



Free Leader's Guide

by Stephen M. Miller

For Bible study groups that like to talk, here's a leader's guide for all 13 chapters in *Big Dummies of the Bible*.

But first, three tips for teaching.

Tip 1. If you're leading the session, lecture as little as possible.

Lecture is boring. Notice people napping during the sermon? People like dialogue more than monologue—unless the monologue rivets your jeans to the chair. So ask lots of good questions, and fill in the information gaps as part of the discussion.

Tip 2. Don't embarrass anyone.

It locks jaws and freezes discussion.

Embarrassment happens most often when leaders ask questions that have only one right answer. Like, "What country did Samson's wife come from?" It's embarrassing to get it wrong. She was a Philistine, by the way, from Philistia along the coast of what is now Israel. So ask questions that have people drawing from their life experiences—opinions, ideas, and reactions. Questions that aren't so threatening.

Tip 3. Don't beat people up for not reading the book.

If your Bible study group is like the ones I've been in, most folks don't read the book before coming to class. Although *Big Dummies of the Bible* could be the exception because it's so exceptionally well written. (My proofreader suggested

that since I wrote *Big Dummies of the Bible*, I should make sure you know I'm saying this with my tongue stuck to my cheek.)

Most stories in the book will be at least vaguely familiar to many people. So try pooling the group's brain resources about those stories. For example, ask, "What do we know about Samson?" Most folks who haven't read *Big Dummies of the Bible* will know at least something about him. And those lucky ones who read the book will have lots of interesting things to say—so you don't have to lecture. Just fill in the gaps, in short bursts.

Each chapter in *Big Dummies of the Bible* has discussion questions in a wrap up feature called "No Question is a Dumb Question." Here they are—along with some of the answers you might hear.

CHAPTER 1, ADAM AND EVE

1. Bible experts can only guess about why God didn't want Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Some think the couple wasn't mature enough, and that God would have let them eat it when they were ready. What do you think?

The Bible doesn't say why God refused to let them eat fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But it seems illogical for God to produce a fruit tree in paradise that's good for nothing but hurting people. Perhaps the tree was there to test and strengthen the couple's obedience. Or maybe the forbidden knowledge was something God intended for them later, when the time was right. There's a parallel story in the Bible about the Man sometimes referred to as the Second Adam. He will one day rule all of creation. But the time wasn't right when Satan tempted him—promising to give him "all the kingdoms of the world" (Matthew 4:8).

2. Adam and Eve knew it was wrong to eat the fruit, but they did it anyhow. Humans ever since have been doing the same; they know something is wrong, but they do it anyhow. (A) Why do you think people do that? (B) Did the sin of Adam and Eve somehow reprogram humanity, tilting them so they lean into sin? (C) If so, how do some people manage to get reprogrammed, so they lean toward God and goodness?

(A) Sometimes it's curiosity. Other times, it's rebellion or attraction to the instant gratification without thinking things through to the consequences.

(B) It's hard to say what happened exactly. The Bible says that with Adam's sin, "One man disobeyed God, and many became sinners" (Romans 5:19). Theologians often speak of that as "original sin," referring to the belief that because of the first sin, all humans are born into sin, and are by nature self-centered. It's not clear how that first sin affected everyone who came later. But this much seems clear: Adam and Eve sinned, and then everyone since then has followed in the same rut—with the exception of Jesus.

(C) Many theologians explain it this way: Jesus came to destroy our sinful nature. “In Adam all of us die. In the same way, in Christ all of us will be made alive again” (1 Corinthians 15:22). That death and life is both spiritual and physical. We have a spiritually dead relationship with God, but Jesus brings it to life. We die, but are resurrected.

3. (A) If you could talk to the boy in the feature “Knowing When to Say No,” what would you say to him? (B) What would you say to the girl? (C) From what you know about Christian teenagers today, whose action better reflects the typical Christian—the boy or the girl? (D) Do you agree that the boy’s response is one piece of evidence that God’s plan to reclaim creation and overpower sin is working?

(A) Perhaps if most men were honest, they’d say something like this: “You’re a better man than I am.”

(B) How about this: “Don’t beat yourself up or think of yourself as rejected. We live in an incredibly sexual world that pushes us to sexual intimacy far too quickly. And the boy was trying to protect both of you.”

(C) The boy was one rare bird.

(D) The boy’s remarkably mature response seems at the opposite end of the scale from selfishness and sin. He knew the boundaries God had set for him, and he was devoted enough to God to stay within those boundaries. Though God has yet to reclaim all of creation, he has certainly claimed this boy—and this boy has claimed him.

4. One of the fallouts of the Fall is that women became dominated by men.

(A) Is that adequate reason for a husband to impose his will on a wife, and to insist that he’s the leader of the household? Or is that fallout’s connection to sin a reason to do the opposite, and to treat a wife as an equal? (B) Paul advised husbands and wives to submit to each other. At what point does submission have to end—when a man or a woman has to put a foot down?

(A) Christians still debate the roles of men and women. Some insist that the Bible means what it says: “The head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is the man,” (1 Corinthians 11:3). Others insist that these words of Paul reflect the culture of ancient times, and are not binding today. Even back then, many argue, Paul was pointing us to a higher road: “In Christ, there is no difference between Jew and Greek, slave and free person, male and female” (Galatians 3:28).

(B) Submission ends when a spouse’s demand clashes with God’s law, as revealed by the Bible or the Holy Spirit. No one—man or woman—has the right to insist that the other do something sinful.

5. “Living Forever” talks about people having an “innate sense” of immortality. (A) Do you have a sense at the level of your instincts that assures you that you’re built to live forever? (B) What about the story of Dr.

Paul Brand's dying friend, who had a death-bed vision of Jesus? What do you think of stories like that?

(A) Many Christians seem to have this sense of eternity.

(B) Some Christians consider stories like this as additional evidence that God is at work in the world, and that there is life after death. Others wonder if these near-death experiences are hallucinations. Perhaps there's a bit of both going on, depending on the situation. In some near-death out-of-body experiences, however, people reportedly saw things they couldn't have otherwise seen—like hospital monitor readings out of their line of sight, or a shoe on a hospital ledge outside the room.

CHAPTER 2, DAVID

1. Like David, many leaders even today suffer with what seems to be more than their fair share of family troubles. That includes world leaders, top business executives, even pastors. What's the problem?

It takes lots of time to run a country, a business, or a church—time away from the family. Some pastors, for example, have gone to small churches on purpose, because they say their most important ministry is to their family.

2. David forced his ex-wife, Michal, to leave her new husband and come back to him. (A) Why do you think he felt justified? (B) If he really wanted to express his love to Michal, and to get her back, what do you think would have been a smarter approach? (C) What effect does it have on you when someone forces you to do something you don't want to do?

(A) He bought her with the foreskins of one hundred unfortunate Philistines, whom he had killed (2 Samuel 3:14). Women, in those times, were considered property first, people second.

(B) When we love someone, we act in the best interest of that person because we seek their happiness above our own. If David wanted her back, his best chance was to ask her to come back and then to leave the decision with her.

(C) When people impose themselves on us, it's usually repulsive—pushing us away. Perhaps that's why God allows us to decide for ourselves whether or not we'll serve him.

3. David took incredible risks in his affair with Bathsheba. (A) Why would he risk so much? And why do people today still take those kinds of risks? (B) Of the four pieces of advice from the Bible that the writer mentions in the feature "What to Do When You See a Naked Lady," which one do you like best, and why? (C) If men are wired to look at beautiful women, can they be rewired to recognize trouble when they see it?

(A) He probably thought he wouldn't get caught. And even if he did, he's the king. Who's going to mess with him?

(B) Run. That's solid advice. Reprogramming the brain is good, too. As long as we keep "run" as a backup.

(C) Getting caught once has been known to rewire men for a lifetime. And many seem to manage the rewiring without it, perhaps motivated by troubles they've seen in others.

4. David didn't punish his rapist son, Amnon. (A) What do you think he should have done? (B) How could punishing Amnon have turned David's family toward a brighter future?

(A) Under Jewish law at the time, Amnon should have married her (Deuteronomy 22:29). That's because most other men would not have wanted her, and in that male-dominated world would have considered her damaged goods.

(B) The victim's full brother, Absalom, would not have felt like he needed to take matters into his own hands. Absalom would certainly have considered his sister's rape as an insult to him, and to his mother's side of the family.

5. The author says David's silence is what killed Amnon, and that we all need to speak up for justice. (A) What justice issues do we need to be speaking up for today? (B) How should we speak up? (C) What difference do you think it would make?

(A) In and out of our country, the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer. The political and legal systems, controlled by the rich, see to it. We need to stand with the poor and other exploited individuals and groups who are powerless without the compassionate help of someone else.

(B) Sometimes bucking the system isn't as helpful as giving a buck, or lending a hand. People take notice when one person helps another. Helping can become contagious.

(C) We can't do everything. But we can do something. We might not be able to make a difference on a national scale. But we can make a difference to someone. And that someone can make a difference to another someone. And one of those someones might one day change a country—even the world.

CHAPTER 3, ESAU

1. (A) What should Esau have done instead of selling his inheritance for a bowl of soup? (B) What's one of the dumbest things you've ever seen anybody do? (C) What were the consequences for the knucklehead? How did you or others who were witnessing it react? (D) What would have been a smart alternative to the dumb deed?

(A) Just about anything. Eat grass. Eat dirt. Call Jacob a "girlie mon" and threaten to beat him up. If servants weren't there to prepare food for Esau, he could have easily killed a sheep or a goat and barbecued it.

(B) One dumb thing I've seen a lot is of people doing nothing and saying nothing when another person is getting hurt, physically or emotionally—when they're brow-beaten by a bully. People are too cowardly to get involved, even when they know the victim is innocent.

(C) Consequences include the victim getting unjustly thrashed, and then losing respect for the do-nothing witnesses who cared more about their own survival than about justice and compassion.

(D) A smart alternative? A wise old man once said, "Interfering in someone else's quarrel as you pass by is like grabbing a dog by the ears" (Proverbs 26:17). His point: You can get bit. But some dogs need a good ear-yanking. And getting bit is a mild price to pay for saving another person from getting torn apart.

2. After spending a few years on the planet, observing humanity, what have you noticed are some of the most common problems that drive relatives and friends away from each other, leaving them estranged for months, years, or even a lifetime?

Pieces of the family estate, whether it's money, land, or Granny's locket. Sibling rivalries that produce unkind words are contenders, too, because you can't unspeak a word. It lives a lifetime, never forgotten and too often never forgiven.

3. Favoritism was a problem in Esau's family. Dad liked Esau best. Mom liked Jacob best. (A) What kind of damage does this do to the individuals and to the family as a whole? (B) What kind of favoritism have you seen in families today? (C) What are some practical ways that parents can avoid showing favoritism among their children? (D) Sometimes kids ask their parents, "Which one of us do you love most?" What do you think of this answer: "I love every one of you all the way to the top—just like you love your dear old Dad and Mom."

(A) It drives them apart.

(B) Some kids get more freedom to do as they please, and more financial help from their parents.

(C) Make an effort to treat the kids the same, especially in ways that can be measured in a bucket or a bank account. Budget the same amount for each kid when it comes time to buy Christmas or birthday gifts, for example. And when they ask for permission to do something, get in the habit of saying yes unless you can think of a doggone good reason to say no—a reason in the best interest of the kid.

(D) Our kids need to know that the love we have for them isn't something you can measure. Our love is always full. We don't have just a little love for one and a lot of love for another. The love we parents have for each kid fills all the empty spaces in our heart. Without each kid, we'd be nursing a broken heart.

4. (A) Do you think that when Jacob spent twenty years away from home that he thought much about what he had done to his brother and father? (B) Some people say regret is a bad thing, and that it's harmful to dwell on it. Others say spending time thinking about regrets is a good thing because it:

- shows we care enough about someone to be sorry for what we said or did
- teaches us what to do and not do.

What do you think? Is it a dumb idea to spend time thinking about regrets?

(A) If Jacob hadn't loved them, he probably wouldn't have returned home to be near them. And if he loved them, he regretted hurting them.

(B) Regret is the emotional consequence of doing something wrong—or not doing something right when we had the chance. If we care about it, we regret what happened. We need to find a balance between dwelling on our mistakes and learning from them. Ignoring them completely is as dumb as thinking about them every day. We need to move on, but move on wiser.

5. Jacob sent gifts to begin his apology to Esau. What do you think is an effective way to ask forgiveness from a relative or a close friend?

Genuinely. That can look different in different situations, but most people recognize genuine when they see it. We may need to bring a peace offering. Or we may need to double dip them in the two hardest phrases known to humankind: "I'm sorry," and "I love you."

CHAPTER 4, HAMAN

1. (A) Haman determined that the Jews were inferior humans, worthy of extermination. How do we categorize and rate people today? (B) What affect does that have on our nation and on individuals? Is it fair, for example, that people living in wealthy cities are able to send their children to schools funded by lucrative property taxes, when children in poor cities have to make do with lower quality schools supported by fewer tax dollars? (C) How does that fit with Jesus' teaching, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself," (Matthew 19:19)?

(A) We classify and rate people by race, fiscal net worth, nationality, level of education, physical appearance, occupation—to name just a few.

(B) This makes some individuals feel inferior to others, though God made us all and loves each one of us enough to sacrifice his own Son for us. Profiling and ranking people by various categories breeds suspicion, jealousy, and fear.

(C) There's nothing Christian or compassionate about a nationwide educational system that allows rich neighborhoods to use their property-value tax

dollars to buy the best education for their own kids, while poor neighborhoods are stuck with bottom of the barrel teachers and with equipment lashed together by duct tape.

2. Haman worked up a high-profile plan to promote himself, when he thought the king wanted to honor him. (A) Why do some people seem to need more acceptance than others? (B) When is it acceptable to promote ourselves? (C) How can we know if the self-promotion has gone overboard?

(A) Maybe they didn't get much loving support in their growing up years. Or perhaps they have a physical problem that keeps them from loving themselves—such as chemical imbalances that keep them depressed.

(B) Paul bragged about himself. But he did it to protect the church at Corinth from false teachers trying to take over the work there (2 Corinthians 11). Sometimes we have to outline our accomplishments—like when we're looking for a job.

(C) Paul bragged reluctantly. That's a good model to follow. If we're feeling like we deserve all the credit for the good things God has helped us accomplish, we've overlooked God's role—and the role of folks he sent our way to help us.

3. (A) Why do you think Jesus pushes people toward humility, and what value is there in cultivating a humble spirit? (B) Think about some of the people you've known that you admire most. Do they tend to be proud and domineering, or humble and focused more on the needs of others?

(A) Humility is a character trait of Jesus himself. He washed the feet of his disciples as a lesson in serving others, and he asked them to do the same (John 13). We tend to warm up to a person who's loving and humble. But we push away people who are full of themselves.

(B) One of the most humble people I've ever known was my mom's mom. We called her Granny. When I started my career as a newspaper journalist, I remember her saying I'd "hobnob with the elite." I don't think she ever realized that as far as I was concerned, she was the elite. She's gone now, but I'd rather spend a day with her than with any of the "elite" people she was talking about.

4. (A) Why do we enjoy it when bad guys like Haman get the noose? (B) Would the ending be just as satisfying if Haman changed into one of the good guys? (C) What do you think it would have taken to change Haman's character that radically? (D) Is Haman that much different than any of us who have sinned?

(A) We've been wronged ourselves, and we've seen the bad guy get away too many times. We want justice for ourselves and for others.

(B) If Haman genuinely changed into a good guy, I think most of us would be content with that ending. The problem is that it's hard to know if someone is being authentically good, or conveniently good.

(C) Haman was so bad to the bone that it probably would have taken something remarkable to heal his distorted character. Yet a selfless act by a solitary Jew might have been remarkable enough, with God's help and with Haman's openness to God.

(D) Sin is sin. It's up to God alone to judge the depravity of one sin over another. But we know from something Jesus said that it's not a good idea to cast the first stone unless we're ready to play dodge ball. Haman sinned, and we've sinned. Thank God for forgiveness.

5. In "Contagious Stupidity," we're asked to consider the consequences of dumb decisions, to think about how far the stupidity might spread. Haman's decision killed himself, his sons, and thousands of others. How far have you seen one dumb decision spread?

Even in modern times we've seen families decimated by contagious stupidity. The sons of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein died in a shootout like some kind of tragic scene from a Dumb and Dumber sequel. Granted by their father power to abuse, they abused. So they must have thought they would face execution if they got caught. Most of the rest of Hussein's family fled the country, to live out their lives in humiliation. At least they got to live, unlike the thousands he exterminated.

CHAPTER 5, HOPHNI AND PHINEHAS

1. (A) How do you think priest Eli could let his sons get so out of hand? (B) What steps could an old priest like Eli have taken to correct such blatant misbehavior of his adult sons? Should he have followed the approach of former cable TV mogul Ted Turner who, during budget cuts, fired his son Teddy with the now-famous words, "You're toast!"?

(C) Why wouldn't Eli have done this, especially since he also raised Samuel, who became Israel's next priest?

(A) Little misbehaviors left uncorrected in childhood can develop into big misbehaviors in adulthood.

(B) Eli might have insisted that his sons not perform their priestly duties for a time—several months perhaps—as a warning to straighten up.

(C) Like many parents, Eli may have found it difficult to discipline those he loved. One of the toughest things parents have to do is punish their children as a way of correcting harmful behavior. Eli tried to correct them with words. But sometimes words need a little action to reinforce the jaw movement.

2. (A) What do you think Eli meant when he warned his sons that no one could help them if they sinned against God? Could he have been thinking

about Aaron's two sons, priests who didn't follow God's directions for incense offerings and who were killed by "fire . . . from the Lord" (Leviticus 10:1)? (B) When Eli got messages from God that his sons would die, he seemed to reply with stoic acceptance. How would you have responded?

(A) Bible experts aren't sure what Eli meant. One possibility is that God is the one who helped settle disputes, usually through the laws he gave. But who is higher than the Lawgiver and able to settle someone's dispute with him? Or perhaps Eli was simply saying that whoever breaks God's law is at risk for suffering the penalties God spelled out in Deuteronomy 28:15-68. Curses such as "You will be destroyed" (verse 20).

(B) Most parents would probably respond with pleas for mercy. Eli may have done that, too. But elderly Eli had apparently experienced enough in life to have built a solid base of trust in God.

3. (A) Do you think God honored the sacrifices of the worshipers, even though the priests were anything but godly? (B) How does that relate to Christians today who feel betrayed by ministers who commit such blatant sins that they are expelled from the ministry?

(A) God honors the worship of the worshiper, sometimes in spite of the worship leader. It's the heart of the person who worships him that matters, not the heart of the person leading the rituals.

(B) Many Christians worship in churches where they don't respect the worship leaders: pastor, song leader, Sunday school teacher. But let me give you a little advice that my mother once gave me. I was a teenager who had been emotionally hurt by our youth leader, so I wanted to quit church. Mom said, "I'd rather go to church with a few hypocrites than go to hell with them all."

4. (A) If you could talk to the minister in the story "Ministers Are Human," what would you say to him? (B) What would you say to his wife? (C) What do you think about the statement: "Ministers are like the rest of us—normal until you get to know them." (D) Assuming they have flaws like the rest of us, at what point do you think people in the church have a right to step in and confront the minister about them?

(A) We might have told the minister that everyone has character flaws, but that we can all work on them. And perhaps one of the character flaws of his wife is that she's overly critical.

(B) We might have advised the minister's wife to help her husband work on polishing his character with a soft cloth instead of a sandblaster. Generalizations that draw hurtful conclusions aren't usually helpful. They're often said to make someone feel badly about themselves, or to get even in an argument.

(C) The better we get to know a person, the more aware we become of their strengths as well as their flaws. We can count on the fact that they have both.

(D) We should step in to help at the same point we would step in to help any other friend we know: when it becomes clear that they're hurting themselves or others, and they don't have the capacity to see it or to do anything to stop it. The most common interventions involve inappropriate use of church money and ministers having an affair with someone in the congregation.

5. The Israelites tried to get God to help them win a battle by taking their most sacred object onto the battlefield, the Ark containing the Ten Commandments. Enemy Philistines won the battle and took the Ark as a war trophy. (A) What are some ways we try to twist God's arm into getting something we want? (B) Do you think it shows a lack of faith for us to ask God for something, and then to allow him the right to deny our request? Or does that simply acknowledge that he's smarter than we are?

(A) Some people see fasting as a way to twist God's arm. But others consider it simply an expression of deep concern. People sometimes try to make deals with God, offering something in return: such as a vow to go to church regularly or to never drink another drop of alcohol.

(B) Christians sometimes quote Bible passages like this: "If your faith were the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Dig yourself up and plant yourself in the sea,' and it would obey you" (Luke 17:6). Then they argue that we can have whatever we want if we have enough faith. Tell it to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He didn't want to die, and he said so. But he ended his prayer saying to God, "Do what you want, not what I want" (Matthew 26:39). That's a good model to follow.

CHAPTER 6, JONAH

1. (A) Why did Jonah run? (B) Do you think he really believed he could get out of God's reach? (C) What does running from God look like today—how do we run from God? (D) Jonah ran because he didn't want to do what God told him. What are some things God tells us to do today that get people running?

(A) He was afraid the Assyrians would kill him. Assyria was one of the most vicious empires in history, even showcasing art of impaled enemies in their palace at Nineveh.

(B) Jonah may have thought of God as just the God of Israel—so Jonah left Israel.

(C) Most often we run from God by ignoring him. And we stay away from places where he's best able to talk, such as in the pages of the Bible or in worship services at church. Fortunately, he talks in other places, too.

(D) God might tell us to break off a destructive relationship or change jobs to something that helps people instead of hurting them. And, of course, we're always afraid God will want to send us to the mission field—maybe even to Nineveh, which is near the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. What Christian today would want to plant a church there? A chaplaincy job on a cruise ship sounds so much more attractive.

2. (A) When was a time you or someone you know ran from God, but was pursued by God? (B) How did God pursue the person, and what happened?

(A) One young man I know, raised in the church, ran from God and hung with the wrong crowd. He got deeply into drugs—alcohol and narcotics—becoming addicted to both.

(B) His family never gave up on him, and never stopped loving him. Whenever he needed them, they were there to help. God used the family's love to pursue and reclaim that young man.

3. (A) Why do you think the Assyrians accepted Jonah's prophecy and repented, when Jews rarely paid attention to the prophets? Is the old saying true, that familiarity breeds contempt? Were the prophets so commonplace among the Jews that their words carried no more influence than any other religious leader—in a system where leaders often disagreed? (B) What does it take for God to get our attention about spiritual problems in our lives and in our land?

(A) Sometimes it's easier to hear an outsider say what we ignore from people close to us. Maybe that's why advice from a friend or a counselor often gets better results than advice from a spouse or a parent who's always around. Even the words of Jesus carried little weight in his hometown. After a disappointing response to his message in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, a prophet is not accepted in his hometown" (Luke 4:24).

(B) Sometimes God has to fire a warning shot over our bow by sending trouble our way. Sometimes he sends a messenger with a warning. And sometimes nothing gets through to us, and we ignore God to death—our death.

4. The Bible says that when the Assyrians repented God "changed his mind" and didn't punish them. Some people wonder how an all-knowing God could possibly change his mind. React to this reply: It wasn't God who changed. The people did. And when people change, God's plan for them changes, too.

There are other times when the Bible says God changed his mind. Once, he planned to kill the Israelites who were worshipping a gold calf. But Moses intervened (Exodus 32:14). And another time God announced the imminent death of King Hezekiah. But the king prayed and God extended his life fifteen years (2 Kings 20:6). God knew that Moses would intervene and Hezekiah would

pray, but perhaps he also knew that the intervening and the praying would change things about those people—as repentance changed the Assyrians. So God changed his plans for them.

5. God sent Jonah to Assyria because God cared about the citizens of what became one of the most vicious empires in human history. (A) Who are some of the most vicious people, groups, and nations today? (B) What does Jonah’s story say about them? (C) And what does it suggest our responsibility is to those hated people?

(A) There are ruthless dictators and regimes throughout the world, including some of the most vicious in Africa—a continent largely ignored by leading nations.

(B) Jonah’s story is tailored for evil people in those nations. The message is that God cares about them. If they repent, God will forgive them. If they ignore him, they can count on destruction.

(C) Our responsibility, it would seem from Jonah’s story, is to deliver God’s warning of punishment for sin, and his offer of forgiveness. A further responsibility, from the parable of the Good Samaritan, is to treat the hurting people of those nations as our neighbors, and to help them in any way we can.

CHAPTER 7, JEPHTHAH

1. Jephthah’s family booted him out, perhaps partly because he was an embarrassing reminder of their father’s fling with a prostitute, but mostly to cut him out of the inheritance. (A) Have you seen any families do the same kind of thing today, and if so, for what reasons? (B) How do we typically shuffle unwanted people—family or not—to the side?

(A) Some families break ties with a perceived black sheep because they’ve embarrassed or hurt the family in some way, perhaps by something they said, the person they married, or a crime they committed.

(B) We shuffle unwanted people aside by ignoring them. We don’t call them or send notes. We don’t invite them over for family gatherings, perhaps fearing they’ll spark an argument. And we don’t even pray for them, because prayer would bring them to mind and that might prompt us to reconsider our treatment of them.

2. Jephthah tried to reason with the attacking king, but reason didn’t work—even when Jephthah backed it up with solid facts. (A) Why do you think the king plowed on, even knowing he was wrong? (B) Have you seen the same kind of thing happen with disagreements in families, in churches, or on the job? (C) Is there anything else a person can do to break through that kind of stubbornness?

(A) The king wanted the land. It became an emotional issue for him, and sometimes there is no amount of history, logic, or common sense that can break down emotional attachments as powerful as greed.

(B) Some older people who grew up with the King James Version of the Bible are deeply attached to that version, and critical of other versions. We can try to teach them the history of Bible translations, and show them that the KJV was one of many attempts to keep the Bible relevant to the language of the day. And we can remind them that the Puritans criticized the KJV and preferred the older and more familiar Geneva Bible, just as KJV-diehards criticize modern Bible translations and swear by the Bible translated when, oddly enough, William Shakespeare was writing a play called “The Tempest.”

(C) It seems we’re seldom able to successfully reason with people who are emotionally attached to an argument or a desire. But as long as they’re willing to listen, we should probably continue talking—in a spirit of concern for them, but not in angry defense of our own position. When they stop listening, it’s generally time to stop talking. Perhaps the time will come when they’ll be willing to listen again, and hear the words from a fresh perspective.

3. The Bible says God’s Spirit entered Jephthah. That happened in only rare instances in Old Testament times, to empower select leaders for special service. (A) Why do you think God’s Spirit would enter the likes of a mercenary? (B) Do you think it depreciates the holiness of God when God links up with an outcast like Jephthah?

(A) Only God knows why he empowered Jephthah with his Spirit. God did the same for other flawed leaders in the Old Testament, including Saul and David. Perhaps God empowered Jephthah not because this warrior deserved it, but because the people of Israel deserved deliverance from their oppressors—and Jephthah was the best man for the job.

(B) God even used evil empires like Assyria and Babylon to punish the Jews for sin that had continued for centuries. Prophet Habakkuk complained, asking why God would do that: “How can you be quiet when the wicked swallow up people who are better than they are?” (Habakkuk 1:13). And yet, in the end, Habakkuk decided to trust that God knows best.

4. Jephthah didn’t have to sacrifice his daughter. (A) Why do you think he didn’t select any of the other options available to him? (B) When we make ridiculous promises to God in moments of desperation, do you think it’s a sin to break them?

(A) This was early in Israel’s history. Jephthah may not have known there were other options. Still, he could have consulted a prophet or a priest to explore the alternatives to slaughtering his own daughter.

(B) Sometimes we go temporarily insane—terrified by worry and fear. If a secular court has enough compassion to find a defendant not guilty by reason of

insanity, how much more compassion should we expect from our Heavenly Father?

5. Jephthah sacrificed his daughter in God's name. People in recent history have slaughtered others in God's name—most recently in the clashes between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. (A) Should we kill the killers in God's name? (B) What do you think is a Christian response to fundamentalists of any faith who shed blood in an effort to impose their faith on other people?

(A) The Old Testament law said killers deserved to die. Oddly, though, God spared humanity's first killer: Cain. And Jesus brought us a new law that calls for forgiveness instead of retaliation. Instead of killing evildoers, Jesus said "Do not resist an evildoer" (Matthew 5:38, *New Revised Standard Version*). If we kill people, we probably shouldn't be implying that God approves of it—unless he has sent Gabriel to tell us otherwise. We may argue that it's right to kill one terrorist to save many innocent civilians, but even the terrorist is precious to God.

(B) God does not impose himself on anyone. So why should people of any God-based faith try to impose their religion on others? One message that's clear in the Bible is this: God wants us to choose him freely. Some Christians argue that a Christian response is simply to shut up, politically, since Jesus said "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If it belonged to this world, my servants would fight" (John 18:36). Instead of political activism, many Christians say, we should become spiritually active by searching for people in need and then helping them. Jesus did that, while religious zealots around him were thumping heads and probably carrying picket signs.

CHAPTER 8, JEZEBEL

1. What makes people grow into mean and vicious adults? What do you think could have contributed to Jezebel's mean streak?

A mean, vicious childhood can create a mean, vicious adulthood. If Jezebel's very name was demeaning—a complaint that she wasn't a boy—that wouldn't have gotten her off to a bad start.

2. (A) How have you seen a person in authority abuse that authority? (B) What would you guess led the abuser to think it was okay to do this? (C) How did the victim react? (D) If you can remember a time when you were the victim, how did you react?

(A) Bosses sometimes overstep their bounds by pressuring employees to do things unethical.

(B) The abuser may have felt that the end result—such as increased profits for the company and accolades for him—justified the means that were necessary.

(C) Some victims resist, to the point of resigning. Many comply, but begin looking for work elsewhere. Others comply and stay, rationalizing that this isn't a perfect world.

(D) I quit a job as an editor of a small newspaper after one of the owners insisted that the advertising department should have some input on how news was treated. A big no-no from journalism ethics 101. You want to strive for objectivity.

3. Jezebel never seemed to mellow out. Neither did the music leader in the "Going Too Far" feature, even though church leaders tried to mentor her.

(A) What do you think it takes to change a self-serving, mean-spirited human being into a selfless and kind soul? (B) How does God accomplish that, and what role do we play in the process?

(A) Years of counseling, lots of medication, or a spiritual experience that amounts to a miracle of God. Sometimes all of these.

(B) One of the reasons some people find it hard to show love toward others is because they don't even love themselves. Their spirits have been crushed for so long that they think being crushed and crushing others is a normal thing. Sometimes what they need to help them discover that building people up is better than tearing them down is to have someone build them up. No artificial compliments, but genuine reinforcement for good behavior along with compassionate confrontation that holds them accountable for misbehavior.

4. (A) How could Jezebel ignore God's power after such a dramatic miracle as the one that ended in the execution of her 850 prophets? (B) How does God reveal his power today—in ways that we ignore? (C) Why do you think people can be so resistant to God?

(A) Growing up a princess and then marrying a king, Jezebel was used to getting her own way. Perhaps all she could manage to see was someone challenging her power.

(B) It seems far too easy to ignore God in his wonderful creation. And then there are the coincidences that seem too coincidental to be anything other than miraculous. Not to mention answers to prayer, and bad situations turning into something good—which is God's specialty. Consider Joseph, sold to slave traders by his brothers. He told his brothers, "You meant to hurt me, but God turned your evil into good to save the lives of many" (Genesis 50:20).

(C) God is invisible, and he doesn't generally talk with a voice that registers on a decibel meter.

5. (A) What kind of legacy do you think Jezebel wanted to leave? (B) What is her legacy—how do we remember her? (C) Who is someone who's no longer alive that you knew personally and admired? What about this person lives on in your memory—and perhaps in your attitudes and

behavior? (D) How do you want to be remembered? What do you need to do to leave behind that legacy?

(A) The Top Dog.

(B) Dog food.

(C) My dad was a person I admired because of his selfless compassion and generosity. He was the kind of guy who—in the days before cell phones—went out in Northeastern Ohio snow storms looking for stranded drivers who needed help.

(D) I'd be happy to be remembered as my father's son, and as my Father's son.

CHAPTER 9, JUDAS ISCARIOT

1. (A) There are a lot of theories about why Judas betrayed Jesus. Which one makes most sense to you, and why? (B) If Judas were trying to force Jesus into launching a rebellion, can you understand why Judas did that? (C) Can you think of a situation when it's appropriate to apply pressure to get someone to do something they wouldn't otherwise do? What's the risk of doing that?

(A) One theory that shows up over and over in movies—which suggests the motive makes sense in Hollywood—is of Judas trying to force Jesus' hand in sparking a Jewish revolt. Judas, as the theory goes, wanted to boot out the Romans and establish Jesus and the disciples as leaders of a Jewish nation.

(B) If that's why Judas did this, it seems dumb because Judas turned him over to Jewish religious leaders appointed by Rome. The high priest was no longer a family job, but a political appointment.

(C) There are lots of times when people need some pressure to do the right thing. A prosecutor might pressure a witness to testify against a criminal, saying that if the criminal goes free, others might get hurt. But there's a risk. If the criminal walks, the witness might get hurt.

2. Think about betrayals you've seen, or perhaps experienced. What caused them and what were the results?

I know of a group of church board members who agreed to confront a pastor about mishandling church money. The group, however, left the spokesperson hanging out to dry—with no backup. The confrontation turned out to be one board member against one pastor, while a gallery of silent gawkers watched. The spokesperson left the church, and it took years for that person to forgive the "friends." The pastor later left, too.

3. Jesus and the disciples needed money. But Judas' need warped into greed. How can we tell when need becomes greed? What are some common symptoms?

When we hide what we're doing financially, that's a clue the greed has claimed us. Same is true if we can find extra money for nonessentials, but we don't seem to have any for charity.

4. Jesus couldn't protect himself from a defector—from Judas who was determined to reject him. (A) What message does that send to churches and to Christian parents who blame themselves for bad choices made by their fellow members or their children? (B) When we publicly compliment the parenting skills of someone whose child turned out well, how do you think that affects parents who have a troubled child?

(A) We're not to blame for the bad decisions made by folks under our care. They make their own decisions. We're not always guilty by association, though some of our critics might argue otherwise. Parents, for example, are generally no more responsible for the sins of their children than God is for the sins of his children.

(B) "You must be proud of how your kids turned out. They're a tribute to your parenting." Overhearing compliments like that can make parents of troubled kids feel badly. And what are the complimented parents to think if they have one bent arrow kid in addition to the straight arrow? When people compliment me for my great kids, I generally say, "Luck of the draw." I'm just glad God sent them my way. And I hope I did more good than harm in nurturing them through childhood.

5. (A) Why do you think Judas killed himself instead of asking forgiveness? Do you think he was covered by Jesus' prayer from the cross, in which Jesus forgave the people who killed him? (B) Of the people you've known and the sins you've seen committed, what were some of the ones that seemed hardest to forgive? (C) How would you advise a friend who is consumed with guilt to accept God's forgiveness?

(A) One Jewish teaching, preserved on the Dead Sea Scrolls, says: "If someone betrays his people to a foreign nation or causes evil against them, you should hang him from a tree and let him die."

Whether or not Judas died repentant, consumed with guilt, and forgiven, we can't tell. But given Jesus' habit of forgiving even the most socially unacceptable sins, such as adultery, it seems reasonable to believe that he would have forgiven Judas if Judas had asked. And even if Judas didn't feel worthy of asking, it's conceivable that the forgiveness Jesus spoke from the cross included Judas. Jesus forgave many who never asked for anything but physical healing. And he said, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven" (John 20:23). Still, if Judas died forgiven, no Gospel writer bothers to report Jesus mentioning it after the Resurrection.

(B) Sins that people commit against our kids and others we love seem especially tough to forgive.

(C) "If we confess our sins, he will forgive our sins" (1 John 1:9).

CHAPTER 10, PHARAOH OF THE EXODUS

1. The Egyptians grew to fear the exploding population of Hebrew immigrants. Sound familiar? (A) Why do some people in the native majority of any country tend to fear a minority group on the grow? (B) What tends to keep racial groups segregated from each other? (C) Is the segregation inevitable, or are there ways to bridge the barrier. What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing this?

(A) In our own country these days, we're afraid of enemies sneaking in to hurt us. And many are worried about the influx of Spanish-speaking people seeking a better life, perhaps out of fear that our land can't sustain the volume of people and the drain on our publicly funded programs, such as education. In addition, some don't want to have to learn Spanish. *Yo no hablo mucho español.*

(B) Many of us like to stay inside our comfort zone. The racial divide has been so entrenched for so long in our country that it's going to take time and deliberate effort to bridge the gap. We have to decide to step outside our comfort zone, so we can stretch it to include others. Many of us simply haven't done this yet.

(C) A Christian ethics professor of mine once said if we ever become a fully Christian world, the flesh tones of human beings would become a bit darker than white and a bit lighter than black. Integration and full acceptance of other races as equals will certainly lead to love and marriage and the beautiful babies that come of it. The first step to bridging the racial barrier is perhaps to look at people the way God does—past the skin. "God does not see the same way people see. People look at the outside of a person, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

2. We would be hard-pressed to find any human being more stubborn than Pharaoh of the exodus. But let's try. (A) Who is a stubborn person you've known or perhaps heard about? What examples show they are stubborn? (B) What do you think makes a person so rigid and unwilling to change, even when the stakes are high? (C) How have you seen people hurt by stubbornness that overwhelms common sense?

(A) Some previous employers come to mind. And some relatives I'm not going to mention. One employer was determined to free himself of some publishing partners, so he'd have the power to make all the decisions. He got his way, but lost a big share of the market that his partners took with them. Suddenly, the publications had smaller budgets. Quality suffered. And the best staffers left.

(B) Ego. Sinful pride. Brain damage from riding motorcycles without a helmet.

(C) I've seen people quit their jobs rather than work for an employer who makes decisions on the basis of stubborn pride instead of reason.

3. (A) What's the best way to help a stubborn person like that? (B) How would you advise the adult children of the elderly couple in "Stubborn to the Bone" to help their parents? (C) How can you protect yourself from someone with a stubborn streak—especially if you live with a person like that?

(A) In their moments of sanity, when they seem open to listening, we can talk gently to them about our inability to understand their decision. We can take the blame for lack of understanding, to give them an opportunity to try explaining themselves in a non-hostile setting. Perhaps then they'll discover that their decision makes less sense than a bird nest in a bowling ball.

(B) Other than explaining their concerns and taking the parents on a tour of retirement centers, the kids have only two options: let their parents live with their decision, or force the parents into a retirement center. These kids chose the first option.

(C) If someone's stubbornness places us in danger, we should probably draw the line and take a firm stand to protect ourselves. That's sometimes hard for a compliant person who's living with someone who can huff and puff like a blowfish.

4. In some cases, the Bible says, God made the king of Egypt stubborn and resistant to the miracles that Moses performed. So the plagues may have lingered longer than they would have otherwise. People died because of that. (A) Do you think God really made the king more stubborn, literally? Or was that a figurative way of saying God used the king's ingrained stubborn streak? If God really did make the king do things that ended up killing people, how can we justify God doing that? (B) For Christians who believe in free will—that God lets us choose our own eternal destiny, and that he wants us all to be saved—how would they justify this story? React to this response to that question: God is determining how the Egyptians die, not their eternal destiny. It's their choice whether or not to reject God.

(A) God is God. He can do as he pleases, intruding into human history and human lives to work his plan of salvation.

(B) Christians who believe in free will would probably warm up to the idea that God didn't affect the eternal destiny of the Egyptians. Many Christians from the John Calvin school of theology—as are many Baptists and Presbyterians—would have no trouble with the idea of God selecting who would be saved and who would be lost.

5. Would it bother you if most of the Ten Plagues were caused by natural disasters? Do you think the idea that they were is plausible? Some people say that attempting to explain miracles is a trick to deny the power of God. Do you agree? Some Bible experts say that looking for explanations about the "how" of miracles is missing the point—that the stories are told to reveal the "who," which is God. Do you agree?

Some Christians say it diminishes God to explain away his miracles. But others think nothing of the sort. They argue that whether God uses the forces of nature to accomplish his plan or whether he steps into the supernatural, he's still the one making things happen.

CHAPTER 11, NABAL

1. (A) Do you think David was out of line by requesting supplies from Nabal for protecting his flocks, even though Nabal apparently didn't ask for the help? (B) Was David justified in planning to kill Nabal for refusing, or was that an overreaction?

(A) In that culture, David shouldn't have had to ask. Nabal should have been grateful enough to offer some supplies.

(B) The decision to kill Nabal and his entire household seems a tad over the top. But simply taking the supplies and making an enemy of Nabal might have left David feeling vulnerable in a region he used as a safe haven. Another possibility is that David thought a show of force would convince Nabal to do the right thing.

2. Why do you think Nabal thought he could get away with refusing to give supplies to an army? What could have possibly been his motivation for insulting David and his men?

Some powerful people who are used to giving orders instead of taking them have forgotten that they're not a deity. They have more ego than sense.

3. The feature "How Much Is Enough?" refers to high salaries of sports figures and corporate executives. (A) Why are their salaries so out of control? (B) As Christians, do you think it's our responsibility to do something about that, or should we focus on the disparity between our income and that of the poor?

(A) Their salaries are high because they have a paying audience. We'll pay heavy bucks to sit close to a guy swinging a big stick. But who wants to watch a pastor visit a shut-in?

(B) If we think salaries of certain people are out of control, we could deprive those people of our attention and our money. But it's probably not worth orchestrating a Christian boycott, since Jesus said his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). His kingdom is spiritual, traveling with the pastor to the home of a shut-in. There's no need to attack greedy people for hoarding their money when we can convict them with our own generosity. One poor and elderly couple I know of gave more for missions than anyone else in the church—and this church was in a wealthy part of town, across the street from where major league ballplayers and corporate execs lived.

4. God made good use of Nabal's stupidity. When Nabal died, David married Nabal's wife and suddenly had much greater wealth and influence—which helped propel him to Israel's throne. (A) What other examples can you think of from the Bible or from your experiences in life that show God making good use of something bad—or smart use of something dumb? (B) What does that say about God?

(A) The classic example from the Bible is Joseph, sold to slave traders by his brothers who were jealous of the attention their father gave him. Joseph ended up in Egypt, second in command of the nation. During a drought in Israel, he invited his extended family to move down to the drought-proof Nile River area. There, he told his brothers, "You meant to hurt me, but God turned your evil into good to save the lives of many" (Genesis 50:20).

(B) God isn't limited by our limitations or dumb decisions.

5. In the feature, "God's Smart Use of Human Dumbness," there's a reference to teenagers who get married because of pregnancy. (A) How do you think Christians could help in a situation like that? (B) What do you think some Christians might do that could be more harmful than helpful?

(A) Christians could support the family by offering to baby-sit, provide baby supplies, and help with transportation needs.

(B) We could hurt them by ignoring them or by criticizing them for making bad choices, and then abandoning them to the consequences of those choices.

CHAPTER 12, SAMSON

1. Why do you think Samson fell asleep on Delilah's lap and expected to wake up with hair—given the fact that she had already tried to take away his strength three times? Was it a testimonial to the power of Delilah's nagging, to Samson's wishful thinking, or to something else—perhaps a very large wineskin?

Love is blind. Wine breaks down our defenses. And nagging is like Chinese water torture, driving us crazy one drop at a time. Samson never had a prayer. He should have jumped out of Delilah's window and run like his pants were on fire.

2. We've all seen people who get their way through constant pestering. (A) How have you seen it work? (B) How can we fight back and win? Does it help to think of the pestering person as a terrorist who is trying to hold us hostage with their emotions? Or is it better to think of the person as having a problem that they're trying to shift to us?

(A) Kids do this to their parents. Spouses do it to each other. And office colleagues in staff meetings sometimes refuse to stop yapping until they get their own way—a corporate filibuster we’d like to stop with a lasso tied to a Hummer. But we’re too polite. And we don’t know how to throw a rope.

(B) Either of these options is better than letting the nagger get away with murder.

3. “Break a Rule, Hurt Yourself” says that God’s laws are there to protect us. Why do we often treat the laws like they’re intended to keep us from having fun? What kind of injuries have you seen from people ignoring God’s laws?

Some laws are fun to break, until the consequences catch up to us. Some folks say that it gives you a rush of adrenaline to shoplift, and that sex during an affair is fireworks on the Fourth of July in the back seat of a Buick. But the shoplifting usually leads to an adrenaline downer in court. And an affair can blow a family to kingdom come.

4. In the fight between Samson and the Philistines, violence met with retaliation which met with more violence—a continuing cycle. (A) How have you seen the same thing in the world today, or perhaps among people you know? (B) What does it take to break the cycle? Have you ever witnessed something like this?

(A) We’ve seen this for decades in Israel, with Palestinians and Jews killing each other for a wedge of land the size of New Jersey.

(B) Forgiveness and a consuming desire for peace can break the violent cycle.

5. God put Samson’s dumb decisions to good use, driving a wedge between Philistines and Israelites. How have you seen God turn dumbness around, using it for good?

King David had an affair with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers who was away at a war. She got pregnant. So David had her husband killed in a cover up, and then married Bathsheba. The baby died, but they had another son: Solomon. Though he earned his own chapter in this book about dummies, he led Israel in a godly manner for several decades. And it was through Solomon’s family that Israel was blessed with many fine kings, including Hezekiah.

CHAPTER 13, SOLOMON

1. Why is it shocking to see Solomon in a book called *Big Dummies of the Bible*? If we had to create a Top Ten list of things for which Solomon is famous, what would some of them be?

Granted one wish by God, young King Solomon didn't ask for wealth or honor. He asked for wisdom. That impressed God, who gave him all of those. God promised him, "wisdom and understanding that is greater than anyone has had in the past or will have in the future" (1 Kings 3:13). Solomon was a sage and a poet. "During his life he spoke three thousand wise sayings and also wrote one thousand five songs" (1 Kings 4:32). But he's probably most famous for figuring out which woman was the real mother of a newborn son—a conclusion he reached by threatening to split the baby in half (1 Kings 3:24-25). He's also famous for building the first Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

2. Take a look at the warnings Samuel gave about kings—the nasty things kings would demand of the people (page 144). What do you think would have been hardest for the citizens to put up with?

One of the toughest demands was probably forced labor, which is a bit like the draft. But instead of fighting a war, Jewish citizens had to build palaces, city walls, and even entire cities for the king.

3. (A) Do you think Solomon's goal of a grand kingdom was a good one? Or was it a flawed goal because it required him to stamp his "footprints on fragile souls"? (B) What over-the-top goals do people today often seek, no matter what it costs? What is often the cost?

(A) Who doesn't want to be part of something grand, as long as we're not the ones who have to build it?

(B) Many people today seek the two things God said Solomon didn't ask for: wealth and fame. Too often, people will do just about anything to reach those goals—even crushing family and friends who get in their way. But too late—often at the end of their career or their life—they realize that there's not much on earth that's better than being rich with loved ones and famous among them, even if no one else knows you from Mr. Rogers.

4. What kind of influence does the faith of one spouse typically have on the other? What have you noticed about couples who don't share the same faith?

In many spiritually split marriages, it's tough on the religious one to stay linked to the church. Just about everything that person does within the church seems to exclude the spouse. In this way, the church can actually increase the stress in a marriage—which is the opposite of what the church should be doing.

5. Solomon seemed to nibble his way into trouble, a little bit at a time—or maybe a wife at a time. How do we nibble our way into trouble? What are some boundary markers that are intended to alert us to trouble ahead?

We nibble our way into debt, shady financial deals, and inappropriate relationships. If we have trouble with debt, one solid boundary is to charge onto the credit card only what we can afford to pay in full when the bill comes due. And if we don't have the discipline to do that, we can recycle the plastic and stick with cash. Regarding business ethics and relationships, one good boundary is to do nothing in private that we wouldn't want broadcast on a primetime reality show called "Gotcha."

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