



# BIBLE IN A YEAR 2020



## Summary

This is a shocking set of stories about a nation turning from faith to failure because, although they had accepted law from God as their constitution, their hearts did not align with God's heart on the right ways to live, love, value and treat others.

There are some famous characters in this book, some with heroic, endearing and even redeeming qualities. Some of them turn to God in moments of crisis and we get amazing glimpses of his power as a result. But where Israel ends up shows that people need much more than religion and occasional prayers to live a good life.

**Bern Leckie**

# Thursday August 6: Judges 1-3

You had one job!

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

## What did I like about today's reading?

Everything starts well! We're picking up the story of Israel moving into the promised land at a point where Moses' successor Joshua has just finished doing a decent, faithful job of following God's way into the land where his kingdom would be established. As he prepared to die, he did what he saw Moses do, gathering the nation and renewing their covenant commitment to walk with God and obey his laws. (See the end of the book of Joshua!)

Fuelled with faith, Israel consulted God and followed his direction, resulting in victory after victory. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, there's a story to tell about that. Actually, quite a few stories, some pretty gory, tragic, even horrific. Spoiler alert: the explanation for this is right at the end of the book. But you might be able to guess without flicking to the end of chapter 21. Want to play along?

The first clues for why the wheels started to drop off the kingdom faith wagon are in the latter half of chapter 1. God had been pretty clear about driving out the Canaanites and helping when asked. But look how many Canaanites are still there, and for how many different reasons, according to the various tribes.

The unity Israel had under Joshua's leadership turned into a mishmash of local issues, compromises, faithlessness and defeat. I love how God intervened, nevertheless, with saviour leaders, "judges", who could rescue people from the pain of enemy oppression, but it turned out that turning people's hearts back to God was a much, much harder job.

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God's establishment of a people in a promised land included laws to guide them, but also the freedom to break them and see what happened. He helped the nation go his way when they wanted this. God had also warned about what would happen if people went their own ways instead.

Today, as then, people make choices and respect leadership to varying degrees. But rather than control and force people to do what he wants, God shows fatherly love.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

Thank God for his love and leadership, and reflect on the fact that God allows me to make mistakes – not all my choices are good. How honest am I with myself and him about this? I want to follow Jesus faithfully, so I need to check with him about what I need to change.

## Who am I going to share this with?

My family and other people I follow Jesus with.

# Friday August 7: Judges 4-6

Whose story is this anyway?

Bern Leckie writes:

## What did I like about today's reading?

We are looking at Israel in a strange, formative time in which people move quickly through cycles of saying they'll trust and obey God, then stopping doing this, then finding out that going their own way was unwise and ruinous, then asking God for help and leadership, and God raising up a "judge" to be a sort of mini-Moses, make some wise decisions and then bring people back to the start of the cycle again. It's a familiar story we've seen unfold over long time periods, but right now it keeps happening with dizzying speed.

It turns out that every judge had some special qualities God could use, but also some baggage which might hold them back or make them infamous. So how does Deborah strike you? I find her remarkable, partly because it was so unusual for a woman to be in her position at the time, and also because of how much this account suggests she knew and traded off that. Was it so dishonourable for Barak to know that "the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman"? I love how Deborah's prophecy was accurate enough to know that, especially as she wasn't referring to herself, but it does make me wonder where everyone's heart was in this gory story. The details Deborah adds into her song, including the bits about Sisera's mum and her ladies in waiting, might suggest a strong desire to make this a human-centred story more than a God-centred one. Is that healthy? Is this a warning?

I love Gideon's honesty when an angel blesses him, but his reaction also suggests to me that he and others were so focused on how well people were doing, they had no confidence to accept a word from God when it arrived. I love how Gideon engages with God to try and gain confidence enough to believe that God could work through him, and I especially love how God sticks with him through doubts, fears and multiple "fleece" tests. But it's clear that when he destroyed his father's altar to Baal, people were only seeing this as a human act rather than a work of God. How could God start to get credit and recognition again?

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God is responsive when his people are suffering and call out to him. He wants to be recognised so that people will keep a knowledge of him, his ways and how to live a life which glorifies him. But he also works with people who will not credit or follow him consistently. He is an ever-loving father and a supplier of saving grace.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

Over the last few days, I've felt several spiritual prompts to seek and credit God's influence and leadership more consistently. I want to do this and not take credit for his work!

## Who am I going to share this with?

My family and perhaps some work colleagues too, as I'm seeking God's help and wisdom over some sensitive conversations at a busy time, and couldn't work well without it!

# Monday August 10: Judges 7-9

You don't need that

Bern Leckie writes:

## What did I like about today's reading?

We have been looking at how anyone can mix up what people and God do, and I love that God has an elegant solution for this in the battle with the Midianites. "You have too many men!" He peacefully thins out Gideon's army until they need a miracle to win, and then it's time for people to see God unquestionably at work.

I also love how God reassures Gideon that this will all go well, directing him to overhear gossip about a prophetic dream – people knew what God was going to do before he did it! So in response, Gideon's fear gave way to worship and enthusiasm to give every soldier symbolic jars and trumpets instead of weapons. All they really needed, it turns out, was to trust and obey God, and he sorted out the victory he promised.

So you might think this would bring everyone else to recognise God at work and support when they were asked to chip in a few loaves of bread. But these tribes are so mixed up, even when God does something in front of their faces, they can't see it or don't value it as much as what they are doing themselves. Even Gideon, who has heard from God, led his missions and pointed people to accept God as ruler instead of himself... even he is so mixed up by his culture's confusion of God's values that he thinks making an idol will be fine.

And as for how Gideon raised his seventy sons... I guess big families can be fractious sometimes but Abimelek is a bit extreme! It's an incredible story, packed with murderous violence, greed and an outstanding bit of pride and misogyny at the end. But what stands out to me is how this family and the people who supported Abimelek, so close to God through his work with Gideon, could be so far from God's heart's desires and values.

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God wants to be known among people. Sometimes he will act in extraordinary ways so that we recognise him. He will do this even though he knows that our attention might be on something else very soon afterwards, and even a great story of God at work can get overridden by our own concerns, greed, fear and desires to do things our own way.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

I'm very grateful that we have historical perspective and the guidance of Jesus and the Spirit to be able to tell which way is up in messy stories like this. Nevertheless, I relate to the difficulty in picking out what God wants from what I want, and what he can do with me from what I merely want to do for myself. So I'm going to try to be as much as possible like Gideon in his best moments, asking and listening to God and ready to drop some of the things I think I need when I'm confident that God can be credited and praised for his work.

## Who am I going to share this with?

My family, where last week we lost something important and it seemed good (but unusual) to stop searching and start praying about it. When we found it, God got the credit! We will make it more of a habit to seek his guidance rather than work in our own strength.

## **Tuesday August 11: Judges 10-12**

### **What good is power from God without wisdom, love and peace?**

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

### **What did I like about today's reading?**

First, ouch. That horrible feeling of recognising my own mess ups in other people's mess ups, specifically the way Israel swapped out God for other things until they were in real trouble. Not that I've ever bowed down to gold idols, but I recognise how other things which seem to have power (recognised status, money, comfort supplies, etc) can get between me and God. But I love how God renewed commitment to Israel when they "got rid of the foreign gods."

Second, ouch. As mighty as Jephthah was as a warrior, and as much as the Spirit filled him with the strength to win battles, how painful is it to watch someone with masses of power but not quite enough wisdom? Especially if we can also relate to how a reckless mouth or an over-eager promise can ruin an otherwise great situation, and that's putting it far too mildly from the point of view of Jephthah's family. What a horrible warning.

Third, all kinds of ouch. What on earth is the problem with the Ephraimites? Loving fighting so much that if they don't get invited, they'll start their own? Or just pride? Or were they so focused on their own roles and recognition that they refused to glorify God after his victory helped them? Killing 42,000 of them in response to an insult doesn't make Jephthah look entirely God-centred either.

Overall, I'm forming a picture of Israel at this point in their history which also looks uncomfortably like countries we know today, perhaps even ours. God's name might be on the money, celebrated in the calendar and quoted in the laws, but none of that is enough to make God central in anyone's heart. There is huge scope to know God but miss his way.

### **What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?**

God never abandons his people. He keeps his promises and, as a result, seems to keep his distance when people are determined to prioritise other things, other gods or themselves. But he does hear and respond when people call on him. His Spirit can be massively empowering, and God can use a wide variety of imperfect people like us to get his work done. But the things that God wants to grow in us, like wisdom, love and other spiritual fruit, take time to develop. He needs to remain in our hearts for a while for us to notice the difference he makes in our lives.

### **What am I going to do differently as a result?**

I'm in a busy time when it can seem quick and tempting to deal with people badly, either rudely to dismiss something I think is wrong, or pridefully to exert my own authority or please people with an unwise promise. I recognise my need for more wisdom, love and peace, sourced from God's work in me rather than my own research and effort. So I've put work aside to write this, but I'll also need to take more times out with God this month!

### **Who am I going to share this with?**

My family and hopefully, when there's a good story to share from the results, some clients!

# Thursday August 13: Judges 13-15

## Who doesn't love a strongman leader?

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

## What did I like about today's reading?

First, I'm loving that, while Israel was going through an extended evil period, God did not wait for them to come back to him. On his own timetable, he initiated an intervention through parents who would respond and obey through their upbringing of a miracle child. So Christlike! What could go wrong?

Well, when God's gift starts acting like they are God's gift, that's not ideal. There's a lot to like about Samson – he's empowered by God, he carries the strength, swagger and sharp wit of an action hero, and he Gets. Stuff. Done. If you've seen Arnold Schwarzenegger as Conan The Barbarian, that's my image of Samson. I'm guessing that kind of grim humoured, zero-to-hero, all-conquering mass of brains-meets-brawn, only thing sharper than his sword was his tongue-type character was the kind of messiah-saviour that Israel had in mind for centuries before they met Jesus.

But who did Samson love? Anyone more than himself? Maybe his wife, at first, but she ended up "given to one of his companions" at the wedding!

I guess it's another example of how people can have a huge amount of God-given blessing and power, but without love, would you think that following them would lead you to God?

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God uses imperfect people to do his work, and sometimes that work and the flaws of the character who executed it can be legendary. God is still determined that, by all kinds of memorable ways, we can learn that he is powerful and acts for justice.

God also can intervene on his own timetable, not needing people to approach him first. He seems to know how to find people who will respond to his calling, and whether it is by being leaders or warriors, parents or worshippers, those people can change the world.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

As much as I'm impressed, amused and appalled by Samson in roughly equal measure, not much of me really wants to change to be like him.

But noticing what Samson lacked, I'm more determined to follow Jesus and grow as a lover, not a fighter. That might mean lowering some of my ambitions to get stuff done and spending more time defending my daddy-son time against invading work distractions which have certainly felt overpowering at times this week.

Not that work is all bad. In fact, I think the best of it comes from a loving heart. So I'd like God to use me to get better work done too, his way.

## Who am I going to share this with?

My family. Maybe also one of my clients, if I'm feeling brave enough...

# Friday August 14: Judges 16-18

## Why, why, why, Delilah?

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

### What did I like about today's reading?

Titus 1:15 says, "To the pure, all things are pure..." Let's just say that I remember a time (childhood) when the story of Samson and Delilah seemed more pure than it seems now.

The short story about Samson and the prostitute shows me how little Samson liked to be constrained, by anyone's expectations, at least. As for the dangerous bedroom games with Delilah, maybe he really saw himself as invincible and thought his partner was loving exploring his boundaries. Or maybe Samson could see that love had nothing to do with Delilah's treachery, but he couldn't resist the urge to continue until he got properly trapped?

In any event, it turned that for all of his specialness, Samson was only one of many to find that being led by his passionate desires outside a loving relationship left him in a mess of regret.

The enduring image of his strength returning to take final revenge on the Philistines always strikes me as a shocking thing to celebrate. But, in the story as in life, I love how God's faithfulness is ultimately the deciding factor and, like stubble, it keeps coming back, no matter how we thought we'd ended up cutting ourselves off from God.

### What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God established the Nazirite rituals, used by Samson's faithful parents to mark him as special, to give people a recognisable sign of dedication. But God knows that our commitment to faithfulness and dedication doesn't match his.

God will always love us more than we know how to love. When he is the source of our strength, we can still get ourselves into trouble when we are reckless, but what God grows in us can give us the power to overcome enemies around us, or even within ourselves.

### What am I going to do differently as a result?

I believe I am very fortunate to be blessed by God, not just with certain strengths (albeit not ones which would make a big impact at the gym) but also with a beautiful wife and loving relationship. What I don't want to do is take any of this for granted!

As yesterday, I think Samson's biggest problem was that he lacked real love, and I want to keep growing mine, recognising that my strength to love comes from God. It's needed in the whole of my life, not just in the bedroom, but I think that God can uniquely help us to grow in both passion and purity!

### Who am I going to share this with?

Some with my whole family, some only with my wife!

# Monday August 17: Judges 19-21

## Is this the way we want to go?

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

## What did I like about today's reading?

Are you ready for the big finale? I thought I was until I re-read these last stories and wondered why their details hadn't stuck in my head before. They are messed up. We've had evil and good in this book, but this chain of atrocities makes it hard to find hope for redemption in the hearts of men.

I think that's the point. It's an inflammatory story, sparked by a singular Levite, wronged by his concubine. He chose to pursue and win her back, and seemed to succeed, but on their journey home they encountered an evil Benjaminite mob intent on rape, who sound just like the people of Sodom in Genesis 19. It's an obvious parallel to that story which we learn from Ezekiel 16 indicated a much greater evil than a few men's lust for sex or power. That whole city deserved destruction because they were "arrogant, overfed, unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy." So this one crime was an indicator of far greater corruption.

And in the absence of angels to rain down direct, divine judgement, the Levite's response was to incite a civil war. It's far messier than what happened in Sodom because Israel gave a tenth of its men to the fight and a tenth of them were killed, even though they consulted God who ordered them and promised victory. God also allowed the tribe of Benjamin to defend themselves with considerable skill. The victory was credited to God, but it looked a lot like a cunning and costly human plan rather than Gideon's pure reliance on God years earlier.

Think it can't get worse? Wrong! How about punishing the Benjaminites with an oath, then realising this was too much (just like Jephthah?), then fixing the problem with murder and kidnapping, all in the name of religious faithfulness? Is this just a story about Israel then?

It also looks to me like a story about the world now. This is what happens when people have God in their culture but not in their hearts. In society held together by outwardly godly things but without a way for people to share God's heart, everyone interprets the law for themselves, if they even know any of it, and does what they see fit. We need a better way.

So what's the answer? How can we live better? Reading on, the story suggests that maybe the answer is better leadership, a king. But is that enough? The trail mapped out by the Old Testament story points to a need for more, a way walked by a redeemer who can save us.

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God wants people to return to him wholeheartedly and can show us why we need more than religion, laws and passion to do so. Jesus shows the real way to God. We need to follow him.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

Remember how important it is not just to feel righteous in doing what I think best, but to follow Jesus and be changed by him, loving and forgiving more, for example.

## Who am I going to share this with?

My family and people I pray with, especially when we pray about wrongs which need righting.