israel was oppressed by the Philistines. He was also the last of the judges, as Israel now had a king while he was still living. We can see with these examples just a few of the many times throughout Samuel’s life that displayed how he served God, even when he was young.

Even before he was born, Samuel was assigned to the work of God. His childless mother, Hannah, was being mocked by her husband Elkanah’s other wife, Peninnah. Hannah was distressed and prayed to God for a son whom she would consecrate, or dedicate, to the Lord. God gave her that son, and she kept her vow, giving him to Eli so he could serve before the Lord. She also vowed that he would be a Nazarite, which means that he wouldn’t cut his hair, have strong drink, or defile himself by touching dead bodies. His name also shows his godly character. It means “God has heard.” Growing up he showed us that he was a God-fearing child. God called to him at night once, and after thinking it was Eli, he eventually told God to speak, because he was listening. He also said that he was God’s servant when he was responding to God, which shows that he knew his duty at a young age. He was very godly, and growing up in the tabernacle would definitely help, especially because his father was living in sin by having two wives, which would be a bad example. He did get to see his mother, but not very often, and that would have to be a very hard trial growing up. Through Eli’s instruction and God’s grace, he grew up to be a God-fearing leader in Israel and was known throughout the land. It is interesting to note that there are not any times where we read of Samuel sinning, which shows that he was close to his Lord.
When we look at his life, we realize that we can use it as an example to us and how we should live.

How can we take his life and faith and learn from it? We see that he led a close, holy life with God. God spoke in person to him as a child and used him as a messenger. We can do the same thing. Since God doesn’t speak that way to his people anymore, we can use the Bible to know his way and can learn from it that we also have to witness to others. We have to lovingly correct others when they are wrong, and, like Samuel, need to have a humble attitude about it. He had outward examples, too, that we can use as our guide. It is important through this that we do not revere him as a god, but as a humble servant of God. He was brave enough to rebuke King Saul. He showed that he had a strong faith in God, just as we need to. He was not afraid to keep the word of God when the Philistines were in Israel, and if we are in a wicked dominated place, we need to continue to witness to others as he did. We need to show both our inward and outward love and faith in God in a humble way.

God used Samuel to bring the word to Israel even from a young age, and we can use his life as an example to us. He witnessed to others of his beliefs, and we should do that too.

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Prior to the late eighteenth century, a majority of those involved in the rise of the natural sciences were individuals with sincere religious convictions. Their new approaches to science were underpinned in various ways to religious assumptions, particularly grounded in a Christian understanding of an ordered universe. As such, religion had a significantly positive role in both the emergence and persistence of the modern sciences. Later, with the commencement of the Victorian era, came the “Age of Doubt,” and though the seeds of religious uncertainty were sown in cultural debate and scientific inquiry, it was nonetheless still acceptable for men of science to engage in honest conversation on both fronts, using their knowledge of science and religion to shed light on either side. This sunny, catholic nature of men, however, is now out of fashion. Rather, it is regarded as dim. With the rise of the new atheists, science and all that it entails is placed on a pedestal, or rather, the plinth of a shrine. The terms of debate and the climate of opinion have changed for the worse. Science has been elevated to a religious-like status. Led by men such as Richard Dawkins, Victor Stenger, and Sam Harris, the promotion of science as a religion has taken popular culture by storm, making science-worship a genuine feature of the intellectual landscape. Worshiped and adored, science is regarded as the elite form of knowledge, if not the definitive way of knowing, and everything else is negligible.

The prominence science is given in our culture and society is plain to see. Science has become a byword for reliability and prestige, it attracts massive funding, it has test tubes, charts, flashing diagrams, and, of course, it simply stands above criticism. Other disciplines have taken note of the world’s fixation with science and, now, the study of economics has begun to gravitate closer to mathematical and scientific models without embracing the nuances of society and human interaction. Our society’s obsession with science, however, has been taken a step further. To some, science is now a way of life, a worldview, a religion. Often termed “Scientism,” the devotion to science and the ideological belief that the sciences encompass and answer all, has caught on in the 21st century. It, too, is neatly wedded to the new atheists and their battle-ready bearings. Individuals of this movement, the fervent devotees to this religion, assert that they are but the children of the enlightenment pursuing the only reasonable source of knowledge on both sides of the grave; namely, science, the “culmination of the renaissance” as Peter Atkins

puts it.\textsuperscript{3} Philosopher Bertrand Russell is a notable forerunner of this movement, believing that there are in fact no limits to the scientific method: “Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know.”\textsuperscript{4} Russell is certainly not alone in this view. For instance, the chemist Harry Kroto claims that “science is the only philosophical construct we have to determine truth with any degree of reliability.”\textsuperscript{5} Invoking for its authority the power and the glory of the Western scientific tradition, these views have become increasingly popular within today’s humanistic culture. Seen in Russell’s and Kroto’s bold claims, the new atheist’s attempt to push science into the realms of religion is found where science, under his careful guidance, assumes its role as the sole system of belief in which rational men should place their faith, and if not their faith, then certainly their blind devotion. From biology to metaphysics, Science’s narrative is the narrative. Ardent followers of scientism maintain, too, that science exclusively offers robust and reliable answers to their take on the questions of meaning and value (or the lack of meaning and value for that matter): “The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.” Clearly, science has become a metanarrative, a religion. The worship of science rests on the thesis that the sciences have to be true—for who would so doubt?—and that it is only the sciences that bear the torch of truth. To members of this religion, theology is not science and belief is not knowledge.

Appealing to men’s depraved will to oppose and put away the notion of God, these ideas have been swiftly picked up by the media and thousands all over the globe. The key figures of new atheism are now, indisputably, international celebrities. Despite its popularity, however, scientism brings with it several necessarily bleak implications. For a start, naturalism and downright atheism are two logical inferences from the doctrines and creeds of scientism as Daniel Dennett establishes here: “There is only one sort of stuff, namely matter—the physical stuff of physics, chemistry, and physiology—and the mind is somehow nothing but a physical phenomenon.” Explaining away the mind as a chemical reaction, religion as an illusion, thought as a mere gag or reflex is self-defeating in itself. To what end are these things done? For what cause? Philosopher Mary Midgley neatly sums up the mess scientism creates: “It is all very well to eliminate God from the intelligible universe but eliminating ourselves from it blocks all sorts of enquiries.”\textsuperscript{6} As with Kafka’s bleak take on his characters’ place on earth, men, once seen as a link in the great chain of life connected both towards the heavens to God, truth, and meaning, and downward to lower life forms, are now connected only downwards, with disastrous consequences. Scientism is not merely devastating, but contrary to reason as well. While scientism claims to disengage from normative, moralistic views, to create a clearer path led by the godhead of science, scientism is, in itself, a normative, moralistic view. It is a worldview. It lays claims to questions beyond its limits. To apply science to “every aspect of existence” is akin to using a mass spectrometer to find the price of real estate, the cause of the Second Boer War, or, more pertinent to matters discussed in this article, the value of life and the meaning of existence.\textsuperscript{7} Evidently, there are matters which science simply cannot comment on, where science comes to an end.

Ultimately, the largest problem of scientism does not lie in its failure to stand up to sound thought. Rather, scientism is idolatry and nothing less. It lies in direct contradiction to scripture’s teaching of authority and infallibility by explaining religion and God away as the mere products of a chemical reaction, a trick played on us by a malicious neuron. Scientism and the worship of science has much to say on everything, having neither bounds nor limits with the new atheism’s leading proponents, as its devoted bishops and priests and The God Delusion its creed. It grapples with reason to give human beings, placed on this earth as stewards over creation for the glory of their heavenly maker, a less important role in the grand scheme of things, being but mere masses of atoms that hardly count. Science is a brilliant tool for working with Dennett’s “stuff”

\textsuperscript{7} Lennox, John C. God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God? Lion Hudson, 2009.
of matter. It has given us a means to investigate the general revelation of God and, to a certain extent, a way to exert dominion over creation. Through the natural sciences, believers can come to greater awe and understanding of God’s power, his order, and majesty as demonstrated through his creation. However, science is not to be revered or exalted. Science is not transcendent. As scientism preaches its gospel, fraught with intellectual garble, Christians must recognize that it has overstepped its mark. Where idols of wood and gold no longer appeal, scientism and the worship of science steps into place. “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (Proverbs 14:12).

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Writing Contest Elizabeth Ensink

ACTIVE IN FELLOWSHIP

After the minister says amen and the service ends, I usually pick up my purse, shuffle up the aisle to shake an elder’s hand, and then work my way out of the crowded narthex until I can reach the spot where I normally stand and catch up with my friends. A few weeks ago, something different happened. On my way out of the narthex, one of the women in my church struck up a conversation with me. It started with the usual polite small talk in which I answer questions about what I’m doing at college and if I have summer plans, but somewhere along the way—I’m not quite sure when—it became a lot more meaningful. She counseled me on discerning God’s will for the future, gave me the encouraging words I hardly knew I needed, and offered that I could call her anytime I needed to talk.

This is what being active in the church looks like, and this is God’s calling for the church. It may sound simple, but one of the most important parts of being active in the church is in the everyday: in our thoughtful, godly fellowship with our fellow church members after the church service and beyond.

It’s clear from scripture that God calls us to be active members in the church. In Matthew 25:14–30, we read Jesus’ parable of the talents. In this parable, a master gives a certain number of talents to each of his servants. The ones who use those talents to earn more for their master are rewarded, but the one who simply hoards his talent is rebuked for being slothful. We, too, have been given many gifts from the Lord, and every one of us is called to invest however much we have into the church so that it may grow and Christ may say to us “well done thou good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21). We read again of these different gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, which emphasizes how each member of the body has an important role to play—this implies therefore that we are called to fill that role in the church.

We also see this clear calling to be active in the example of the early New Testament church. The book of Acts gives the beautiful account of the spread of the gospel after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. After Peter’s sermon on Pentecost, we read that three thousand people were baptized and, “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). These new converts didn’t just go home after the sermon to tend their field and think about what they learned on their own; they continued steadfastly in fellowship. They ate meals together and prayed together. We go on to read of that same group selling and sharing their possessions in community (Acts 4:32–37), and they also used their abilities to serve the church. Some men were chosen as deacons (Acts 6:1–7). Others hosted gatherings of believers in their homes (Acts 12:12). Paul also often mentions specific saints for their service in the church at the end of his letters. For example, in Romans he says, “I commend unto you Phoebe our sister...that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also” (Rom. 16:1–2). Paul calls the church in Rome to be active in assisting members of the church and also points out that Phoebe herself was active in helping to care for many Christians. Scripture makes clear that the flourishing, godly congregation is an active one, and that each member is uniquely equipped to contribute to that activity.

But what does this activity look like today in practical terms? When people talk about being active in the church, it’s easy to first think of roles and responsibilities: serving as an office bearer, leading a church committee or bible study, volunteering...
to make a meal, attending nursery, and so on. These are all excellent ways that we can, and must, be active in the church. However, we might think (maybe subconsciously) that the most active people are the ones who become ministers or teachers or maybe donate the most time and money to church causes. But you don’t have to be a hero with extraordinary gifts or abilities to be an active member of the church, and being an active member certainly can’t be tallied and ranked. For young people especially, it can be easy to excuse ourselves as being not ready for service. If being active is limited to filling these roles, then it must be something we do in the future. But in truth, being active starts by simply being a present and prepared member of the church.

Being present means that we engage in meaningful fellowship after the service. In the book of Hebrews, we read an exhortation to fellowship: “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:24–25). God commands us to gather together not just to worship, but also to encourage, admonish, and lift each other up that we may be stronger in our faith. This means we don’t rush out to our cars at the end of the sermon. This means that we don’t just talk to our friends about the huge homework assignment we have to finish or the latest basketball results. And this means we talk to more people than just our close friends at church. Something tells me that when the early church members in Jerusalem “continued steadfastly in fellowship,” they weren’t just talking about the weather. We are a body of believers, and we have a shared faith with every member of the church that can form the start of a conversation if we can just get the courage to actively pursue it.

Pursuing God-centered conversations with other members may be simple, but it does require preparation through prayer and devotions. How can we direct a conversation towards spiritual things if it’s not an important part of our own personal lives? If we spend the week in God’s word, then church services become the perfect place to share what we learned with our friends or maybe even discuss a question we came across. Further, if we know God’s word, then we are equipped for counsel when someone presents a struggle, and if we are active in prayer, then we can tell someone that we will pray for them about it…and actually do it. One of the most important ways we can be active in the church is through relationships with others, but that starts outside of the church service with a personal relationship with God.

Of course, like any service in the church, God has equipped some to be more able in this area than others, even with practice and preparation. Some of us are shy. Some of us may not be great at making conversation. But this brings us back to my earlier point: activity in the church isn’t rated or ranked. You do not have to be the extrovert that knows everyone and has a list of prayer concerns for every member of the church. But what if you challenged yourself to talk to just one new person? It doesn’t have to be a complete stranger; maybe it’s one of the men your father always talks to or someone a couple years younger than you that joined your young people’s group this year. Ask them how their week went and get past the initial “good how about you.” Next week, follow up with them on something they mentioned the previous week, and the next, talk to them about something that struck you from the sermon that morning. In a large congregation, one or two small interactions can have a big impact in tying all of us closer together.

There’s also a lot to be said for simply making yourself available. The Bible speaks of the importance of mentorship between the older men and women and the younger—another excellent way for us to be active members in fellowship (Tit. 2). It can be difficult to know how to put this into practice, but I think that it starts with the meaningful conversations I’ve been emphasizing. Perhaps you feel intimidated by approaching a group of men or women that you don’t know. I imagine that many of them feel the same way about the groups of young people. What if we simply stood in a different part of church for a change without a friend or a phone and genuinely engaged in a conversation if someone approaches us? Once again, this can do wonders for encouraging the active mentorship the Bible commands.

I know from experience that all of this is easier said than done. In fact writing this makes me painfully aware of how little I practice this. I am guilty of standing with the same group of people at church every week and rarely talking about more than our daily lives. But I know that it can be done. I have been struck by a few people in my life, from friends to an office secretary at my college, who talk freely about their faith with others and offer to pray about difficult circumstances. It is this sort of conversation that freely flows from the mundane to the spiritual—depth that truly matters that we need to cultivate as active members of our church.
If we do this well, think of how this could impact our fellowship and growth as a church. The interactions founded on our shared faith will strengthen that foundation, and it seems inevitable that it will spill over into further activity as well. We would be better at praying with and for one another. We would be more active in applying the sermons to our lives. And if we embrace being active in everyday interactions, think of how welcoming our churches could be to visitors. Think of how this can flow into witnessing! In the book of Acts, just after reading of the fellowship of the early church, we read, “...the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47). This pattern continues throughout the New Testament as Paul writes of active congregations being a witness to the rest of the world. When the church is active, people notice, and the church grows.

After that conversation with the woman from my church, I felt more encouraged and content than I had in a long time. When I think about that and all the benefits that can come through active fellowship, I feel the joy that the apostles must have felt as the church in Jerusalem began to bloom. And so I’m trying to make small steps. I joined the women’s fellowship group at my church. I lingered in the narthex to talk to my aunt and ended up talking with a few other ladies. I’m walking along a different path after church and trying to say hello to people by name. Maybe next week I’ll approach someone I’ve never talked to before. And if you try to do this too, maybe we’ll find each other and realize how easy it can be to be active in spiritually focused fellowship.

Certainly we must all look for ways to be active using our specific talents to fill positions and roles in the church, but let us not neglect being active in this simple way as well. By being active in fellowship, we can grow stronger in our faith together in the communion of the saints, the way God designed the church to be.

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As Christians we are called to be witnesses to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. That isn’t a minor calling, or one calling among many, but the central calling and mission of the church. It’s a calling that takes on increasing urgency as the day of Christ’s return draws near.

The calling to witness is closely connected to the calling to preach the gospel. We tend to separate those two, but Jesus taught that they are intimately related. He instructed his disciples to “teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 28:19). Later he added, “...ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). He linked those two callings again when he appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, “I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness” (Acts 26:16).

In light of that connection, our witness ought to begin with support for the preaching of the gospel. We witness when we join ourselves to a church that boldly proclaims the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ alone, faithfully attend worship services, actively participate in the life of the church, and remember her in our prayers and with our gifts.

Our witness continues with lives that are lived out of the truth of that gospel. We are to be, “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (Jam. 1:22). We confess that Jesus Christ is Prophet, Priest, and King (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 31), and that those who are members of him by faith partake of his anointing (Q&A 32). In the office of all believers we witness to the gospel in our daily lives.

Hebrews 11 has much to teach us about that aspect of witnessing. We tend to think of the saints recorded there as “heroes of faith,” but Hebrews 12:1 gives them another title, “so great a cloud of witnesses.” Their lives reveal the source of our witness, the substance of our witness, and God’s purpose with our witness.

Hebrews 11 makes clear that our witness proceeds from faith. It introduces each saint by calling attention to faith as the source of their witness. “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain” (v. 4). “By faith Noah, being
warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house” (v. 7). “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac” (v. 17). We can’t do anything in our own strength. Our witness begins with God’s gift of eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand.

Faith is the bond by which those who are saved by Christ are “ingrafted into him, and receive all his benefits” (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 20). Hebrews 11 calls it “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (v. 1). Apart from Christ we would have no hope in this world. We would see only its sinful pleasures. We would set our hearts on those things and spend our lives in pursuit of them. By faith we know God and know ourselves to be citizens of his kingdom. By faith we strive to live as pilgrims and strangers in this world.

In order for faith to produce a witness it must become visible. The term witness implies that others must be able to see it. Hebrews 11 makes clear that faith becomes visible when it finds expression in obedience to God. “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain” (v. 4). “By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house” (v. 7). “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac” (v. 17). By faith we know God, love him, and strive to live in obedience to him.

Our witness need not be grand or global in scale. We are called to witness in the particular circumstances in which God has placed us. We confess that he created the heavens and the earth and that he “upholds and governs the same by his eternal counsel and providence” (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 26). God gives us life and health and so much more, but he is also sovereign over the trials that we face day by day. Some struggle with sickness and elderly parents, others with difficult marriages, or children with special needs. Those are difficult trials and we can easily respond in anger or despair. In our own strength we certainly would. But in faith we strive to obey God even in those difficulties. We care for the parents that he has given us. We remain faithful in our marriages and strive each day to make them reflect the love of Christ and his church. We train up the children whom he has entrusted to us.

Our witness includes also a willingness to speak openly of the gospel. Faithful Enoch “prophesied… saying, Behold the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all” (Jude 14–15). Faithful Noah was, “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:5). We witness by speaking of those things as we have opportunity with friends, neighbors and co-workers. We take seriously the instruction to, “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Pet. 3:15).

God uses our witness to accomplish several important purposes. The first is his own glory. In gratitude to God we do good works, “that he may be praised by us” (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 86). Jesus taught us, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). The great goal of our faithful obedience is the glory of God’s name.

God also uses our witness to provide encouragement to fellow believers. That’s the point of Hebrews 11, as the beginning of chapter 12 shows: “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us” (v. 1). In the faithful obedience of others we see the power of salvation in Jesus Christ. In the light of that witness we find strength to “lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees” (v. 12).

God also uses our witness to rebuke the ungodly. Hebrews 11 makes clear that the world despises faith and hates obedience. Unbelievers respond in opposition to our witness. Abel’s faithful obedience resulted in Cain’s murderous rage. Moses’ faithful obedience caused him to suffer, “affliction” (v. 25), “the reproach of Christ” (v. 26), and “the wrath of the king” (v. 27). Others experienced, “trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented” (vs. 36–37). We also can expect opposition, for “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12).

But God is also pleased to use our witness as the means by which he brings his people out of darkness and into his marvelous light. One of the reasons that God calls us to do good works is that, “by our godly conversation, others may be gained to Christ” (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 86).

Our calling to witness is fundamentally the same as it has ever been. It begins with support for the preaching of the gospel and continues with lives that are lived out of that gospel truth. But as the day of Christ’s return draws near that calling takes on
increasing urgency. Abel did not live in the last days. Nor did Noah or Abraham or Moses. But Jesus Christ has now come in our flesh. He has borne our grief. He has risen triumphant over sin and death and hell. He has ascended to God’s right hand. He has poured out his spirit upon his church. All that remains is the ingathering of his church, for “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise...but is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

We see the signs of Christ’s return on every side. The gospel is reaching the nations. The world grows increasingly bold in its wickedness. The church descends into apostasy. The hour is late. Let us witness then, not in our own strength but, “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

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THE DAILY PRESS

“press toward the mark...”
(Philippians 3:14)

September 8  Read Joshua 21
What we see in this chapter with the Levites can be applied to our ministers (and teachers) today. The Levites were not given their own section in Canaan. Instead, the other tribes were commanded to provide cities for them, much as our ministers today are provided for by the church. 1 Corinthians 9:14 says, “Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.” Matthew Henry interprets this verse to be referring to the fact that pastors are cared for by their congregations.

Henry moves on from the calling of the church towards ministers to the calling of ministers towards the church, as taught in this passage. He points out that the Levites were content to be given their portion after all the other tribes had received theirs. In order to be a servant, we must put the needs of others before our own. This is the command in Philippians 2:4, which reads, “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.” Sing or pray Psalter #24.

September 9  Read Joshua 22
Before the two and a half tribes crossed back over the Jordan River to be reunited with their families after helping the rest of Israel conquer Canaan, they built a big altar on its banks. When the other tribes heard about this they got very angry, because they thought the men were making an idol that was supposed to represent the altar of burnt offering in the tabernacle. They were so troubled, in fact, that they rose up to go fight the two and a half tribes. When these tribes saw how riled up their countrymen were they quickly explained they had just built the altar as a memorial for their children, but weren’t planning to actually use it for sacrifices.

Were the men right in making the altar? It seems that they had good intentions, but could this problem have been avoided if they hadn’t chosen land on the other side of the river? If they had lived closer to their fellow Israelites and the tabernacle would they have felt the need to make a memorial like this? Sing or pray Psalter # 372.

September 10  Read Joshua 23
Israel is warned extensively about the judgment of God that will come on them if they turn to other gods. We see these judgments coming upon the world today. Although most people in this country don’t bow down to gods of wood and stone, serious idolatry still plagues us. One of the worst forms of this is seen in sports. The amount of time and money that goes into sports today is hard to comprehend. Daily fantasy sports have quickly become a billion dollar industry and are just as grave a problem as traditional gambling. In order for athletes to have a chance at the top levels, they must completely dedicate their lives to the game. With this rise in sports worship, we see a direct attack on Christianity. Sunday is often the biggest sports day of the week, with the Super Bowl being the most obvious example. In fact, this god has so far infiltrated religion that churches themselves even broadcast the Super Bowl for everyone to watch. Sports are something that we can all enjoy to a certain degree,
but we must be on guard against the serious danger they pose for us today. Sing or pray Psalter #1.

September 11 Read Joshua 24

In Joshua 24:12, God says to Israel, “And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out from before you, even the two kings of the Amorites; but not with thy sword, nor with thy bow.” This reference to hornets is also found in Exodus 23:28 and Deuteronomy 7:20, where the reference is used in a similar way. Matthew Henry interprets this to mean that God actually sent swarms of hornets before Israel in battle. That’s pretty amazing to think about if it’s true, but I would tend to believe that hornets are talked about more figuratively here. I think that the context of the passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy supports this. In both these passages God talks about how Israel will only be able to drive out the wicked nations little by little. Instead of giving them a quick knock-out punch, Israel will keep stinging them like hornets until they are finally driven out. What do you think? Did God actually have swarms of hornets lead Israel into battle? Sing or pray Psalter #353.

September 12 Read Judges 1

In verses 24 and 25, we read of Israel letting a man go for telling them how to get into the city. Do you think this was right of them to do? On the surface, this appears similar to the deal the spies had made with Rahab earlier. In both instances, Israel agreed to let a citizen of a heathen city go free in return for helping them.

However, this cannot be compared to the deal with Rahab. Rahab was a child of God, mentioned in Hebrews 11:31 with the other heroes of faith. She helped the spies because she loved God, but the man in this story only helped them because he was scared for his safety. This is made obvious in the chapter, where we read that the man went among the heathen, built a city, and named it after his former home that the Israelites had destroyed. Matthew Henry supports the Israelites sparing of this man, but what do you think? Sing or pray Psalter #401

September 13 Read Judges 2

The end of this chapter reminds me of the parable of the wheat and tares recounted in Matthew 13:24–30. Here, the enemy plants weeds in a man’s field of crops. The man’s workers ask if they should remove the weeds, but the owner decides to leave them. They can just be burned at harvest time, but if they attempt to pull them now they might end up destroying the crops. Judges 2 talks about how Israel kept failing to fully kick the heathen nations out of Canaan, and they were continually judged for it. Finally, in verses 20–22, God tells Israel that the wicked nations will remain in their land to try their faith, because they failed to carry out the command God had given them. That is one of the main reasons why the world exists today: to try our faith. We are tempted to be like them, and our faith must be strong in order that we might flee that temptation. Sing or pray Psalter #99.

September 14 Read Judges 3

Verse 15 tells us that Ehud was lefthanded. If I’m understanding Matthew Henry correctly, he says that the phrase in the original would better be translated “shut of his right hand,” seeming to imply that his being lefthanded was an impairment. It is true that being lefthanded has historically been viewed this way. It used to be a common practice for parents to try to force their lefthanded children to become righthanded. In fact, someone even advised my parents to do this with me when I was a lefthanded toddler. Whether he was lefthanded by birth or circumstance, God used his right hand to deliver Israel through the weak means of sinful man.

On a slightly different note, it’s interesting to me that though the name Benjamin means “son of my right hand” God makes a point of telling us that many Benjamites were lefthanded. I don’t have a good explanation, but I wonder why this is. Why do you think? Sing or pray Psalter #407.

September 15 Read Judges 17

Matthew Henry says this story demonstrates the truth that “the love of money is the root of all evil,” as stated in 1 Timothy 6:10. Micah’s love of money caused him to steal from his own mother, and the mother’s love of money caused her to curse her own son, without really thinking about what she was doing. Do you think it was wrong for Micah’s mother to curse the one who had stolen the money?

Whether right or wrong, the young man’s mother turns around and blesses him when he confesses. What do you think about this? Matthew Henry says it teaches us that we should forgive those who repent of their sin. This is undoubtedly true, but did Micah really repent, or did he just confess because he was afraid of what might happen to him? The story of the prodigal son is the classic example of one being received again with joy when he repents, but we don’t read of his going off again, or of his father’s cursing him when he left the first time. In this story, Micah seems more like the pretending son than the prodigal one. Sing or pray Psalter #83.
Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

After all, it was true that the men of Gibeah had committed horrible sin for which they should have been put to death, and no apology was coming from Benjamin. However, Gertrude Hoeksema demonstrates that Israel was not in the right either and deserved the defeats that came upon them. For one thing, it’s not as if the rest of Israel was living according to God’s commandments. Remember, this was the time when “everyone did that which was right in his own eyes,” and all of Israel needed to repent of that sin, not just Benjamin. Also, Israel failed to begin by asking God if they should make war against Benjamin. Instead, they just made that decision themselves and only asked God which tribe should lead into battle. It is also worth noting that Israel made this fatal decision after only hearing one side of the story, a side which was not entirely true, as the Levite neglected to mention that they had willingly offered his concubine to the men of Gibeah. Sing or pray Psalter #156.

Do you see how crazy that story was that you just read? Israel wipes out all the Benjamites in the third battle, except 600 men who flew into the desert. After the adrenaline rush subsides, Israel starts feeling bad that their brother Benjamin is going to be completely wiped out, so they decide to find the 600 men wives. They can’t offer their own daughters, however, because they had sworn not to let them marry any Benjamites. The elders of Israel were stumped until they found a solution in Jabesh-Gilead. The men of that city had failed to help Israel fight Benjamin, and the elders had said that the people of any city who didn’t send soldiers would be killed. Destroying the city and bringing the young virgins to the Benjamites provided 400 wives, but they were still 200 short. What to do? The elders eventually came up with a second solution, which involved the remaining 200 wireless Benjamites simply kidnapping a mate as she danced at the yearly feast in Shiloh. As you can imagine, the fathers of these kidnapped girls weren’t very supportive, but the elders of Israel convinced them to take one for the team. Sing or pray Psalter #84.

Understanding the meanings of names in the Bible helps us understand the stories. According to Gertrude Hoeksema, Naomi’s name means “pleasant one,” and her husband Elimelech’s name means “my God is king.” The couple lived in Ephrath, meaning “fruitful,” near Bethlehem, meaning “house of bread.” These names and places all have very positive meanings, bringing out the idea that these were godly people in the promised land.

Naomi’s life, however, becomes full of sorrow upon arriving in Moab. Her husband dies, followed by her two sons, until she is left with only her heathen daughters-in-law. It is because of this that she changes her
name to Mara, meaning “bitterness,” upon returning to Canaan. The same name appears earlier in scripture, in Exodus 15, where it is the name of the pool of bitter water Israel came to in their wanderings. Still, just as the waters of Marah grew sweet when Moses threw in a tree, so joy was restored to Naomi’s life when Boaz and Ruth married and provided her with a grandson who would be a grandfather of Christ. Sing or pray Psalter #277.

September 21 Read Ruth 2

In Ruth 2:11, Boaz tells Ruth he’s heard her story, “and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore.” This statement stood out to me, because it could be applied to God’s people throughout history. Abraham was called out of Ur of the Chaldees. Paul was called out of his own country to preach to the Gentiles. He went from being a celebrated persecutor of Christians to a despised preacher to them. Jesus was called out of his hometown to preach to those who saw their need for a physician. As he said in Matthew 13:57b, “A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, and in his own house.” We are all called out of this world to our heavenly home. As Jesus speaks of us in John 17:16, “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” We live in this world as pilgrims passing through, but we build up our treasures in heaven “where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Matthew 6:20). Sing or pray Psalter #378.

September 22 Read Ruth 3

Wasn’t it inappropriate for Ruth to lie at Boaz’s feet in the middle of the night? Matthew Henry isn’t sure the act can be justified. According to him, she probably shouldn’t have done it because it had the appearance of evil and put them both in a position to sin. 1 Thessalonians 5:22 commands us to, “Abstain from all appearance of evil.” We have to remember that the world is watching and looking for a cause to blaspheme. So, why was it that Boaz didn’t see what she was doing? This is one of the troubleshooting questions we can ask for understanding the act. Henry does go on, though, to say that it’s safe to conclude that it didn’t look as bad then as it does today. Still, it’s probably safe to conclude that it didn’t always happen this way, since Boaz is quite taken aback when he finds Ruth lying at his feet and must ask who she is. He wasn’t expecting her to be there. However, whether prudent or not, this is a picture for us of the beautiful truth that we find rest at the feet of Jesus our Savior. Sing or pray Psalter #52.

September 23 Read Ruth 4

Can you think of some reasons why the Book of Ruth would be included in the infallible word of God? What is God teaching us in this book? First, by redeeming Ruth’s place in Israel, Boaz was acting as a type of Christ, who redeems all his people. Second, Boaz was in the line of Christ, so Ruth was one of the great grandmothers of Jesus. This is clearly seen in the fact that the book ends with the name David, the first real king of Israel, who pointed towards the king of heaven and earth. Third, this book is a reminder that salvation is all of God, and it’s not for us to know who is saved and who is not. Remember the story of the Moabite women who seduced the Israelite men to commit adultery with them in Numbers 25? These were the most wicked of women, yet this is the nation that godly Ruth comes from. Fourth, this book shows that the Savior would come to save all his people from their sins, Jews and Gentiles alike. Sing or pray Psalter #310.

September 24 Read Judges 4

This story leads us to the question, was it wrong of Jael to kill Sisera? The Biblegateway.com writer that put together a page about her denounces Jael for her murder of Sisera. “While divine judgment fell upon Sisera, Jael erred in that she did not allow God to designate the means of punishment. She remains forever censurable for the cruel way she killed him.” I was intrigued when I read this, because I would say that her killing of Sisera was commendable, but she should not have lied in order to do it. I would compare this to Rahab, who is praised for helping the spies, but shouldn’t have lied about where they were.

I have discovered, however, that when you start examining real-life situations it becomes much more difficult to define what a lie is than it appears initially. Biblestudytools.com defines lying as “practicing deceit, falsehood, and treachery either by word or action.” According to this definition, what Jael and Rahab did would definitely be considered a lie. Yet, isn’t that the way war works? Aren’t you always trying to deceive your enemy to get the advantage? Taking it further, how about sports? In sports aren’t you trying to trick your opponent into thinking you are going to do something you are not? Is that lying? Sing or pray Psalter #374.

September 25 Read Judges 5

Yesterday, we talked about what lying is. Today we look at the subject from a little different perspective: Is it always wrong to lie? As we are all aware, lying is brought up in the ten commandments. The ninth
commandment, found in Exodus 20:16, reads, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” Does this commandment condemn all forms of lying, or does the end phrase “against thy neighbor” make some distinction between types of untruths? Mind you, I am in no way trying to convince you of something here, but merely encouraging thought-provoking discussion. In this chapter, Deborah and Barak praise Jael for her killing of Sisera. Nowhere are we told specifically that she shouldn’t have deceived him, just as we never hear of Rahab’s being reprimanded. During World War II, many people helped hide Jews from the Germans, and many of them denied knowing anything when confronted. Was that a sin? If they had told the guards where the people were hiding, wouldn’t they then have been guilty of aiding murder? On the other hand, lying because of what will happen if you don’t sounds eerily similar to the worldly philosophy, “the end justifies the means.” Sing or pray Psalter #41.

**September 26**  Read Judges 6

In Revelation 9 we are given a little glimpse into the demonic world. In order to put it in terms that we can understand, scripture describes demons as a combination of locusts and scorpions. Verse 3 reads, “And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power.” These demons come out of the bottomless pit and are given power to torment those who don’t have the seal of God on their foreheads. The locust is used here to illustrate the demon army, because of its capacity to swarm and destroy everything in its path. It’s a very intimidating enemy that cannot be fought with swords and spears.

We see the image of the locust used elsewhere in scripture, including this chapter. Verse 5 reads, “For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land to destroy it.” This seemingly unstoppable force, however, was nothing in the hand of God. Sing or pray Psalter #34.

**September 27**  Read Judges 7

In verse 13 of this chapter, one enemy soldier tells his comrade of a dream he had where a barley cake rolled down into the Midianite camp and overturned their tent. The other man says that the barley cake is a picture of Gideon, because God has delivered the Midianites into his hand. The image of a barley cake was fitting, because Gideon was only a poor farmer, not a well-known warrior. In addition, a barley cake was a very lowly form of food, which demonstrated how improbable an Israelite victory was.

The soldier’s dream interpretation shows us that even the wicked are forced to confess that God is the one in control. One of the best examples is Balaam, who wanted to curse Israel, but told Balak that he could only speak the words God placed in his mouth. In Daniel 6:26, King Darius makes an amazing decree after Daniel survives the lion’s den, “That in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: for he is the living God, and steadfast for ever, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall be even unto the end.” Sing or pray Psalter #3.

**September 28**  Read Judges 8

No sooner is Israel given victory over the Midianites than the Ephraimites rise up in jealousy at the honor Gideon’s tribe, brother Manasseh, is now receiving. Instead of telling them off, which they would have deserved, Gideon appeases them with a soft answer. This principle is taught by Solomon in Proverbs 15:1, where we read, “A soft answer turneth away wrath.” Ephraim knew the problem with Midian and didn’t need to be called. Their anger during this time of rejoicing showed they were only concerned about their own glory, not God’s. Still, Gideon caters to them in verses 2 and 3 to diffuse the situation. He says, “What have I done now in comparison of you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? God hath delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb: and what was I able to do in comparison of you?” In other words, Ephraim’s pursuit of the enemy and capturing of Midian’s princes was greater than Gideon’s initial victory. Gideon teaches us here to promote the unity of the church whenever possible, even at times when the offended party is in the wrong. Sing or pray Psalter #369.

**September 29**  Read Judges 9

Abimelech began a shaky “friendship” with the men of Shechem. He convinced them to make him their king, because he said that they needed a strong leader to protect them from the seventy sons of Gideon. There is no indication that the sons were actually planning to attack Shechem, but the men of the city bought it. Abimelech hadn’t ruled for long, however, before God sent an evil spirit to divide them. The men of Shechem and Abimelech started plotting against each other. After Abimelech escaped their clutches he returned to the city with an army and destroyed the city.

This is similar to what will happen at the end of time.
We can look at the unrest in the world today, especially in regards to terrorism and wonder how the nations will ever be able to unite. It is amazing that it will actually happen, but it will be a very fragile union. It will be a union based solely on a common hatred for the truth, and because of this it will not last long. Just as the union between Abimelech and the men of Shechem ended in destruction, the same will be true of the antichristian world power. Sing or pray Psalter #224.

Judge 10:16 reads, “And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the LORD: and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.” Matthew Henry explains this verse by saying that God’s thoughts here are just put into the context of an earthly father so that we can understand something of God’s feelings towards us. This does not mean that God changes or can actually be sad. I was intrigued by the statement that God cannot be sad. Is that true? We know that Jesus, the Son of God, was sad at times. Jesus, however, had a human nature as well as a divine nature, so some distinction could probably be made between God and Jesus being sad. Verses that could be examined on this topic include Genesis 6:6 and Psalm 95:10, which both speak of God being “grieved.” Obviously, the answer is not that God is sad in the sense that he has any feelings of regret or sense of loss. Maybe the answer is that the Bible uses these words because they are the closest fit, but that there’s no way God’s feelings can really be expressed in human terms. Sing or pray Psalter #173.

Mizpeh, you will remember, was the place where Jacob and Laban said their farewells. The name means “watchtower,” and we see it make an appearance in this chapter as well. Jephthah grew up in a home where his brothers hated him, because he was only their half-brother. They eventually kicked him out, and he fled from the land. Over time, Jephthah was able to organize an army of sorts for himself and became known as a mighty man of valor. Now his brothers ask him to return to Gilead and become their leader. Jephthah is skeptical that they just want to use him to win the victory and then reject him again. Therefore, he makes the elders swear that they will keep him as their leader after the war. It’s noteworthy that Mizpeh is the place Jephthah chooses to do this. Jephthah wanted to make it clear to the men of Gilead that they were calling upon God to bear witness of the agreement they made and to judge them if they broke their word. Sing or pray Psalter #13.

Do you remember what happened with Ephraim in Judges 8? Ephraim was jealous that they hadn’t received any of the glory when Gideon defeated Israel’s enemies. At that time, Gideon appeased them with a soft answer. In the chapter for today the time for soft answers has passed. Ephraim is again angry that they aren’t getting all the praise. They go even farther than before, however, telling Jephthah that they are going to burn his house down around him. They claim that they didn’t have a chance to help because Jephthah didn’t call them. Jephthah reminds them that he, like Gideon, did call them, but they had refused to listen. The men of Ephraim were beyond the point of reason, so Jephthah sent his army to fight them. Just as Gideon’s response taught us the importance of giving a soft answer whenever possible, so there is a lesson for us here too. Jephthah illustrates that there are also times when we need to stand up for what is right and severely condemn wickedness. Ephraim needed to be taught a hard lesson, just as we ourselves often do. Sing or pray Psalter #300.

I remember two topics of conversation we had in class when going over this story. First, Eli’s assumption regarding Hannah shows just how bad things were in Israel. The fact that he assumed she was drunk just because her lips were moving silently shows that seeing someone drunk in the tabernacle would not have been all that unusual at the time. Second, was it wrong of Hannah to make this vow? Wasn’t she trying to make a deal with God? “If you do this for me, God, then I will do this for you.” Scratch my back, and I will scratch yours, as the saying goes. However, there is no indication in the Bible that what she did was wrong. On the contrary, we read that Eli praises her for her request. With these things in mind, I think we must understand that Hannah was not trying to make a deal with God, but simply expound her way of showing thankfulness to him for answering her prayer. We show our thankfulness to God by the good works that Christ performs in and through us, and Hannah’s dedication of her son to God was a good work. Sing or pray Psalter #77.

Eli was judged for the sins of his two sons. They had committed adultery and had eaten sacrificial meat raw with the fat on it. By doing so, they robbed God of his
sacrifices. They said that they did not care about God’s laws and did not need his blood to be shed for them. They worshipped themselves instead of God. Because of these sins, Eli was told that his sons would die on the same day, and all his descendants would be beggars and die young. The priesthood would be stripped from his family and given to another.

But why did all this judgment come upon Eli? He didn’t take part in the sin of his sons, and he did rebuke them for it. The answer is found in verse 29, where we read, “Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honoureth thy sons above me…” Eli rebuked his sons, but did so very mildly, because he was more worried about making them angry than he was about angering God. How often don’t we fall into that same sin? Sing or pray Psalter #338.

Gertrude Hoeksema brings out a number of ways in which Samson was different from other judges. First of all, Israel did not repent before God brought them Samson. The history of God’s people is always a cycle of sin, repentance, and redemption, but that cycle is broken in this story. Second, Samson was called before he was born, while other judges were called at certain times during their lives. Most of them weren’t called until they were grown men, and even Samuel wasn’t called until after his mother had weaned him. Third, Samson delivered the Israelites alone, and he only began to do so. Usually, the judge would lead an army against the enemy and win a great victory that would free Israel from oppression once again for a time. This was not the case with Samson. He never had an army to lead, and Israel was still under the Philistines at the time of his death. Finally, Samson was the only man who was born a Nazarite. Samuel and John the Baptist are the only other two permanent Nazarites that we read of in the Bible, but both of them were called after they were born. Sing or pray Psalter #232.

Matthew Henry showed how Samson was a type of Christ in a different way than I had thought of before. As he puts it, “The truth is Samson was himself a riddle, a paradox of a man, did that which was really great and good, by that which was seemingly weak and evil, because he was designed not to be a pattern to us (who must walk by rule, not by example), but a type of him who, though he knew no sin, was made sin for us, and appeared in the likeness of sinful flesh, that he might condemn and destroy sin in the flesh, Romans 8:3.”

What do you think about this? By fighting God’s enemies while living in sin, Samson was a type of Christ, who fought his Father’s enemies while carrying the weight of our sins on his back. It is true that it can be difficult to see Samson as a type of Christ considering the lifestyle he led, so this provides an intriguing way of putting the pieces together. Sing or pray Psalter #47.

When we think of Eli we usually think of a figure with spiritual character similar to Lot, and rightfully so, but here Eli shows his godliness. God comes to the young boy Samuel in the night and recaps to him the judgment that is about to come upon Eli. When the old man learns that it is God that is addressing Samuel he instructs Samuel in how to respond, but doesn’t try to interfere. When Samuel tells him what God has said is going to take place, Eli meekly responds with, “It is the LORD: let him do what seemeth him good.” It took a lot of spiritual strength to submit to the proclaimed judgment of God, especially when it was spoken to him by a young child. In doing so, Eli reminds me a little of Job. Just as Job famously had everything taken away from him and still blessed God, so Eli was told of the coming wrath of God that would be poured out on him and still submitted to God’s will. Sing or pray Psalter #204.

Mark H. Hoeksema: Nick, do you have comments on all of this?

Nick Kleyn: Well, back in 1975, Prof. Hoeksema and Rev. [Cornelius] Hanko came over. And they came to Winnaleah where we actually lived. We lived in LaPort, just only a few minutes out of Winnaleah, and we have to be to the airport at five o’clock. Anyway, it was so funny. We got to the airport,
but he wasn’t there, and we had no idea what they looked like. So when they came off the plane, Prof. Hoeksema had a big coat on and my wife went up to him and said, “Are you Mr. Hoeksema?” And he said, “No, I’m Prof. Hoeksema” (laughter).

Anyway, they gave a lecture in Burnie Church. Then they went to Launceston, so we didn’t see much of them at all. I think Rev. Hanko actually preached in the Presbyterian Church. They only gave him twenty minutes to do his sermon. That was the first time they came, but they came again, back in the ‘80s. We didn’t see them then, did we?

Ina Kleyen: No. They went to Pastor Fisk’s house, and Pastor Fisk hadn’t told any of the congregation that they were coming, because he felt threatened by the Protestant Reformed. You could see that the people were hungry for learning more, so he felt threatened by that. And then we didn’t know anything about it. And we had a bit of a hitch-up with family visitation from Pastor Fisk and John Driscoll. The question came up, “Well, how do you like my preaching?” And I always said he was one of the best preachers that we had as far as doctrine goes. I said, “Oh, I don’t think it’s as good as what it used to be.” And he said to John Driscoll, “Well, what do you think?” He said, “Well, my wife and I said the same thing together.” He stood up and said, “If you have anything against my preaching, you go to the presbytery, because it’s a presbytery government.” We didn’t mean it that way. He asked the question and I just answered it. So he was very angry with us after that.

But anyway, life went on, and then we got more to learn from the Protestant Reformed Church. We had The Standard Bearer and Beacon Lights, and we would order what was on the back. Gradually, like when we got that sermon from the Lord’s Prayer and people wanted to hear more of it, Launceston would allow us to listen maybe once a month, and that gave them a bit of easy time because they didn’t have a minister at that time, either. The elders were giving the preaching, and they never read sermons. They had to make up their sermonette. So then we in Burnie got much more involved with the Protestant Reformed Churches. Then we were saying, “Can’t we get a minister from somewhere else,” because the EPC didn’t have any ministers. Where do we get a minister from? That was our big question mark as a church. And they said, well, we were allowed to look around. So then we had to look around. We had a Rev. Dekka who had left the Free Reformed Church. We had him come over for a weekend and he preached to us. We just wanted to see what he was like. Then our church put out a call to him. They also put out a call to Prof. Hoeksema for help from the Protestant Reformed Churches at the same time. Albert, my brother, said, “You can’t do that. You can’t put two irons in the fire at once.” And we said, “It’ll be fine, it’ll be fine.” So then they both said “Yes.” Prof. Hoeksema said he would come. And the Protestant Reformed said, “Yes, we’ll help. We’ll give you Prof. Hoeksema for a year.” And Dekka said “Yes, I’ll come.” So then they choose Prof. Hoeksema. They said to Albert, “You had better tell him that he can’t come.” Albert said, “No, I’m not going to do the dirty work for you.” So they had to do that themselves.

So then we had Prof. Hoeksema. And it was the high peak of our spiritual wealth. Our boys were teenagers, Albert’s boys were teenagers at the time. It was just like a dry sponge that wants to soak in the water. It was tremendous. They were like parents to us as well: “Ina, what are you cooking?” We had a tremendous time. When we went out for drives, your mom [Gertrude Hoeksema] always used to tell us lots of stories.

So that’s how we started with the Protestant Reformed. Right before that, because we were allowed to have Protestant Reformed sermons, we got the tapes from Hudsonville. So we heard Rev. Van Baren every Sunday.  

NK: And then Prof. Hoeksema went back home. In the meantime, Prof. Hanko came out, too, and he brought a couple of girls along. And Prof. Hoeksema said, “I’m going to introduce you to the girls.” Anyway, we had to pick them up at the airport. And Sharon met Daniel then and Deb met Nick at that time. They were in love with each other.

When Prof. Hoeksema left, he organized the wedding. I was in Grand Rapids at the time for the wedding, and I saw Rev. Woudenberg. He had a couple of videos [of church services] from Hudsonville, and he said, “You take them home.” I said, “You need them Sunday,” because that’s what he got them for. He said, “Ah, don’t worry what Kalamazoo needs Sunday. I’ll find some. You take them home.” So, we took the videos from Hudsonville at the time of Rev. Van Baren. We couldn’t play them on our video player because American is a little bit different speed. So we went to a shop and said, “Can we borrow a video player and a TV for the weekend.” We had no trouble obtaining that, so we played the videos. People were so pleased with it they didn’t even want audio tapes anymore. So, after that we
bought a TV and video player, and they regularly sent the videos from Hudsonville—some of Rev. VanBaren, and then later on with Rev. Gritters. After that we never went back to audio tapes anymore. It was much better to look at something than to sit there and listen. It was so wonderful, we just got the first two tapes from Rev. Woudenberg, and then afterwards we always got video tapes.

IK: We had audio tapes for about three years before we got the video tapes in Burnie. So we were very Protestant Reformed-structured. For Bible Study we were doing the book of Acts, and we followed Prof. Hoeksema’s study guide that he wrote for it. Then if we had any questions, one of the men would write to Prof. Engelsma and ask for an explanation.

We didn’t even think of asking our men in Launceston. We just went straight to the PR and asked for answers on complications that we had with some of the things. Then we had Rev. [B.] Woudenberg with us for six months, because Prof. Hoeksema had to leave because of his cancer. Then we had Rev. Rodney Miersma from New Zealand. He stayed in Burnie for four months and looked after us.

So gradually we were introduced to more depth of doctrine and understood it better. Also, the congregation in Burnie was more Dutch, while the ones left in Launceston were all Australians. So our Reformed background was better fulfilled in this area at this time.

NK: When Prof. Hoeksema was there, our son Daniel was very interested in going into the ministry. When Prof. Hoeksema came, that really made the decision for Daniel to go into the ministry. So he had a few lessons with Prof. Hoeksema during the week at his home, and then he applied for ministry in the EPC. He had to make an essay on purity of worship—worship without music in the church.

IK: Regulative principle.

NK: But they called it purity of worship over there. Anyway, he had to make his essay, and he showed me the essay. Daniel mentioned in the essay music is just things indifferent, but we worship God in spirit and in truth. I said to Daniel, “Dan, you’re finished with the EPC.” And he was. They sent him a letter that they could not accept him any longer in the EPC if he held to that point of view.

Prof. Hoeksema warned him. He said, “Your loss is our gain.” And that's what happened. When Daniel came over here in the States he went to the university and then to the seminary.

IK: Later on when Rodney was inspired to go to the ministry, he said, “Shall I go straight to the Protestant Reformed?” We said, “No, your duty is to ask the church here where you belong.” So he did, and they straightaway said, “No, not if you hold to the same principles.” So they didn’t even go into it much—just asked where he stood on the regulative principle. So he straightaway went to the Protestant Reformed.

MHH: So that made the decision for him very simple.

IK: Yes. Because of the history, because when Daniel did his thesis, they said he resigned. And we thought, well, he didn’t resign. And when it came to marking (this was foul) there was no marking on where he went wrong, what he said wrong—nothing. To me that was always a fault on the EPC part that they didn’t correct where he failed. So, what do you go on?

MHH: But your sons had apparently learned the Protestant Reformed viewpoint about the regulative principle from Professor Hoeksema?

IK: No, we always ourselves were strong about that too. We had no problem singing without music because I don’t think it’s a sin to sing without music. But I don’t think it’s a sin to sing with music, either. And that was the difference—that they thought that was sin in worship to sing with music. They only used music for anything not to do with psalms or hymns. Maybe they sing hymns with music. But they won’t sing any psalms at home with music, either.

So it’s at this point that you have at least one son in America, and another one either here or on his way. What precipitated your move to the States?

IK: All right. Nicholas married Deb, and after marriage he straightaway went to live in America. Daniel and Sharon stayed in Tasmania because Daniel was hoping to become a minister in the EPC. It took a year until the presbytery said no. They just said he resigned. That was hurtful to me because I didn’t think it was a resignation. Before that, we had officebearers’ nomination and Albert and Nick were on there. But they were never put in office because they could not agree to say that it was a
sin to use music. So, that’s why Burnie never had officebearers. So then Nicholas, when he became an American citizen, could sponsor us to come to America. Looking back now, who would want your girls to court someone from the other side of the world, a different denomination, that you might have just had a brief knowledge of? But I see that God had Prof. Hoeksema there to put his stamp of approval on it, spiritually, you know.

**MHH:** Plus, he played match-maker a little bit (laughter).

**IK:** Then also, he was there for my mother’s funeral. I thought that was very special too.

**MHH:** That is truly an interesting history. Now I would like to put this question to both of you: How would you compare the church of today with the church of your youth?

**IK:** In the Liberated Church, we arrived from the Netherlands. When a church starts up in a new country, I think you stay more conservative because you don’t have any roots, and the roots that you form are God-focused. We had no sport with the Australians. We didn’t do anything. We weren’t mingling. We were almost like Jews in the Old Testament. Later on when we joined the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, their concept of the covenant was new at first. It wasn’t till ’75 that it was introduced by the lectures that Prof. Hoeksema gave that our people started to grow more in the necessity of the covenant and the friendship that God related with Abraham. Before that, there was no concept of that. So they didn’t want a Christian school. In Burnie we tried the Christian school, and presbytery stepped in and said that if you do that, it’s our property and not yours. So we, as Dutch Liberated people background, were not going to do that. So we didn’t start up a Christian school.

So then our children went to Laylands Christian School, and Albert and Mary’s children went to the Baptist Christian school (which was more like a home-schooling). Albert’s children went to the Baptist school, and that was more monitored. It’s called ACE curriculum. Later on we used that with our four youngest children, and they were homeschooled.

When we came to the PR— I’m not involved with all the sports, but I think that is a weak spot in the Protestant Reformed Churches. I don’t mind them playing sports. But in America you can become a college student if you’re a good sportsman, huh? That doesn’t make any sense to me.

**MHH:** That was not true in Australia?

**IK:** No. Still isn’t. You don’t get in by any sports. There is no college sport. There are sports—they are sports mad, but it is never on a college basis.

**MHH:** It’s not a part of the educational system?

**IK:** No.

**MHH:** Whereas it is here, obviously. That’s interesting.

**NK:** Just to get back to your school again. Back in 1972, the EPC didn’t start a school. We got involved a little bit with the Christian Reformed school. It was Christian Reformed people. We wanted to start a school on the northwest coast in Tasmania. I was even in the board at that time. So we got together and decided to send out flyers to see how many we could get. We got 22 students, but we still went ahead with a little four-classroom school. After it opened we did get about 60-70 students. And when we got going, then later on some parents wanted to start a high school. I wasn’t on the board, but they didn’t want it because they wouldn’t be able to get all the facilities that the state school had. So there was a bit of a division. Most parents were going to start a high school because that’s just as important [as grade school]. But they didn’t start a high school, so numbers stayed about 70-80 students. A couple of years down the road, they came to an agreement to start a high school, and the school doubled in enrollment.

**IK:** In the middle of the year. They doubled in their enrollment.

**MHH:** Really?

**NK:** It became interdenominational. So we had to pull our children out because it had Baptist ministry, a Pentecostal minister, you know. It didn’t work out very well. So then we pulled our children out and we did home-schooling for five years before we came to Grand Rapids.

**MHH:** Do either of you have any closing remarks?

**IK:** OK. I’m just very thankful to God for guiding our pathway and bringing us here. And I’m just so thankful we can live here. People say, “Do you miss Australia?” I say, “No, I never miss Australia.” I loved it there, but I have no desire to go back. Spiritually I was famished compared to what we are given here in the Protestant Reformed Churches.
Another thing is, when you move and you have to get new roots, I think you are closer with the Lord. We went back to the Netherlands eighteen months ago and the Free Reformed Church, where we grew up in, is so wayward down there. You go to Australia, and they are very conservative. And it’s the same denomination in the Netherlands. They allow homosexuals to be officebearers. It doesn’t even look like church. The new building is just a hole with loose chairs, jeans, and whatever. It didn’t even feel like we were in a worship place. And that is something very unique to the Protestant Reformed, where people sit together as families worshipping God. In the Liberated Church the young people always tried to sit in the back seats and play around. Even in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the kids always sat together. We always made them sit with us. That’s why we go to church, not just to be disrespectful and unattentive.

So I’m so thankful to see our grandchildren growing up in the atmosphere and the school. I’m very impressed with the dedication of learning and praying at the schools here too.

NK: It’s like Ina said. It’s very family-orientated here. I found that’s wonderful. It was like in the EPC and the Liberated church in early years—family orientated. The third time I came here in ’89, I could not believe how people came to worship the Lord on a Sunday, how well they present themselves—well-dressed. And big families. It was just wonderful to see, and it is still today. Children sit with the parents in church. It wasn’t like that in my young days and later not either, like Ina said. Children sit separately, and I don’t think that’s any good at all. I hope and pray that it may continue over the years to come that this family-orientation is so important—that the family comes to church and worships together as a family.

IK: You know, Mark, it’s very interesting. We’ve taken some relatives from work to church. They cannot, for the life of them, think that all these little kids can sit still for all that time (laughter), and that there is no separate place for them to go and play. It brings them back a hundred years ago to when that was how it was. And they cannot believe it—there’s still a church today that holds to that kind of tradition.

NK: We were in Western Australia in ’77. We went to a Presbyterian church. The children had their Sunday School because the children could not sit still in the worship. We were there with our nine children at the time, and our children sat still. That was such a blessing to that congregation to see, to show that children can sit still and worship. And I think it’s wonderful that Rev. Smit is going to the Philippines. He’s got a large family. It’ll be a blessing to the congregation there to show that children can attend worship and sit still in the worship and listen—that’s a real experience we had, and I think it’ll be wonderful even in the Philippines. It’ll be such a blessing there to teach them that we come together as a family to worship.

MHH: It’s certainly clear from your comments that both of you see and appreciate the outworkings of the covenant. And I thank you both kindly for your time and for sharing your thoughts in this interview.
SOLA GRATIA: THE UNDESERVED MERCY OF GRACE ALONE

Once a man huddled in a dark cell, shaking. He had killed someone, and now he deserved to die. He was waiting to die with a whole group of other murderers.

The man shook harder. He was scared, but he knew he deserved death. He and all the men around him did. There would be no mercy for the likes of them.

As the guards came and took them away, a guard pulled this man away from the others. The guard led him toward a door. “Not you. You are being set free.”

“Set free? Why? I deserve to die with the others.” The man didn’t understand what was going on. He deserved to die. So why was he being set free?

“A stranger came and died in your place. Since punishment has been made, you are free to go.”

Free? The man’s legs shook so much he could barely walk. Why had that stranger done that? And for him? It was a mercy he didn’t deserve. He hadn’t earned it. He wasn’t any better than the other murderers. Yet he was the one being set free.

Thankful for the new life he had been given, the freed man lived the rest of his life working hard and doing good things.

Christ died in our place as payment for our sins. We didn’t deserve to have him die for us. We don’t have any goodness in ourselves. But in grace, God chose to love his people and gave Jesus to die for us. Reformers like Martin Luther fought for the truth that mercy is found only in God’s undeserved grace.

Tricia is a member of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church in Byron Center, Michigan.
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