



Reading the first five chapters of Judges might lead someone to ask, "How could the people of God have been so dense?" The pattern of their lives seems almost comical: reject God and God's ways, suffer consequences, plead for help, receive help, and live in peace, only to reject God and God's ways once again. What keeps this pattern from being truly comedic is the accuracy with which the cycle describes tendencies in our own walks with God.

In times of trouble we shout, "Help me, help me!" We want and need God's assistance, so we cry out for it. In times of relative ease, however, we face an important test: Does God matter enough to us to remain the focus of our devotion even when we don't seem to need him? It's a test that the Israelites flunked numerous times.

They didn't always get it wrong. Whenever God provided his people a leader, the Israelites aligned themselves with the leader's devotion to God. When the leader was no more, however, the people of God returned not only to their ungodly ways, but to a level of ungodliness unknown to previous generations.

How about your life? Does a graph of your devotion and commitment to God look like a wavy sea? It might be that your devotion to God peaks on Sundays or on the day your small group meets. Maybe it peaks at Christmas or Easter, only to be set aside when things like deadlines, agendas, chores, activities, sports, entertainment, school, or friends clamber for your attention. Maybe, like the Israelites, your commitment to God peaks when life is difficult. Choose today to break the pattern. God has given Jesus Christ to rescue us from our slavery to sin and has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us into ever deepening devotion. We lack no resources for godliness, so let us take our walks with God seriously. God's rightful place is at the top of our daily agendas.

**Personal Reflection and Application**

*Keep a journal to address the following questions and topics.*

**AC** Each day this week, pay attention to how conscious you are of God. Attempt to graph your awareness of and commitment to God. Ask a respected Christian friend to reflect on the graph with you.

**AC** Practice a new spiritual discipline, one that will help you remain focused on God not only in crisis, but also in the mundane. Exercises you might consider include: *silence, solitude, reflective Bible reading, prayer, fasting, mentoring, acts of kindness, etc.*

**Q** Since the time when you asked God to lead your life, what has been the pattern of your devotion? What can you learn from this pattern? In what ways has this pattern honored God? In what ways has it dishonored God?

**Q** What does God want your devotion to him to look like in your life? What do you want it to look like?

**P** *Father, destroy any ungodly patterns in my life.*



**Small Groups**

Opening Question: For each of the past three months, what has tended to be the dominant focus of your conscious thoughts?

**AC** Read Judges 1 – 5, and develop a timeline of events. Alongside the timeline, note the items that pleased God and those that didn't.

**AC** Reflect on the following verses to capture a sense of the depth of devotion into which God invites us: Exodus 6:7; 20:3; Joshua 1:8; 1 Samuel 15:22-23; 1 Kings 2:2-4; Psalm 1:1-3; 42:1-2; 89:1-2; Micah 6:8; Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 12:29-30; Ephesians 3:14-19; Revelation 2:1-7; 3:14-22.

**Q** What standard of devotion to God have you set for yourself? What standard of devotion to God is shared within your small group? What standard is held by your church? How do these standards align with God's call to devotion? How are these various standards of devotion impacting the faith of the next generation?

**Q** What would you like your devotion to God to look like one year from today? How can you participate with God's Spirit to make this desire into reality?

**P** *Heavenly Father, may your love dominate our lives.*

**One-on-One Relationships**

One of the helpful things the Bible provides is a view into how real people struggle to live godly lives even in the light of God's grace. It's true that the Israelites, after the time of Joshua, lived cycles of disobedience for several generations. The fact that these unhealthy cycles are captured in print gives us the opportunity to examine how the same cycles might be at work in our own lives.

When helping your disciple, examine her or his life. Resist any temptation to play the role of a psycho-therapist, especially if you have little or no training in the field. Instead, make use of the tools you do have. First, you can pray for your disciple's devotion and commitment to God. You also have the Bible. Point out the patterns of sin and devotion found in places like Judges 1 – 5. Additionally, you have your own life example. Share appropriately your struggles with reoccurring disobedience. Another tool available to you is learning to ask great questions. Questions have the ability to help someone else explore thoughts and memories so that he or she can discover patterns for themselves. Be careful, however, not to just design your questions so that they lead your disciple to what you assume the answer to be. Trust the conclusions to the Spirit!

**Families**

*Pick and tweak items below to fit your own family's context.*

**AC** Play a game of *Chutes and Ladders*. While you're playing use the chutes and ladders to tell the story of how God's people disobeyed God, became distressed, cried out to God, were rescued, only to disobey once again. Talk about how God wants us to be "ladder-seeking" Christians.

**AC** At dinner, talk about the cycle of disobedience found in Judges 1- 5. Ask your kids to tell you how they see your walk with God. What practices do they see? What actions don't seem to line up with God's teaching? What do they think loving God looks like? Their answers to this last question might give you a pretty good sense of how they view your example.

**AC** Read Ephesians 3:14-19 together. Use it as a prayer for each person in your family. Substitute the names of each family member for the personal pronoun *you* in the verses. You might pray the prayer each night at dinner, focusing on one family member. Talk about what a life might look like if we grasped just "how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ" is and if we were "filled to the fullness of God."

**P** *Capture our hearts, God!*