

## Chapter 8 – A Few Good Women . . . and Men

Apparently the conquest of the land was far from complete. Now we learn that God's people "followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them." This is disappointing but not surprising. These people had for a couple of generations been nomads who herded sheep, goats, and perhaps cattle. When they weren't herding, they were fighting. But when they settled down into cities and villages it became necessary to grow things--- something they didn't know how to do. So when the neighboring Canaanite's crop was better than Joe Israelite's, naturally Joe asks for advice:

"How come your corn and wheat and olives are so healthy and mine are so scraggly?"

Well, the Canaanite would make suggestions and then ask, "And did you say the prayers?"

"What prayers? Sure, we pray to the LORD."

"Well, I never heard of the LORD, but if you want to grow stuff you have to worship the gods who make the soil fertile: Baal, Asherah---those gods."

So then Joe Israelite consults with all the other inept farmers and they decide that it can't hurt to do as their neighbor suggests. After all, the LORD is good at fighting, but nobody ever said the LORD could grow vegetables.

That's the way idolatry happens. God's people don't get up one morning and say to themselves, "Today I think I'll start worshiping some idols!" We just get out of the habit of turning to God for direction and start imitating the people around us. We spend our money the way they spend theirs, we occupy our time with the same pursuits among people just like us, absorb the same values, and seldom think to ask God, "Is this what you want for my life? Is this the pattern you want for my family? What do you want me to do with this education you are providing for me? How can this income you are making it possible for me to earn be used for your glory?"

**What are some of the non-God things that people like us tend to put our trust in, just because they're practical---they work? We don't have images of false gods that we literally worship, but the word "worship" means "to assign ultimate value (worth) to."**

It might be better for us if the consequences of our idolatry were as obvious as being raided by some Midianites. But maybe not. What we see in this chapter is a downward spiral of idolatry, suffering, admitting idolatry and asking for help, salvation, and then right back to idolatry again. If it weren't for the fascinating stories of Ehud, Deborah, Jael, Gideon, Samson and Delilah, it would be downright depressing.

**What are some of the consequences of the idolatries we are likely to practice? If the Moabites are not killing us off, what other kinds of deadness come our way as a consequence of idolatry? Be willing to listen to each other. You probably won't agree about the idols and their consequences.**

## Chapter 9 – The Faith of a Foreign Woman

This chapter starts out, “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine . . .” But as we saw in the last chapter, the people whose job is translated into English as “judge” weren’t primarily making legal decisions. They were more like military leaders. Or, in Samson’s case, a bully that God used to annoy the Philistines. Sometimes God has to use who’s available.

Although the story in chapter 9 is set during the time of the judges, it was written much later by an anonymous gifted storyteller who was inspired to remind God’s people that their disdain for and fear of foreigners was getting out of hand. “Don’t forget,” the writer warns, “that King David had a foreign woman in his family tree. They’re not all bad.”

Note the practice detailed in this story of providing a way for desperately poor people to get enough to eat. Farmers were not entitled to everything they worked for. Some of “their” grain was the property of poor people like Ruth and was to be left for them to gather.

**Have you ever seen the kind of stunning love and loyalty that Ruth demonstrated for her mother-in-law? (a rather negative woman to whom Ruth actually owed nothing).**

**As our society becomes more and more ethnically diverse, how can we as Christians cultivate the level of openness and welcome that Boaz demonstrated toward a foreigner?**

### Thoughts on Christian maturity

While it’s easy to see how other people need to change, we have trouble recognizing our own idolatries. When Christian community is functioning well, each of us has a group of people whom we can trust with the real truth about our lives. We need people to encourage us and to remind us of God’s faithfulness in the Bible and in our own lives. But what many of us lack is a few people we can trust to confront us and challenge us to turn away from bad choices. We need people whose commitment to us is so strong that we will receive their critique with openness and without defensiveness. This kind of Christian community takes time and effort—two things that most of us think we don’t have. But it’s important.