

CHAPTER 6

A Wicked Surprise

THE STORY OF DEBORAH AND Jael

*God hath chosen the weak things of the world
to confound the things which are mighty.*

1 Corinthians 1:27

Deborah can't remember a time when she didn't pray. As a child, not praying would have been like not skipping across the fields or not picking wildflowers in spring or not laughing at a good joke. An impossibility.

She asked God to make her beautiful and strong and smart enough to please her father and outwit her brothers. She prayed that God would bless every baby born from her mother's womb and that their home would have less shouting and more kindness. She prayed that even the most witless of their sheep would behave whenever she was charged with watching over them.

She learned to thank God for every answered prayer. And as she grew, God taught her to thank him even for what she liked the least—the times when he said no.

One prayer he hadn't answered was to make her beautiful. But now that she has grown up, her huge brown eyes and the calm that radiates from them draw people close. They trust her.

Her husband knows he has found a treasure. For she has brought him good all the days of his life. Her wisdom has helped increase his wealth and added to his reputation. He feels like laughing whenever he thinks of his good fortune. How is it that he, an ordinary man, has found a woman who is clothed with so much strength and dignity? A woman who loves him more than she loves herself and whose wisdom has become legendary?

Every day Deborah sits beneath a large date palm to meet with her people. They come seeking a word from God. Will the rains come early or late? Is God pleased with my sacrifice? Will my wife have a child? Am I right and my neighbor wrong? Will I recover from this illness?

Deborah knows her people are not strong and that many of them are hounded by troubles. Some seek her as though she is a soothsayer who is able to beguile the gods to do her will. But she believes in only

one God, the God of her ancestors—of Abraham and Sarah, of Rahab and Joshua. Hers is a God who rides across the highest heavens, the ancient heavens, a God who thunders with a voice that even the wind obeys. She hears his voice regularly, sometimes in thunder, more often in silence.

It has been nearly two hundred years since the walls of Jericho were breached and the city burned to the ground. Though Deborah's people swept into Canaan like an unstoppable force, they failed to drive out all the peoples who lived in the land.

There had been too much sin for that. Too much weakness.

Bowing down to the Baals of Canaan, who promised them fertile fields and a quiver full of children, they had forgotten the ways of the God who delivered them out of the hand of wicked Pharaoh. It has been like this ever since Joshua and the generation that followed him died off. Their children and their children's children have forgotten Joshua's stern warning.

“Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have until now.

“The LORD has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you. One of you routs a thousand, because the LORD your God fights for you, just as he promised. So be very careful to love the LORD your God.

“But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the LORD your God has given you.”

Instead of heeding Joshua's warning, the people have let a great wave of wickedness wash over them. Its steady undertow pulls them further and further from God.

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Because of their failure to follow him, thousands of Israelites have been routed by just one man, whose name is Sisera. He is a ruthless mercenary who answers only to Jabin, the king of Canaan, who rules in Hazor, to the north. Because of his people's unfaithfulness, God has allowed Sisera to harass and oppress them for twenty years. By now, so much wickedness is abroad in the land that the roads are mostly empty. No one dares travel them, and the people are impoverished.

But God has not completely turned his face away. Instead, his ear is inclined toward them as he listens for the laments of his people, hoping they will cry out to him so he can restore their fortunes once more. It is for this very purpose that he has raised up Deborah to lead them, a woman bolder than any man.

One day God speaks to her. Quickly she sends word to Barak, the son of Abinoam from Kedish in the north. "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you," she says. "Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands."

But this is a fearful errand, and Barak knows he is no Moses. Nor is he a Joshua. He is only a man who wants to live and let live, to enjoy a little peace. But there is no peace.

Attempting to bridge the gap between what he fears and what God is asking, he sends word to Deborah: "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go." Using Deborah as his banner, he knows he can rally the troops and raise an army to follow him.

But Deborah is unimpressed with his response. "Very well," she says, "I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will hand Sisera over to a woman."

So Deborah heads ninety miles north to Kedesh in order to join Barak. With her on his side, he is able to raise an army of ten thousand men. Heading south, they plan to lure Sisera into battle.

Meanwhile, a Kenite by the name of Heber,* who is encamped

* A man with divided loyalties, Heber was at peace with Jabin, Sisera's overlord. But he is also a descendant of Moses' brother-in-law, Hobab, who helped the Israelites find their way through the wilderness. See Numbers 10:29–32.

near Kedesh, lets slip to Sisera that Barak and his army have gone up to Mount Tabor. Seizing his chance to quash the rebellion, Sisera leads his army and nine hundred chariots straight into battle.

As always, he is supremely confident. He is certain his chariots will make him unbeatable. But wily Barak has led his troops up the mountain, where chariots cannot go. Still Sisera knows that the Israelites must sooner or later come down and face him.

Meanwhile, Deborah is encamped on the mountain along with Barak and his troops. She arms herself, not with the weapons of war, but with prayer to the God who loves her. Refusing to entertain thoughts of how a ruthless enemy might treat a woman captured in battle, her ear is tuned to God's voice. As soon as she hears it, she turns to Barak and says: "Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?"

With Deborah's thunder ringing in his ears, Barak and his men rush down the mountain to meet Sisera and his dreaded chariots. Tearing through sheets of rain that shroud the valley below, the Israelite troops see what Deborah has already seen—that God is fighting for them. The sudden rains have caused the River Kishon to overflow its banks, turning the field of battle into a mucky swamp. Suddenly Sisera's greatest strength—his nine hundred chariots—has become his greatest weakness. Mired in mud, he and his chariots are an easy target.

So Barak and his men descend on Sisera's army, slaughtering every man but one.

Sisera escapes his chariot and flees on foot. His sturdy legs carry him mile after mile. When he thinks he can run no more, he keeps on running. At last he spots a place of refuge in the storm. Ahead of him loom the tents of Heber the Kenite. Sisera knows that Heber and his people are at peace with Jabin and thus with him.

But as he draws near to Heber's tents, it is not the Kenite who greets him but his wife, Jael. Though Sisera's distress is evident, she hails him, not as the battle's obvious loser, but as a friend in need of help. "Come, my lord," she says. "Come into my tent. Don't be afraid." He hesitates for just one moment because it is scandalous for a man to enter a woman's tent. But then it dawns on him. He has found the perfect hiding place. No one will think to look for him there.

Tenderly, as though she is caring for one of her children, Jael covers him as he lies down on the floor of her tent. Then she pours him a drink of milk and tells him to rest.

“Stand in the doorway of the tent,” he commands her. “If someone comes by and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say ‘No.’”

She nods her assent, but he misses the small curl in her lip and the glint in her eyes as she leaves. Sisera knows only too well what men are capable of. But he has no idea what a woman can do. So he falls fast asleep.

Jael is a clever and hearty soul who is used to women’s work, like taking down tents and putting them up again. Now she bends to the task at hand, reaching for a hammer and a large tent peg. Without a wasted movement and no hesitation in her steps, she walks silently to Sisera’s side. He is exhausted, curled up in a ball and sleeping soundly. With a silent prayer and a steady aim, Jael raises her arm and then drives the tent peg straight through his temple, pinning his head to the ground.

Then she waits. When Barak comes by in hot pursuit, Jael comes out to greet him. “Come,” she says, “I will show you the man you’re looking for.” So Barak follows her only to find that his enemy has already been slain. Wicked Sisera, the mighty general, has suffered the most shameful death a warrior can endure. He has perished by a woman’s hand.

From that day forward the hand of the Israelites grows stronger and stronger, and Jabin, the Canaanite king, grows weaker and weaker until at last he is destroyed.

On the very day Sisera perishes, Deborah and Barak sing this song:

“Most blessed of women be Jael,
 the wife of Heber the Kenite,
 most blessed of tent-dwelling women....
 Her hand reached for the tent peg,
 her right hand for the workman’s hammer.
 She struck Sisera, she crushed his head,
 she shattered and pierced his temple.
 At her feet he sank,
 he fell; there he lay.
 At her feet he sank, he fell;
 where he sank, there he fell—dead....
 So may all your enemies perish, LORD!

But may all who love you be like the sun
when it rises in its strength.”

Thus ends the story of how Deborah arose, a mother in Israel, and how Jael, a tent-dwelling woman, shamed the enemy and delivered the people God loved.

After that the land of Israel enjoyed peace for forty years.

THE TIMES

Their story probably took place around 1209 BC.

Deborah ruled Israel between 1209–1169 BC.

Deborah and Jael's story is told in Judges 4–5.

Prophecy was common in the ancient Near East. In many pagan kingdoms, prophets were installed to affirm the policies of the reigning king. By contrast, true prophets in Israel were called by God and accountable only to him. Often, their messages were delivered in opposition to Israel's unfaithful rulers.

Among the patriarchal society of Israel, women rarely held leadership positions. One exception was in the area of prophecy, in which women as well as men could be prophets. In addition to being a prophetess, Deborah was considered a judge or leader in Israel before the Israelites had kings. Unlike modern judges, the leaders referred to in the book of Judges were hero-deliverers whom God raised up in order to rescue his people whenever they repented of their sins and cried out to him for help.

By choosing two women to rescue his people, one of whom was a foreigner, God was shaming his enemies and showcasing his own great strength, as though tying one hand behind his back to defeat them.

Of the two women in the story, Jael would have shocked her contemporaries the most. Throughout her story, she always took the initiative. Even though her husband was at peace with Jabin and therefore with Sisera, she appears to have acted independently, thus breaking their treaty. It would also have been considered highly improper for her to greet Sisera and invite him into her tent. In addition, hospitality in the ancient Near East was considered a sacred obligation, so sacred that the host was expected to protect his guests at the cost of his life if necessary. Yet Jael

reverses the usual formula by killing the man who has taken refuge in her tent. Even in the final scene, she takes the initiative by stepping outside her tent to meet Barak when he comes looking for Sisera.

Just as Deborah had prophesied, the glory for the victory went not to Barak but to a woman. Actually, it went to two women. To Deborah who began the war and to Jael who finished it.

THE TAKEAWAY

1. In the Old Testament, God often judged people by allowing them to suffer the natural consequences of their failure to trust and obey him. How does that dynamic play out in today's world, in the lives of individuals and nations?
2. Through Deborah, God promised he would go ahead of his people and fight for them. How has God fought on your behalf?
3. Throughout the Old Testament and especially in the book of Judges, we see a clear pattern emerge. God's people cry out for help. He rescues them. They fall away and become oppressed. They cry out for help. He rescues them. What does this cycle tell us about God? About human nature? About what to do when you feel oppressed?
4. When was the last time God asked you to do something you were afraid to do? How did you respond? What were the results?

CHAPTER 11

Wicked Smart

THE STORY OF ABIGAIL

How a Quick-Witted Woman Averts a Foolish Disaster

*The wise fear the LORD and shun evil,
but a fool is hotheaded and yet feels secure.*

Proverbs 14:16 (NIV)

Though his head is large, it seems like wasted space for a man who thinks only of the smallest things—like whether the latest delicacy has been properly prepared or his new robe is quite to his liking. Easily displeased, Nabal soothes himself with wine and pleasant food. Year after year, as his head grows emptier, his waist expands.

Despite his tendency toward complaint, he has to admit it has been a good year. Because his flocks have not been troubled by bandits, they have multiplied beyond expectation. He predicts the annual shearing will yield a record harvest—more than three tons of wool! Plus his profits have improved through shrewd negotiations with the shepherds who tend his flocks. This year their cut is even less than last year's. A thousand goats and three thousand sheep are far too many for one man to tend. Better to stay at home while his hired men spend their nights in the open, fending off predators.

Nabal knows other men despise him. But they are jealous, he thinks. The more he senses their disdain, the more he struts and brags. He is a rich man, and not afraid to show it. So what if people envy him? In addition to his wealth, he is married to a woman many men would covet. Abigail is a stunning creature, remarkably intelligent. The proof, he says, is that she married him. Chuckling over his frequently repeated jest, he fails to notice that his wife never smiles when she hears it.

Abigail is always pleasant, never unkind. Because of her, he has no worries. Still, it bothers him to see the servants treating her with greater deference than they do him. But she is quick to put him at ease, telling him it is only natural since she is the one who cares for the household. Why should the master bother with such a task when his wife is close at hand?

He doesn't know nor would he care to realize how much energy Abigail expends to keep the peace. Nor does he understand that he is the brunt of frequent jokes. He claims, for instance, that his parents

named him Nabal because it means “clever,” but everyone else thinks that his name sounds just like the word for “foolish.” No doubt Nabal *is* a fool—a grown man with the temperament of a two-year-old.

Though she doesn’t show it, Abigail is worn out by her husband’s behavior. His constant complaints are a low-grade torture, like continual dripping from a leaky roof. She wonders if perhaps others pity her, thinking she has become like a pretty piece of jewelry adorning the snout of a pig.

She thanks God that at least she has a large household to manage and people to care for. Generous and sensitive, she is a woman who is loved by all. Like her neighbors, Abigail is glad that David is near with his six hundred men. They are encamped in the Desert of Maon, not far from where she and Nabal live. She also knows that Saul would like to kill David. But David is a fox who always gets away.

What she does not know is that ten of David’s men are speaking with her husband right now, bearing this message from David: “Long life to you! Good health to you and your household! And good health to all that is yours!

“Now I hear that it is sheep-shearing time. When your shepherds were with us, we did not mistreat them, and the whole time they were at Carmel nothing of theirs was missing. Ask your own servants and they will tell you. Therefore be favorable toward my men, since we come at a festive time. Please give your servants and your son David whatever you can find for them.”

David has chosen a season of harvest and plenty to make his request—a time when good men are generous. He expects Nabal to show gratitude for the way he has protected his flocks.

But Nabal has other ideas. Instead of offering provisions to David’s army, he seizes the opportunity to prove himself a fool by replying, “Who is this fellow David? Who does this son of Jesse think he is? There are lots of servants these days who run away from their masters. Should I take my bread and my water and my meat that I’ve slaughtered for my shearers and give it to a band of outlaws who come from who knows where?”

When David hears of Nabal’s insulting reply, he is furious. “What a waste to watch over this fellow’s property so that nothing goes missing.

Nabal has paid me back evil for good. May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him. Each of you strap on your sword!”

So David and four hundred stout men advance toward Nabal’s house in order to take revenge. Meanwhile, Nabal is putting his feet up, taking his ease, and crowing over the size of his harvest.

Sensing danger, one of the servants goes directly to Abigail. “David sent our master his greetings,” he tells her, “but he hurled insults at his messengers. Yet these men were very good to us. They never mistreated us, and the whole time we were out in the fields, none of our flock went missing. All night long and every day they were a wall around us. Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him.”

Abigail has borne the burden of being married to a fool. But she never imagined a disaster on this scale. Who could have guessed that Nabal’s stupidity would outpace his instinct for self-preservation? Unless she intervenes, many members of her household will die. Ordering her servants to collect every bit of food they can put their hands on, she loads up several donkeys, piling them high. There are two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five slaughtered sheep, sixty pounds of roasted grain, a hundred cakes of raisins, and two hundred cakes of pressed figs. She hopes it will be enough to appease David’s wrath. Then she tells her servants, “Go on ahead; I’ll follow you.” But she says nothing to Nabal.

Risking the dark, Abigail heads out in haste. As she travels, she prays, begging God for deliverance. Before long, she sees David and his men advancing toward her. She hopes he is as good a man as people say he is.

Falling at his feet, she implores him. “My lord, let the blame fall on me alone. Please let your servant speak to you; hear what I have to say.

“Pay no attention, my lord, to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name—his name means Fool, and folly goes with him. As for me, your servant, I did not see the men my lord sent. And now, my lord, as surely as the LORD your God lives and as you live, since the LORD has kept you from bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hands, may your enemies and all who are intent on harming my lord be

like Nabal. And let this gift, which your servant has brought to my lord, be given to the men who follow you.”

Taking David’s silence as permission to continue, she blesses his future by saying: “The LORD your God will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my lord, because you fight the LORD’s battles, and no wrongdoing will be found in you as long as you live. Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, your life will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the LORD your God, but the lives of your enemies he will hurl away as from the pocket of a sling. When the LORD has fulfilled for my lord every good thing he promised concerning him and has appointed him ruler over Israel, my lord will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself. And when the LORD your God has brought my lord success, remember your servant.”⁴⁴

Her gracious words evoke memories of everything God has promised to David. They also remind him of his first great victory—his triumph over Goliath. He has never heard a woman speak like this, a message that brings peace and hope to his heart, calling him back to God.

“Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me,” he says. “May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from shedding blood and from avenging myself with my own hands. God himself has kept me from harming you. For if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male in Nabal’s household would have been left alive by daybreak. Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request.”

It is not yet morning when Abigail arrives home. By now Nabal is drunk and in high spirits. Presiding over a feast, as though he thinks himself a great lord, he’s too drunk to listen to what she has to say, so she waits until morning.

Once her husband has sobered up, she tells him everything. His eyes grow wider with each word. His mouth falls open but there are no words—only grunts and moans. Suddenly one side of his mouth droops low, and he collapses on the couch as though he’s been turned to stone. Ten days later, God finishes the job, and Nabal is no more.

Oddly, Abigail feels a mixture of sadness and relief. Though she no longer bears the burden of her foolish husband, she senses him everywhere as though the misery of his sorry life still lingers.

But David is jubilant when he hears the news, praising God for upholding his cause and keeping him from shedding innocent blood. Wasting no time, he sends word to Abigail, asking her to become his wife.

No one mourns for Nabal.

But everyone honors Abigail. By acting wisely and quickly she has preserved many lives. Though David is still on the run from Saul, she is eager to join him, and so with five of her maids she heads out into the wilderness. There she will marry an outlaw named David, the man she believes will one day be king.

THE TIMES

Her story takes place about 1005 BC.

Abigail's story is found in 1 Samuel 25.

Abigail's household was probably sizeable since her husband was a wealthy landowner whose large herds would have produced a hefty income. Her ability to put her hands on so much food at short notice and the fact that she had servants to command as well as five maids who traveled with her when she married David are further evidence of her wealth.

In most households, women were responsible for threshing and grinding grain, kneading dough, baking bread, cooking, weaving, making clothes, preserving food, and hauling water. It probably took the average woman at least three to four hours every morning simply to grind enough grain for the day's bread. While girls often acted as shepherdesses, some women were so poor that they had to glean in the fields like Ruth or hire themselves out to do fieldwork, work that was normally reserved for men.

Instead of performing these chores herself, Abigail would have had servants who handled them under her direction.

For his part, Nabal would have been responsible for hiring shepherds to care for his large flocks. He would have negotiated a contract that provided them with milk and meat and a certain portion of the wool at shearing time. Though herds sometimes grazed near the household, shepherds often had to lead their flocks a considerable distance in search of pasture. Each shepherd had to provide an accounting for the sheep in his care. Normal birth and attrition rates were carefully calculated, and

sheep that had been lost due to predators or illness had to be accounted for by bringing the owner some part of the animal like ears, skin, or tendons. At the end of the day, it was the shepherd's responsibility to make up any losses according to previously agreed terms.

Abigail's life would have changed drastically when she married a warrior who was living with his men and their families in the wilderness. Just prior to the death of Saul and Jonathan, she was kidnapped by a band of raiders along with David's other wife, Ahinoam, as well as many other women and children. Fortunately, Abigail and the others were soon rescued by David and his men. She would likely have been present in David's palace when Michal was returned to him by Ish-Bosheth. Abigail and David had a son named Daniel.

THE TAKEAWAY

1. What three to five words would you use to describe Abigail's character? Consider especially her actions and her speech to David (1 Samuel 25:24–35).
2. Which of the words you used to describe Abigail represents a quality you wish you had more of in your life? Share the reasons for your response.
3. Abigail is the consummate mediator, effectively brokering peace in the midst of a perilous situation. Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation, putting yourself at risk in some way in order to be a peacemaker? Describe the circumstances and the outcome.
4. Though provoked, neither Abigail nor David takes revenge on Nabal. What does the story reveal about their character and their relationship to God?

CHAPTER 16

Wicked Funny

THE STORY OF ESTHER

How a Good Queen
Gets the Last Laugh

*But if thou shalt indeed obey his voice, and do all that
I speak; then I will be an enemy unto thine enemies,
and an adversary unto thine adversaries.*

Exodus 23:22

Once upon a time in a faraway land in a city called Susa,* at the winter palace of King Xerxes, three splendid feasts are held. The first of these lasts for 180 days—a full half year. It gathers together the leading men of Persia so that the king can enlist their support for his coming campaign against the Greeks. While the men strategize and plot about the merits of the planned invasion, they have ample time to marvel at the riches† of the court and the splendor of the king, who adorns himself each day in scarlet-colored trousers and robes of shimmering purple.

Once the king is confident of their unqualified support, he holds another feast. This one lasts for seven days and is open to every man in the citadel of Susa—from the least to the greatest.

Please don't imagine that the king and his guests are confined to a room within the royal palace. Instead they feast outside in the sumptuous garden that adjoins it, drinking wine to their heart's content while they recline on softly cushioned couches that are made of solid gold. Streams of water cascade through long rows of stately trees and plantings artfully arranged in geometric shapes. Colonnaded pavilions paved in multicolored mosaics are decorated with white and blue linen cloths that hang from silver rings on marble pillars. Filled with every known species of plant and animal, the king's garden offers every guest a taste of paradise.‡

On the seventh day of the feast, when the king is in high spirits, he commands the seven eunuchs who serve him to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown. He plans to parade her in all her loveliness before his honored guests because the queen's beauty will provide yet more evidence of the greatness of his splendor.

* Susa is located in what is now southwestern Iran.

† Persia was extremely wealthy. The Greek historian Herodotus indicated that Xerxes' father, King Darius, received more than 14,000 talents of gold and silver in annual tribute, which would amount to nearly 800,000 pounds of these precious metals.

‡ The Persians created sumptuous gardens, calling them *paridaida*, which literally translates as "beyond the wall," referring to an enclosed area. The Greek word *paradeisos*, which becomes "paradise" in English, is derived from this word.

But Vashti is not a particularly compliant queen. Plus, she is busy hosting a female-only feast* inside the royal palace. Like her husband, she has been eating and drinking for several days. When the queen hears of the king's command, she is indignant. Who does he think he is, ordering her to parade around before hordes of drunken men as though she is nothing but a prized cow? Emboldened by one too many cups of royal wine,† the queen does the unthinkable. She refuses.

Odd though it seems, the Persians think they are wisest whenever they are inebriated.‡ Today Xerxes is drunk, which makes him want to boast and preen. It also makes his temper flare.

As soon as he learns of his wife's refusal, he explodes. And he is not the only one. His counselors are indignant. How dare a woman upset the natural order of things? Even if she is the queen, this is simply too much for any man to bear. What will their own wives think when they hear the queen has refused to obey the king? There will be no end of disrespect and discord. It is outrageous—and terrifying. So the king and his counselors conspire together with all their might to put down a revolt that hasn't even begun.

On the advice of his counselors, Xerxes issues a decree deposing Vashti and affirming—lest any woman doubt it—that every man is always and everywhere to be considered the sole ruler of his household.

Emboldened by this great domestic victory, Xerxes travels west to lead what will become a failed invasion of Greece while his commissioners begin looking for Vashti's replacement. She will be chosen from among the realm's most beautiful virgins, a woman of impeccable character who will never dare contradict the king. Throughout the kingdom a search is made, and the most beautiful young women are transported to the harem of the king. One of these is Esther, a young Jewish woman, an orphan who has been lovingly raised by her cousin Mordecai.

Like the other young women who have been gathered like fish

* Though Xerxes and Vashti are hosting separate feasts, it was common among the Persians for men and women to feast together.

† Though the Bible doesn't indicate that Vashti was drinking, it is not an unlikely conjecture given the fact that she was holding her own feast at the time the king summoned her to appear at his.

‡ The Greek historian Herodotus indicated that decisions that were made when the king and his counselors were sober had to be revisited when they were inebriated to ensure that they were still judged to be sound. Apparently the Persians believed that intoxication brought them closer to the spirit world, which would in turn bring them closer to enlightenment.

into Xerxes' net, she is entrusted to the eunuch in charge of his harem. Esther is so winsome that she soon becomes his favorite. Assigning her the best spot in the harem, he lavishes her with special foods, servants, and beauty treatments.

Meanwhile, Mordecai instructs Esther not to breathe a word about her Jewish identity. No one, not even the king, is to know she is a Jew.

Before she can marry the king, Esther must complete twelve months of beauty treatments, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. During this time, she must also learn palace protocol so she can behave as a wife of the king should. When the time comes, she will be called to the king's bed chambers, where they will consummate their union, and she will become one of his many wives. Once summoned, she may not return to him again without his expressed request.

One night after the king has finally returned from Greece, Esther is called to his chambers. The king is so taken with her that he sets a crown upon her head and makes her queen instead of Vashti. To celebrate her ascendancy to the throne, a banquet is held in her honor and a holiday proclaimed throughout the provinces.

But this is not yet the happy conclusion to her story. For that will take some time.

After a while, her cousin Mordecai uncovers a wicked plot, which he makes known to Esther. It seems that two of the king's officers are planning to assassinate Xerxes. When Esther tells the king, the two men are promptly executed. Though Mordecai's good deed is dutifully recorded in the book of the annals, it is promptly forgotten.

About this time, the king elevates a despicable man by the name of Haman to the highest office in the land. An Amalekite* by birth, his ancestry traces back to ancient enemies of the Jewish people. Though all the royal officials kneel in homage to Haman, Mordecai alone refuses to bow down. Full of self-importance, Haman is enraged by Mordecai's refusal. Instead of deciding to punish only Mordecai, as one might expect a normal man to do, he decides to wipe out all the Jews of Persia.

* The Amalekites were descendants of Esau. During Saul's reign in Israel, God instructed him to wipe out the Amalekites and take none of their goods. Instead Saul spared their king and kept some of the plunder. His disobedience cost him his throne (1 Samuel 15).

Haman knows that a plan this devious must not be carried out without first consulting the gods. So he casts the *pur* (the lot). Tossing a small clay cube onto a surface on which the months and days of the year have already been drawn, he notes as it lands on an auspicious date, eleven months into the future.

Having fixed the exact day for executing his wicked plan, Haman goes straight to the king with a false report about the Jews. “A certain people,” he tells Xerxes, “are scattered throughout your empire. They are a peculiar people with their own habits and customs, and they refuse to obey the king’s laws. Why should the king tolerate them?”

Then he proposes a strategy for wiping them out, sweetening the deal with an enormous bribe. “If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business.”

Since ten thousand talents amounts to most of what comes into the royal treasury during the course of a single year, the king readily agrees. No doubt Haman is planning to raise the money by plundering the wealth of his intended victims.

So the royal secretaries waste no time in writing up a decree for the king to sign. On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, it will be permissible to destroy, kill, and annihilate the Jews— young and old, women and little children. Anyone who wants to may slaughter them and plunder their goods on that day.

When Mordecai hears of the king’s decree, he tears his clothes and begins to mourn. Sending word to Esther, he tells her exactly what Haman is plotting and how much money he has promised the king. Then he urges her to go to the king and beg for mercy on behalf of her people.

But Esther hesitates. Even though she has been queen for five years, she is still afraid of Xerxes’ mercurial temper. So she sends this response to Mordecai: “All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.”

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She fears her appeal with the king may already have worn thin.

But Mordecai sends back this reply: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

Esther responds by asking Mordecai to mobilize all the Jews in Susa to begin a fast. “Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day,” she instructs. “I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

On the third day, weakened by the fast and terrified by what her husband may do, Esther puts on her royal robes, and then enters the presence of the king. Will he raise his golden scepter and spare her life, or will he cast it down and condemn her to death?

She does not know.

But then she sees the light in his eyes and the smile that quickly spreads across his face. The king is pleased to see her! Holding out his golden scepter, King Xerxes calls her forward. “What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you,” he says.

“If it pleases the king,” she replies, “let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him.”

So that night the king and Haman feast together with the queen. As they drink their wine and take their ease, Xerxes turns to Esther and asks, “Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted.”

But Esther senses that the time is not yet ripe. Rather than asking the king to publicly admit his mistake by revoking his own decree, she replies, “If the king regards me with favor, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king’s question.”

So the king and Haman depart. By now, Haman’s head is filled with visions of greatness. Even the queen has exalted him by inviting him not once but twice to dine alone with her and the king. But his dreams of glory are shattered as soon as he encounters Mordecai, that insolent Jew,

who once again refuses to bow down and pay him homage. By the time Haman arrives home, he is seething. Telling his wife and friends exactly what has happened, he listens as they offer their advice:

“Build a gallows seventy-five feet high and ask the king in the morning to impale* Mordecai on it. Then go and enjoy yourself, feasting with the king and queen, knowing that your enemy is no more.”

“Wonderful!” Haman replies, clapping his hands in glee.

That night, while Haman is busy arranging for a gallows to be built near his home, it just so happens that the king is tossing and turning in his bed, unable to sleep. To pass the time he orders the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. The book is opened to the precise page that recounts the story of how Mordecai once saved his life.

“What honor has been given to Mordecai for uncovering the plot against me?” the king inquires. When he learns that Mordecai has never been rewarded for his loyalty, he asks his attendant if any of his officials are present in the palace. As it happens, Haman has just crossed into the outer court. Eager for revenge, he has come early to seek the king’s blessing on his plan to execute Mordecai. But before he can pose his question, the king inquires: “What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?”

This is a pleasant surprise, thinks Haman. Surely there is no one the king would rather honor than me. So he replies: “For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king’s most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, ‘This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!’”

“Go at once,” the king commands Haman. “Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king’s gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended.”

* Though some translations of the Bible indicate that Haman was planning to hang Mordecai, the Persian practice was to impale victims on wooden stakes. So it seems likely that the victim was first executed and then was hung or impaled on the gallows for all to see. See Anthony Thomasino, “Esther,” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds on the Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 3:486.

So Haman, who has prided himself on reaching the pinnacle of power, suddenly feels as though he has been plunged into the depths. He has no choice but to obey the king's order. Placing a royal robe on Mordecai, he leads him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming: "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!"

Afterward Haman rushes home. When his wife and friends learn how Haman has been shamed, they tell him the truth: "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!" While they are still talking, Haman is summoned to the banquet that Queen Esther has prepared.

While Esther, Xerxes, and Haman are drinking their wine from golden goblets, each one different than the other, the king inquires of Esther once again, assuring her he will grant her request, whatever it may be.

"If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition," she says. "And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king."

As soon as he hears it, the king erupts: "Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?"

"An adversary and enemy!" Esther declares. "This vile Haman!"

Enraged, the king puts down his goblet and stalks out of the room. Though Haman knows it is a capital offense for a man to remain in the royal harem without the presence of the king or one of his eunuchs, he stays behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. Falling on the couch on which she is reclining, he is still pleading with her when the king re-enters the room.

Exploding with rage Xerxes exclaims, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?"

After Haman is arrested, one of the eunuchs says to the king, "A gallows seventy-five feet high stands by Haman's house. He had it made for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king."

"Hang him on it!" the king commands.

So wicked, vile, vainglorious Haman falls victim to the punishment he had intended for Mordecai. With his body swinging high up in the air, he becomes a spectacle for everyone to see.

That very day, the king hands Haman's estate over to the queen, who then appoints Mordecai to administer it. But this is not yet the happy conclusion to Queen Esther's amazing story, for the king's decree to annihilate the Jews cannot be revoked.

Falling on her knees and weeping copiously, Esther pleads with King Xerxes once more, begging him to put an end to Haman's evil plot. "If it pleases the king," she says, "and if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman ... devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces. For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?"

Though the king does not retract the initial decree, which allows the Jews to be slaughtered on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, he is willing to issue another. With Mordecai's help he draws up a decree that allows the Jewish people to assemble an army with which to destroy, kill, and annihilate the men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children. It also gives them permission to plunder the goods of their enemies.

After this is done, the king adorns Mordecai in royal garments of blue and white, dressing him in a purple robe of fine linen and placing a large crown of gold upon his head. Because of Mordecai's rise, Haman's demise, and the new decree empowering the Jews, the entire empire is seized with fear of them, and many people become Jews. Then Susa holds a great feast in order to celebrate.

The thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar,* becomes an auspicious day for all the Jews of Persia. On the very day their enemies had planned to annihilate them, the Jews strike with deadly force, wiping out all those who hate them.

From that day forward, Queen Esther and Mordecai are honored as heroes among God's people. Every year a celebration, called Purim†

* February or March 473 BC.

† Jews throughout the world still celebrate Purim, a holiday that involves some initial fasting and in which the book of Esther is read. People dress up in masks and costumes, reenact the story,

(meaning “lots”), is held so that every generation and every family without fail can celebrate how the Jews were delivered. On that day there is a great deal of feasting and nonstop laughter when they remember how that stupid, wicked Haman was bested by the good Queen Esther and her cousin, Mordecai the Jew.

THE TIMES

Her story takes place from 483 to 473 BC.

Esther's story is found in the book of Esther.

The events recounted in the book of Esther took place after Babylon conquered Judah in 587 BC. After that, Cyrus the Great, king of Media and Persia, conquered Babylon in 538 BC, and the territory reverted to him. Though Cyrus issued a decree allowing Jews who'd been taken into captivity to return to Judah, many decided to remain in the land where they had settled. Some had moved eastward to Susa, the winter capital of the Persian Empire.

Esther and Mordecai were part of a Jewish community that remained faithful to their religious and cultural heritage. By then, Cyrus's grandson, Xerxes (also known as Ahasuerus), was reigning as king.

Though Persia was a patriarchal society in which wives were expected to obey their husbands, women were not generally oppressed and often worked as business managers, who at times also supervised men.*

Eunuchs (castrated male servants) were highly prized in the ancient Near East. Because they were unable to father children, they were trusted to watch over royal harems. They could hold positions of great power since no one would suspect them of scheming to establish a dynasty of their own. Persian monarchs valued them highly and sometimes received tribute payments in the form of good-looking boys who were made into eunuchs to serve the court.†

The term translated “harem” in Esther 2:3 literally means “house of women.” It consisted of special quarters in which the king's wives

exchange gifts, donate to charity, and eat a celebratory meal. At riotous celebrations, complete with noisemakers, people are sometimes encouraged to drink until they can no longer distinguish between the phrase “Blessed be Mordecai” and “Cursed be Haman.”

* See Thomasino, “Esther,” 3:480.

† Ibid., 3:478.

and concubines lived. Though taking more than one wife was practiced early in Israel's history, in later times only the king had concubines. In Persia and surrounding regions a man was allowed to have as many wives and concubines as he could afford. Though concubines held lesser status than wives, they were considered second wives. Though some concubines were free women from noble families, many were acquired as captives in war or as slaves. Usually chosen for their beauty, concubines often provided children in a childless marriage.*

Women like Esther who were candidates to replace Queen Vashti would have remained in the king's harem as wives or concubines regardless of whether they were chosen for the role. By fulfilling her duty as one of his many wives, Esther would not have been committing fornication when she slept with the king.

When Esther was elevated to the position of queen, she would have been installed in her own quarters apart from all the other women in the harem.

* Ibid., 3:484–485.

THE TAKEAWAY

1. Scholars have noted that the word *God* is never used in the original Hebrew version of Esther's story, and yet it is evident that God's hand is on Esther. In what ways do you recognize God at work behind the scenes in Esther's story? In what ways, if any, do you recognize his behind-the-scenes work in your own life?
2. Psalm 27:14 urges us to
Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD.

What evidence is there in Esther's story that she waited for the Lord? What do you think would have happened had she not?
3. How would you characterize your own experiences of waiting for the Lord? In what ways do you sense God may be inviting you to wait for him in this season of your life?
4. When she faced a difficult task, Esther fasted and asked others to fast on her behalf. Have you ever practiced the spiritual discipline of fasting? If so, what was the experience like?
5. During Purim, the Jewish people remind themselves that in every generation there will be people who will rise up to try to destroy them, just as Haman did. Why do you think they have been such frequent targets of persecution?

The Story of Samson

How God Makes a Weak Man Strong



In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

Judges 21: 25

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Many years have passed since Moses led the people out of Egypt. Once they enter the promised land, he raises up charismatic leaders, who will be called judges, to care for his people. They do not always lead well.

*

A boy in a man's body. That's Samson. As reckless and fickle as a ten-year-old, his moods are like clouds that churn and chase each other across the sky whenever the latest storm blows in. One minute his belly is shaking with laughter and the next he is raising a fist in anger, bellowing threats to make your blood run cold. Built like a mighty oak, he is nimble as a deer.

Even as a boy, no one could prevent Samson from getting exactly what he wanted. Too big and brash for anyone to ignore, he has always felt special, set apart for some great work.

His mother likes telling the story. "Before you were born," she says, "a messenger from God appeared to me, saying, 'You are barren and childless. You will become pregnant and have a son whose head should never be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite¹, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel out of the hands of the Philistines.'"

Samson can hear the thrill in his mother's voice as she recounts the moment in which she discovers she will bear a son destined to become one of Israel's great deliverers.

"Your father," she continues, "could hardly believe me when I told him what happened. Manoah prayed, asking God to send his messenger once more to instruct us so that we would know how to bring you up.

¹ A Nazirite vow could be made by men, women, or even slaves though the latter needed permission from husbands or masters. Vows were usually temporary but could be permanent as in the case of Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist. Samson was supposed to refrain from cutting his hair, eating anything unclean, and abstaining from intoxicating drinks.

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“One day while I was working in the fields, the angel returned. Your father was so delighted that he asked his name and then invited him to stay for supper. But the angel refused, saying only that his name was beyond understanding. So Manoah prepared a burnt offering to the Lord. As fire blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame! We were so stunned that we fell flat on our faces.

“Lying on the ground, your father began to wail and moan, saying, ‘We are doomed to die! We have seen God!’ He was afraid to lift his head lest the Lord strike him down.

“But I felt strangely happy and at peace. ‘Why,’ I asked, ‘would God want to kill us? Hasn’t he accepted our offering and told us many wonderful things about our child?’”

Samson listens attentively as his mother recounts the story. Since childhood, he has known that God has called him to lead Israel. But he also knows there are conditions. According to the Nazarite vow, he must never cut his hair, drink anything inebriating, or touch the carcass of man or beast.

Growing up in a town west of Jerusalem, in a region of the country that has for decades been threatened and harassed by Philistine warriors, Samson feels God’s Spirit stirring him. And something else is stirring too. His attraction to a young woman in the neighboring town of Timnah. “I have found the woman I love,” he announces to his parents. “Now get her for me as my wife.”

But they object. Why not a nice, young girl from among his own people? It would shock them to know that God intends to use Samson’s relationship with this woman to confront the Philistines, who have oppressed his people for many years.

So Samson continues to insist until his parents give in. One day, they head down to Timnah to propose the marriage. While they are still on their way, a young lion springs out of the

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bush heading straight for Samson. The Spirit of the Lord rushes on him so forcefully that he rips the lion apart with his bare hands.

Later, when Samson is on his way to Timnah again, he turns aside to relive the glory of that kill. Looking down at the lion's body, he is surprised to see bees swarming the carcass. Scooping honey into his hands, he eats it and then saves some for his parents. Knowing they will never let anything unclean touch their lips, he fails to mention where he found it.² As for himself, he doesn't mind bending the rules. Why should he be deprived of the spoils that belong to powerful men?

When it is time to celebrate the wedding feast in Timnah, a riotous affair that will last for seven days, Samson is given thirty men to be his companions, as is the custom.

"Let me tell you a riddle," he says. If you can discover the answer before the end of the feast, I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes. If you can't, you must do the same for me."

"Tell us your riddle," they demand. "Let's hear it."

Out of the eater, something to eat;

out of the strong, something sweet.

For the first few days, they make one guess after another. Perhaps Samson is talking about all the wonderful food they will eat during the feast. Or maybe he wants to flatter them by implying they are strong. But with each new guess Samson merely shakes his head and laughs. As the wedding feast draws near, they corner his wife and threaten her: "Coax the answer from your husband or we'll burn you to death along with everyone in your father's household."

When she begs Samson to disclose the answer to the riddle, he confides in her. On the

² See Leviticus 11. Because the honey was found in a dead animal, this would have been a serious violation of ritual laws that forbid touching an unclean carcass or eating anything extracted from it.

seventh and last day of the feast he tells her the secret.

That night, his thirty companions are especially boisterous. Surrounding Samson, they venture a guess.

What is sweeter than honey?

What is stronger than a lion?

When they answer correctly, Samson falls into a rage. Traveling twenty miles to the Philistine city of Ashkelon, he slaughters thirty men, strips off their clothing, returns to Timnah, and then pays off his bet. Still furious that his companions have pried the secret from his wife, he returns to his father's house, leaving his bride behind.

Grateful for the chance to rid himself of this madman, his father-in-law weds his daughter to another man. When Samson discovers his wife has married someone else, he becomes enraged. He will make these Philistines pay for everything they've taken from him. Capturing 300 jackals,³ he ties them tail to tail in pairs. Then he fastens a torch to each set of tails, and lets the animals run loose among the fields. Standing back, he watches the conflagration spread, consuming Philistine grain, Philistine vineyards, and Philistine olive groves. Soon there will be nothing but ashes to harvest.

When the Philistines discover what has happened to their crops and why, they head straight to Timnah, where they retaliate by burning Samson's wife and father-in-law alive. As the conflict escalates, Samson becomes a one-man army, slaughtering many of them.

With their anger boiling over, the Philistines begin to threaten Samson's countrymen. Terrified of what might happen, his own people turn against him. Binding him with two new ropes—the strongest they can find—they lead Samson straight to the enemy. As an army of

³ The Hebrew word can be translated either "foxes," or, "jackals." Unlike foxes, jackals live in packs and were far more common than foxes, making them easier to catch.

screaming Philistines rush toward him, Samson feels God's Spirit rushing upon him. Snapping the ropes that hold him fast, he is like a whirling cyclone, cutting down everything in its path. At the end of the day, he has killed so many Philistines that the score is 0 to 1,000 in Samson's favor.

Over the next twenty years, Samson enjoys so many victories that he fears nothing, not even spending the night with a prostitute in the Philistine stronghold of Gaza. When word gets out that he has come to town, men surround the house and hide by the city gate, vowing to murder him at dawn.

But in the middle of the night, Samson gets up and heads straight for the city gate. No matter that it's locked. Samson merely takes hold of its massive doors, together with the posts that hold them in place, and rips the entire structure from its sockets. Heaving everything onto his back, he carries the gate forty miles to Hebron, leaving Gaza defenseless.

Some time later, Samson encounters a beautiful young woman named Delilah,⁴ who lives in the Valley of Sorek in Philistine territory. The unprincipled Delilah has a habit of living on the edge, of doing whatever she wants when she wants. Because she is drawn to power, she finds the Jewish strongman uniquely attractive. The two are perfectly matched since Samson craves someone who will make him feel as though he is the center of the universe.

One day, his old enemies, the Philistines, come knocking on Delilah's door. "If you can persuade Samson to tell you the secret of his great strength so that we can take him captive, each of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver."⁵ It is a stunning offer, so large that it

⁴ Though the meaning of her name is unknown it may be a pun consisting of *d + lylh* ("of the night"). See Daniel I. Block, "Judges," *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 2: 200. Though the text doesn't say, it is likely that Delilah is a Philistine.

⁵ As much as 140 pounds of silver or an amount equal to 550 years of a day laborer's wages. See Daniel I. Block, "Judges," *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 2: 200.

signals the scale of their desperation.

One day, when gazing up into his large, dark eyes, Delilah tells Sampson, “Whenever you hold me, I feel safe, like no harm will ever come to me. You’re such a powerful man. Tell me, Samson, what is the secret of your great strength? How can a man like you be tied up and subdued?”

Thinking she is playing some lover’s game that will increase the pleasure of their bond, Samson decides to play along, saying, “If anyone ties me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, I’ll become as weak as any other man.”

A few days later, Delilah obtains seven bowstrings and ties him up. With his enemies hidden in the room, she exclaims, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!”

Roaring with laughter, as though this has become his favorite game, Samson frees himself, snapping the bowstrings as though they are brittle bits of string.

Humiliated, Delilah sulks and pouts and then demands, “Stop playing me for a fool. Tell me how you can be tied!”

Pretending to tell the truth, he replies, “If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I’ll become as weak as any other man.” But when Delilah ties him up again, he simply breaks the sturdy ropes as though they are mere threads.

“All this time you have been making a fool of me and lying to me,” she accuses him. “Tell me how you can be tied.”

“If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric on the loom and tighten it with the pin,” Samson assures her, “I’ll become as weak as any other man.” So while he sleeps, Delilah weaves his hair into a horizontal loom fastened to the floor.

“Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” she exclaims again. To the sleeping Samson this

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sounds like the refrain of a familiar song. Rubbing his eyes, he sits up and shakes his head, freeing his hair from the loom. How many times, he wonders, will she fall for the same old trick?

Whether or not he admits it, Delilah is gaining on him. Hasn't he already mentioned the number seven (the number of his braids) and suggested that the secret has something to do with his hair? With a little more wheedling and pleading, she will soon force the secret from him.

"How can you tell me you love me, when you refuse to confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me," Delilah sulks.

By now their little game has lost its luster. Sick of being nagged, he gives in. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he confides, "because I have been a Nazarite dedicated to God from my mother's womb. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man."

At last Delilah has heard the truth. Ropes, bowstrings, or even an army of giants will never subdue Samson. All that is needed is a simple razor.

Summoning the Philistine rulers, she tells them she is ready to trade—Samson's secret for their money. When they arrive at her house loaded down with silver, she hides them. After Samson arrives, he lays his head on her lap and begins to snore. Quickly, Delilah gestures for a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair. As soon as the deed is done, she cries out, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!"

Thinking to free himself as he has always done, Samson is distressed to realize that the Lord's strength has left him. He has become as weak as any other man.

Seizing him, the Philistines gouge out his eyes and then drag him to Gaza. Securing their blind captive with bronze shackles, they throw him in prison and force him to do the work of slaves and women, grinding out grain.

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Humiliated and alone, Samson has time to reflect on what has led him to this point. Remembering his mother's words, he realizes that he has broken faith with God by ignoring the terms of his Nazarite vow. First came the honey scooped from the lion's carcass that rendered him unclean. Then came the seven-day wedding feast at Timnah, where the wine flowed freely despite the fact that he is supposed to refrain from strong drink. Lastly there is the secret of his hair that he so foolishly disclosed to Delilah.

Samson can no longer avoid the truth—that he has been arrogant and foolish, holding God in contempt by flouting the rules of his vow.⁶ While Samson is thinking these thoughts, his hair begins to grow back.

One day, the leaders of the Philistine gather together to offer a sacrifice to Dagon, the half-fish, half-human deity they worship. Boasting, they say,

Our god has delivered our enemy
into our hands,
the one who laid waste our land
and multiplied our slain.

In the midst of their celebration, they shout, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." Disheveled and blind, Samson hardly looks like a champion. With shoulders slumped and head down, he walks unsteadily to the center of the temple, asking his captors to please place him where he can feel the pillars supporting the temple, so that he has something to lean against.

Meanwhile 3,000 men and women, along with their rulers, are crammed onto the

⁶ Though the text doesn't say whether Samson used his time in prison to reflect on the sorry condition of his soul, it is not unreasonable to think that a time of punishment might lead to greater self-knowledge and even to repentance. Though his subsequent prayer for victory is couched in terms of personal revenge, Samson would have known that defeating the Philistines in such a spectacular way would greatly weaken the enemies of God's people.

balcony, craning their necks for a look at Samson. As they gape, he prays, “Sovereign LORD, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.”

With his right hand carefully braced against one pillar and his left pressed hard against the other, he pushes with all his might and shouts, “Let me die with the Philistines!” In an instant, the temple collapses.

In the days that follow, cries of mourning sweep across the five cities of the Philistines as the enemies of God’s people confront their losses. In his death, Samson has managed to kill more of them than during the rest of his lifetime.

Foolish for a season, chastened for a time, Samson is acclaimed a hero in Israel because God used him to weaken their Philistine enemies, paving the way for Saul and David who would establish a monarchy that would soon make Israel one of the greatest nations in the region.

After leading Israel for twenty years, Samson is laid to rest in the tomb of his father Manoah.

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THE TIMES

He led Israel from 1075-1055 BC

Samson's story is drawn from Judges 13–16

The Philistines were a seafaring people of Aegean origin who tried but failed to invade Egypt in the twelfth century BC. Retreating, many of them settled on the south eastern coast of Canaan, eventually inhabiting the five city-states of Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gash, and Gaza. The word “Palestine,” is derived from their name.

Each of their five city-states was ruled by a lord. Together, these five lords formed the ruling body of the nation, enabling them to act together. This gave them a great advantage over the disorganized Israelite tribes, which were sometimes at odds with each other.

Fierce warriors, the Philistine knew how to smelt and forge iron at a relatively early date. Since their knowledge of this new technology gave them an important military and economic advantage, they guarded it jealously. As late as the reign of King Saul, they forced the Israelites to use Philistine blacksmiths whenever they had to repair or sharpen iron implements.

Since the coastal plain was flat, in contrast to the hilly and mountainous terrain that characterized much of the rest of the country, Philistia was part of a natural land route along which trade flourished. The rich soil of this region also contributed to the wealth of the Philistines.

For two hundred years, from 1200-1000 BC, they remained Israel's principal enemies.

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Though Samson's victories weakened them and paved the way for the monarchy to be established, they continued to fight against King Saul, who met his death at their hands. King David finally succeeded in pushing them back and inhibiting their growth.

Unlike the Israelites, who struggled to resist the lure of Canaanite deities, though not always successfully, the Philistines happily succumbed, worshiping not only Dagan but gods like Baal-Zebub and Ashtoreth.

As God's chosen people, the Israelites were to resist the kind of spiritual contamination that resulted from associating with the Philistines or with other people in the region. Often referred to as "the uncircumcised" by biblical writers, Scripture's negative attitude toward them helps explain why in popular parlance the term "Philistine" has come to mean an "uncultured person." Ironically, the archaeological evidence suggests that Philistine culture, at least in its material aspects, was far more advanced than that of the Israelites.

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THE TAKEAWAY

1. By today's standards, it's difficult to think of Samson as much of a hero. Yet the writer of Hebrews mentions him as one of several great figures in Israelite history, who by faith "gained what was promised." (Hebrews 11:32-34). What role does faith play in his story?
2. The Book of Hebrews also says that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (11:6). Describe situations in which you've been able to please God by exercising your faith in him.
3. Hebrews 11:34 says that through faith Samson's "weakness was turned to strength." Describe the interplay between God's strength and Samson's weaknesses. Now think about and describe ways in which God has turned your own weakness into strength.
4. The angel of the Lord told Samson's mother that he was to be dedicated to God from his birth. Why do you think God imposed such a requirement on him?
5. Samson's story highlights the fact that God can use anyone to accomplish his purposes. What his story can't tell us is how much more impact his life may have had if he had been concerned for God's glory rather than his own. What are the implications for our own lives?

The Stories of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar
How Two Babylonian Kings Discover Who's Really in Charge



*For the LORD of hosts will have his day
against all that is proud and arrogant,
against all that is high, and it will be brought low
(Isaiah 2:12, New American Standard Bible)*

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Nebuchadnezzar's Dreams

Long ago in the land of Judah a poet-prophet arose. A farmer and sheep broker by trade, Amos' lips were blessed by God. Everyone who heard him marveled at how boldly he proclaimed the word of the Lord, with no regard for how it might sound to the ears of powerful men.⁷

“Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord!” He would thunder. “Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion, only to meet a bear.”

Indeed within forty years, the northern kingdom of Israel⁸ was torn apart by the lion called Assyria, its people carried into captivity.⁹

More than a hundred years later,¹⁰ the southern kingdom of Judah was trapped by the bear called Babylon, a wild beast of a nation that held it under siege and then burned it to the ground, carrying its survivors away.

This was accomplished on the orders of King Nebuchadnezzar, who, though he did not know it, was a powerful sword in the hand of God. For the people the Lord loved had strayed like an errant wife, chasing after other gods and ignoring the command to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God.

Nebuchadnezzar began his quest for world domination while he was crown prince of Babylon. In 605 BC he invaded Judah, selecting the first wave of captives from among its royal family and nobility.

The boy Daniel was among this first group, as were his three friends Shadrach, Meshach,

⁷ Though Amos was born in Judah, he prophesied against the northern kingdom of Israel. His prophecy was probably delivered in 762 BC, 40 years before the destruction of Samaria, when Israel became a province of Assyria.

⁸ The nation of Israel split into two kingdoms after the death of King Solomon—Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

⁹ This happened in 722 BC.

¹⁰ In 587 BC.

and Abednego.¹¹

Instead of merely subsisting in the land of their exile, these young men landed in the heart of the king's palace. Among the best and brightest of his captives, they have been hand-picked to become his servants. Their favored status as the king's trainees allows them the privilege of eating the food that flows from the king's table.

As delightful as this arrangement sounds, it presents problems. For the food that comes from King Nebuchadnezzar's kitchen is tainted. How can good Jewish boys maintain their purity if they are forced to eat food that is ritually unclean? Instead of going on a hunger strike, Daniel devises a plan. "Please test your servants for ten days," he says. "Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see."

When it becomes clear that David and his friends are flourishing, they are allowed to continue.

Meanwhile, God gives the four young men knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. On Daniel he bestows a special gift—the ability to unlock the meaning of dreams and visions.

In the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, the king has a disquieting dream.¹² Summoning his magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers, he challenges them to tell him what it means.

"O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it," they say.

Suspecting them of fraud, the king demands proof of their powers. Truly, if they are as wise as they claim, they will be able to describe his dream. If they cannot, he will cut them in

¹¹ Daniel's Babylonian name was Belteshazzar. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were the Babylonian names given to his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

¹² Dreams were considered vehicles in which the gods sometimes communicated with humans.

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pieces and reduce their houses to rubble.

“There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks!” they object. “No one can reveal the dream to the king except the gods, and they do not live among men.”

Enraged, the king orders all the wise men in Babylon to be put to death. Even Daniel and his friends are to be executed.

Learning of the king’s decree, Daniel speaks to the commander of the guard, offering to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. Then he hurries to his three friends, asking them to plead for God’s mercy and help.

That very night Daniel sees a vision. He knows it to be the dream of the king. The next day he goes immediately to the captain of the guard, asking him to spare the lives of all the wise men in the kingdom. He, Daniel, is ready to disclose the dream to Nebuchadnezzar and to interpret it for him.

“No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about,” Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar. “But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He is the one who showed you what is to happen in the days to come.

“Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue. Its head was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.”

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As Nebuchadnezzar leans forward on his throne, eager to catch each word, this is what Daniel tells him:

“Your Majesty, you are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed all mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds in the sky. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.

“After you, another kingdom will arise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; it will be partly strong and partly brittle.

“In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain,¹³ but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver

¹³ See Isaiah 2: 2:

In the last days
the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

and the gold to pieces.¹⁴

“The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.”

When Daniel finishes, the king falls prostrate before him. “Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries,” Nebuchadnezzar exclaims.

Though the king is amazed by the wisdom of young Daniel, he still can’t shake the idea that he, and not Daniel’s God, is the true center of the universe. After all, who but he could have so rapidly extended the Babylonian Empire, making it spread out to the east and the west, the north and the south? Hasn’t he also transformed Babylon into the world’s most dazzling city?

As Nebuchadnezzar congratulates himself on his achievements, he decides to build a golden statue, so tall that it touches the sky. Nine-feet wide by ninety-feet high,¹⁵ the idol will shimmer with the blinding radiance of the sun. When it is finished, he orders everyone to bow down in worship.

But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego know better than to worship an idol. Though Nebuchadnezzar is furious when he hears that they have refused to bow down to the glorious statue that he has made, he tries persuasion. “Is it true,” he asks, “that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”

“King Nebuchadnezzar,” they reply, “we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from

¹⁴ The figure the king sees represents the course of history. The four kingdoms in the king’s dream may represent Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece, and Rome.

¹⁵ The Colossus of Rhodes, erected in 280 BC, was even higher, standing about 105 feet high.

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it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

Enraged, the king orders the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual, commanding his strongest soldiers to tie up the three young men and throw them into the blazing furnace. His command is so urgent and the furnace so hot that the soldiers who toss Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into it are themselves burned up.

Soon after, King Nebuchadnezzar leaps to his feet in amazement. Peering through a window in the furnace he asks his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?"

"Certainly, Your Majesty," they reply.

"Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

Approaching the opening of the blazing furnace, he shouts, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"

So the three young men step out of the fire. When the satraps, prefects, governors, and royal advisers crowd around them, they see that the fire has neither harmed their bodies nor singed a hair on their heads. Nor are their robes scorched, and there is no smell of fire on them.

Then Nebuchadnezzar says, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be

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turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.”

After that Nebuchadnezzar promotes Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Though the king has already had two marvelous encounters with God during the course of his reign, his pride continues to increase. One night he has a dream that terrifies him. Here is how he describes it.

“I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, content and prosperous. I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me. When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me. Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream.

I said, “Daniel,¹⁶ chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. These are the visions I saw while lying in bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.

“In the visions I saw while lying in bed, I looked, and there before me was a holy one, a messenger, coming down from heaven. He called in a loud voice: ‘Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field.

¹⁶ The biblical text says “Beltshazzar,” which is the name Nebuchadnezzar gave Daniel. See Daniel 4: 5-6.

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“Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.

“The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.’

“Tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me. But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you.”

As Daniel considers the king’s dream, he is filled with a sense of dread. How can he speak of the terrible things that will happen to Nebuchadnezzar if he does not change his ways? “My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries!” he says. “Your Majesty, you are that beautiful tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.

“This is the decree that the Most High has issued against my lord the king: You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.”

But Nebuchadnezzar cannot find it in his heart to heed the warning of his dream.

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Twelve months later, while pacing the rooftop of his royal palace and surveying the splendor of the city spread out beneath him, he exclaims: “Is not this the great Babylon that I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” Before the last syllable of the last word has left his mouth, he is struck down.

“Your royal authority has been taken from you,” a voice from heaven says. “You will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.”

At once, the great king of Babylon loses his mind and is cast down from his throne. Forsaking the palace, he wanders in the fields. Scorched by the sun and drenched by the dew, his hair grows like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird. Mistaking himself for a cow,¹⁷ he dines on grass. All who pass by shake their heads in wonderment, amazed by what has happened to their once proud king.

At the end of the appointed time, after Nebuchadnezzar has finally learned his lesson, God restores him.

With his own mouth the great king concludes his story: “When my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.”

¹⁷ As remarkable as this story seems, there is a delusional disorder called “boanthropy,” in which people exhibit the behaviors of an ox or cow.

Belshazzar's Strange Vision

Twenty-three years after Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 BC, a peacock of a man is sitting on Babylon's throne. Though styling himself a king, Belshazzar is acting as co-regent with his father, Nabonidus.

While Daddy is off fighting wars in Arabia, his son is busy presiding over a spectacular feast laid out for a thousand of his noblemen. Balladeers accompanied by trumpets, flutes, and harps tell stories that amuse and delight. Servants weave in and out of the boisterous crowd carrying platters of beef, fish, ostrich, and chicken. Artfully arranged plates filled with dates, pomegranates, olives, cheese, and nuts are placed on tables alongside trays of warm bread slathered in butter and honey. There is enough beer and wine to satisfy everyone.

In a final display of the splendor of his kingdom, Belshazzar brings out golden goblets that have been plundered from the temple of God in Jerusalem. Filling the sacred vessels with wine, he offers a toast to his gods. While he, his guests, his wives and concubines swill wine from the golden goblets, a terrifying vision appears. Fingers from a disembodied hand begin to write a mysterious message on the wall of the banquet hall.

The terrified king, whose knees knock like sticks in the wind, commands his astrologers and diviners to interpret the message on the wall. But they can neither read nor make sense of any of it. He feels a sense of mounting dread.

Arriving at the banquet hall, the queen mother¹⁸ addresses her son: "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

¹⁸ In Ancient Near Eastern courts, the queen mother was often a person of considerable influence. In this case, the queen's easy access to the king (see Daniel 5: 10-12) combined with the memory of events that happened many years earlier suggests this was the queen mother. See Ernest C. Lucas, "Daniel," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 4:543.

As soon as Daniel arrives, the king asks him, “Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father¹⁹ the king brought from Judah? My wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.”

“You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else,” Daniel replies. “Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means.

“Your Majesty, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and peoples of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.

“But you, Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.

¹⁹ In this instance the Bible seems to indicate that Nebuchadnezzar rather than Nabonidus was Belshazzar’s father (Daniel 5:2). This may simply have been a way of indicating that he was Nebuchadnezzar’s descendant, possibly through one of Nebuchadnezzar’s daughters who may have been married to his father Nabonidus. If he was not a blood relative, it was simply a way of indicating that he was a successor ruler of Babylon.

Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.

“This is the inscription that was written:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN²⁰

“Here is what these words mean:

Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales²¹ and found wanting.

Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

That very day, Daniel is clothed in purple, a gold chain is placed, around his neck, and he becomes the third highest ruler in the kingdom, after Nabonidus and Belshazzar.

But then, that very night, Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, is slain, and the Persians overrun his kingdom.

Not long after the fall of Babylon, Cyrus the king of Persia proclaims a decree allowing any of the exiles who so desire, to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the temple, and worship the God of their fathers. In an instant, the fortunes of God’s people change as they are restored to the land God had promised. For seventy years they had languished by the rivers of Babylon, mourning their captivity. Now they remind each other of the words of the Prophet Jeremiah, spoken many years ago, before the fall of Jerusalem:

“I will punish the king of Babylon and his land

as I punished the king of Assyria.

But I will bring Israel back to their own pasture,

²⁰ The *mina*, *shekel*, and *peres* (*parsin* means “two peres”) are the names of Babylonian weights. See Ernest C. Lucas, “Daniel,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 4:544.

²¹ It is interesting to note that Babylon fell on the 16th day of the Babylonian month of Teshrit. The constellation Libra, which was known as “The Scales,” appeared in the night sky for the first time in the middle of the month of Teshrit. See Ernest C. Lucas, in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 4:544.

and they will graze on Carmel and Bashan;
their appetite will be satisfied
on the hills of Ephraim and Gilead.
In those days, at that time,”
declares the LORD,
“search will be made for Israel’s guilt,
but there will be none,
and for the sins of Judah,
but none will be found,
for I will forgive the remnant I spare.”ⁱ

From then until now, whenever God’s people are tempted to forget how strong their God is, they recall the stories of King Nebuchadnezzar and King Belshazzar and the way God humbled them both.

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THE TIMES

Nebuchadnezzar reigned from 605 to 562 BC. Belshazzar served as co-regent from 550 to 539

BC.

Their stories are told in Daniel 1-5

After the death of the Assyrian king, Assurbanipal, in about 627 BC, the Babylonians revolted, breaking free from Assyrian power after three centuries of subjection.

Under King Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon became a city of legendary beauty and Babylonia grew into the greatest power in the region. His empire encompassed Babylonia, Assyria, Israel, Phoenicia, Philistia, northern Arabia and some parts of Asia Minor. It endured until 539 BC, when it was conquered by Cyrus the Great of Persia.

At the beginning of his reign, in 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar's army invaded Judah, forcing it to become a vassal state. But the kings of Judah were a rebellious lot. Finally, in 586 BC, the Babylonian army tore down the walls of Jerusalem, ransacked the city, and burned it to the ground. With the temple destroyed and Jerusalem in ruins, most of its citizens were carried into captivity in Babylon.

With the spread of iron weaponry in the Ancient Near East, warfare had become a constant fact of life. Though many nations were continually at war, those that were decisively defeated were at the mercy of enemies who would destroy temples and loot religious artifacts as a way of proclaiming victory not only over the nation but its gods. In some cases only the leading citizens would be deported. For those who continued to rebel, as Judah did, the punishment was more severe. At times large numbers of the population were carried into captivity and non-native people were brought in to resettle the land. Such a strategy was

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designed to weaken the national identity of those who remained.

Though God had warned both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah of the consequences of their rebellion against him, both nations were defeated and exiled from their land. The people of Judah were allowed to return to the land after their 70-year-period of captivity had come to an end.

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THE TAKEAWAY

1. Consider the political climate in your country. What underlying themes are helpful as you consider how leadership is exercised?
2. What can ordinary people, who may or may not be leaders in government, business, or the church, learn from these stories?
3. How does Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's refusal either to worship an idol or to expect God to rescue them from the fiery furnace display the true nature of faith?
4. God's people went into exile because of their continued disobedience. What questions come to mind when you think of how God disciplined his people?
5. Proverbs 9: 10 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." How does this description of wisdom play out in the stories?

¹ Jeremiah 50: 18-20