

CHAPTER 8, A FEW GOOD MEN AND WOMEN

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

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

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

- Israel turned again and again to the worship of pagan gods.
- God brought divine judgment.
- Israel cried out for God's help.
- God raised up a judge to save them.

This cycle of sin became the pattern of life in Israel for the next 300 years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Perfect Parent gave those same warnings to His people. The Canaanites were bad news. They were the drug dealers, the prostitutes, and the criminals of their time. They were the kind of people from whom any good parent would warn their beloved children to stay away. God had warned, but the Israelites began to ignore those warnings. The consequences of covenant disobedience were tragic.

I. The Call of Israel

- A. God had chosen Israel to be a holy nation.
 - 1. The Abrahamic covenant had called them to be a blessing to all nations. They were to represent Him to the world.
 - 2. They were given the covenant of the Law to tutor them in how to fear God and how to live justly with one another.
 - 3. They were to be a kingdom of priestly people (Exodus 19:6).
- B. They were the covenantal community of faith.
 - 1. They were given the divine gift of revelation from God and were expected to believe it by faith.
 - 2. They were a people of God's own possession (Exodus 19:5).

II. The "Canaanization" of Israel

- A. Instead of destroying the Canaanites, Israel joined them.
 - 1. They turned away from YHWH, the God of Israel.
 - 2. They began to worship Baal, the god of Canaan.
 - 3. They participated in the cultic practices of Baal worship including the sexually immoral unions that accompanied the seasonal feasts.
 - 4. They participated in their sacrifices. It is unclear to what degree Israel became like the Canaanites in their sacrifices at this time, but the Canaanites participated in child sacrifice in the fire, and buried children in the foundations of their buildings. Later Biblical texts, like Jeremiah and 1-2 Kings, give further insight into these atrocities.
 - 5. They intermarried with them, which explicitly violated their covenant.
 - 6. Israel had become just like their pagan neighbors, the Canaanites.
- B. Remember Joshua's charge, "*As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD*"? Israel exchanged the One True God for worthless idols, which, according to the covenant (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28), makes them His enemy.
- C. God was furious!
 - 1. God's anger must be understood against the backdrop of His extravagant acts of grace in the past.
 - 2. God is passionate and cannot stand by while idolatry snatches his people from Him.
 - 3. Nor will he passively accept Israel's adulterous affairs with other gods.

III. The Call of the Church

In much the same way that God called Israel to be a holy people, He calls the Church to a righteous standard.

- 1. We are called as saints.
- 2. We are called out of darkness and into light.
- 3. We are called not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person (1 Corinthians 5:11).
- 4. We are called to freedom to serve one another (Galatians 5:13).

5. We are called to walk in a manner worthy of God, with humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, and love for one another, (Ephesians 4:1).
6. We are called to a new life of righteousness, and holiness of the truth (Ephesians 4:24).
7. We are called not for impurity but for sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:7).
8. We are called for salvation, sanctification and glory in Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).
9. We are called for eternal life (1 Timothy 6:12).
10. We are called by grace through faith for good works prepared by God (Ephesians 2:8-10).
11. We are called to be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession to proclaim the gospel (1 Peter 2:9).
12. We are called to be a light to point others to Christ (Matthew 5:16).
13. We are called to be a living sacrifice, not conformed to this world, but transformed to live out the will of God (Romans 12:1-2).
14. Bottom line: We are called to be God's hands, feet, and heart on earth; called to be holy and different than the world around us.

IV. The "Canaanization" of the Church

As the culture goes, so goes the church. Sadly, the Church in America has become "Canaanized" in much the same way that Israel did during the days of the judges. According to highly regarded pollsters and researchers such as The Barna Group, the Gallup Organization, and others, the lives of American Christians bear far more resemblance to their unbelieving neighbors than they do to the transformed life expected by the New Testament writers. George Barna concludes, "Every day the church is becoming more like the world it allegedly seeks to change." So, how bad is it really?

1. **Divorce:** In August 2001, Barna found that 33% of born-again Christians were divorced, compared to 34% of non-born-again Americans (90% of all divorced born-again Christians were divorced AFTER they accepted Christ.)
 - a. In many parts of the "Bible Belt," the divorce rate is well above the national average.
2. **Materialism and the Poor:** A 30-year study by John and Sylvia Ronsvalle showed that the richer we become, the less we give in proportion to our incomes.
 - a. In 1968, the average church member gave 3.1% of their incomes.
 - b. In 2001, the average church member gave 2.66%.
 - c. Today, evangelicals give about 4%.
 - d. In 2002, Barna discovered that only 9% of evangelical adults tithe.
 - e. 1.2 billion of the world's poorest people try to live on just \$1 a day, and at least 1 billion have never heard the gospel. If American Christians tithed 10%, they would have another \$143 billion dollars per year to help the poor and spread the gospel.
 - f. One of the most common themes in the Scriptures is that God and His people have a special concern for the poor. Why this contradiction between belief and practice?
3. **Lifestyle habits:**
 - a. Each week, Christians spend seven times more hours watching television than they spend in Bible reading, worship and prayer.

- b. Only 9% of born-again adults have a biblical worldview (live in obedience to scripture and practice the practices of a Christian—Bible reading, worship and prayer).
 - c. Only 2% of born-again teens have a biblical worldview.
4. **Faithful remnant:**
- a. A 2001 Pew Center poll showed that those who were highly committed to their faith were three times more likely to have volunteered with the poor, sick, and elderly in the last month than those who did not describe themselves as highly committed to their faith.
 - b. Barna found that those **with a Biblical worldview** showed genuinely different behavior than those who just claimed to be born-again.
 - i. 49% had volunteered to help the poor, sick, and elderly.
 - ii. 5x less likely to report that their “career comes first.”
5. **Bottom line:**
Learning to think Biblically and theologically DOES matter.

V. Applications and implications

- A. Although the Church may have become Canaanized in our present culture, the Holy Spirit is still at work in me if I will yield to Him. I can be different.
- B. I should evaluate my life in light of Biblical truth, not the world's standards.
- C. I should guard myself against the gradual slide into cultural relativism.
- D. I am to be in the world, but not of it. But am I being truly transformed?
- E. My checkbook reveals my true priorities.
- F. God is faithful to forgive me and restore me when I repent and confess my sin.
- G. I am an ineffective witness if there is no evidence of change in my life.
- H. The incomprehensible privilege of grace compels me to live righteously according to the revealed Word of God.