



RESOURCES

IMPERFECT HEROES



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Imperfect Heroes covers the remarkable leadership in Israel's history, this is what we will be focussing on in this series.

The book of Judges falls after the death of Joshua, who has successfully lead the people of God into the promised land, with the nation now being led by a sequence of rulers. The stories of these judges are bold, brutal and often challenging.

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WEEK 1

DEBORAH

For a helpful overview of the book of Judges, watch The Bible Project's short animation by [clicking here](#).

ICE-BREAKER

Fish-Bowl discussion: Arrange four chairs in the centre of the room you meet in, with your group forming a circle around them. Ask three volunteers to sit in the chairs, leaving one free. As you work through the following questions, only those sitting in the chairs are allowed to answer, starting a discussion. If someone wants to speak, they must sit in the empty chair. When the empty chair is filled, one of those already sitting must leave and join the rest of the group. This swapping in and out is encouraged so different voices and views can be heard, allowing the discussion to eb and flow in response.

- What does a good leader look like?
- What stops me from leading others?
- What stops me from following the advice or orders of those who lead me?

REFLECT

'Villagers in Israel would not fight; they held back until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel.' Judges 5:7

The story of Deborah, a prophet and leader of Israel, is a short, brutal and brilliant. Judges 4 tells the story of her actions to inspire individuals within the nation to overthrow Jabin king of Canaan, while Judges 5 recounts the same story in a song.

Have the group read the whole of Judges 4 together in groups of three, looking to reflect on the following points as they read or after they've read the whole chapter:

- How does Deborah motivate others to obey God's commands and plans? Do you find her an inspiring leader, or a challenging one?
- How do others respond to her leadership? What would your response be to a leader like Deborah?
- Notice, do we ever hear God's voice or see His direct action?

WEEK 1 DEBORAH

The leaders we see depicted throughout Judges are human, imperfect and often marked by failure. In Deborah's story, we see a model of a human ruler that will gradually become more and more broken and imperfect as we journey through the book of Judges. God does not condone the behaviour of these leaders, but He uses them in incredible ways to bring about the plans He has for His people.

As God's story unfolds, we witness Him move from relating His plans to His people through isolated rulers, heroes and kings, to ultimately becoming human Himself, to serve what was His own (John 1:1-18). Within the incarnation, Jesus Christ gives us the truest depiction of God; His ways, His plans, His love. Jesus invites his disciples to partake in the same plans that God sent him to fulfil:

'Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." John 20:21-22

RESPOND

While our account of Deborah's time in leadership is short, we can note the strength and tenacity with which she holds on to God's plans, even when others are reluctant to follow her.

Leave some time for individuals to respond to the following questions by writing down their thoughts:

- Deborah would judge from a position of isolation, sitting under a palm tree in the hill country of Ephraim. The Gospels depict Jesus as having a regular rhythm of withdrawing from crowds and even the disciples to seek time alone with God. What would it look like for you to withdraw to seek God's plans and purposes in your day?
- Deborah and Barak give praise to God in song, remembering His plans and actions. They don't claim the glory, they give it straight back to God. Jesus constantly points back to the Father throughout his ministry (John 5:16-30), revealing God's nature in all he does. What's your relationship like with praise? How do you give glory back to God?

RECEIVE

If praying for new rhythms and disciplines to seek God's plans and purposes, ask the Spirit for pictures and words and scripture that can help and inspire the individual with forming this new practice. Offer them with sensitivity, and don't shy away from speaking – a word or picture might not make sense for you, but it could be very specific for the person you're praying for.

You may wish to spend this time giving praise to God for all that you've witnessed Him do in the last week. Like Deborah and Barak, you could try writing your praise, giving time and space to reflect on things in your own words.

WEEK 2

SAMSON

ICE-BREAKER

“Faithfulness is one brick in a wall of character, but so often it’s undervalued in our society... we all want more love, more peace... but I think faithfulness is something we struggle with.” Martyn Layzell

- Break into groups of three to share your thoughts on this insight from Martyn Layzell’s sermon ‘How to Build Strength of Character’ (available online here)
- How would you best describe ‘faithfulness’? What examples have you seen in your life?
- What happens when we lack or undervalue faithfulness in our society?
- What would it look like if society placed a higher value on faithfulness?

REFLECT

Samson’s reign as a judge of Israel is crammed with ups, downs, failure and success. His life story, as seen in Judges 13-16, depicts him as a deeply flawed character, but one that God still uses for His plans and purposes – a divine destiny that is set in motion before Samson’s birth.

Judges 13 sees Samson’s parents visited by an angel, who declares that Samson is to be born a Nazirite, a person set aside to live a life consecrated to God.

- Break into three groups to read Numbers 6:1-21 for a full context on what life God is calling Samson to. Discuss and reflect, how would you go about making decisions if this destiny stood over you? How might you live differently to those around you?

Despite having this declared over his birth, Samson consistently ignores God’s calling for him to live as a Nazirite. Instead, he begins to form a pattern of behaviour that sees him become more controlled by his appetites than faithfulness to God’s plan. Break into groups to read the following passages: Judges 14:8-9, Judges 15:1-8, Judges 16:1-3, Judges 16:15-20

Take five minutes for everyone to reflect in private: Reflecting on Samson’s story, do you have any habits or patterns in your character that you struggle with? While God has been working through your life, has it always been easy to remain faithful to His calling on your life?

WEEK 2

SAMSON

RESPOND

The secret of Sampson's great strength was in his roots – not purely his hair, but his divine destiny to live a life consecrated to God. In the final moments of his life (Judges 16:26-30), Samson recalls his destiny and calls out to God to strengthen him once more, finally delivering the Israelite's from the Philistines as the angel told his parents he would.

Broken, imperfect, human, Samson's life contains nudges toward God's wider, perfect depiction of discipleship in the life of Christ. If we are to be faithful to God's call on our lives, we must be rooted in Jesus, living distinct lives in his name.

'Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.' John 15:4 Jesus calls us to be faithful because he is faithful. God is even bigger than our bad choices, our wrongdoings and mistakes, he uses it all. He calls us to Himself, to remain in Christ. Like Samson, Jesus was rejected, mocked, handed over to be killed – but Jesus remained faithful to God's call. It's through Christ's death that we are set free, forgiven and made whole.

- Take five to ten minutes for everyone to respond in private: How do you respond to Samson's story when looking at his model of faithfulness? What is Christ calling you to? What would it look like for you to be faithful to this call, recognising your identity as a child of God, forgiven and set free, rooted and built up in him (Colossians 2:7)?

RECEIVE

Give time at the end of your meeting to pray specifically on anything that might have arisen as in your moments of response. When praying for each other, establish that your Connect Group is a safe space to receive prayer on points of character and faith that people are struggling with. You are all free from shame or condemnation when requesting prayer: tell people that they don't have to share anything they would rather keep between themselves and God at this time, but that they can still receive prayer for encouragement and healing, or requests for God to break patterns of behaviour that undermine faithfulness. Pray for forgiveness, freedom and a renewal of our identity in Christ.

WEEK 3

GIDEON

ICE-BREAKER

Split everyone into pairs. Ask one person to think of and describe a time in their life when they carried significant doubts that they would be able to complete a task or life moment. It could be a challenging project at work, or a significant event they'd never done before - like moving house or having a child.

Once they've finished describing their experience, it's the turn of the other person to discuss what they've just heard but only focusing on the positives, reframing the story to knowing that it was indeed possible all along. The pair should then swap roles. This exercise introduces the themes of navigating doubt.

REFLECT

"Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." Judges 6:14

Gideon's rule as a judge of Israel is marked by a rhythm of questioning and request. Whether it's the acts of God in his nation's history or the acts of God he's just witnessed, Gideon consistently seeks signs to be sure it's really God he's hearing from. Gather into small groups of around three. Have half the groups read Judges 6:11-16 & 6:33-40, the other half is to read Judges 7:9-24.

While reading these passages, reflect on the following:

- What words would you use to describe Gideon's trust in God?
- What kind of leader would you describe Gideon as? Would you feel confident following him?
- How do you relate to Gideon in the passage you have read?

Once you've had time to read and reflect on these questions, come back into a larger group and ask the group to summarise their thoughts. What differences do you note?

WEEK 3

GIDEON

We can all face doubts and seek clarity from God – Gideon is a brilliant example of someone who consistently struggles to know when they've heard from God, but isn't afraid to ask for a sign to build their faith. However, as with many leaders throughout Judges, Gideon isn't the perfect model of leadership.

Read Judges 8:22-27 together as a group. While Gideon does point to God as the ultimate ruler of Israel (v23), the creation of an ephod (a tunic-like item of clothing) built out of the spoils of war sees the nation and Gideon fall into a pattern of idolatry, worshiping something other than God. Consider how different this is to Deborah's song of worship in Judges 5.

RESPOND

Jesus' entire ministry is an extended sign of what God's rules and plans look like; his healings, miracles and teachings consistently point to God and His Kingdom. Yet time and time again, those around him ask for additional signs: Matthew 16:1-4; Luke 11:16, 23:8 ; John 2:18-19, 4:48, 6:30.

Jesus' lifestyle, teaching and actions weren't enough for many of those he encountered, particularly those who felt that what he was demonstrating ran in opposition to their understanding of how to live by God's law. They are ultimately given the 'sign of Jonah', the three-day 'descent and resurrection' Jonah experienced, which Jesus applies to his own death and resurrection.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the ultimate sign by which we come to have life in his name. Whilst we may not have witnessed it for ourselves, Jesus offers encouragement and blessing for us:

'Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'" John 20:29

WEEK 3

GIDEON

RESPOND

Break into pairs and discuss:

What is your response to these two sets of scripture, Gideon's constant need for a sign and Jesus's own blessing of those who have not seen yet believed?

Note that the signs have an important part to play in unpacking God's plan: the Lord 'confirms' his word via the signs that accompany his disciples (Mark 16:20); how Saul begins his journey to being renamed Paul by a significant sign (Acts 2:1-6).

Do the signs and promises of God appear readily your life?

Does your relationship with Jesus bless you in ways where you don't need signs like Gideon?

RECEIVE

Jesus Christ is the centre of our faith. All signs and promises, both those we encounter in scripture and in our lives, point us back to his life, death and resurrection. When closing in prayer, hold on to Gideon's acknowledgement that 'The Lord will rule over you'. If you'd like some guiding words for your prayer, try the following:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.
Amen.

WEEK 4

CALEB

Throughout scripture, God uses normal, broken people to bring about his perfect plan. These slightly odd ancient stories are a constant reminder to us of God's grace and redemptive plan. Each story points toward a perfect hero, Jesus, who ultimately gives us the perfect picture of leadership and service. In this session we will be looking at the Caleb.

ICE-BREAKER

Fun Fact: Caleb's name in Hebrew means "faithful, whole hearted". It's also identical to the Hebrew spelling of the word "dog"!

Do you know what your names mean? In pairs or as a small group, share the meaning of your names (look it up on your phone if possible) and discuss whether or not you think it describes you well.

REFLECT

Caleb's life journey sets an example of trusting God's promises even in the face of unlikely circumstances, mounting peer pressure, and actual physical and personal peril. While God often dealt with the Israelites as a people group - an entire nation - Caleb's story throughout Numbers 13 & 14 shows that God sees individual's hearts and honours individual's faith when it is lived out in practice.

Break into small groups and read Numbers 13:26 to 14:9

Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh were sent into the Promised Land as spies, ahead of the Israelites, to see what awaited them there. While those around them could only see the challenge ahead, Joshua and Caleb were able to see God's plan despite the challenge:

"The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them." 14:7-9 (NIV)

In giving their report to Moses, Aaron and the assembly of God's people, Joshua and Caleb not only gave a good report on the land in the face of scepticism and fear, they were able to point the true way to obtaining that land: through obedience to God.

Invite your group to reflect on their own, perhaps writing notes to help them focus: What hopes are you holding at the moment? What fears sit alongside these hopes? What would it look like to hand these hopes and fears over to God?

WEEK 4

CALEB

REFLECT Read Numbers 14:20-24 in your groups:

"But my servant Caleb has a different attitude than the others have. He has remained loyal to me, so I will bring him into the land he explored. His descendants will possess their full share of that land."

Caleb had to wait 45 years to enter the Promised Land due to his people's sin, but God miraculously preserved his strength and vitality during that time so that he could fully participate in and enjoy the Promised Land. While the other spies sent into the Promised Land saw only problems, Caleb was able to hold to the promise in God's plan – a promise that took 45 years to come into fruition!

Reflect on the following questions in small groups or pairs:

1. In what circumstances has it been difficult for you to do what you knew was right whilst those around you behaved differently?
2. How have you experienced God's faithfulness in your life? Are you still waiting on a promise from God to come to fruition? What has the waiting been like?
3. What does it mean to you to follow the Lord wholeheartedly?

RESPOND

From these few chapters in Israel's story we glimpse that Caleb was a truly faithful man of God amongst God's people. He trusted the promises of God even when others did not. Caleb lived an example of lifelong faithfulness to God, a life that in turn revealed God's everlasting faithfulness to His people. It shows that God keeps His promises, with a timeline that might require patience from us.

Ask the group to respond to the following questions on their own, again writing a response if it helps them focus:

1. What are the promises of God that you want to claim and trust God to fulfil for you?
2. In what area of your life do you need to stand up against the pressure of others and hold to the promise that you can see?

RECEIVE Give time at the end of your meeting to pray specifically on anything that might have arisen in your moments of response.

Like the Israelites approaching the promised land, when we approach the promises God has given us it can be a struggle not to focus on the problems or challenges that await us.

Pray for each other in the group, that God can increase our faith, that we can see the promises and hopes He has for us. Pray for a renewed strength in our identity in Christ, for a fresh knowledge that as Children of God we can walk into challenging situations resting in God's strength, in God's hope, in God's power.

Pray for those who might be looking for an increase in faithfulness, to hold on to God's promise if they've been waiting for what feels like a long time.